

# Inter Nos

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AU & OoC Disclaimer: Mai-Hime/Otome characters belong to Sunrise. The Mai-Hime/-Otome characters in a universe fashioned after the world of Ancient Rome.

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# Chapter 1

## NOTE:

*This story is AU/OoC and, as the standard disclaimer goes, the MaiHime (and other) characters belong to their creators but everything else is this author's. Furthermore, I have chosen to create a world that is based upon several ancient civilizations. The most prominent similarity you will see is that of the Hime (here, a state/nation) to Ancient Rome. The Himean political structure is based almost entirely on the Roman one, specifically that which was in place prior to the empire, or Republican Rome. If you are a historical purist who dislikes seeing people grossly distort the Roman sociopolitical institutions for the sake of Yuri, please look away. Obviously, one had to change an essential thing about Roman society to make the story work: the patriarchy. This makes it possible for me to have women in significant offices/roles. Either that or I turn them into men-and risk having the readers flay me alive.*

*Most of the Latin terms are kept intact. **The following notes may be referred to before, during, or after the story, to help comprehend the details of the era . You are not obliged to read them now: the reader should simply refer to them as or if the need arises. Use Ctrl+F to find a term whose definition you require.***

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## Vocabulaire:

**1. A note on the Himean military** - The military structure for the Himean troops follows the Roman one. The largest tactical unit would be the legion . For quick reference: 1 legion = 10 cohorts ; 1 cohort = 600 men (noncombatants included); 1 cohort = 6 centuries ; 1 century = 100 men (noncombatants included).

**2. Cursus honorum** - "The Way of Honour", the classical Roman/Himean political ladder of governmental offices. It begins at the office of **quaestor** and peaks at **consul**. The consul is the highest

position, with 2 for every year .

3. **Decury** - The Roman Senate was organised into groups of ten senators. Each group was called a decury, and as the old laws had it, each decury had to be led by a **patrician** (s.v).

4. **Legates** ( in Latin, Legatus ) - The most senior members of a general's military staff. Typically members of Senate.

5. **Patricians vs. Plebeians** - An important but simple distinction: Patricians come from the original aristocratic families; Plebeian means everyone who is not patrician, and does not necessarily mean "commoner" in the way we use it today. Wealth does not enter the picture in this particular classification: there were a good number of impoverished patricians in Ancient Rome and so it is here.

6. **Primipilus** - The centurion with the highest rank in a legion, also called the primus pilus . There are many grades of centurion, from first spear centurions to second spear centurions, etc..

7. **Stibium** - A substance based on antimony (the element). It was used as a cosmetic, as well as for writing, in ancient times. It is similar to the modern eyeliner.

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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"Surely we'll reach Otomeia today," Chie Harada said, struggling with the ends of her cloak to wrap it more securely around her. She shivered, even with the cloth enclosing her. "This country's climate is intolerable."

"Piss'll freeze before it's even hit the ground in this place," came the sneering comment from her side. The speaker, Nao Yuuki, ground her teeth and scowled, bright green eyes narrowing with irritation. She brought a hand up to rub at a conspicuously red ear, visible even against her conspicuously red hair.

"My ears are about to fall off," she complained.

"I think one of mine already did, a few hours ago," Chie replied.  
"Either that or I'm just so numb I can't feel it anymore."

The woman on the horse ahead of them laughed and slowed her steed to fall in between theirs.

"Perhaps the two of you should get in a carriage," she offered. "It is unnecessary for you both to be out here at the moment."

Nao bared her teeth in a grimacing smile.

"That's easy enough to say, Fujino-san," she said. "But when even the commander stays out with the soldiers on the march, it'd be poor of a simple centurion not to ride next to her just because the weather's colder than a Conservative's heart."

"Well now," the other replied, unable to help smiling. "I actually doubt they have ones to speak of, on occasion. And there is truly no need for you to brave the cold for my sake-after all, Nao-han is not just a 'simple centurion' but a *primipilus*, and one who has been marching on her feet since we arrived in this land," she added, to soften the admonition. "Surely a little comfort is only deserved by such a soldier."

The *primipilus* snorted.

"You don't have to flatter me, General. It won't work, I'm staying right here." Nao gave her another sharp grin and continued: "Besides, I'll be damned if the soldiers tell of the day I couldn't stand a little ice up my ass, when a patrician senator and a letter writer could."

The other two laughed, the sound hollow in the dead winter air. The "letter writer" grabbed a handful of snow from a low branch on a tree they were passing and threw it at the centurion, who dodged it with a hoarse cackle.

"Scribe, Yuuki. Personal scribe, the general's fellow senator and *your* legate," Chie said, not really offended. "That's the title, not 'letter writer'. Get them straight, you heathen."

"Sure, sure."

"And this scribe's been in almost as many campaigns as you have, so shut your mouth."

"Well, I don't see the other senator complaining."

"Shizuru-san's too well-bred for that."

"Which means you're not."

Chie cursed the centurion again. This set them off on another round of friendly bickering as they plodded along, the soldiers marching beside them grinning from ear to ear as they listened. It was pleasant to the rankers to hear their officers being warm and cheerful with each other: it made for a nice camaraderie in the army, which was why the commander encouraged it strongly. She herself said nothing more afterwards, content to just laugh and listen to her two officers as they continued bantering.

The jokes were stopped by a galloping rider coming from the front. He drew his horse up before them and saluted.

"General," he said, "we've entered the outskirts of the Otomeian plateau. The city walls are up ahead."

"Good," was all the general said. "Thank you for informing us, Soldier."

Another armour-slapping salute: "General!"

"How far, Scout?" the centurion asked before the man could go, squinting against the rising wind.

"Just past this valley, hidden by the bend, Centurion," he answered. "The other scouts we sent up to clear the tops said there were some archers on the promontories, but they were Otomeians, and they signalled to us."

"That's expected. Tell them to look alive. You can't be too sure with these barbarian places if you've missed something or not, and I don't fancy fighting off a damn ambush here."



"Understood, Centurion! Permission to return to scouting?"

All eyes turned to the commander.

"Granted," she said simply.

He saluted again and rode off. Nao spurred her steed on as well and said that she would get word out to the other centuries' officers that they were near their destination. The other two waved her off and kept their pace, staying at the head of the century with which they marched.

"Finally," Chie said. "Let's hope these ones are a little more civilised than the last 'allies' we had."

"Indeed."

"Shizuru-san."

"Yes?"

"Do you think the Mentulaeans know yet?" She turned her head towards her friend as they rode side by side. "That we're here to stop their expansion?"

"I think they may suspect it by now."

"How come they haven't even tried to get in touch with us? No attacks, even, and we're not carrying as many troops as I'd like. There are hordes of them, so I've heard."

They were speaking in low voices, their beasts close as they leaned towards each other.

"Certainly it is a curious thing," the general replied, sounding meditative. "I would have expected an envoy from them, at the very least, to probe for information as to exactly what our purposes are, here. But at least we shall not have to engage in combat prematurely."

"And that's good because of how outnumbered we are right now?"

"Not really," was the reply, given with a small smile. "Simply, it would be an annoyance at this stage. Numbers are not the end-all and be-all of the world. Even when we do reach our allies at Otomeia, we shall very likely remain heavily outnumbered even with the Otomeian military filling our ranks. No, it is that I would prefer to minimise any possible losses, frankly speaking. Whatever the case, I am entirely sure we would win."

"I see."

Chie smiled to herself as they rode on, reflecting on the calm but unselfconsciously confident manner in which the answer had been given. *That's the good thing about being with Shizuru Fujino*, she thought to herself. If her friend said they would win, they would. In all their years together, the general—even when she had not yet been a general, and even when she had not yet entered the military arena—had never been anything less than successful. Shizuru Fujino's brilliance came allied with a powerful lucky star, one that seemed certain to lead her to even more triumphs than she had already achieved. Which was probably why she had managed to become a senator at such a young age. And head of a *decury* too, something Chie had never been, for all that she was the elder of the two of them. Not that it pricked her pride in any way, for she had grown too used to her friend's star for that. After a while of standing beside it, you simply resigned yourself into accepting that it would outshine any other star flanking it into insignificance.

*In fact, she should be outshining everyone in the political arena back home right now*, Chie ruminated, a small frown building on her forehead. She had been expected to run for the office of praetor this year, then go on to the next rung up the ladder that was known as the *cursus honorum*, which was the consulship. By all rights that was what should have happened this year in Hime. Had it not been for this campaign, that is.

But that would change after this, Chie was sure of it.

*We'll finish this thing wreathed in glory*, she nodded to herself, the confident thought bringing a momentary flush of warmth to her chest. *Shizuru-san will do it again and we'll beat back those dogs, the Mentulae, all the way to their borders.*

Yes, they would do that. Never mind that they were outnumbered. Never mind the dratted chill nipping at her ears. They would finish this campaign and show up those jealous curs in the Senate that all their schemes to send Shizuru Fujino and her army to a situation she could not fix were for nothing! And perhaps, she would even manage to show up that snobbish old father of Aoi's who kept apostrophising her as unfit for his daughter, calling her blood too weak and new, her achievements too thin...

*I hope I'm not being too optimistic*, she told herself. Yet being optimistic at the outset of a journey was surely the better way to begin it. There was no harm in being sanguine even in light of such conditions, as it could not hurt. Besides which, she had one of the best talismans of good luck at her side, did she not?

She smiled, watching as the talisman herself edged close to the walking soldiers and chatted casually with them, their tired expressions falling away as they laughed at her jests. She knew her friend did this every time they went on campaign, mingling with the army on the march to keep their spirits up. Still she found herself amazed by it each time.

This was something no other general did, because it was considered unnecessary as well as uncomfortable, when it was possible to merely wait out the journey in a carriage or riding serenely at the head of the column. Shizuru Fujino, in contrast, not only spent her time with the soldiers for the full march but usually walked with them too. She was only horsed this time because the army, through the centurions, had managed to convince her to use her horse during the last stretch of their trail. They were concerned that the general would be overtired in the brutal climate, especially as she insisted on moving back and forth the column even more than usual, probably to keep up the rankers' spirits against the frigidity of the weather. She capitulated only when the soldiers themselves made direct pleas to her, saying that it would set their minds more at ease.

*She's the only general I'd ever follow happily*, thought Chie, sighing in contentment at her lot. True, there were some other good commanders back in Hime, but as far as she was concerned, none of them could even begin to hold a candle to her red-eyed friend. She was brilliant, kind, generous, and-most importantly of all-had

never lost a single venture. All of the soldiers, Chie knew, would follow such a general to the death. Who would not?

"Chie-han."

She turned her head to her general, who had cantered back to her side.

"We are almost there. How are you holding up?"

She smiled: "Fair enough, Shizuru-san."

"Ah," was the only response, and a smile.

A while later, they heard the ripples of speech coming from the leading soldiers that told them the ones at the head of the column were in sight of the city walls. It was not long before they themselves could see it as well, silhouetted against the sinking sun. The sky, formerly a grayish blue, had now melted into a soft orange towards the centre of the dying light. The snow covering the trees and the land reflected the colours and bathed everything in warm shades, softening the earlier harshness of the landscape's cool monotone.

"For all its chill, this land is very beautiful," the general remarked.

Chie made a sound of agreement, busy trying to imprint the sight into her memory. She intended to make an illustration of it when she had the time. As they approached, however, she furrowed her brows and squinted at the outline of the city.

"Shizuru-san," she said. "Don't they seem seem a little... *crooked* to you? The walls?"

It was a while before the general replied.

"Ara..." she said. "You're right. The line does seem highly irregular at the top."

"Does this mean they can't even build even walls?" the other said in dismay.

"Perhaps there is more to it than that," said the commander, her

tone holding a touch of excitement. "Come, Chie-han, let us go to the front. I wish to see it."

They galloped forward, their horses complying eagerly with the release from the monotonous pace. When they were close enough to make out the sentries on the tops of the walls, they realised why the walls looked so odd.

"By the gods!" Chie exclaimed. "This is amazing."

Shizuru laughed, equally delighted by the discovery: "Extraordinary. You should make a note of it in the record you send to the Senate."

"Oh, you can be sure I will."

"Hey, General!" said a voice, one that had joined theirs sometime earlier. "Crazy, isn't it?"

"What do you think of it, Nao-han?" asked Shizuru.

Nao brought her horse in line with the others. She looked up at the walls they were approaching.

"Well, it's unusual, all right," she said. "But it's perfect for defence. Those sections look like they'd be impossible to breach with normal artillery. A catapult or ram wouldn't even make a dent in that part."

"I've never seen such a thing," Chie said. "What are they?"

"I do not know," Shizuru said, eyeing the entire structure.

*Imposing*, she thought. And the primipilus was correct: the whole would be difficult to breach, if not for the sections of the wall that were actually man-made-although she could not be too sure that those other cliff-like sections were not man-made, even if they do not seem like it. What were they?

They seemed to be sheer slabs of rock that rose from the ground at a close-to-vertical angle, jutting out and ending in sharp peaks ranging from twenty to forty metres from the earth. The rock appeared smooth, and there were hardly any regular crags or projections that a climber could use for purchase. The narrowest

wedge appeared to be at least a hundred metres wide, and there were around ten of them that she could see from the side they were approaching. There were a few others that were not part of the city's walls, but which stood alone on the white field of the mountain plateau.

Like solitary towers, was Shizuru's thought as she stared at them: like monoliths thrown up by the gods.

The walls of Otomeia were made up partly of these monolithic slabs, with the more standard brick and stone sections built into the spaces between them. These were of an even height, about thirty meters tall. The irregularities of the city's silhouette were caused by the stone wedges rising from the regular height of the brick and stone sections.

Soon the Himean command was entering these walls, having sent envoys ahead to tell the Otomeians to open the gates. The gates too were formidable as they appeared to be made almost entirely of metal. Due to the weight, they also took a little longer to open and shut than others-or so Shizuru thought, as she studied the shape of the doors and entertained herself with imagining what kind of huge winching mechanism was on the other side, with how many oxen it must take to move them each time. She alone was quiet among the officers as the doors creaked and groaned, her famous red eyes gleaming and taking in everything.

When the portals were finally open, she rode forward with her legates and several officers at either side, some other officers leading the other cohorts into orderly arrangement on the flat plane outside the gates. Accompanying the general's party were two of their interpreters who were familiar with the Otomeian dialect. The Himean command gazed around.

Seen from within, the stone slabs were also flat on this side. Shizuru and the centurions, who had been taking note of the thickness of the walls as they passed through them, knew that each had to be at least seventeen metres thick.

*Truly impressive*, the general thought, drinking in the sights with a calm eye that masked her excitement. *I really must ask about them*,

*these walls. And the charming buildings!* Undoubtedly foreign in design, yet wonderfully aesthetic to her eyes. Even the Otomeian clothes appeared far more cultured than she had expected, and her expectations had not even been poor. She supposed it was her fault, permitting the usual archetypes to influence her expectations: a mountain people, known for being military, at that, was not usually expected to present such an elegant, almost Grecian atmosphere. White was everywhere-they obviously favoured it for their clothing-blond hair predominated, and gold and lapis lazuli adornments seemed sprinkled liberally throughout the crowd, even the people on the fringes. Oh, and they were so tall! A very tall people, very athletic, somehow appealing in their Attic-looking wraps and robes. Yes, they were a handsome race.

*Well, now, she berated herself. Don't just stand here staring, go forward and get the initial diplomacies over with. The sooner you do, the sooner your people can rest and get warm.*

She dismounted and walked forward, her attendants and officers doing the same. Several persons from the Otomeian line in front of them came up to meet her. They met in the centre of the square, bowing to each other.

"I believe I have the honour of addressing the General Shizuru Fujino?" inquired the man who was standing foremost, facing Shizuru. His eyes widened as he met hers, and she smiled, used to the reaction. She took the opportunity to study him in turn, filing away as many notes as possible within those two seconds of silence his pause afforded.

He was extremely pale, as all the Otomeians appeared to be, and had very long, lank grey hair that went past his shoulders. There were several thin braids in the hanging mane, adorned with minute golden clasps and beads. His eyes were heavily outlined in black-*stibium*, Shizuru presumed-and his garb was entirely white, with trimmings of gold and brown. Like most of the other Otomeian elders, he was wearing a long robe-like garment that reached his feet, with a cloak of fur over it.

"I hear most of you speak our tongue?" she said, appreciating his use of Himean from the beginning.

"Most of us, General," he said. "But the elder ones are more comfortable with it-there was more congress with Hime in our time-and the nobles. Most of us speak Greek as well."

"Excellent." She swept the people behind him with a look. "The king is not in present company?"

"I am afraid not," he replied, courteously putting on an abject expression. "We apologise for this, but His Majesty has been feeling poor of late, Fujino-san. He regrets that he cannot come to greet you outside, as the present weather is contrary to his health. If you would be so kind as to follow us, we shall escort you to him. As for your army, we shall be glad to take care of their needs. We have already prepared lodging and food for them-and all our interpreters are at the ready, although I doubt you shall have need of them very often."

"I am grateful for such thoughtfulness," she replied. "Please lead the way."

"Of course, Fujino-san. I am Hyodo, by the way, one of His Majesty's counsellors."

Accompanied by her senior legate, the interpreters, and a century of soldiers, they followed the Otomeian representatives through the city, leaving the other officers with the wagons and the soldiers. As they passed through the streets, Otomeians thronged the road to watch the foreigners being taken to their king. Some of them even cheered at the sight of the Himeans, awed by their appearances. This prompted a low chuckle from the senior legate, who leaned over to her friend the primipilus-it was Nao's century Shizuru had chosen to bring with her on security detail.

"Nice to be welcomed, all right," Chie said, grinning. "I do get tired of dour looks for welcome, after all. What do you think?"

"Hm. They don't look as uncivilised as the Scurrae," Nao muttered quietly, referring to the allies they had worked with during their last campaign. "But I'll be damned if they don't look decadent."

"I know," Chie replied. "Look at all the gold. Dear me!"



"Filthy rich bastards. I bet the king's a greedy old fart."

The general interrupted silently by sending a humorous warning look at her chief primipilus, earning a grin.

"Right," said Nao, sighing. "I know. Be diplomatic."

"Indeed."

"Maybe we should've brought two centuries," Nao muttered. "I'd feel better with two hundred for a bodyguard instead of one."

A smile: "Do you suspect something, Yuuki-han?"

"If you're asking me if I feel they're going to try anything funny, no," the redhead replied. "But I always suspect something."

Shizuru chuckled and told her to relax.

"I am quite sure they shall not try anything," she said, looking at the buildings they were passing. "Enjoy the tour. Look at Chie."

The person in question laughed.

"Guilty," she said to them. "Look at their dress, the structures. Fascinating!"

"Is it just me or is it warmer inside their walls?" Nao asked.

"It is warmer. Amazing, isn't it? Probably since there's a denser concentration of people, and the walls pretty much stifle the wind."

"Well, I don't care why, so long as it keeps my ears stuck to my head."

They entered a compound and came up to the palace, a striking edifice that appeared to be made almost entirely out of painted stone from the outside. They entered and found that the inside was even more noteworthy, done with elaborate murals and smartly tiled floors.

Making their way through the rooms, they noticed the heat and

made comments to that effect. One of Otomeian representatives explained that the palace was kept heated by continuous fires burning on every floor.

"Hypocausts?" Shizuru offered.

"Yes, General," an Otomeian responded. She motioned vaguely to the ceiling. "And we have fireplaces for each part of the structure, each positioned to maximise heating capabilities for every storey."

"Marvellous architecture."

The Otomeian nodded, smiling with pleasure: "It is the king's pride and joy, General."

"Nice and toasty," Nao commented as they entered the great hall, which was lit by several fires and lamps inside, giving a warm glow to the area. There were already a lot of people-judging from their clothes, mostly more counsellors and elders-waiting for them there. All were seated on cushions and fur rugs on the floor, at low tables that prompted many an odd look among the Himeans. The bizarre tables were laden with a veritable feast, however, ostensibly for the newcomers.

In the middle of the rows of tables and cushions was a clear path leading towards a longer table, this one set on a raised platform. The Himeans were led through this path as the seated people stood up in respect and made bows to them. At the end of the path by the platform was another group of Otomeians, who bowed slightly as Shizuru and her party came near. A tall man with white hair and a long beard braided with small gold twine stepped forward, his manner and the white ribbon of the diadem tied around his brow indicating his identity.

"General Shizuru Fujino," he said, addressing her in faultless Himean. "I am Kruger the Third of Otomeia. We are honoured by your presence."

Shizuru bowed as he did, although rather less deeply: "We are honoured by your having us as well, Your Majesty."

"Please, address me by my name, Fujino-san. It is hardly meet for one such as you to have to refer to me by such distant formal titles. Even we, far as we are from Hime, hear tell of your greatness. I would be ashamed to put on airs before the Red-eyed Conqueror," he intoned, pronouncing one of Shizuru's titles with almost comical gravity.

"Please do not say such things-I would be ashamed to demand such titles for myself," Shizuru said with her customary diplomacy. "As you insist, however, I shall address you as either Kruger-han or King Kruger. Is that satisfactory, Your Majesty?"

"It is satisfactory, Fujino-san." He clapped his hands and the people at the other tables seated themselves. Some of the Himeans looked around curiously, obviously wondering if they were supposed to do the same.

"It is customary among us to indulge in a feast for any important gathering," the king explained. "Will you do us the honour of gracing our banquet with your presence, Fujino-san? Your entourage is included, of course, and we can provide for the soldiers accompanying you too."

Shizuru inclined her head: "As you wish, King. It would be good to have a rest before more pressing matters are discussed."

"Then, please join me at the table." He made a motion to Hyodo, who stepped forward. "Direct Fujino-san's escort to a table."

After they were seated-a slightly amusing affair on the part of Shizuru's group, since they were unused to sitting on the floor with rugs and cushions-the feast began and conversation resumed in the huge hall. All of the Otomeian representatives seated with the Himean officers spoke the Himean language, although with varying degrees of proficiency, and if that language failed, they all spoke superb Greek, which meant the Himeans could still interact comfortably with them even then. As for the king, Shizuru found that he spoke both languages flawlessly, with no trace of a foreign accent. She commented on it.

"The Greek is expected, but my pedagogue was a Himean

philosopher," he explained. "So naturally, he taught me the language as he spoke it in his hometown. Which was Hime itself."

"Yes, you speak it as someone from the upper class or schooled parts of the city would."

"Quite so. And your accent is one of the older ones, I think? From which area did it hail it again?"

She told him.

"Yes, I recall. Most distinguished. I have met people who speak as you do before. It is most pleasant to the ear."

He paused to quaff some wine, urging her to taste it as he had had it opened from his cellars for her sake. She did so and complimented the vintage, privately noting that the rest of his people were drinking a foamy beverage instead. She had done her research and knew what it was, of course: it was the beer of which these mountain peoples were so fond.

"It is expected that I would learn your language," he continued. "No one denies the influence of Hime today, and any ruler of Otomeia must be aware of it, our distance from your city notwithstanding. Besides, our dynastic line has long held client-patron relationships with Hime and its senators."

"Indeed, we have a long history of alliance," Shizuru agreed.

"Although relations between our countries have been sparse of late, unfortunately. How came so many to speak our language here, aside from you, Kruger-han? I understand that it is indeed a well-known language, but I had no idea it was so common in these parts, so far up north."

"It is considered the language of civilised peoples, especially in several of the areas we walk and trade with, so it well befits us to learn it. We interact with your two Northern Provinces, Argus and Sosia, regularly, for example. It is one of the prime languages in Argentum too, and even in the Mentulaean Empire, as you know. It is taught to the upper-class families, and it is a requirement for gaining a position in our government," he explained, after a swig of

wine from his goblet. "The lower classes speak very little of it, although most of them understand it quite well."

"I see." Her eyes went around the hall again. "I must say that I expected more people to be wearing trousers."

"Ah!" He grinned, his blue eyes lighting up with amusement. "Due to the cold, no doubt? Well, all the soldiers' uniforms are trousers. And as to the formal dress you see us wearing at this moment, there are in fact trousers underneath the long tunic. Some of the women wear leg wraps instead."

"Now I see."

"Now then, let us have some entertainment," he said all of a sudden, signalling to one of the attendants behind him. Several musicians took up positions near the platform their table was on, and some people clad in colourful costumes began to dance in the empty space before the platform. Some of the diners clapped and cheered as one of the dancers, in a particularly smooth movement, flipped and twirled in the air.

"I hope it pleases you," the king said, seemingly very pleased himself with the performers putting on their elegant show of athleticism. He tapped his fingers on the table to the rhythm: the king, all of his subjects knew, adored music.

"Interesting, isn't it?" Chie said after a while from Shizuru's side.

"Yes."

As everyone was watching the performers and falling to the repast with renewed vigour-dinner entertainments sharpened the appetite-Shizuru let her eyes wander throughout the hall once more, enjoying the looks of these foreigners. They were all so pale and fair, and because nearly all of them wore white, with the rest wearing shades of fawn and cream, she found them all the fairer for it. They rimmed their eyes too with *stibium*, she noticed, and with their pale skin, it made them look even more exotic.

She was about to put a piece of bread in her mouth when something

caught the corner of her eye, and she turned, looking past the king. There, leaning against the far wall, was a female figure that did not appear to be Himean yet was not wearing white. She seemed to be in dark clothes of some kind-black, to all appearances-which Shizuru could not see perfectly because of the flickering light of the torches and the depth of the shadows in which the figure was standing. What she *could* see perfectly was the figure's face, illuminated in such a way that made her appear to be glowing.

Shizuru paused with her hand halfway to her mouth.

"Fujino-san?" inquired the king, who had noticed her odd pose.

Shizuru looked at him and smiled apologetically.

"Forgive me," she said. "I was just thinking of something."

"Perhaps you are anxious to begin our talks already?"

"It would be appreciated if we could do so."

"Then, if you have finished with your repast, would you like to join me in the council room? Or would you prefer to wait until the feast is over?"

Shizuru glanced at the wall and found that the person was gone.

"Indeed," she said. "It would be best if we could cover some of the ground now and adjourn to another room, King Kruger."

"Of course, Fujino-san. Your attendants?"

A while later, Shizuru and a few of her officers were with the king and several of his head counsellors in another room, this one much quieter. There were two interpreters from the Himean side as a precaution, although the speech being used was Himean. Guards were posted outside the room as they held the conference.

"So he has not yet stepped into your territories?" Shizuru was asking the Otomeians. "Or tried?"

"He has not," a female Otomeian said. "But he is getting closer and

closer. Even now, he is making movements that tell us he plans to besiege Argentum, and that is already a Himean client-state, as well as an ally of ours."

"We shall have to engage him soon," Shizuru said. She looked up. "Your forces?"

"Good," said the other counsellor, a man. "Although we are nowhere near his numbers, ours are better-trained, I think. We have at the ready three thousand horse, fifteen thousand foot, and about a thousand archers. About seven hundred of the cavalry are archers-although the Lupine Division's units are crack shots with arrows as well as spears."

"The Lupine Division?"

"Our elite unit, the first cavalry division. They comprise about seven hundred warriors, all of whom can use nearly any weapon with remarkable skill. Sending them out often decides the course of our battles, so fearsome are they."

"How interesting," Shizuru said, lifting her brows. She was a rarity among Hime's generals in that she loved to use cavalry in her battle tactics. "An elite cavalry squadron? I daresay that would be useful."

"I'd like to see this Lupine Division," her chief primipilus muttered quietly to the senior legate behind her, eyes lighting up with curiosity.

"Why, one of them is just outside the door," the king exclaimed, clapping his hands. The door opened and he called for someone. "Here she is now. Come here, My Dear. I think you should meet our guests."

As the person entered, Shizuru felt herself freeze again, the odd crystallisation going through her body as though it had been touched by some winter wind. The person the king had called in was the figure she had been looking at in the great hall.

The king beckoned to the young woman and said something in the Otomeian tongue to her with remarkable gentleness for a king

addressing a subject: Shizuru noted it. The new arrival then stepped forward, bowing to the Himeans. As her hair fell forward, Shizuru realised why her face-and what a face!-had seemed so much paler than the rest of the Otomeians' faces, even at a distance: her hair was dark as night, black with no hint of brown or red in the strands. The little gold-ornamented braids in it, relatively fewer compared to the others, looked like stars.

"This is Natsuki," the king explained. "She is head captain of the Lupine division, as well as one of my personal attendants. She is one of my most trustworthy subjects and one of the most valued."

The Himeans took in the young woman, appraising her with great interest. Just a little behind her, Shizuru was conscious of her senior legate responding quietly to someone-probably the primipilus-digging her in the ribs.

"I see," Shizuru said to what she now realised was still a girl, speaking a little more softly than she had intended. "We are pleased to be working with you in the coming months."

The Otomeian merely bowed and retreated to one corner of the room with the king's permission, receding into the shadows. The rest continued their conversation, speaking for a good while. Every now and then, however, Shizuru would flick her eyes surreptitiously to the figure standing in the dark, wondering what in the world would drive someone with a face like that to hide it in darkness.

"Now, I believe we have covered everything," the king said, at length. "The rest needs to be planned in detail, and perhaps it would be best to get some rest before that. I am sure you are very tired, Fujino-san."

"The idea is appealing," Shizuru responded with a wry smile. "How nice it would be to actually sleep in a warm room, after having spent so many nights in the chill of marching camp. Why, I am almost afraid I would fail to fall asleep if I do not see my breath misting above me."

"We shall paint it on the ceiling of your rooms if need be," the king laughed, the braids of his white beard waving. "I shall have



someone take you to your rooms, honoured guests. We have rooms enough for each one of you to sleep in peace, as well as comfort."

The primipilus approached the commander when they stood up, which made the others turn towards her. Shizuru understood and looked as though she would shake her head.

"Pardon me, General," Nao said, setting her face into its most pugnacious lines. "But I think I'd better set some of my rankers outside your room, just in case."

Shizuru chuckled: "Unnecessary, I should say. We are clearly among friends here."

Chie added her opinion to the matter: "But it's par for the course even when in camp, Shizuru-san. Maybe Nao's right."

"In camp, yes. As a guest in the home of another, palace though it may be, it is shabby conduct."

Looking from one woman to the other, the Otomeian king took in what was being said and what was being suggested. And then, with the lightning-fast intelligence that was required to be ruler of his nation, he made a decision that he calculated would benefit him in the future, one way or another.

He gently interrupted the three women and offered the resolution he had invented.

"Fujino-san," he said. "Perhaps I can help set your worthy officers' mind at ease. Would you be willing to accept Natsuki as your personal bodyguard while you are our guest? It would set *my* mind at ease as well, for she is the best warrior we have, as well as the most reliable one. I myself would vouch for her, for I too feel exceeding calm when she is near."

It was clear that Nao found this intelligence even more cause to be suspicious, and she was about to protest when Shizuru cut her off with an unexpected response-at least, as far as her officers were concerned.

"I would be happy to have her as my guard," she said firmly, eliciting

a curious look from the senior legate and every other Himean in the room. "Would she be willing, Kruger-han?"

"She will do as I tell her."

"I would prefer to hear it from her, I am afraid, to be sure it is no imposition."

The king called the young woman over from the shadows. She stepped close to them, her face shining in the yellow light.

"I want you to be Fujino-san's personal attendant, Natsuki." Again he spoke more kindly to his supposed attendant than he had with several of his counsellors, and again Shizuru wondered at it. "For as long as she is a guest of our country, guard her with your life."

The girl's eyes, which she had kept lowered all the while, flicked up and met her king's. They were a startling shade of green and the general, seeing the woman's eyes properly for the first time, had the impression of a glittering forest after rain.

*Truly*, Shizuru thought once more, *what a face!*

Natsuki nodded.

"There," the king said, pleased. "You have a bodyguard, Fujino-san."

Nao and Chie turned to look at Shizuru, still wearing bemused expressions on their faces. There was good reason for their confusion. Their commander had never accepted foreign offers of personal bodyguards before, and they wondered why she would do so now. Certainly both thought the young woman, this "Natsuki", cut an enigmatic figure-but why should that make a difference to the general?

The general, for her part, was locked in a staring battle with her new bodyguard. Her eyes twinkled mischievously as she realised that the young woman was not about to cave in to her stare, something fairly unusual. This was the first time anyone had even dared to take her on at first meeting, she thought with amusement, tickled by this interesting situation into which she had willingly walked.

A smile formed on her lips, and she was even more amused to see that spots of colour had appeared on the young woman's cheeks.

"Does this please you, Fujino-san?" the king of Otomeia asked her.

"Oh, yes," Shizuru said, still keeping her eyes on the young Otomeian. "I have a bodyguard."

## Chapter 2

*My thanks to all the reviewers. Before we start, I wish to answer a question first.*

*The question comes from SychoBabbleX, who really flatters me too much-not that I mind. "Inter Nos" is Latin for "Between Ourselves". Incidentally, I have been playing with the names a little. Take the main civilisation our protagonists shall be fighting against-namely, the Kingdom of the "Mentulae". It means a certain unsavoury thing in Latin.*

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### **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Caligae** - Roman soldiers' boots; lace-up sandals made of leather with hobnails on the soles for absorbing the shock of walking.

2. **Chief/senior legate** - The general's topmost military officers are called legates. Of these legates, there is at least one tasked to be superior in rank to the others. In Shizuru's case, it is Chie Harada.

3. **Client-state** - A term for a state allied to Rome/Hime in such a way that it seeks the latter's protection in exchange for its allegiance or tribute.

4. **Consuls** - Chief magistrates of Rome. They preside over the Senate's discussions too. There is one chief or senior consul (here, Haruka Armitage) and one junior consul. The consular term lasts for one year, at the end of which they will step down and new consuls will be voted in from among the other senators.

5. **Military Man (or Woman)** - Military man in Latin is "vir militaris"; it refers to a person whose fame is primarily for his achievements in the military and who tends to move forward in his career using those achievements.

6. **Princeps** - A shorthand term for Princeps Senatus or Leader of

the House. In the Roman Senate, once someone is chosen to be Princeps, he retains that title for life, and thus has a very important (and sometimes, deciding) say in discussions. To be Princeps often means one is a very remarkable speaker. Here, it is Reito Kanzaki.

7. **Pteryges** - The skirt you often see worn by Roman soldiers; a sort of apron made up of leather/metal strips that protect the groin, worn with an actual cloth skirt and often breeches or trousers beneath.

8. **The Cursus Honorum** - The Himean political track, from lowest to highest : quaestor - praetor - consul. One does not go straight from one office to the other in consecutive years, however. Future chapters shall show why.

9. **Tribunate of the Plebs** - The tribunate of the plebs has ten members per year, all called tribunes of the plebs. As there are many other "tribunes" in Roman government, we shall henceforth refer to this office almost always in full. Plebs here is shorthand for plebeian, as only plebeians could be members of this council or could elect members of this council. It was originally created to protect the rights of the plebeians against the patrician aristocracy. Their office's greatest power is the veto. They may veto any motion from any magistrate, presumably (though not always) with good reasons for doing so, which makes them significant forces in politics.

10. **NOTE on Oratory** : The tale follows the Ancient Roman style of speaking in the Senate, which is a very rhetorical, stylised way of presenting arguments. Speeches were expected to be more dramatic than reasonable-which means that logic was often less important than presentation. The best orators combined both aspects in equal parts. There are also several sub-styles of rhetoric, naturally, from the Attic or Athenian to the Asiatic.

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**Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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"I am sure I will be comfortable here, King Kruger," Shizuru was saying to reassure the king of her satisfaction. He had personally seen her to her quarters, along with the horde of servants who had lit the lamps and the fireplace with silent efficiency before quietly backing away. Shizuru's own servants were mostly still with the baggage train, in the middle of unpacking and fetching her effects. The last member of the party at present was the Himean general's new bodyguard: true to form, she had sought the darkest corner of the room.

"I am very glad that our humble lodgings are enough," the king said. "I have had a bath drawn for you as well, Fujino-san. There is a bathing room beyond this one, through that passageway. I hope you find it to your liking, as it is one of the most finely-designed private washrooms in my palace."

"I would appreciate any washroom at this moment, I should say," Shizuru said honestly, rather liking the king's easy manners and subtle way of drawing attention to his palace's richness: he had given her one of the grandest rooms in the entire edifice, it was obvious. "It is one of the greatest disadvantages of going on a campaign that if one is able to take one's time bathing once in a fortnight, that is already terribly lucky. I imagine I am quite foul already."

"On the contrary," the elderly man replied smoothly. "Your beauty is such that it shows purely whatever the situation, General Fujino."

"You would make a fine senator, Your Majesty," she said to the flattery.

Two more women entered the room, these ones younger and noticeably better-looking than the other slaves. The king introduced them as her attendants for the bath and then excused himself, pausing to give final instructions to the young woman skulking in the corner. Shizuru smiled as she heard the words: "Do not let her out of your sight or let even a thorn prick her, Natsuki-she is important to us!"

*That makes me sound like a stray child, no matter how important,* she thought with amusement.

And then the king was gone, the doors to her enormous chambers shut by her Otomeian bodyguard, who strode over to the archway leading to the washroom and went through it. While this was going on, Shizuru dismissed the rest of the Otomeian slaves, saying she would be happy with only the two bathing attendants to assist her. The one Himean servant present-one of hers-she sent to ensure her other slaves knew where to find her.

The Otomeians left laid out fresh clothes on her behalf. They bowed to Shizuru afterwards and stood, waiting as she inspected the Otomeian-style robes they had laid out on the bed. The cloth was the finest linen, and-unsurprisingly-white.

"Do you understand Himean speech?" she asked her attendants. One nodded and the other replied in the language, with a slight accent:

"Yes, General. We speak it as well."

"Good," Shizuru replied. "Then shall we go on to the washing room? I am anxious for a bath."

They bowed again and followed her to the other room, where steam had misted drops of condensation on the walls. Lamps had been lit there as well, showing her a steaming pool of water that could have easily fit five bathers. It was tessellated in an elaborate pattern and had been built into the floor, the clear water showing the whorls of colour at the bottom. Shizuru sighed as she gazed at the inviting sight, then looked up to meet her bodyguard's eyes. The young woman was standing on the other side of the pool, and appeared to have been inspecting the room as well as-Shizuru guessed-the water.

"Well... Natsuki," Shizuru said, testing the name and finding it pleasant on her tongue. "I trust everything is safe?"

The woman nodded, then moved into a corner where an oaken bench was set. She perched herself on it, folding her arms and shutting her eyes.

Shizuru felt intrigue quirk her lips. So her shy, dark little bodyguard

was going to stay in the room? She had honestly not expected that, but she should see potential for entertainment in it.

She divested herself of her armour and clothes, setting each piece aside with the reverence due to objects that protected her life. Once she had come to slipping off the padded undershirt beneath her cuirass, her attendants took over the task. It had been a while since she had let someone do that for her-even back home, in Hime, she usually declined the help of her slaves when she bathed, because she had become so used to the self-service expected of a soldier. But the Otomeian slaves were tender and unobtrusive, and she felt herself relaxing under their attentions. Soon, they had stripped her to her skin. She lowered herself into the water with a drawn-out sigh just as several of her own servants entered the bedroom. She called to them.

"Did you find your way easily?" she asked, telling them to set aside the clothes they had brought. "Good, then please put my gear in the other room. The Otomeians were just about to bathe me, but perhaps two of you can take over instead."

"As you wish, Domina," said the head servant, who conferred quickly with the Otomeians and dismissed them. Shizuru herself merely leaned back in the pool and let the slaves do their jobs. Eventually there were only two left in the washroom, and they bathed her where she sat, their fingers rubbing her taut muscles into the beginnings of comfort.

She was silent at first, her eyes watching only the play of light on the water. After a while, however, she brought them to the figure seated in the corner. She thought the name before she said it, and it sounded sweet if strange even in her thoughts.

"Natsuki," she said.

The young woman opened her eyes and promptly averted them at the sight of Shizuru's naked form. Shizuru fancied that if the Otomeian would step into the circles of light created by the lamps, her face would have those spots of colour once again.

"Why do you always lurk in the dark, Natsuki?" she asked, letting



her voice seep in a slow drawl from her throat. "You do not need to, you know."

She waited a few seconds for the other to answer, but waited in vain. The only response was a slow shake of the head, eyes still averted.

"Really now," she said, deciding to try to bait the woman. "I thought that Kruger-han told you not to let me out of your sight? I am not in your sight if you keep your eyes looking away like that, am I?"

There was no response save for a sharp exhalation from her bodyguard. Shizuru resigned herself to the silence, tempted to roll her eyes. It was not that she disliked the quiet, but she was a naturally companionable creature-and one who, after finding someone as interesting as her new bodyguard, would prefer to talk to this new discovery instead of just regarding her like a goggling mute. Which she had to admit was very tempting: the foreigner had such a face!

Still, she supposed she could get her new attendant to talk to her later. So she closed her own eyes now and leaned her head back, inhaling deeply the fragrance of the oils they were using to clean her dirty hair. She enjoyed the gentle rubbing and scraping away of old skin and dust from her arms, luxuriating in one of the best feelings in the world as far as she was concerned, which was that of being *clean*.

After the bath was over, her slaves helped her dry and dressed her in the native clothes that had been provided for her use. She found herself in a long, robe-like garment similar to the night-robos some wore back in Hime and found it surprisingly comfortable.

She thanked her slaves and sent them away, with instructions to return in the morning with fresh clothing. This left her new bodyguard as her only companion, as it was obvious the young woman would not leave absent her dismissal. Shizuru had no intention of giving that to the Otomeian, or not just yet, when she could have fun with her first. She looked the girl over with a slight smile that would have signalled danger to those who knew her well.

*This is going to be interesting.*

Shizuru settled herself on the bed, which was a large mattress spread on an enormous fur rug on the floor. The fur was soft, obviously not made of mere wolf's pelt. As for the bed, it was filled with cushions covered in various textures and fabrics that brought Nao's comment on the Otomeian 'decadence' to her mind. The linens were all superb-they could even be imported from as far away as Egypt, she guessed-and gold thread had been used to work borders and geometric patterns into the pillows as well as the heaviest blanket. She thought of the king's words earlier and grinned.

*Humble lodgings, nothing!*

She sat back against the pillows but did not lie down. At the moment, she preferred to look at her stoic companion-who resolutely avoided the curious gaze by fixing her own eyes on the floor.

"Natsuki, would you come closer?" she said, after a while.

Somehow managing to radiate apprehension as she did, the other came forward.

"Into the light."

A few more steps. This time she was close enough for Shizuru to see every line of her visage. It did not disappoint, and even caused the older woman to inhale reflexively.

She had been right earlier, she realised: the girl had *a face*. The countenance Shizuru was looking at was remarkably good-looking, sculpted atop fine bones that determined a beauty that would persist even beyond the sag of either age or death. It was a lovely shape, elegant and possessed of a small, pointed nose and sensuous lips, the lower one slightly fuller than the upper. The eyes too were beautiful enough to be unearthly.

*The demure way in which they are downcast right now, however, hardly makes her look a fearsome warrior-not to mention head of an*

*elite division*, Shizuru thought, still inspecting the young woman. *More like a pretty girl at what those back in Hime call "the lethal stage" of unknowing coquetry.*

Shizuru suddenly wondered how young she was. The Otomeian's bearing was noticeably regal; that could throw off an observer as it imitated the poise of a mature woman, and yet the girl's looks argued that she was far younger than her comportment and position might indicate.

"How old are you?" she asked, barely able to restrain her curiosity. Somehow, this girl brought out the most feline interest in her. "You look so young."

When no answer came, she mentally slapped herself.

*Perhaps she is one of those the king was talking about*, she thought. One of those who could understand their language but not speak it. If so, she had been acting very rude towards the Otomeian. Here she had been asking questions all night, without even knowing if there was actually a way for the other woman to answer. Indeed, for all she knew, the girl might be mute!

She decided to reframe the question.

"I myself am twenty-four. Which they say is quite young. Or my detractors in the Senate say, is *very green*," she added with a smirk. "I suppose you are close to my age. Are you the same age, Natsuki?"

When there was no reply, she tried again, consumed by her odd interest.

"Younger, then. Twenty-three?"

Again no reply.

"Twenty-two? Twenty-one? Twenty? Nineteen?"

At "nineteen", the other made a small gesture of her head.

"Nineteen?" repeated Shizuru, provoking a small nod. The general's

eyes widened in both surprise and delight.

"Heavens! Young indeed," she mused aloud, turning over the information in her head. "Why, you are still a girl! How long have you been a warrior? Perhaps you have been doing so as early as I? And to be captain at this age..." She paused and smiled cheerfully at the young woman. "We are both early starters, I suppose."

As usual, only a sullen silence met her friendly speech. She sighed, having been hoping to hear the girl speak-or even just make a sound-at least once. What mattered it if the girl spoke not a whit of Himean? She just wanted her to respond!

"I wish you would speak to me, even if only in your native tongue," she said with disappointment. "Even if I cannot understand it. Or Greek?" She switched to the language of the Hellenes. "If you speak Greek we may speak in that language."

There was no response and she shrugged, close to giving up, but more than a little vexed by her failure. It might be an odd fancy, but she had wanted to see if the girl's voice matched her face. What kind of voice would be produced by that mouth?

Her own mouth twisted as she returned to Himean with a wry observation: "I suppose it is all very well for a bodyguard to keep her counsel, but it is surely another thing when my own bodyguard will not even meet my eyes."

At that, the younger woman's gaze lifted. She looked straight at Shizuru, who was surprised by the sudden and searchlight glare but looked back. The general marvelled again at the Otomeian's ability to stare straight at her without flinching in the way many others did. The young woman had nerve, even if she did not appear to have a tongue. But she did seem to lack a bit of humour too, which Shizuru thought a great pity: one of the things Shizuru loved best was to laugh.

A notion came to her then, a notion born of the rogue inside her heart. Why not tease this damnably surly girl a little? She was so serious! Surely she needed to loosen up a little, be taken down just a peg from her standoffish and silent high horse.

Shizuru moved her gaze to the young woman's lips, intensifying her stare. The other unconsciously mirrored the gesture, acting on instinct. At this, Shizuru smiled to bring the younger woman's eyes back to her own, which she knew were shining with mischief.

*Just as I thought.*

Realizing what she had just done, the Otomeian woman pinked with mortification and looked away. Shizuru smiled at her again, entertained by the reaction.

"You really are quite attractive for a cavalry captain," she said to provoke her further, her eyes still on the green ones. "And you have such beautiful lips."

The colour on Natsuki's face had now deepened to a furious red, even as she snapped her gaze back at her tormentor defiantly.

"One wonders... what you think of *my* lips," Shizuru continued, unable to resist-the Otomeian was simply too amusing. She nearly burst into laughter as she saw the girl's eyebrow begin to twitch.

*The poor child*, she thought after managing to swallow the hilarity. *I really am hopeless, baiting her this way when she is supposed to be looking after me*. Instead of letting the girl do her task in peace, here she was, teasing her relentlessly. True, she had a bit of a reputation for teasing, but she herself knew that she hardly teased people as much as this back in Hime. Perhaps it was a little cruel for her to be doing so now, especially to someone seeing to her safety.

She lifted her eyebrows when the younger woman suddenly broke her glare to turn away, heading for the corner she had been occupying a while ago. Shizuru watched as her bodyguard stooped and retrieved something from a pack she had apparently left on the floor, returning to stand before the Himean woman. The girl held it out in one hand.

"What?" said the older woman, wondering what the object being extended to her was. "What is this, Natsuki?"

Natsuki, whose head had been turned away, merely looked at her.

Wordlessly, she pulled back her hand to handle the object. Shizuru watched as she pulled at a clasp to reveal that the thing in her hands was a small container made of wood. The Otomeian opened it and dipped a finger inside. When she pulled back her digit, it was glistening. She brought the finger to her mouth and started rubbing it there, slicking her lips with whatever the gleaming substance from the container was.

The Himean watched this exercise with quiet fascination. When Natsuki began rubbing her lips, Shizuru had felt herself go into a sort of stupor, her eyes fixed on her companion's mouth. She was jolted out of this trance only when Natsuki thrust the container towards her again, still looking away.

"I see," Shizuru said, aware that her voice was uncomfortably thicker than usual. "So this is how you deal with the cold. A kind of balm, I take it?"

At a nod from the younger woman, she took the container and proceeded to do as the other had done. It stung a little upon initial contact, as her lips had cracked and chapped on the march, but she felt a soothing sensation gradually spread over the area.

"Oh, that does feel better." She marvelled at the relief. "This balm is superb. Thank you."

She smiled and handed back the container to her bodyguard. As she did, their fingers slipped over each other in the exchange.

*Rough*, she thought. *But very warm.*

"I am glad that your concern for me is so great that it extends even to protecting my lips," she said suggestively, still unable to rein in the rogue inside her that seemed obsessed with teasing Natsuki. Why *did* it feel like that? "How nice to have such a devoted protector."

She grinned unrepentantly at the Otomeian's discomfiture, watching the fine twitch of the fine dark brows: they seemed to want to slant downwards even more than they already were. Suddenly, the younger woman turned again and retreated to her corner. She did

this soundlessly, her movement much like the shadows of which she seemed so fond.

*Should I let her stay here?* pondered Shizuru, watching the young woman stoop to return the container to the pack. *I should make her stay outside, really, if she is supposed to be my watch for the night. That would be usual, but...*

*But what?* she asked herself. But the girl might be uncomfortable standing guard all evening outside? Still, she supposed that was par for the course with a bodyguard. Yet it seemed churlish to situate the girl uncomfortably somehow. And besides, it was not even certain if she was supposed to be staying outside. Was that how Otomeians treated their bodyguards? Shizuru could only guess, could only recall the oriental and southern potentates she had heard brought their bodyguards into every room. It did not matter if they were only sleeping or even about less innocent business in the bedroom: royals seemed to believe it safer to have their guards present at every second, without even a door between them.

She supposed that might be what Otomeians did as well. And some part of her whispered that it was understandable, with a bodyguard like hers: would one not want that face nearby and visible at all times?

That was another of her strange whims talking, she supposed: they seemed to be turning up more and more. How eccentric she really was becoming! Well, and did not her fellow senators constantly remark on it?

She looked at the girl in her room once again, narrowing her eyes in the dim light. Again she found her eyes gravitating to the Otomeian's countenance, that splendid young face.

She shrugged her shoulders privately and threw caution to the wind. Oh, why not let the girl stay in? Eccentricity should be indulged once in a while, she decided. She was a light sleeper anyway, and she doubted the girl posed any danger. The Otomeians would gain nothing at all by harming her person, and she had detected no malice earlier from the king. Why else had she refused her centurion's earlier proposition to put a guard at the doors of her

chambers? Her only hesitations had been in the fact that she was unused to sleeping in a room with someone else in it, for she made even her slaves stay out of her bedroom back in Hime. Sociable she might be, but she was also very private about certain things and certain places.

Still, she doubted someone as unobtrusive and quiet as her new bodyguard would trouble her privacy greatly in sleeping.

"Shall you stay here?" she asked.

She perceived a nod. So it was how the Otomeians' bodyguards worked!

"Where shall you sleep?"

She lifted her eyebrows as the figure in the corner sat down and put her back against the wall.

"I could not countenance that: it is so uncomfortable," she said. A grin: "Do you not want to join me in bed?"

She felt the glare even before the flickering light let her see it.

"I suppose that is a no," she said with a low chuckle. "Pity."

She got up, taking two very heavy blankets from the covers piled on the mattress and three cushions among what had to be a dozen. When she reached Natsuki, she saw the confusion patent on the girl's face-for it was still very much a girl's face, she decided.

"It would be a waste to have so many of these without you using them," she announced while handing the pile to the Otomeian. The younger woman took them abashedly, then ducked her head to contemplate them where they lay on her lap.

"Is that all right? I am not at all unwilling to share more of the pillows or covers with you if you need them."

A nod to show they were enough. Shizuru smiled and returned to the bed. Moving some of the pillows aside, she stretched out upon the sheets and looked up at the ceiling.



"Put out the lamps when you are done, please," she said, closing her eyes. "Have a good sleep, Natsuki."

The only answer was a shuffling sound that indicated the other was arranging the items Shizuru had given her.

*I've never slept with anyone else in the room, before, now that I think about it*, she thought idly. It was strange to know that there was another person, not even just a mere slave, inside the room. She wondered if she could make her peace with it enough to actually fall into slumber, or if she would end up regretting this little game she had taken on for amusement.

Her concerns turned out to be in vain. She fell asleep so quickly that she did not even hear the Otomeian girl crouching beside her, studying her face with silent interest before blowing out the last of the lamps.

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"It's a crock, is what it is!"

The general and the other officers turned to look at the senior legate, who had made the exclamation.

"Well, we all know it, don't we?" Chie growled, directing her gaze to her commander. "Those asses in the Senate would give anything to see you come back crushed and bawling for someone else to do it."

"I fancy they would rather I did not come back at all," Shizuru said dryly. "If only to be able to say that I cannot even handle this 'small affair'," she finished, quoting the words of the senior consul in describing the Mentulæan situation.

"'Small affair' my eye," returned her chief legate. "Armitage is crazy if she thinks of this as small in any way. Here we are, posted in some foreign country with barely five legions-maybe four, if we actually redistributed the soldiers so the legions weren't understrength-and all to cover the entire North against what could be an army of a hundred thousand imperials, if you believe the reports!"

"Well, this was a bit of a suicide mission-or my enemies meant it to

be one, as Reito-han put it," Shizuru said, referring to one of her allies in the Senate, the famous orator and current *Princeps*. "It merely shows how determined they are to see me fail an enterprise, even at the expense of Hime, when even the Princeps is unable to sway a vote as he wishes."

Chie shook her head as she recalled that ill-omened senatorial meeting. The junior consul had been the one to convene it, subsequent to receiving a report from the governor administering one of the Himean provinces in the North. The report, written a little over two months earlier, was read to the House by the junior consul, Utada Asou.

"In sum," Utada had said, after finishing it, "the Mentulaeans are moving in force upon the Northern Territories, it seems. We already have multiple reports that one of their armies crossed their empire's border far north of one of our provinces and sacked several local villages. They have not yet set foot on any of our client-states' territories, to be sure, nor indeed any of ours. But they are very close and they come as an army."

"Is the Mentulaeen king expanding his territory, Junior Consul?" someone asked.

"It appears so to me, and our sources concur with that impression. We would do well to be wary of this, Members of the House. Such an expansion might threaten even our own provinces there, from Sosia to Argus, both of which are significant-Sosia, for its mines, and Argus for its function as the prime port in those lands. Senators, we must take action."

There was a brief moment of buzzing along the rows, until one senator stood and belched out a proposition.

"I propose that we send an investigative party to determine what action is proper! Until then we cannot engage in any hostile action, for we have treaties with the Mentulae. Armies are not what this calls for. We should avoid leaping into military action before we are certain it is needed. Send only an investigative party!"

"An *investigative* party?" burst out a voice, from the centre rows. The

speaker, bright hair seeming to bespeak her indignation, rose to her feet.

"Members of the House, let me speak," she cried, patently exasperated. "To send a purely investigative party is to send a lamb to the wolves! I know how much you hate the idea of paying out more legions, but wouldn't it cost more to lose our provinces in the North? To lose our many people there?"

"But we don't know yet that that's even a possibility, Tokiha-san!" came the retort.

"Of course it's a possibility! It's not a certainty even now, but it's a possibility. We all know how these particular northern barbarians act-haven't we had several treaties with them, all of which they broke, sooner or later? No, this is no longer a matter of investigation but of military caution. To that end, an investigative party would be a huge underreaction!"

The junior consul followed this with a question, addressing the one who had spoken.

"What do you suggest, then, Tokiha-san? You seem to have an alternative in mind."

The red-haired senator nodded.

"Send a party to *investigate*, by all means," she declared. "I agree with that much, Asou-san. But do not make it a *mere* investigative party! Send an actual army to garrison our territories as well as the client-states in the North, for-investigation or not-I don't see any party surviving an encounter with the Mentulaeen king without an army behind it! Why else would he march at the head of a column of several thousand soldiers into the Northern Territories? Do we really think he would content himself with just having a late autumn walk to sample the riches of our provinces? Send him senators, yes. But also send an army!"

A furore exploded at this suggestion as senators and consuls alike tried to get a word in, shouting and gesticulating to draw attention to themselves. The senior consul, by dint of having by far the strongest

voice in the House, managed to scream them all to silence.

"Esteemed consuls Armitage-san, Asou-san, may I speak?" asked a clear voice, easily distinguishable as that of *Princeps Senatus* Reito Kanzaki. Given an affirmative, he got up and strode forward, stopping at the centre of the floor. He took a moment there to arrange his toga: the long and draped garment that was standard attire for Himean senators during formal functions. His friends watched him fuss over his dress with amusement, for they knew it was one of his tactics to get attention-by primping his attractive, broad-shouldered figure in a sort of flirtation with the audience.

"Honoured Members of the House," he began. "I agree with the words of Tokiha-san, that we cannot simply allow the Mentulaean king, Obsidian, to run amuck as he pleases. It is a significant threat to us if he is somehow able to consolidate the Mentulaean Empire into such a force as would pose danger to the lands bordering Our Sea. We cannot condone such a peril, nor can we condone letting it pass unmitigated while we waste valuable time sending out an investigative party under care of some meek diplomat. Yet neither can we act hastily, too, for there is still a possibility-a very small possibility-that the Mentulaean advances can be stopped before they reach our own northern lands."

He held up his hand to stay the murmurs and proceeded with what he had to say.

"Yes, it's possible," he said to them. "How can anyone doubt it? Reflect, Members of the House, upon the fear that our armies are able to instil in savage hearts, no matter how barbarian these hearts may be. The prudent option, therefore, is to send an army to garrison, as Tokiha-san said, but with an initial view to intimidation that may forestall any actual warfare. It may be unnecessary to incur casualties or losses at this point... although I do feel that we shall have to, later on, against this particular king. So yes, send an army. Our armies are the backbone of our strength and pride as a nation, and all other nations cower at the sight of them. So let the Mentulaeans have sight of them! Let King Obsidian see what he may face if he does not heed good sense and turn tail! It is for this reason that we absolutely have to send an army and not just a soldierless investigative party. And, if all else fails, at least we shall

have forces immediately at hand for any possible engagements."

"Prudent words, Princeps," said the junior consul. "And fair to the mind. I for one support the proposal. Members of the House, is anyone opposed or does anyone else have a better plan? I address the question first of all to my fellow consul, Armitage-san."

The senior consul shook her blonde head and thundered: "A good plan, Kanzaki-san, My Good Felon!"

Rustling titters and chuckles filled the floor as another senator on dais leaned towards the consuls and whispered a correction behind the hapless Haruka Armitage, who had a horrid knack for malapropisms. Meanwhile, the Princeps returned to his seat and turned his head to smile at the person to his left.

"Well now," this person was saying to him. "As far as your exploits with women go, she got the word right, did she not?"

He laughed and leaned towards her, actually angling his chin slightly upwards because she was extremely tall.

"I'm a better fellow than I am a felon, I assure you," he whispered. "You will most likely be given the commission, Shizuru-san, to lead this expedition. You do know that, right?"

Red eyes danced: "Why should it not go to another of the military men and women we have in the House?"

"Because none of them is as famous as you are right now. Furthermore, none of them has a ready army the way you do at the moment. Your veterans from Africa have not been discharged from last year's campaign and are still parked in the Campus Martius, just outside the city. Fortuitous that the Senate was considering sending them back to Africa Province to stiffen up the garrison there temporarily, no? Now you have them ready to go at a moment's notice... Only it looks like they shall be heading northwards, instead of southwards to Africa as we had thought before this."

"The House might well choose another senator to lead them there."

"That would be silly indeed, when their old general is already here."

Come now, and tell me. Shall you take it if they offer the commission?"

"You make it sound as though I have a choice, Reito-han," Shizuru finally sighed. "As the commission of the Senate is the command of Hime, I cannot but do as they see fit."

"True, but there are ways of getting out of commissions, such as a good group of senatorial allies-or I daresay even a Princeps Senatus-might put into speech."

She flashed him a demure smile.

"If you are asking whether I would like the commission or not so that you could put your persuasive powers to work for which one I want, then allow me to say this: I would like it, insofar as I have always wanted to see the North, and I would not like it, insofar as I had hoped to stand for praetor this year, or possibly even the next."

He nodded in understanding.

"A difficult choice indeed," he said. "Personally, I would prefer that you take it, as I am in doubt that anyone else could manage such a potentially dangerous campaign as effectively. Furthermore, I believe it would be to your advantage to postpone your candidacy for one more term."

"Oh?"

"The conservatives are still strong in the Senate, and to top it all off, they've managed to overrun this year's Tribune of the Plebs as well." He made a shrugging gesture. "No, Shizuru-san, it would be no loss at all to delay running for praetor. Besides, I hear that the northern provinces are very rich-and that the allied state of Otomeia, though remote and extremely difficult to reach, is also very wealthy. It might be to your advantage to visit that region for the moment."

At this moment, the senior consul's voice boomed out once more.

"As the House has no objections, we adopt the measure," she proclaimed. "Who will be commander? I offer myself, for one. This needs the touch of the senior consul," she declared, drawing herself

up pompously.

"I would protest," said one of the more aged senators, rising. "The senior consul must stay in Hime to oversee things, particularly as we are not yet assured that several other threats we have in the south are finished. I would propose that the commission be given to one of the other senators."

"I second the motion," announced Tate Yuichi. "Let it be handed over to someone else. To send both the senior consul and our forces to handle the Mentulaean situation-just plain silly, especially if it drags out into the elections!"

The Princeps chuckled at this.

"Tate never did get the finer points of rhetoric," he mumbled to his seatmate.

"Indeed," Shizuru said, trying to suppress a laugh. "But he is a decent officer, as well as a good man to trust things to, I have heard."

"I know," Reito replied. "And that's the reason I endorsed him when he said he wanted to enter the Senate."

"But."

"But he'll never make it to the consulship. Too weak in the tongue and not enough of a politician."

"Armitage-han never really understood the finer points of oration either," Shizuru whispered back, smiling. "And she is the senior consul."

"Yes, but she definitely does not have a weak tongue!" he hissed to her.

"Members of the House," intoned another senator. "I move that the commission be given to one who can handle such a task *and* has veterans of her own already at hand-let it be Shizuru Fujino."

Fresh mumbling broke out at this, and Shizuru and Reito halted their

dialogue with each other, as most of the senators were looking their way. It was no surprise, of course, and Shizuru did not even bother making it look as though it was.

"I protest," said someone, just as the senior consul appeared to be on the verge of another explosive outburst. "Fujino-san has just finished one campaign, and now we are to send her out again? To such a taxing situation, no less? We are grateful for what she has done in Africa, of course, but that does not give her priority in our selection of generals for the legions. No, fellow senators, it is time to send someone else into the fray. Let others have their chance! I suggest Yukino Kikukawa, who deserves the commission better, especially as she is currently a praetor."

"I endorse that suggestion!" cried the senior consul, eager to get her friend and subordinate to head the enterprise. Indeed, it was exactly what their faction needed to consolidate their influence: the promise of a successful campaign, both in terms of victory as well as spoils. As if on cue, her senatorial allies began to rally their voices in agreement. However, there was an opposing wave that clamoured for the other choice. Loud words began to turn into shouts and madness threatened to overtake the meeting.

"Silence!" cried the junior consul, addressing both the senators on the floor as well as his screaming consular colleague. "Silence, I say, for the Princeps wishes to speak! Members of the House, you are acting like rabble-control yourselves, if you please!"

Eventually, they calmed enough to allow Reito to begin his speech. He put on his most formidable air as he addressed them, making sure to stare each one in the eye to press his point.

"Honourable Members of the House," he started, sparing no time for priming and sporting a disapproving scowl from the beginning. "I said before that the situation has the potential for extreme gravity. Yet what I've heard just now seems to be ignoring this. Have you not heard my warnings? We may be facing a Vesuvius on the verge of eruption! Have we any desire to be eradicated that way-melted off the face of the Earth after taking all warning signs lightly? Do we wish to be so blind, so stopper up our ears to all rumblings?"



He paused, took a deep breath, and drew himself up to his full height.

"Fellow Senators, this is a force of nature we face!" he boomed out. "And if we take it lightly, if we do not heed the rumblings in the distance, that force will overflow and reach even our shores! Yes, even across Our Sea! I adjure you, be prudent in your decisions, for this is not merely a question of the Northern Territories. Recall the doings of these Mentulæan kings, even the ones before this Obsidian. Do you not see their arrogance? Do you not see how savage, how primal these people can be? They are as unchecked in their ambitions as a volcano is unchecked when it explodes-they have no sense of where to stop! And if we take them lightly, they will not stop!"

He turned and faced the consular platform, bowing slightly.

"I have no intent," he continued. "Of deprecating the esteemed senator Kikukawa-san, fellow Members of the House. Truly she promises great things in the future, that much may be seen from her past achievements and conduct. Yet I am wary of sending one who has not yet headed a military campaign, even if only as a legate, to the situation we are speaking of. For that, Fellow Senators, is to taunt Fate. It is to taunt Nature, by saying that we take it-in the guise of these primal barbarians we face-so lightly that we make it a mere training ground for our unblooded. And one does not taunt Nature. Such an act only leads to the worst catastrophes, and you know it. So I say we must give Nature and this threat its due! Present it with our best, our most blooded."

He wheeled to face the rest of the senators instead of the consuls on the dais.

"There," he said, turning to hold out his hand to the direction where Shizuru sat, "is our best this very moment. Shizuru Fujino has just wrapped up the Numidian Campaign in Africa to Hime's benefit... and has made every battle she has thus far generalled an unqualified victory! She has won battles that are already legendary and on which many of our current military experts have written treatises of analysis and praise! She has seized fortresses so apparently impregnable that my heart stills in my breast to think of

the feats! And she has won something no other in this present House has, which is the greatest of all our military decorations! Can anyone possibly have a record here that can compare to that list? Can anyone else show me a *corona obsidionalis* ?"

No one could, of course, so he rushed on with the rest before they started protesting again.

"Now, you may not all like her, Fellow Senators," he continued. "But by god, you do not need to! You can even hate her if you wish! But you need to acknowledge that we have a threat spilling over the northern boundaries and that she is the person with the best chance of pushing that threat right back into the pits from where it originates! All the other generals with a comparable level of experience are away and cannot be recalled from their own posts for this. Those who *are* here are either too aged already-esteemed though they may be-or tied down by posts of their own. They also do not have veteran soldiers readily available, ones who have fought for and would willingly fight for them again even in the wastes of the North. Do you really think soldiers would be happy to sign up for such a campaign if just any commander were heading it? Even levying recruits would become a challenge! But it would not be if we had someone of Shizuru Fujino's repute heading the commission."

"So it's Shizuru Fujino we have to send," he concluded, "if we are to take this threat seriously and repel it effectively. And before you begin to think this possible threat is a small thing, reflect on how close the Mentulaeen Empire is to Upper Fuuka, with only our neighbour Caledonia and the Alps to separate them. Therefore, we must send someone who can do the job as well as possible, and not take any chances with this matter! Again, who cares if you hate the person we send? What is important is that the Mentulaeans shall fear her! Senators, see sense: it is Fujino-san who must be sent!"

After such a speech, there was little for the House and the consuls to do but give the commission to the woman many of them did not want leading another military expedition-not least because she had a knack of being so successful (and thus, enviable) on them. Shizuru accepted the campaign with a short and gracious speech. The other faction had another ace up their sleeves that even the Princeps failed to foresee, however. It was enunciated by none other

than the patrician senator Sergay Wang, another of the House's eminent orators.

Given, he said, that this was indeed a potential disaster, the House must indeed send its best, and its very bravest. But as it was a potential disaster and still not an actual one yet, then surely it would be unwise to expend unnecessary resources for the sake of what could well be averted. There were other threats to Hime to consider. Hence, he concluded, the Senate should send Fujino-san with her best legions-but not too many of them. The clincher came with the prescribed limit: five legions, at most.

"Five? Heavens above, that is suicide," the stunned Princeps had pronounced to Shizuru, upon hearing of the recommendation. He along with several other senators had argued strongly against it, but the other senators, ever mindful of costs, had adopted the "moderate" option and passed it, to the satisfaction of the senior consul and her allies. It had been disheartening to Shizuru's supporters, yet she herself had shown no visible discomfort at the time. Only later did she speak of it scathingly to her friend and long-time senatorial ally, Chie Harada.

*And now we're facing a situation that isn't just a potential disaster but a probable one,* Chie thought. The minimum number of legions was usually two for an army, and the standard number was six. *Anything above six means that the campaign's going to be an awful one, and this promises to be an awful one. And here we are, with an impressively understrength five!*

"The bastards," she hissed, finishing her reminiscences. "Sergay! How I wanted to shove my toga down his throat and stop that evil tongue!"

Shizuru laughed, again the portrait of inhuman calm.

"Come now," she said. "There is nothing to be done-at least, not until we actually are provoked somewhere into a battle with them, Chie-han. Then we can send off a request to the Senate for a few more legions up here and tell them the potential has turned into the actual. Otherwise, I fear all we can do is prepare and use what we do have wisely."

"My cousin told me that he overheard Armitage's people talking about what would've happened if Senator Kikukawa had been the one sent here," another legate noted, entering the conversation. "They say the senior consul would have requested *your* legions from the Numidian Campaign anyway, Fujino-san."

Everyone at the table burst into laughter.

"Of course-it would have been a friendly request, certainly," Shizuru said, with light sarcasm. "Just as I am sure my veterans would have gone along willingly with that."

"Can you imagine Nao's reaction?" Chie stuttered out, still shaking with mirth at the idea of the fanatically loyal Fujino legions being commanded by someone who was notorious for being a Fujino opponent. "She'd terrorise Yukino-san so much that the senator would be begging to go back home only a day into the bargain."

"True, Fujino-san," said another legate. "You're the only commander who can manage that one."

The general tilted her head thoughtfully.

"Nao-han can be a little complex to deal with," she allowed. "But she is a brilliant soldier and the best primipilus one can have."

"I'll second that," said Chie. "She's a terror-especially that tongue of hers!-but there's no one else you'd want to be behind you in a tight spot."

"Except for the general herself, naturally," supplied a voice from the doorway.

They looked up to find the centurion in question walking towards them. She saluted Shizuru first, then was told to sit at the table and break her fast with them.

"I'll say this much about this place," she said. "They've got that nice sense of comfort down-nothing beats sprawling around like this."

"But this just seems like such a savage way of reclining," one of the legates remarked. "Resting on a couch for meals is normal. But on

cushions and rugs *on the floor* ? Barbarian!"

"I would think," Shizuru said suddenly. "That it is improper for us to call them barbarians. We Himeans tend to think of ourselves too much as the only civilised people in the world, with little appreciation for how others must think us the opposite. Indeed, were we to ask the Otomeians or any other people, for that matter, they would say that we seem barbaric to them."

The others looked at their general, unsure of what to make of her statement. She had such radical ideas sometimes that they were never really certain of how to react to her remarks.

"Anyway," said the centurion. "I like this place. Good food. Too much meat, though."

"Here's some bread," said the senior legate, handing her a hunk of it from one of the plates. Nao tore it apart with her hands.

"Scouts came back, General," she said, referring to Shizuru's order that she send the scouts out in the morning to double back on their tracks up and around the Otomeian mountain and see if anyone had been following them. "All's clear."

"Good. Thank you for your work."

Nao nodded, chewing through some bread. She smiled at the commander after she had swallowed it and said, "Say, General, where's that ghost of yours, by the way? Or should it be your sphinx? Has she said anything yet?"

The others laughed. "The General's Sphinx" had become a familiar sight as well as joke to them, as she simply seemed to follow Shizuru everywhere, obviously taking the king's injunction to 'never let her out of sight' to heart. It had been several days, and still the young woman had said nary a word to any of the Himeans, which led some to conclude that she was mute-something Shizuru was beginning to think herself, although for some reason she doubted it. She had been meaning to ask the king, but kept forgetting due to the sheer number of things that needed doing.

"She is right there," Shizuru said to her primipilus, flicking her eyes to the "ghost" standing in a distant corner of the dining room. "You really should not call her that. She has a name. Natsuki."

"What exotic names they have!" said another legate. "And they do not even have last names-how do they tell them apart if two people have the same name?"

"Their names have meanings," said another officer, who was also an interpreter. "So each one is made to be unique. Otherwise, they add 'the second' or 'the third', such as in the king's case. Usually, names are only repeated in families."

"What does 'Natsuki' mean?" Chie asked, before Shizuru could ask the question.

"I think it means 'summer child' or 'summer girl'. Something like that."

There was a pause followed by uproarious laughter. Even the general had to struggle to mask her giggles.

"*Summer* child?" Nao guffawed. "That's the coldest 'summer' I've ever seen!"

"It doesn't really... suit her, does it?" Chie managed, in between laughs. "The 'summer', particularly."

"Ah, now," Shizuru said, reprimanding them even as her face showed her own amusement. "You should not say such things. Natsuki has superb hearing, from what I have noticed, and she can understand us."

Indeed, when they turned to look, the general's bodyguard was glaring at them so horribly that their laughter dried out. Only the primipilus was unfazed, and she hooted and snorted away, aggravating the intensity of the offended girl's glare.

"Oh, perfect-just perfect!" she said, as she laughed.

"Yuuki-han, really," said Shizuru in a reprimanding tone.

"Sorry, General," the redhead grinned, shoulders still shaking. She flicked a glance to the figure in the corner who was still glaring at her, and narrowed her eyes.

She dropped her voice.

"I don't trust her one bit," she muttered. "You shouldn't keep her in your room, General. Who knows if she's an assassin."

"Then she would have killed me long before," Shizuru replied smoothly. "Or tried to, at least. But she has not once ever threatened me or given me cause to distrust her. Besides which, she is quite expressive of face in some ways: I daresay I would know if this girl were planning something nasty from a single look at her. No, trust me, I have no suspicions towards Natsuki."

"Still. I don't like the look of these Otomeians." Nao scowled. "And what's with their eyes? All that black stuff like them Egyptian ponces-creepy!"

"I like it," said one of the legates, making his way through another cup of watered wine. "It sort of makes their eyes pop out, you know, the colour. It looks especially good on Natsuki-san, actually, because of the colour of her eyes. Quite a ravishing green! Like a cat. Or broken glass."

"I think," Chie put in, grinning, "that everything looks ' *especially good* ' on Natsuki-san. Wouldn't you say so, Shizuru-san? She's actually... oh, terrifically good-looking!"

Shizuru smiled, nodding in quiet agreement. One of the legates laughed and they turned to look at him.

"You see," he said, speaking in a low voice. "Half of the soldiers are already eyeing her like animals in heat. Just eyeing, mind you. She's too intimidating to be approached. But that sort of adds to it, that she doesn't say anything at all, and they all think she's the-how did Tenjou put it, Nao-san? I know you were there when we were talking about it."

Nao rolled her eyes.

"The sexy, silent type," she said. "Anyway, they can't miss her since she's always trailing after you, General. But you're right-she's drawing a lot of attention. Some of my boys and girls have their eyes on her too."

"Well," Shizuru said, eyebrows shaking a little at the ends as though they wanted to draw together. "Well, now."

Chie noted the displeasure in her friend's eyes and wondered what it meant. Did Shizuru perhaps disapprove strongly of the soldiers getting together with auxiliaries? Well, that was understandable, certainly. She decided to change the subject.

"So, what's on the schedule for today, Shizuru-san?" she asked.

Shizuru, broken from her thoughts, looked up at her.

"Inventory, I think," she said. "It is time for preparations."

She signalled to one of the Otomeian slaves serving them that she wanted to wash her hands, and was provided with a basin of water. After drying her hands on the supplied cloth, she reached for and began to pull on her *caligae*, lacing the cords tightly.

"Please prepare the legions for inspection," she instructed, walking towards the doorway with her red cloak flapping behind her. "I shall meet you all at the square. I need to see Hyodo-han, first."

They went their separate ways and Shizuru found herself striding through the hallways of the Otomeian palace with her bodyguard. She slowed her steps and asked the other woman to walk by her side, telling herself that she was doing it as a precaution.

*How silly I am, she thought as Natsuki complied wordlessly. I certainly do not suspect her of being a spy, much less an assassin who would stab me in the back. So why do I keep asking her to walk in step with me? She is supposed to be simply my bodyguard, after all, or at least my Otomeian attendant. Now it looks more as though she is either a high officer in my army or a friend-which would be fine if not for the fact that having her by my side this way only makes her refusal to speak with me even more noticeable. I really should*



*ask them if she is mute.*

She looked at the woman from the corner of her eye, seeing the proud rise of the nose in profile. Letting her gaze fall lower, she noted the dark uniform that no doubt added to the "eyeing in heat" that her legate had spoken of. It was an extremely form-fitting affair, unlike those of the regular Otomeian robes or even the Himean issue for soldiers-which was composed of *pteryges* with loose trousers underneath, and the standard cuirass covered by cloaks and tunics in winter.

In contrast, her bodyguard's uniform seemed to be made up of a dark, fitted shirt that shut by means of tucks in a front flap, and similarly-coloured trousers that appeared much slimmer compared to the Himean ones, as they were overlaid by wide leaves of leather that wrapped around the thigh. These leather pieces were strapped together to prevent them from slipping down the leg, and Shizuru guessed they were to prevent chafing when the troopers were on their horses. The shirt, too, was fitted even closer to the outline of the body due to a complex sort of torso-protection made of leather strips or belts, each belt about three fingers wide. There were sheaths and pockets worked into the belts for an array of darts that Shizuru guessed to be thrown weapons. There was no cuirass as far as she had seen.

All in all, a complex outfit, Shizuru thought. It was made for lightness and manoeuvrability, which explained the lack of metal and chainmail on it. She initially thought that it was the standard uniform for the Otomeian military-but attendance of a demonstration from the Otomeian ranks disproved that. Upon asking about it, she had been informed that it was the uniform exclusive to the Lupine cavalry unit. Afterwards, being presented with some of the other members of that unit, she had made a mental note that none of them looked as good in the uniform as Natsuki did. Her senior legate had been right earlier in saying things tended to look especially good on the girl: she really did have remarkable looks. Even Shizuru, who was possessed of spectacular ones herself, had to admit to the power of the girl's exotic appeal.

Turning a corner, they met some servants carrying packages. The Otomeians stopped and bowed to them. Shizuru smiled and inclined

her head, not pausing her steps. Natsuki for her part ignored them and made no motion to show acknowledgement of their presence.

After a moment, Shizuru spoke.

"So aloof and so silent," she said nonchalantly, still walking. "It is no wonder they call you a Sphinx, on occasion."

She sensed an almost tangible drop of temperature from the younger woman.

"Did I forget to mention *so cold*?" she quipped. "Ah, Natsuki. It means 'summer child', eh?"

This time, the glare was impossible to miss, even if only from the corner of her eye. She turned her head to face the dark-haired girl, meeting the glare without fear.

"Do not mind them. For my part, I honestly think it is a beautiful name, Natsuki."

She fancied that she felt the heat coming from her bodyguard's reddening cheeks even before she saw it. The glare melted away, replaced by a completely bewildered look.

Shizuru had to smile.

# Chapter 3

## Vocabulaire/Notes:

1. **NOTE on centurions and primipilii** - The **chief primipilus** of the Ninth Legion is Nao, but there are other **primipilii** [plural] in the army because there are other legions. The primipilus is essentially the senior centurion for a legion.

2. **Cursus honorum** - Lit. "Way of Honour", the Roman political track.

3. **Praefectus fabrum** - This particular prefect was a civilian (as opposed to a military officer or soldier) appointed by the general to be responsible for equipping and supplying the needs of an army. He/she is generally someone with a good mind for logistics and accounting.

4. **Rhomphaia; falx; naginata** - All three are actual, existent weapons. They also happen to all be of the polearm (lance or spear) type.

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## Inter Nos

*par ethnewinter*

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Nao Yuuki watched the troops being marshalled into formation, inspecting their ranks with an eye long used to it. She looked around after a while and noted the Otomeians milling at the edges of the square, obviously there to catch a glimpse of the Himean forces in their exercises. Most of the bystanders appeared to be civilians, although there were a good number of local soldiers in their uniforms. That was good—at least they would have an idea of how the Himean legions worked, even before joint exercises. She turned to the centurion next to her, instructing him to see to her century. He

accepted the order with a salute.

*They're all big boys and girls, she thought as she walked away. It's not like they need me to hold up their tunics for them to piss.*

The primipilus took the main street, sneering at the Otomeian citizens whom she passed. Not really out of dislike: she simply had a habit of doing it when she was in a hurry to get somewhere. They scurried away before the flame-haired woman, some bowing and some too intimidated to do more than walk off swiftly. She went along this way until she reached her destination, a courtyard teeming with bustle. It was a veritable hive of activity, giving an initial impression of chaos amidst the crates and weapons and other things scattered or being transported around-but once you looked more carefully, it became clear that it was a methodical kind of madness. Underneath the veneer of disorder was a system, and the one directing that system was the one she had come to see.

She approached the tent that had been set up to the side and entered. Several people were within, busily fiddling with scrolls and whatnot, and talking to the never-ending stream of visitors. The centurion's presence made them stop long enough to greet her, however, and she grinned at the young man at the centre of the commotion. He got up and excused himself from the others.

"Centurion," he said, moving the two of them out of and away from the tent. "What a pleasant surprise!"

"I'll bet. How's everything?"

"It's going along nicely."

"Frozen your arse off yet?"

He laughed. "It isn't getting any warmer."

She eyed his spare, rather unmartial frame and grinned at him with irreverent offhandedness. She was not at all normal in the way she tended to ignore class distinctions by treating him and others of his ilk as she would someone with birth as common as hers, but he liked that-it was natural when you grew up being coddled by most

people around you, as had been the case for most of his life. What mattered it if she did not stand on ceremony? She was, as her friend the senior legate, put it, strange but good people.

"I'd have thought you'd be blue by now, Praefectus," she told him. "You getting toughened up by being around us?"

"I hope so-if only to stop my sister from worrying so much about my health."

"Clucking like a mother hen, you mean," she snickered, knowing the ongoing story of his sister babying him: she was a follower of politics, and the topic was much bandied about in political gossip. "Senator Tokiha can be tough as nails in Senate, but she sure gets thin-skinned when it's about you. Remember the hell she raised when she found out you volunteered for this campaign and Fujino-san accepted?"

He chuckled, knowing most people had heard of his sister's attempts to get the Senate to recommend a different person for his current position: "Do I ever! She nearly barricaded my room."

"Those are the breaks. Even almighty senators can't get everything they want."

"I don't really think of her as almighty-odd, huh?"

She stopped walking and he did the same, sensing she was coming to the reason for her visit.

"Stock," she said flatly. "Are we running low on anything? Chie told me there could be some problems with food. I don't want the legions starving on top of this goddamned weather. They'll need more food than we counted on, I think, at least if we drill them as hard as our general wants. Cold keeps a soldier's belly feeling like its empty. It also means we'll need to make sure we get as much surplus cold weather gear as possible. If a legionary loses a sock, we've got to have a replacement ready."

"That's true," he replied with a pleasant smile. "We're fine, Nao-san. It's a funny thing, actually. I was worried about the wheat in

particular, but it turns out that Otomeia trades that with the merchants bringing in their stock through our own port province, Argus. They sent out for a larger amount than usual this month, factoring us in. It may be a concern later, when the supply we've brought along with us runs out. Then we have to make do with what's here and what we can get from Argus. They've also sent out traders to meet the ones from Rheia, although that's a little further off and will take a while," he admitted. "Particularly since we're working in stores, since winter's just about here."

"Damn ice everywhere," she muttered. "Couldn't grow a blasted stalk in this place. The soil here's frozen."

"There are some nice valleys nearby, though. Very green and lush."

"They're grassland, not farmland. What about meat?"

"That's what they have a surfeit of," he grinned. "They keep quite a lot of flocks nearby-goat, horse, ox, you name it. We have meat."

"That won't keep the soldiers running," she grumbled. "They're used to more bread than meat."

"I know. I'll see what I can do."

She grunted and ground the heel of her boot on what appeared to be a broken arrow on the ground.

"A little fidgety today, Nao-san?" he observed gently.

She shrugged: "I don't like this. We're practically cooling our butts just waiting for those bastards to make the first move, just because those half-baked aristocrats in the Senate-half of who don't know one end of a spear from another!-don't want to pay more legionaries than they think they have to."

"But it *is* the more prudent thing to do, instead of jumping directly into a war," he offered hesitatingly. "Or so my sister told me."

The primipilus narrowed her eyes before heaving out a breath, deciding she would be wasting her time in arguing otherwise to a coddled young cub like this. No doubt he still believed most of what

his sister said was the right way to go, even if he did claim to want to strike out for himself. Well, that was the way it was. The blood ruled, especially among the upper classes.

"Maybe I'm just getting restless," she said irritably, trying to withhold the sharp words she was clenching behind her teeth. "Or maybe it's the risk we're putting perfectly good legions through, getting to me. These soldiers have fought for Hime more times than you can count on both hands, and then they're sent to this kind of place with an enemy that outnumbers them, what, ten to one? Then we can't even have the advantage of making the first move... and you should know what a bitch that spells out, if you've been listening to that sister of yours." She gave him a nasty look, superbly executed because she found her second metier in such expressions. "We're sitting on thin ice here, Praefectus. You'd better know that."

He nodded gravely, seeming to actually agree with the evaluation.

"Yes, I do see what you mean, Centurion," he replied with a sombre look. Then he smiled. "Do you know, I think everyone knows that: you, I, Akira-kun, and everyone else. And yet *we're all here*."

She bared her canines at the remark, grinning in that somewhat dangerous way she had.

"Well, for me and the army, it's because of the commander," she admitted. "But why did *you* apply for this stint, Takumi-san? There are easier posts to be *praefectus fabrum* at-I'm sure your sister would've gotten them for you, easy. Or is it one of them political things you'd rather not say?"

"Oh, my reasons don't require me to be as cagey as all that, Nao-san! I hope I never have to be."

He smiled at her as they began to walk again. People made way for them amidst the chaos.

"To be honest, the first reason was that it would help me get a little away from being under my sister's thumb, so to speak," he said, smiling at the centurion's laughter. "Oh, don't get me wrong, Nao-san-I love my sister dearly! But I know that most people in Hime

consider me a lightweight, someone unable to act without her approval, much less climb the *cursus honorum* or any ladder of our society apart from her. Succeeding in this post would go a long way to disproving that, I think."

He watched as she considered it, knowing she was a very smart woman rather in a different mould from the other centurions. He also knew that her former occupation had required her to understand quite a number of complexities in politics that were often beyond the ken of people of her class, which meant he could actually expect informed reactions from her here.

"Yes," she said, at length. "You're right. This was a dangerous campaign, to start with. Just volunteering for it would've helped your image. Plus you're *actually* here. It's a good idea-provided we get out of this and back to Hime in one piece."

"You have doubts on that score, Centurion?"

She half-smirked, half-sneered: "Don't bait me, Praefectus. I'm talking about us, individually. As far as the war's concerned, we'll get these bastards. With the general in the lead, of course."

He smiled and said, "It's wonderful how much faith everyone has in Fujino-san."

"You've never been on a campaign before, so consider yourself lucky the first one you go on is hers, even if it's to a place like this. You'll understand why we believe in her, soon enough."

"Ah, but the truth is," he answered, "I already do. I'm not that different from the army in that sense, Nao-san, unblooded civilian though I am. I would never have volunteered for this if it were not under Fujino-san's command. I know enough to see that she's the one who makes a difference."

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As the troops were preparing for the inspection and preliminary exercises, their general was speaking to the Otomeian king's chief counsellor-ambassador to the Himean Northern Commission. The



king was apparently abed, still suffering from mild traces of his ailment. Thus it was that Shizuru found herself discussing the local situation with Counsellor Hyodo instead.

"We have not had news yet," he was telling her as they reclined upon thick, shaggy rugs in a reception room. There were draughts of warm wine as well as beer before them, and some platters of various delicacies that could be picked up and sampled in one bite. "Although we did send messengers down to Argentum."

"When did you send out?" she asked.

"Nearly two weeks ago," he said. "The day you arrived, Fujino-san. They should be on their way back by now. I do not think it is time to be concerned yet."

She closed her eyes in response. After a while, she opened them and met the Otomeian counsellor's, startling him a little.

*Zalmoxis preserve us*, he thought with a shudder. It was little wonder her people made as much of her as he had noticed: sometimes the woman felt like something more than a woman, something more than a mortal. Witness the colour of her eyes, which seemed truly arterial, brilliant spots of crimson spilled on perfect white.

"We have sent to our present governor in Sosia too," she was saying. "And inquired as to the situation in that province. Although I must admit that what concerns me more at this moment is Argentum. If what you say about the Mentulaean movements is true, we may have to fight them there."

He agreed.

"The problem," he said. "Is that the Argentians don't have a standing army as we do. They're not a very military people, I'm afraid, and it's a small city. We can only hope the Mentulae have not attempted anything yet, that place being so close to the borders."

She sighed quietly: "If only we knew what was going on there we would be able to make preparations earlier."

"Yes, Fujino-san." He paused, musing. "If the couriers do not return

in, hmm... three days' time?"

"Make it two."

"Two, then."

"Then we send out more," she replied calmly, but in a tone that indicated she had made up her mind about it. "If those still do not return promptly, I shall march. I would prefer that to simply waiting and wondering about the state of our allies in Argentum. In any case, if it turns out that our fears are unfounded, I will at least be able to garrison their city to prevent Obsidian from thinking of trying anything."

"And yes, I must visit Sosia as well, sooner or later," she added. She turned her head and was surprised to see that her familiar shadow was not nearby. After a quick sweep of her eyes, she found her bodyguard a ways off, at the other end of the room and by the entrance. The girl was with a group of other young women, oblivious to her attention on them.

Shizuru's eyebrows went up. Although they were too far for her to hear anything, she could see that her bodyguard was nodding occasionally at her companions. And from the way she was moving her mouth...

"She is talking," Shizuru said, perhaps a little more loudly than she had intended, for Hyodo turned to her with a concerned expression on his thin face.

"Fujino-san," he said. "What is it?"

She looked quickly at him, then at the cause of her surprise. Natsuki still appeared to be talking.

"Natsuki," she said with tones of wonderment and enquiry. "She is speaking."

She returned her eyes to Hyodo when she heard his chuckles.

"I thought you would have asked someone about that by now, Fujino-san," he said with apparent enjoyment. "It turns out I was

wrong."

"I confess I do not understand."

He smiled and tipped his head gracefully, one of his beaded braids swinging forward.

"Forgive me for laughing at your expense, General," he said. "I mean no disrespect. It is just that you are not alone. Many-outsiders and newcomers in particular-tend to think she is mute, especially if they do not see her often enough to catch the times when she does speak."

"You make it seem so rare a phenomenon, her speech."

"Oh, relatively speaking, it is," he explained offhandedly, reminding her of her bodyguard's position. "It is graver when she is in the company of those she does not know well, of course. In any case, she has deceived many with that tendency to silence. It is simply that she is-how does one say it?-reticent."

Shizuru smiled at his words.

"Reticent," she repeated, with a wry twist of her lips. "That is surely the gravest reticence I have yet to meet, Hyodo-han."

He acknowledged her point with an inclination of his head.

"She was never inclined much to conversation," he said. "Not even in her younger years."

"What was she like, then?" she asked, genuinely curious.

"Silent, withdrawn... a little independent, perhaps, but that is to be expected."

"Why so? And how long have you known her?" she asked, trying to keep the swelling curiosity out of her voice but intent on indulging it.

"Since she was brought here along with the other survivors," he replied. Seeing the question on her face, he added, "She is not actually Otomeian, Fujino-san. Not in blood, at least. In fact, it may

be of interest to you to learn that she is the last of a line-that of the Chalinitis."

At this, the general lifted a hand to her face, thinking of where she had heard that name before. It came to her in the time it took her companion to blink. She looked to the Otomeian's face and saw the answer confirmed there.

"Why, can it be..." She lifted her brows, impressed. "She is of Ortygia?"

He nodded, somewhat gratified that she knew the relevant history already.

"Yes," he said. "She is Ortygian-one of the few who survived that infamous massacre of their people. There are others, perhaps six or seven aside from the captain, whom our people came upon and rescued after it happened, but we found no more. It's possible to say they are the only ones who lived."

"Indeed," she said in a hushed tone. "I thought none did."

"A common misconception," he replied complacently. "The survivors were all children, except for an old crone who has since passed away."

"Where were they found? How were they able to escape?"

He wet his lips with wine before answering.

"Some were found wandering about in the forest," he said. "And some were hiding. Natsuki herself was found hidden under several bodies-corpses." He grimaced. "A gruesome case, Fujino-san. The corpses were those of her kinsmen."

Shizuru blinked her eyes at this intelligence, expression impassive. He looked inquisitively at her, wondering what she was thinking.

When she spoke, her voice was level.

"How old was she?" she asked him.

"I am not sure now. I would say seven or eight."

"The Massacre of Ortygia," she murmured, after a pause. "If Natsuki is of the House of Chalinitis, that makes her a noble, does it not? I may be a little rusty on my northern dynasties here, so feel free to correct me, please."

He shifted a little and tipped his head to acknowledge her question. And immediately after seeing the gestures, Shizuru knew he would tell her the truth but not all of it. Why was that?

"Yes. That is partly why the king took her, in particular, to be under his care." He lifted a hand to push back his grey hair. "And there is also the point that the nobility of the Ortygians is related to our own. A long way back to be sure, but of the same stock. We have always thought that this was the reason their tongue is- *was* -very much the same as ours."

"Related to your king, then?"

"Remotely." Again he shifted, as if wondering how much he could keep saying. "But yes."

"Is that why she became captain of the Lupine Division?"

"That *may be* part of it, yes," he said reluctantly. "But there is no doubt that she also outstrips everyone in her division in both battle and leadership, so it would be insulting her prowess if I were to say that her lineage is solely what determined her status. One would have to see the *pr*-the captain's skills as both an officer and trooper to understand how her age did not stand in the way of her promotion."

"I see." She turned her head to look at the figures by the doorway, privately wondering why he had checked himself. "She grows more and more interesting."

"The girl to her right," offered Hyodo. "Is her cousin."

Shizuru eyed the girl.

"They do look somewhat alike," she admitted, while mentally adding

the note that the other girl was yet not as impressive as her taller, much more elegant-looking cousin. "Particularly the colour of their hair. Was she another of the survivors?"

"Yes. But she was found at a different place from where Natsuki was retrieved."

"Is she in the military? A part of Natsuki's division?"

"No, she is in the light cavalry unit, I think. She's actually quite young, you know-a year or two younger than Natsuki. Still, the last members of their line seem to display remarkable military prowess, so that is no surprise."

"They have other relatives who lived?"

"I'm afraid not. They are the only ones left of or related to the Chalinitian house. Natsuki is, to be exact. Her cousin comes from a much lesser branch of the extended noble family."

At this point, Natsuki had apparently finished conversing with the other two and was heading back to take her customary post near her charge. Shizuru, seeing this, got to her feet. Hyodo did the same.

"I must see to the troops now, Hyodo-han," she told him. "Shall I expect you to come?"

"Of course, General." He bowed to her, his long, braided hair swinging forward again and hiding his face. "Please expect the other counsellors as well."

"Then I shall see you there."

She inclined her head, then turned on her heel and walked off with her bodyguard trailing behind her. She sighed after a few strides and stopped dead on her tracks. The young woman behind her did the same, giving a small start when Shizuru cast a mock-dour glare over one shoulder.

"Natsuki, I have told you to walk beside me thrice now. Must I stipulate it every time or would it suffice to ask that you do it always

from now on?"

The other seemed put out by the remark. She moved forward to comply, however, and they started off again. They went at a slower pace, at Shizuru's behest.

"I am surprised, though," the Himean said, almost as if to herself. "How obedient Natsuki is getting!"

A puff from the Otomeian's nostrils, very clear and sharp.

"It tempts me to see if you shall actually obey if I ask you to talk to me, you know," Shizuru went on.

Another puff was her answer. Shizuru smiled and flicked her eye to the side, looking out of a window they were passing. The breeze from outdoors blew against her face, leaving the slight and smarting sting chill breezes did.

"I saw you talking to those people earlier, Natsuki," she said easily to her bodyguard. "One of them was your cousin, yes?"

She knew an answer was unlikely, so she simply talked on as though the other had replied.

"I was almost beginning to think you were mute," she said. "Now that I have seen that, I know it is merely that you are *reticent*. Not that this is a bad trait, really. Simply that you take it to such levels that I must marvel. You cause only more curiosity, you know, by refraining from releasing information so much. It is something to keep in mind if your goal is to evade other's attentions, My Dear Girl."

She paused in her speech as they passed several Otomeian guards, who saluted them.

"I am beginning to wonder, however, if it is that you reserve your words for those you actually like," she said afterwards, turning her head to smile sweetly at the girl. "I am also beginning to fancy your speech so rare it must be an honour to receive it. An intriguing challenge to achieve that honour, yes. I love challenges."

The crimson eyes sparkled.

"I promise you this: you *shall* talk to me soon, Natsuki."

Natsuki looked mildly astonished by the statement and lifted a swanlike eyebrow at the older woman. She quickly returned her glance to the front. Despite that and the fact that the girl said nothing, Shizuru was pleased to note that she had the ghost of a smile on her lips, as well as the faintest of pinks dancing on her cheeks. The girl was so fair that it must have been difficult to ever hide any moment of elevated feeling, the Himean thought, watching that heightened colour with more pleasure than she had ever known possible to acquire from such a simple phenomenon.

Then they were already outside the palace, heading for the square. People fell silent as they passed, smiling shyly and bowing in salute. Shizuru returned their smiles with ease and her usual grace. Natsuki returned the greetings in her own fashion.

Some of the greetings, the Himean commander eventually noted, were directed more towards Natsuki than to her. That strange young woman acknowledged them in the barest of ways, simply nodding her head in such a way that it could just as easily be taken for a casual movement instead of a deliberate one. It was exceedingly subtle and the patrician watching it from the corner of an eye was struck by its restrained yet deep hauteur.

*What a little aristocrat*, Shizuru thought with amusement. For a moment, she wondered if it was the girl's knowledge of her own aristocratic origins that made her act so standoffish. She cast that thought aside quickly, judging somehow that Natsuki was not of such a character as to make such distinctions. After all, she acted almost the same way around the king too, albeit with a little more deference. Her actions towards Shizuru—who was noble and of illustrious enough origins herself to rouse the envy of many in the Himean Senate as well as no mean hand at showing hauteur herself—were further proof of that.

*It is simply the way she is*, Shizuru decided. It was probably intensified by the standoffish, blighted part of her that Shizuru had identified earlier as being without humour and turned in on itself somehow. Not that Shizuru could arraign her for that tragedy of character: what little she had heard of the girl's past certainly made



all the excuses for it. To be hidden under corpses and survive a bloodbath that way, to experience such things as a child? Ye gods, what a tale! Too grotesque to be made up yet too horrid to be real. She would have to find out more about it. If only because there now lived in her mind a Natsuki who was a child, green-eyed and stick-limbed and drenched with blood, weeping in that way some little girls did: with a complete absence of wailing but with quiet hiccups that tore at the heart. How could she let that urchin in her mind stay that way, even if only in her imaginings?

They were at the square now, and people made way for them to pass through the crowd until they were facing the ordered ranks of Himean legions. Shizuru smiled at her soldiers, gratified to see their stoic faces take on adoring expressions when they saw her making her way to the front. She stopped in front of Nao, who grinned. She reciprocated the greeting, as well as those of the other centurions gathered at the front with the rest of her officers.

"They look trim," she commented, looking at the rows with a laid-back eye that her subordinates knew missed nothing. "Any reports?"

"All's fit and fair," Chie replied. "We've been keeping them busy doing work since we got here, so they haven't fallen out of shape or anything like that."

"What are the exercises for today? Not joint ones yet, correct?"

"That's tomorrow." It was another legate who answered. "And we're thinking standard exercises today. I know they're all vets, General, and it's unlikely they'll be forgetting the formations, but we'd like to keep them in the mood anyway. Soldiers can get a bad habit of cooling their heels when they're given a few days of doing nothing."

Shizuru nodded. "Fair enough."

She looked at the soldiers again and gave them an extravagant grin.

"Well then," she said. "Carry on."

The officers dispersed to their respective units and the square was filled with the sound of stamping boots and clanking armour. Shizuru

was about to begin her rounds among the centuries when her senior legate approached.

"Shizuru-san," she said. "There's something I'd like to show you because I think you have to see it to believe it."

Mildly curious, she followed as Chie led her-and Natsuki, naturally-to a warehouse near the square. Entering it, Shizuru quickly caught the flash of metal in the spare light and smiled to herself. Chie ordered the Otomeians guarding the place to open the barred windows. Once this was achieved and the light from outside was streaming in, the general's suspicions were proven correct.

"Their armoury," she stated, as her legate nodded. She turned her eyes to the articles. "What curious weapons they use."

"That's why I wanted to give you a preview, before joint exercises start tomorrow," Chie returned, smiling. "Fascinating, aren't they?"

"They seem to have a lot of those," Shizuru said, indicating a long, spear-like device. "Mm... interesting objects."

"What do you call those?" Chie asked, addressing one of the guards. After making him repeat the name a couple of times, she felt secure enough to pronounce it. " *Rhomphaia* ."

"It looks like the *falx*," Shizuru was saying. "Do you not think so?"

"Yes. Although I have to admit this reminds me of your *naginata*, too."

"Certainly there are similarities," the other answered, still considering the rhomphaias. "Although I would imagine that my *naginata* is considerably more manoeuvrable. You see how the blade is thicker."

Chie nodded at the observation. "Interesting, isn't it? I suppose they use them just like we've seen people use the *falx*, then-slashing. Although... now that I think about it, this one could be used for thrusting too. The *falx* was a bit hard for that because of the curve of the blade. These *rhomphaia* seem a little straighter. Might be a good thing, you think?"

"The distinct advantage of the straighter blade," said Shizuru, "is that these can be used for fighting defensively, even in crowded situations. The disadvantage would perhaps be that it loses some of its cutting power, but that is only in comparison to the curved falx."

She turned her head and masked the resultant surprise upon seeing her bodyguard looking at her intently, green eyes glittering with naked interest. Realizing she had been caught, the girl promptly turned a shade of pink again and looked away. Shizuru smiled and suppressed the urge to chuckle, feeling childishly pleased by all the blushes she was eliciting.

"But this isn't what I wanted to show you," Chie said, drawing her attention once again. "The strangest one I saw was over there."

They walked over to the area indicated, and Shizuru herself felt her eyebrows lift at the sight.

"Ara," she said, staring at the same things causing her friend to goggle. "What *are* they?"

## Chapter 4

*Thanks to the reviewers and to the edifying Fade9Wayz, in particular, for bringing my attention to Zalmoxis-had she not suggested it, I might have forgotten that possibility altogether for choices of religion here. EphemeralOne was most helpful as well.*

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### **Vocabulaire/Notes:**

1. **A n ote on a commander's largesse** - A general who can afford it sometimes adds to the pay of the soldiers, especially if he/she wins a war with rich spoils, whereupon he/she distributes part of the spoils to the army. This is done to prevent any thoughts of sedition in the ranks or to consolidate or strengthen the troops' loyalty to her/him.
2. **Cataphract** [s.], **c ataphracti** [pl.] - A military unit made up of a heavily armoured man on a heavily armoured horse.
3. **Consular** - A senator who has been consul at least once in the past. The consul is the top magistrate of Rome: two were elected every year.
4. **War chest** - Technically the funds allotted by the Senate to a campaign. This includes the wages of the army, expenses for food and weapons , and so on. It is not unusual for a commander to find that the war chest is insufficient for his/her campaign, so obtaining money is often a concern for generals and their staff. This is also why some generals have personal war chests, with which to augment the funds from Senate when they run short.
5. **Corona obsidionalis** - Also 'corona graminea'; the highest military medal/decoration for Romans (and Himeans), it was very rarely awarded. It was so rare that it is possible to count the recipients of it throughout recorded Roman history. Even two of the greatest military men of Ancient Rome did not have it-Gaius Marius and Gaius Julius Caesar Dictator. It was the only crown given by the

*soldiers to the general, as other crowns were usually the other way around. To receive it, a person has to save at least an entire legion (about 5000 soldiers) by his/her individual efforts in the battlefield. The legion has to confirm that the person deserves the corona obsidionalis for him/her to receive it, and no one can beg or argue that he or she deserves the reward: it must be given of the army's own volition, absent attempts to persuade them to do so on the part of the recipient.*

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## ***Inter Nos***

*par ethnewinter*

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The day the Himean officials were to satisfy their curiosity about the alien weapons of their host state-the day of the first joint exercises-was also when the first letters arrived from home. The general found several scrolls waiting for her with her senior legate, who flourished her own thick missive.

"I got one from Aoi," she said cheerfully, waving it at the blonde woman. "I'm glad to see that mail from Hime is still delivered quickly in these places."

Shizuru quickly broke the seal on her first scroll, which was from her banker, Sosius. He explained succinctly that he had withheld the bulk of her letters as per her directions, specifically those that had been sent by her admirers-that amusing but oh-so-irrepressible lot! He had chosen to send only those he deemed worthy of her attention: a letter from the Princesps; another from Senator Tokiha; and one from her cousin, Senator Tomoe Marguerite.

She frowned at the third name. It was with nothing less than apprehension that she eyed that particular scroll, wondering why Sosius had deemed it prudent to send it to her considering she rarely got anything of merit from the woman's letters. Then again, Tomoe was her cousin, and the banker might have thought that the blood tie merited Shizuru's attention. Oh, Tomoe definitely merited

attention! But not in the ways the woman fancied herself worth attending.

*If ever there were a potential thorn*, Shizuru thought wryly. A wily politician and a promising strategist in the senatorial arena, that cousin of hers was nonetheless far more poisonous than most people saw. She hid it well, but Shizuru saw it sometimes, especially when she rebuffed Tomoe's sly little advances towards her, and then- *such* malice in her eyes!

*Perhaps I should be grateful that she is fond of me*, Shizuru sighed to herself. *Otherwise I would be on the receiving end of her viciousness, as some people have been. But that is so selfish a view of it: simply because I am not party to her poison-or not yet!-does not mean I should ignore those who are, and are unjustly. But what am I to do, when she is technically family? Oh, family is a wretched nuisance!*

Her senior legate's voice cut into her thoughts.

"I've already read mine," she was saying. "And there are a lot of gossipy bits. Very entertaining. Do you want to hear them, Shizuru-san, or would you rather read your letters first?"

Shizuru smiled.

"I would rather hear from your letter, Chie-han," she replied. "Much-vaunted as some of my correspondents are in the realm of rhetoric, they rather lack the art of delivery your sender has when it comes to the social happenings at home. Yes, read it to me, if you please."

"Well then," Chie began, clearing her throat. "I'll skip over to the parts where she starts telling the news."

"Oh, please do not feel obliged to do so."

The laughter pushed up her nose in a snort: "I daresay I would be reading the rest to you in a red face if I didn't!"

Shizuru laughed as well. "As was the idea."

"You're terrible, Shizuru-san."

She stopped and looked up as they heard the sound of marching feet from outside the tent.

"Looks like most of them are here," she said nonchalantly. Returning to the task at hand, she scanned the letter for a moment or two, then began reading.

*Such events, Chie! You'd have a field day recording it in your "Archives," as you call them. It's barely been a month since you left, and here everything's in turmoil. But first things first.*

*You remember when you left that the elections were coming, and people were announcing candidacy right and left-with many lamenting the absence of the Fujino name from the praetor's roster. You also remember that the year before last was when the law that no senator could be consul for two consecutive terms was passed. Anyway, it turns out that our senior consul, Armitage-san, remembers it too. Result: she tried, belatedly, to pass a resolution invalidating that law.*

*I myself don't think much of that restriction-I think it should be made to allow for two successive terms, at most-but I'm straying from the point: which is that she could have attempted to undo that legislation early in her term instead of waiting so long. Now she can't avoid the accusations by saying she's doing it for reasons other than wanting a second, consecutive consulship. So the accusations flew, and how they flew!*

*First was the outrage from the two consulars who drafted the original law. Crusty old men, both of them, but still spry enough to jump up and howl at Armitage's proposal. The Princeps was so worried they'd suffer from heart attacks that he actually sent for the most prestigious doctor in Hime these days-you know, that Athenian called Youko-san. So the good doctor stayed beside the doors of the Senate's Hall, waiting for either old man to drop. The patient she got was unexpected, though. But more about that later.*

*After the old men started jumping up and howling, guess who set up a roar and at them? Yes, none other than our senior consul! Up she got from her seat, and started screaming back at the two consulars, at which they promptly screamed even louder. Oh, the sound! I was*

told it reached even the other end of the Forum.

*But there came a lull here, thanks to the good efforts of the Princeps and the junior consul to calm the howlers down. After which several senators proceeded to give speeches opposed to Armitage-san's proposal-you know how distrustful they are of anyone who wants to be consul twice in a row. And goodness! Even that famous member of Armitage's camp, Sergay Wang, came up and delivered what must have been the most scathing speech of all! How the Princeps smirked and chuckled and clapped at his nemesis!*

*This was unexpected. Our senior consul's face was beyond description, I tell you. Even her own supporter had turned against her, and suddenly-to use the metaphor that the Princeps has made popular ever since his speech advocating Fujino-san's leadership of your campaign-Vesuvius erupted! It was awesome, actually. Armitage simply up and burst.*

*I don't think I've ever seen her in such a state. She simply roared everyone down, especially anyone who tried to roar back. Even the Princeps. Yes, even her fellow consul, Utada Asou-san. I wish you could have heard her, although I'm not sure you didn't, since her voice must've been loud enough to reach you people up in the Northern Territories.*

*Anyway, the House was in an uproar. It took a long time before everyone calmed enough for the junior consul and the Princeps to threaten everyone-the senior consul included-with disgraceful ejection from the hall. Amidst the mumbling, Nakajima-san suddenly got up and asked Utada-san if she could speak. When he waved her on, she delivered what I'm sure was the best speech of her life.*

*I wish I had your talent for remembering things, Chie-as it is, I can't remember exactly what she said. But, in gist, she denounced the senior consul's actions in a way that had everyone who was still mumbling shut up and listen.*

*"Never in my life," she said, practically shaking with indignation. "Have I ever seen such a disgraceful display from the consul's chair. And I hope never again to see it! What we have seen today not only brings dishonour upon the present consuls and senators but on the*



*office of the consul and the Senate forever."*

*And so on. She ended by asking Armitage-san how she dared to even call herself a consul while acting in such a way. If this was the way their consul behaved, she said, then she would leave the Senate immediately and call her other colleagues to do the same. Anyway, she ended to the applause of the House, and poor Armitage-san had to sit stiff, sore, and shamed before the rest. Oh, she was red with rage, Chie, but she kept her mouth shut, at least.*

*So the meeting went on, and it was more orderly than before, thanks to Nakajima-san. No more talk of consecutive terms from the senior consul. But when the candidates for next year's consulship were being announced or announcing themselves for an early start on the electioneering, up came Haruka-san. I felt a cold sweat then, because I thought she was going to try and press the matter. But I was wrong. Instead of announcing her own (illegal) candidacy, she announced that of her protégé, Yukino Kikukawa-san's!*

*That was unexpected. So unexpected, in fact, that the nominated candidate didn't even see it coming and stood up to stare at her mentor in shock, only to turn pale and faint on the spot. So the good doctor Youko got a patient after all.*

"Oh, I wish I had been there!" cried Chie, howling. "Didn't I tell you it was entertaining?"

The general herself was shaking with laughter, and she nodded her head.

"Dear me," she said. "Poor Kikukawa-han."

"She'll get in, you know."

Shizuru stopped laughing, looked pensive and smiled.

"Yes," she said. "Who else is running?"

Chie gave her some names that she identified as some of the less inspiring members of the House.

"Yes, she shall get in," Shizuru reiterated.

"I guess she's not so bad," Chie allowed. "I like her better than Armitage, to be honest. It's just that she's liable to do whatever Armitage tells her."

"Hmm, I don't know," Shizuru answered. "Because I have a feeling that Kikukawa-han is actually quite capable of holding her own against Haruka-han, on occasion. In her own subtle way, perhaps."

"Maybe," Chie said. "By the way, I see you have a letter from Sosius-if I remember that seal correctly. Worried about the funds?"

"At first, yes. But it turns out I shall not have to dip into my own accounts to supplement the war chest this early. You recall that Kruger-han and I had a private meeting yesterday?"

"Yes."

"He was kind enough to present a gift to us-a few hefty bags of gold, to be precise. I should think that will go a long way to helping our campaign."

"That's wonderful!" Chie exclaimed, clapping her hands together happily. "I was worried about it, actually, because those cheapskates in the House gave us so little to start with, and we always end up having to make up for it from our own coffers... Oh, don't get me wrong, Fujino-san, I don't begrudge it to the soldiers! Otherwise, I wouldn't even bother adding to their pay, nor would you. It's just that it's bad policy and those from Senate can't see it!"

Shizuru nodded: "Indeed. I never understood how they could see fit to allocate so little to the legionaries' salaries and supplies when they obviously were not having fiscal issues. Why, there is more than enough in the Treasury to fund three or so full wars *and* carry out management of Hime at the same time. Hoarding state moneys is a crime!"

"They'd rather use it for those grand banquets they're so fond of," Chie frowned. "I wouldn't mind a good banquet myself... but pretending it's a state affair and making the state pay for it when they could very well afford to do that themselves! And there's nothing of value discussed-they only spend the time to gossip and

flirt and pretend to be very busy people!"

"I seem to recall seeing you at several of those 'grand banquets', Chie-han."

"Guilty!" Chie cried, laughing at the tease. "Well, it's a wonderful place to get all the dirt on everyone, and you know how I can't resist that. Although... there's also that other thing."

"Senou-han," Shizuru noted. "Or, to be precise, Senou-han's father."

Her legate sighed and lifted a hand to push the dark hair out of her eyes.

"You got that right, General," she said. "I'm still trying to get around to his good side, you know, and those parties are the best places for that sort of thing. He can't exactly ignore me like he does when I visit their place, because he has to act civil in front of everyone else."

"I wonder why he is so insistent on Aoi-san being married to a man instead of a woman."

"Continuing the family line."

"Progeny? But surely it is possible to adopt, as is often the custom in such cases."

Chie bared her teeth in a wry smile.

"He'd rather they were of his blood, I think," she said. "It's not just that I'm a woman, you know: it's a secondary excuse to him. It's the blood. You know what pride that old bastard has in their lineage-he keeps touting his illustrious ancestor, you know the one-and he has the old patrician snobbery to boot. Huh. Not that all patricians are like that," she added quickly, seeing the smile on her general's lips.

"I would hope not," Shizuru said. "As it is, I consider that way of thinking a very outmoded concept."

"Which doesn't stop a lot of people from still being 'outmoded,'" Chie sighed. "Why more people can't be like you is beyond me... but, no, that's a silly thing to say. You're rather beyond comparison, Shizuru-

san. No-one else's standards can be applied to you."

"Oh, really, Chie-han!"

They were interrupted when a head poked into their tent. They turned towards it to see the chief primipilus of the Ninth, her red hair waving over her eyes. She stepped in, snapped off a crisp salute, and smiled at them.

"All in, Nao-han?" Shizuru asked.

"Their people are here, General," the other replied, before turning her head to the side and facing the general's bodyguard. Their faces were not exactly level, for the Otomeian had her people's height and the centurion was the same. Even so they glared at each other, two dissimilar pairs of green eyes shining.

"Shouldn't you be out there leading your whatever-you-call-it division, pup?" she snarled at the Otomeian, who said nothing and merely gave her the full benefit of a frigid stare. Used to cowing people she provoked, the primipilus faltered in her glare momentarily, then narrowed her eyes at the intractable figure.

"I can't wait to see what you can do on the battleground, Girly," she sneered. "If you can do anything, that is."

She nodded to the other two in the tent, then vanished. The flaps of the entrance waved slightly after the disturbance.

"Well, Nao's being herself," Chie said wryly. She rolled up her scroll and put it in the trunk next to them, after which she stood up and left, only stopping momentarily by the dark-haired girl next to the exit to tell her-rather awkwardly-not to mind the centurion too much. Then she was gone and the only people in the tent were the general and her bodyguard, who eyed her with the usual quiet wariness Shizuru had grown used to by now.

"Chie-han is right, you should not mind what Nao-han says," the Himean said, after a while. "She is not saying it out of spite, Natsuki."

Natsuki said nothing, merely looking away.

"But she did bring up a good point. Shall you not be leading your division today?"

The Otomeian nodded vaguely.

"So you shall?" Shizuru smiled and feigned a sad expression. "So I shall not have a bodyguard to protect me today? How will I ever fend for myself without Natsuki to look over me?"

Natsuki rolled her eyes-it fascinated Shizuru, being such a normal gesture-and shook her head at the older woman with a pointed expression, making the latter's eyebrows go up.

"So you will be staying with me after all?"

A nod.

"Then how will you lead your division? You do not mean to do both at the same time?"

Another nod. Shizuru laughed and stood up.

"How the people back home would laugh at how we communicate," she said, coming around her desk to stand in front of the girl. "This gives new meaning to the phrase 'a one-sided conversation', I tell you."

She reached out to touch the silky hair, making the other freeze with a look of alarm on her face. Shizuru ignored it and simply went on. When she withdrew her hand, she showed Natsuki the object she had removed from her locks: a small leaf.

"Really, now," Shizuru said soothingly. "My own bodyguard should not be scared of me."

Natsuki, having recovered from her surprise, frowned and coloured angrily. It was the jibe at her being afraid, of course: Otomeians had a very proud culture of courage.

"I cannot wait to see what you can do, too," the older woman said kindly, apologising for the previous joke with a smile.

Having said this, she exited the tent. Natsuki slipped out after her and followed. Soon the two found themselves looking at row upon row of Otomeian and Himean soldiers standing to attention before their respective officers. Weapons and mail shirts flashed in the sunlight as more troops moved up into position before the dais where Shizuru was supposed to oversee the manoeuvres.

When the Himean and Otomeian officials planned today's exercises, they had hit upon the fact that the square within the city's walls was most definitely not spacious enough for their purposes. Hence it had been decided that the armies would have their training outside of the citadel: on the vast, snow-covered plain directly before the western entrance of the city.

Now, as Shizuru made her way to the dais put up for her sake, she found herself thinking how picturesque the scene was. Before her were the colours of the soldiers against a backdrop of pure white, the snow having been packed to ice by their feet as well as the cold. Behind the armies was the deep green of the forest, sprinkled with glittering snow on the very tops of the firs and pines. And the smell! The cool, crisp scent only winter could bring, cut with the underlying sap and scent of pine. Why did it seem so familiar to her, a woman from a warm, grassy country? It was so clean, so comforting.

She greeted the other officials on the dais and stepped to the front. As she did, she saw the criers ascend their individual, smaller platforms throughout the ranks, ready to begin repeating her words so that they would reach even those farthest from the dais. Unsurprisingly, the Otomeians also had criers, and no doubt translators as well.

She closed her eyes for a moment, glad that there was hardly any wind today. It would make it easier for her to project her voice without becoming too high-pitched or nasal—a technique she had learned from a friend who was a famous actor of the stage. She took a deep breath.

"Fellow Himeans and Otomeians," she said, her clear-carrying voice sounding through the cold, still air. "Today we begin our first joint exercises. Today the Otomeians shall see how the Himean legions move, and today we Himeans will see how our Otomeian friends

manoeuvre. We will see how you use your weapons and you will see how we use ours. This we shall do in the proper spirit of respect and regard for each other."

She paused to allow the criers to call out her words. The one closest to her would cry out her words down the line, only to have them taken up and repeated a second time by the next crier, and so on. When the last faint yell ended in the distance, Shizuru resumed.

"Yet this is only in the beginning. By the end of today, I expect that we should no longer see each other as strictly Otomeians or Himeans. At the end of today, I expect that we should have lost that distinction between and among us when we enter the field. For what we are doing is merely for the purpose of being able to acquit ourselves well in the coming battle. And in battle, being Himean or Otomeian does not count. What counts is being victorious. What counts is being able to survive."

She paused again and shifted her stance, red eyes blazing.

"I say this because I do not want distinctions of nation or class to be made when we finally come to war. I will not have it! I tell you clearly now that anyone who dares to think in such ways has no place in my army. And you are-every one of you-my army, for so long as this campaign lasts. Those from Hime have been assigned to me by the Senate and the Himean People. Those from Otomeia have been assigned to me by the kindness of His Majesty Kruger the Third. So let us be clear about it: you are now, all of you, one unit. My army."

"In my army," she went on. "Everyone is on equal footing with everyone else, in a certain sense. Yes, even I, commander though I may be. What I mean by this is that there should be no divisions made within an army on the basis of who belongs to what group. The army *is* the group. The army's survival *is* what matters, because it is the survival of everyone in it."

"I say this now because I have seen some officers and even generals encourage such elitist thinking in their ranks, with the result that the whole suffers. I have seen people abandon or ignore an allied soldier's plea for assistance simply because he was merely an ally, and 'not one of their own'. I have even seen whole units sent to

a massacre as bait, because they were not the commander's people and their loss could thus be condoned. I have seen a soldier hesitate to go through the risk of saving another's life simply because the other was a mere ally, and he wondered whether it would be worth it to go through the risk 'just for an ally's life'."

She lifted her chin, sweeping the rows with a severe gaze.

"I will punish anyone who does something along those lines," she said. "For as long as you are under my command, you will move *together as one*, think *together as one*, and act *together as one*. You will aid a fellow who needs it not because he is Otomeian or Himean but because he is your fellow. You will think of the whole before you think of the factions. You will not discern who is Otomeian and Himean because it is irrelevant. You will be my soldiers first and Himeans second. And those of you who hail from this nation will be my soldiers first and Otomeians second. If this is taken as treasonous thought by those in our respective nations, I beg to differ. As my soldiers, you are my army and I am your commander. I... I am not Fujino Shizuru when we come to the fighting. I am, by the power vested in me by two governments, Hime and Otomeia both. I represent the two, united in interest."

"I spoke earlier of survival. Many of us have begun to think ill of that word—that to be concerned about one's survival is the surest way to being a coward. That one cannot be a good soldier without disregarding one's survival, for if one dies bravely, it is the surest way to immortality. I speak not only to those Otomeians who adhere to the faith of Zalmoxis, but to the Himeans as well, who seek to become immortalised as heroes."

"I agree that to die bravely is an honour," she declared. "Yet I also agree that *to live bravely* is just as great an honour, and in many ways may even surpass an honourable death. For what can be more immortal than to enter the battlefield and emerge from it wreathed in the laurels of victory? What can be more honourable than to be able to say that you won the war and lived to enjoy your triumph? I would rather have living soldiers than dead ones. I would rather win this war with living heroes rather than men and women in the grave."



"I say this because I wish to make this clear: I have every intention of winning this war, whatever happens. *But I also want to do it without making martyrs of my army* . This is only possible if we are unified. Others have said this time and time again: strength is in unity. I repeat it now."

She stopped to fix them all with her look, putting all her power into her gaze. As though on cue, the sun peeked out of the cloud it had been hidden behind and caught her face: her eyes were on fire.

"You are my army, and you will be unified," she enunciated, seeing that she had them hanging on every word. "You will be strong. My army is always strong. You will survive. My army always survives. Do you know why? That is because my army always wins."

She ended her speech with a smile. As the last echoes of her words reached those at the very back and she was returning to the officials standing behind her, a roar came from the first ranks of the Himean line.

"General!" came the cry. "We are *your* army!"

As though that had been the only catalyst needed, a wave of yells and cries swelled up through the soldiers on the field, reaching even the Otomeian ranks. The applause for the general exploded the silence of the previously calm landscape as soldiers beat their swords and spears on their arm greaves or shields.

As for the object of all this adulation, she merely turned to face them and inclined her head, mouth set in a warm smile. The Otomeian officials watched, as fascinated by her as they were by the spectacle of seeing their normally stoic soldiers moved to this wild display. The Himean officers, more accustomed to their general, smiled knowingly and gazed at her with admiration.

Shizuru waved the ranks into calm again, bowing gracefully to acknowledge their applause. As this was happening, one of her officers sidled up to her senior legate.

"She's got them," he said. "She's really got them."

"Oh, yes."

"If the Otomeian troops weren't falling for her before, they're all in love with her now, Chie-san." He shook his head humorously. "And as for our legions-that's always been a love affair there."

Chie grinned.

"The thing of it, Taro-san," she told her fellow legate. "Is that I've heard her give similar speeches several times now. But it gives me the shivers every time, and this... awful giddy feeling. I don't think I'll ever be immune."

"No one is." He lifted his eyes to the sky, squinting against the light. "It's just her. And it's hard not to love a general who's actually just as concerned for your life as for the victory. I mean, seriously concerned."

Chie chuckled.

"You know," she told him. "People used to think she was crazy when they first found out about her hate for losing soldiers. Crazy, they said. Or too idealistic. Either way, they thought she'd never get through a war as a soldier, much less as a general." She laughed. "And the first battle she jumps into, she goes and wins the *corona obsidionalis*."

"And later commands her first official campaign constantly outnumbered!" Taro laughed back. "She's unbelievable, isn't she? I'm starting to believe the rumours about her being the child of Jupiter-what?" he asked, seeing his fellow senator's shoulders shaking.

"Jupiter is right! I didn't know you were that superstitious."

"You shouldn't take the gods so lightly, Harada-san."

"And you shouldn't be so light in the head. Even Shizuru-san calls those rumours preposterous."

They stopped their conversation when Shizuru approached them. The other officers, Otomeian and Himean, gathered with them as they clarified the day's training schedule, which had been decided

on earlier. Afterwards, they dispersed to their tasks.

Shizuru remained where she was after the others had left, speaking to one of the royal princes. He was acting as the king's representative today, so the rest of the Otomeian counsellors deferred to him. He complimented her on her "stirring speech" before moving on to the real matters at hand.

"I expect that you wish to be more acquainted with our military's ways," he said. "So I arranged for the Baron Seki here to accompany you, General. He is one of our best commanders on the field, and he will explain whatever you need to know about."

The man beside him was a hulking giant who stood a hand's span above Shizuru, herself an exceedingly tall woman. She gazed up at him and returned the salute with an admiring smile, appraising his form.

"I can see what an imposing figure you must be in the fray, Seki-han," she said. "It would take a brave soldier not to cringe at the sight of you advancing."

He smiled, his angular features crinkling with open pleasure.

"I'm nothing compared to the great Fujino-san," he said in Himean. His low voice held traces of a slight accent, the one she had recognised by now as the Otomeian one. "We're honoured to be in your army, General."

"As I am honoured to be working with all of you," she returned, waving away his compliment. "Well then, we shall leave you now, Prince."

With a nod to the prince, Shizuru turned her head and found what she was looking for: the forest-green eyes of her bodyguard. Natsuki herself was facing the prince, who was smiling at her and said a few words to her in their language before leaving himself.

*More and more curious*, Shizuru thought, having noticed by now how well-situated her bodyguard seemed to be in the ranks of the nobility. First it was the king and the way he always spoke to her in

those warm and personal tones, then it was the fact that most of the high officials being sent to see to Himean needs were always giving acknowledgments beyond the usual nod to the young woman whenever they saw her. Clearly, her bodyguard was an important person in her own right, and certainly a well-connected one. Was it simply because of her pedigree? Her captainship of her division?

"Natsuki," she said simply when the young woman's eyes had returned to her, giving a slight tip of her head towards one side. Understanding, Natsuki came up and nodded to Seki, who grinned at the young woman. They started walking.

"I'm in legendary military company here," the gigantic man suddenly rumbled good-naturedly. "The famous general of Hime and the leader of the Lupine Division. Makes me feel smaller," he joked.

He and Shizuru laughed. Sneaking a quick peek at Natsuki, Shizuru found her with her lips trembling, trying to suppress a smile. She thought the sight strangely appealing and resolved to get it to break into fullness one day.

"By the way-if you don't mind me asking Natsuki a question, General. No? Thank you. Natsuki, I heard you're going to make Kyo take charge of your unit for most of today?" Seki said.

The younger Otomeian nodded.

"So you'll be overseeing them from a distance?" Seki went on.

She nodded again.

"Right." He looked at Shizuru. "That's all right, then."

They were walking past several cavalry units in training. Shizuru slowed her steps to be able to survey them properly, not bothering to hide her interest.

"Cataphracti," she observed. "True cataphracti! It is my first time to see them in the flesh." She chuckled at her words. "Although strictly speaking, I am not *seeing the flesh*."

Seki's voice held a note of pride to it when he replied to this.

"Yes, ours are what they call the real ones," he said. "We've seen and heard of those imitations they did in those other places... sad little things. They couldn't stand to a real one. It's the armour and the horse that makes the cataphract. And we have the best armour and horses for it."

"I imagine the gear must be heavy, though."

"Very much," the big man admitted. "And that's why we put the strongest, bulkiest riders in the third cavalry division. That's the cataphracti."

"Heavy cavalry."

"That's it. Though heavier than most, I'd think. Same with the horses. The bulkiest horses go there, to make sure they can take the weight. Of course, that doesn't mean they're the best horses all-around-those still go to the Lupine Division-but it does mean they're the strongest if you want to put it in terms of brute force."

"I see. How many cataphracti here?"

"I'd say seven hundred right now. What you'd call an ala and a half, I think?"

"Indeed." Looking ahead, she narrowed her eyes slightly. "Then the second cavalry division is that one I see in the distance, near our Fourth Legion. Judging by their armour and spears, would I be correct in saying that they are the light cavalry-what you call skirmishers?"

The giant nodded.

"So you're familiar with cavalry tactics, General?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "Although the only ones I have worked with have been the auxiliary and allied units we had from Africa and Thrace. No cataphracti, although they did have heavy cavalry."

She stopped to look at the soldiers they were now passing.

"Mounted archers," she said with obvious enthusiasm. "Excellent!"

"They can shoot just as well off the horse, General," he said, sounding happy at her approval of the auxiliary troops. "But we're a horse people. Most of our troops prefer to operate on horseback."

"I see. But what is that they are using? It looks like a composite bow. I thought they were not used in such countries as this."

He nodded to acknowledge her point.

"The usual ones aren't, I think," he said. "Because the moisture gets to them and the glue starts getting weak. But we use a different kind for ours-it's only made in Otomeia."

"How superb!" Shizuru said, truly excited by the discovery. "It's a great advantage over the enemy's archers, unless they use composite bows too."

"No, the Mentulaeans use simple bows," Seki said, baring his teeth in a grin. "We've seen them before. Only Otomeia uses composite bows in these parts. We don't sell them or tell how to make them either."

"A wise decision, militarily." They resumed walking. "Out of curiosity, Seki-han, have the Mentulaeans and Otomeians ever fought each other?"

Seki shook his head.

"No," he said. "Because our lands have always been far from each other. More so back then, when they hadn't started to expand yet. Now, though, they're much closer. Too much for comfort."

"Would you say they are familiar with your methods of engagement?"

He spent a moment thinking, letting out a rolling hum as he did.

"They know we have real cataphracts," he said. "Because we're known for that here. They know we have an elite cavalry-I mean the Lupines, of course-but that's more like knowing a legend more than anything. Lots of people outside Otomeia talk about the Lupines, but they don't know what they are. They don't even believe it exists, I

think. We haven't sent the Lupine unit out in years-except for that one time out east, right, Natsuki? But that's too far from these parts for anyone from around here to have seen it."

"I think it's safe to say they've never seen us fight," he continued. "They don't really send out scouts as far up as here for that, or they haven't. And most of our own battles have been to the east, in the opposite direction. Our kingdom stretches there-to other provinces, to lowland mining towns, valleys, other hilly regions-and the bastards around there keep trying to invade our territory. Just small fry now, really, so not really threats as big as the Mentulaeans. We've pretty much beaten down most of the enemies in those areas."

"So most of your activities have thus far been confined there. There are other armies there, yes?"

"Yes."

She smiled at the sight of Chie ahead of them. Her senior legate was overseeing the joint exercises of one cohort of Himean infantry and an equivalent unit of Otomeian foot soldiers, the latter carrying their long pole-arms.

"The rhomphaias, " Shizuru noted to Seki, referring to the lance the Otomeian infantry was using. "Are quite a good spin on the falx. You are familiar with the falx?"

Seki's broad face arranged itself into a grin: "Yes. The Mentulae have switched to pole-arms based off of them in the last, hmm, three or four decades, I think? I'm not sure. We call them falx too."

"Indeed."

"I'm not that worried. They're not as good with them as we are with our rhomphaias," he said proudly. "All they do is slash. Which isn't a bad thing, because it's easy and the falx is better for that than rhomphaias, actually... but huddle them together and they've no idea what to do."

"Actually, we do have some experience with that," she told him.

"And with the nation from which the falx originated, so I am not worried about the Mentulaean prowess with it either. What I actually wished to learn more about was that strange instrument I saw yesterday-I do not know what you call it. The one that looks like a threshing sickle with a long chain attached to it."

He turned to her with a puzzled expression on his face.

"The *daos* ?" he asked, brow furrowed as he looked at her bodyguard. "But surely Natsuki..."

He trailed off and grinned, lifting a large hand to scratch at his blonde head.

"No, you wouldn't say anything, would you?" he said humorously to Natsuki, who did not respond, although Shizuru noticed her eyes were sparkling with what seemed to be amusement.

"What are you talking about, Seki-han?"

He faced her.

"You're talking about the Lupine Division's primary weapon, General," he said. "We call it *daos* . In your language... let me see... ah. Wolf."

" *Wolf*, " Shizuru repeated. She lifted an eyebrow at Natsuki and smiled. "So all this time Chie-han and I were going about wondering what it was, you could have simply told us, Natsuki? Really, you can be so unkind."

She shook her head with a hint of exasperation as Natsuki stared back at her with mischief in her eyes, lips pressed into a tight line as though trying not to laugh.

"What do you call it again, Seki-han?" she asked, turning back to him.

"Daos, general."

"And it means 'wolf'?"



"Yes." He chuckled, suddenly. "It's strange to be the one explaining this to you, you know, when the best person who can do so is standing right next to us. But knowing her-well, I guess it's to be expected."

She laughed softly but stopped when she saw Natsuki smiling and shaking her head at the Otomeian giant. Her bodyguard's splendid face was transformed by the expression, and the transformation stripped Shizuru's breath from her throat so hard that she had to clear it to avoid the impending cough.

*Good god, she thought, irritated by her own unexpected reaction. Again-what a face!*

The deep voice of their companion interrupted her thoughts and she turned to him as he returned to talking about the daos. He proceeded to take the lead as they walked, telling them that he would take them to where the Lupine Division was training today.

"It's called that because of the parts," he explained to Shizuru. "As you say, it's made up of a sickle blade with a handle attached by a long chain to a metal weight or lump. We call it a ball. The ball end of the chain is called the paw, and the sickle end is called the fang. There are other variations of the paw-one's even called a claw-but the ball is the standard for battle."

She nodded. "It's certainly curious. I've never seen anything like it."

"I'm sure of that," he told her. "Only we use them. And only a few people *can actually* use them. Almost all of them are in the Lupine Division. They're handpicked and trained very carefully."

"I am very interested."

He tipped his head at their silent companion.

"Natsuki here is best at the daos," he said. "If you really want to see how effective it can be, you should ask her to give a demonstration when we get to where the others are. It's beautiful when Natsuki does it, General-I've yet to see anyone work with that thing as she does. I could watch her all day."

Shizuru looked at Natsuki from the corner of her eye. She was surprised to see that the blush she would have expected from Seki's compliment was not there. It took only the barest compliment from her to make Natsuki flush, yet here her bodyguard was with nary a spot of colour on her cheeks at Seki's extravagant compliment.

*Dare I think that blush is something for my eyes alone?*

She shook her head at herself, letting a smile come to her face.

*Oh, your ego, Shizuru ! she thought, sneaking another look at her bodyguard's ever-stoic face. Watch yourself and your fancies, for god's sake. The girl does not even speak to you!*

"Ah! Here we are," Seki rumbled, bringing them to a group of warriors wearing uniforms similar to Natsuki's. There were a good number of Himean uniforms mixed in, and Shizuru distinguished her chief primipilus there. The redhead saw them approaching and ran up to meet her.

"General, you need to see this," she said, sounding more excited than Shizuru had ever heard her outside of the actual battlefield. She led Shizuru and her two companions to the edge of the crowd of dark uniforms, stopping next to several Himean and Otomeian officers. They saluted the new arrivals.

"It's damn amazing, how they use it," Nao told Shizuru. "Even I think it'd take me a while to learn how to use it the way they do without slicing off my arm. Or giving myself a nice little cosh on the head."

She turned to one of the black-uniformed warriors next to them.

"Kyo," she said. "Can you do that again? I want the general to see it for herself." Turning to the Shizuru, she said: "He's the best at it here, they tell me, so I think you should see his way of using it."

"Excuse me, Nao-san," came a voice.

It was the lanky one named Kyo and they looked at him.

"It's not true that I'm the best. Not now that the captain is here," he said, speaking carefully in powerfully accented Himean. "The

captain is much better than I am. Maybe she should give the demonstration this time?"

Nao turned to face Natsuki, who was standing a little behind Shizuru, off to her side.

"That's a good idea," she said, giving her a halfway-nasty smirk. "So how about it, Kid? Let's see it."

"Yes, please do humour us, Natsuki," Shizuru said, adding to the chorus.

Natsuki stepped forward and made a motion to Kyo expressionlessly. He came up to her and handed over his daos, which she held by gripping the handle of the sickle in one hand. She looped the long chain until she could hold the lump of metal at its end with her other hand without having the chain touch the ground as it sagged in between. She then let the metal lump slip through her fingers, giving it enough length to let it dangle like a pendulum.

She looked around, seemingly searching for a target.

"Use those pegs," Nao said, pointing to a series of thick wooden dowels that had been driven vertically into the icy ground, nearly three metres from where Natsuki was standing.

Nao nodded to her commander. "You'll see, General. They sort of throw that end with the lump-the weight-and lasso something with it, then finish it off with the blade. When they're on horse, they don't bother to pull it to them and just follow through with a charge. But since we're standing still, we might as well have her pull it here. With the pull, they catch the peg with the blade when it flies back after the pull on the chain."

"Centurion, General," interrupted Kyo. "That is still a simple manoeuvre I showed you. The captain is capable of far more difficult things than that. Some of them, in fact, no one else of us can do."

Nao squinted at Natsuki, who simply listened to them while continuing to finger the chain of the weapon in her grip. She looked as though she was asking them to give her the signal to begin.

"Tricks, hm?" the Himean primipilus said, licking her lips. "Okay. Let's see it then, Captain. Impress us with your skill."

"Yes," said Shizuru, smiling at Natsuki. "Do show us, Natsuki."

Natsuki held Shizuru's eyes for a moment, then nodded. Turning her head so that she was no longer looking at them but at the pegs, she changed her stance so that her body was half-turned to the targets and half to the observers. The weight swung slightly from where her left hand held part of the chain. She slowly began to pull up the chain with her fingers, and soon, that hand was holding the weight itself.

The rest watched her, curious as to what she intended to do.

Suddenly the hand from which the ball hung tensed and flicked out the weight in a snapping motion, sending it on a direct trajectory towards the target. There was the whistling sound of something rushing through air, then a crash as one of the pegs shattered in its middle, splinters flying along with the severed half.

"Damn!" came the awed oath from one of the Himeans. "D'you see that?"

Shizuru's eyes, trained to spot the swiftest movements, still had to strain to catch the quick progress of the metal ball from Natsuki's hand to the peg and back again as the girl pulled back with the hand holding the sickle end of the weapon. She blinked after Natsuki once again had the weight in her fingers, having caught it as it returned with the retracting pull. She seemed to be absorbing the returning blow of the weight by catching it with a retreating drag of her palm, whose wrapping of linen strips Shizuru now understood.

Shizuru's eyebrows went up after the demonstration, her mind recalling the blurred image of the chain extending from Natsuki's hand in an impossibly straight line.

"Natsuki..."

There was another flick of the chain and the weight shot out again. This time, it seemed to miss its target as it went past another peg,

missing it by a good hand's width. Suddenly, there was a jerk that shivered up the still extending chain like a wave, rushing across the line in the air and ending with a rippling curl at the end. The weight seemed to pause, then snaked back and inwards rapidly as the wave forced the chain to alter the direction into which it was forcing the metal lump. This caused the weight to hit the peg from behind and smashed it just as the other one. Another jerk and the weight was back in Natsuki's left hand.

Shizuru was vaguely aware of Nao letting out a sharp curse, even as she followed the ball in its third projection from Natsuki's hand. This time, it smashed one of the remaining pegs close to where it was dug into the ground. The severed part flew up in the air and the next thing the spectators knew, the chain had waved again and curled around the airborne object, wrapping around it but not smashing it with the weight. There was a tug and the chain retracted, the severed peg coming with it. Then came the flash of metal as the sickle met it, slicing through the wood as though it were made of wax.

All of this was done in a matter of moments. As quickly as it had begun, it was over. All that they saw afterwards was Natsuki standing before them with the sickle and the weight end of the chain gripped by her other hand. The split pieces of the third peg lay on the ground near her. The spectators, particularly the Himeans, stared at her mutely, jaws slack. It was the chief primipilus who broke their silence.

"How in the bloody hell did you do that?" she asked, green eyes dancing.

## Chapter 5

*Good day to all. I have opened an account with DeviantArt. My username is still **ethnewinter** .*

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### **Vocabulaire/Notes :**

1. **Shades** - One doubts anyone is unfamiliar with these, but to be sure: Dis/Hades is the Underworld as well as the name of the god of the underworld in Roman/Greek myth. The Romans/Greeks believed that upon death, a part of the person that retained his/her form went to the Underworld. This was called the shade, and it is unlike the modern notion of soul in that it does not exactly have a mind or personality (at least, not in the sense of having agency that a soul is supposed to have), although the noblest shades could be brought 'to their senses' (to put it crudely) upon a draught of blood. For purposes of expediency, I have the Himeans use 'shade' interchangeably with the word 'soul'. Please be careful not to confuse the modern understanding with the ancient here, however. To a Himean, the Underworld is not an Afterlife. This point is significant.

2. **NOTE for the sceptics** - Yes, the manoeuvre at the end of this chapter is possible and has been done. (Most of those thinking otherwise may be imagining the distances between forces unbelievably short!) It is worth noting that a baggage train would make it much harder. Recall that Shizuru marches light, however.

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### **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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Two days after the beginning of joint exercises, the Otomeian scouts

sent to bring back news of the enemy finally returned. They bore the intelligence that would precipitate the Himeans' march down from Otomeia and to the western lands that bordered the Mentulaean Empire. It was not until evening that they arrived in Otomeia to bring this catalyst with them, however. The people of that city still breathed an air of near-idyll for most of that day, and even those in the army were able to enjoy the morning as well as the afternoon with pleasurable indolence.

The Himean general herself was taking a quiet moment of relaxation at the time the scouts were riding their way back to the Otomeian citadel. She had taken to hiding in the royal gardens with her bodyguard when seeking a moment for herself. Since the morning, she had talked to over a dozen Otomeian influentials, had partaken of her midday meals with the king upon invitation, and had overseen the military manoeuvres for joint training. One would say it was only natural, therefore, that she felt the slightest bit of weariness creep into her bones. Yet she herself felt it foreign and attributed it to the cold as well as the lack of actual engagement with the enemy, as she explained to her attentive bodyguard.

"Do you know," she told the young woman. "It is the most curious thing. I hardly ever feel tired when I am actually on the battlefield, and there have been times where I had to fight almost without cease for days. Yet when I am simply preparing for battle or for war, I am quick to feel fatigued. Almost as though the waiting itself is more draining than the activity. Do you know the feeling?"

The dark-haired woman predictably nodded instead of answering her verbally. Shizuru had become so used to it these past days that she simply went on, continuing their 'conversation'. She leaned back against the trunk of the tree she was sitting under, looking at her silent bodyguard.

Herself no great talker-or at least not one known for disclosing her true thoughts as candidly as she now did with her Otomeian companion-Shizuru had acquired the habit of talking to her watcher as a way of passing the time. It was partly due to her promise that she would get the younger woman to talk to her one day, and partly due to the fact that it felt immensely, oddly comfortable to speak to the quiet girl. Occasionally, she would marvel at the way the other's

silence managed to draw out words from her that she would ordinarily not speak freely, but then it would slip her mind and she would go on with ease. Natsuki of the Otomeians, she thought, was bizarrely soothing as a listener.

She paused to look at their surroundings again, the secluded spot she had found. The ground on which she sat was frozen, and snow covered most of the area as well as the greenery, but she had spread her cloak out as a rug. It was getting dark-not to mention cold-but she did not mind. She chose to savour this moment of respite for as long as she could, chill be damned.

"I suppose it is simply my body storing up the energy it needs for the coming battle," she said, squinting as she looked up at the other woman, discerning the outline of the girl's features by the light of the torches nearby. "Diverting as much as it can of what I have now into reserve, or something to that effect."

A nod from her companion.

"Natsuki," she said, "you have been standing there for a while now. Did I not tell you to sit down? Come here, there is still room."

To prove the point, she shifted her seat on the cloak and pointed to the space next to her. Natsuki gave her a dour look that she answered with a smile.

"Could it be that you feel that to sit next to me-on a humble cloak on the earth-is too far beneath your dignity?" she said, eyebrows lifted as she feigned hurt. "I wonder what I have done wrong to deserve such low regard in your eyes."

Natsuki sighed, accustomed to the Himean's levity by now. Shizuru wiggled her eyebrows.

"Come. I do not recall anything in the king's instructions saying that you should stand all day. Sit here. I do not bite. Come now, please?" she added, seeing that the girl was wavering. "It is far more comfortable for you and for me as well. I do not have to strain my neck looking up at you."



Giving another resigned sigh, Natsuki stepped forward and took a seat, managing to do it with a fluidity of movement that the older woman found appealing. The girl was so catlike in some ways, Shizuru thought.

"Thank you." She gave the Otomeian a bright smile. "Now then, where were we? Ah, yes, waiting for battle."

Natsuki tipped her head slightly, eyes surveying the area.

"I am looking forward to it," Shizuru said, leaning against the tree once more. "And yet I am not. I feel two things very strongly about war, and they seem to be contradictory. I do not deny that fighting is in my blood, and that a great part of me enjoys it. Yet I loathe it, too, on principle."

Natsuki swept her eyes back to meet Shizuru's, emeralds asking a question. Shizuru gave her a wry smile.

"Yes, I loathe it," she went on. "Because it always means death. And I loathe death, on principle, as I said. You remember what I told the army in my preliminary address?"

Natsuki nodded.

"Well, it is true. I do hate the thought of losing soldiers. More than that, I hate the thought of losing people. An odd thing for a heavily blooded general to say, perhaps, and yet it is the truth. Human life is so precious, Natsuki, and so frail. It struggles so! And nothing is more wonderful than the way it triumphs in its efforts to overcome the difficulties of our paltry existence," she said, frowning thoughtfully. "Lives are meant to be lived, as they say, and yet I am in an enterprise that would prefer them to be offered up to the god of war. And for what purposes? Do these other lives under my command understand the purposes we officers and commanders bandy about, even? Oh, the others talk of glory being the goal of the rankers, but that is not true. My soldiers are not Achilles, and they are not Greek. They are Himeans, practical and beautifully sensible and far more likely to disdain the futility of a Leonidas and his three hundred than admire it. Glory? It is not a commodity they can purchase or seek. They do not search for it. It is more likely for me

to do that, instead of them."

Natsuki was staring at her intently, seemingly engrossed in her words. Shizuru did not notice because she was shaking her head at the injustices of the world.

"It is true I am their better, and so I am privileged with the ability to consider glory," she muttered. "A consideration they shall never feel, or if they do, in only the smallest of ways. Each time they send a shade to the Underworld, they do it not so much for the elevation of their own stature but for their commander's. For mine. No doubt some of the philosophers would ask of me if one person's pursuit of glory can be justifiable cause for the extinction of a thousand others."

She paused to tuck her hair behind her ears, smiling at the young woman frowning at the problem she had posed.

"Oh, but that selfish pursuit is only the core of the thing for me," she said, in answer to the girl's drawn brows. "I suppose even those hypothetical philosophers must remember that there are other cores for others involved in this. For the peoples of our Northern Provinces, the core of the thing is their safety. And I am aware of it. I kill so that others shall not. The Mentulae, for instance, must be stopped from their expansion not merely since it is in Hime's territorial interests for them to do so, but also because they would be likely to kill more lives throughout their unfettered conquest than could ever be lost in this war. They are not known for being gentle masters: they practise genocide and eradication of races in territories they claim. They even practise human sacrifice in their faith. Horrific. What bloody gods and faith would countenance the regular sacrifice of a mortal life, one that has not even been conquered fairly on the field of battle?"

She stopped, then let out a sardonic laugh.

"Although," she admitted. "Even Himeans can have few scruples on fairness in dealing out death. My cousin, I am sure, subscribes to no rules when it comes to killing and getting her way."

She smiled dryly as she thought of the letter she had received two

days ago from that cousin, Tomoe Marguerite. It had been full of pleas for her to return, to simply let someone else take charge of that campaign, to join her at her sumptuous villa outside the city. All of which Shizuru read through with sighs, having expected it. What stopped her sighs was the portion of the letter that informed her that her cousin had finally managed to acquire the vineyards she had been after for a while now, and had managed that acquisition in suspicious circumstances.

The vineyards were situated in the southern parts of the country and belonged to a certain well-to-do merchant who had absolutely refused to sell them, no matter how much Tomoe had heckled him. Now, it turned out that the merchant had died, allowing her to buy the land from his widow at a pittance: the poor addled woman had had little idea what those rich properties were truly worth. Small news, seemingly. What caught Shizuru's eye was Tomoe's description of how the merchant died-by a sudden seizure during a dinner party.

*A sudden seizure .*

*Could you have laced his drink with those poisons you are so fond of keeping for research?* she wondered in disgust, knowing there would be little to no proof of it but conscious too of a powerful conviction that this had been the case . After all, Tomoe was famous for her very un-Himean knowledge of poisons and their effects. She kept countless specimens of various noxious mixtures, powders, mushrooms and the like, with what she called her interest in studying them. Poisons, of all things! The Himean world was much like the classical Greek one in this respect: poison was not considered a proper tool for anything, its study a subject regarded with wariness. Shizuru, for this reason, disliked having meals with the relative studying them... and secretly dissuaded most of her friends from doing so.

*The moment I am gone,* Shizuru thought, *she would do something like this .* She wondered if her cousin had been waiting for her to take a short absence to do such a reprehensible thing and only after plead with her to return immediately, once the job was done. That was certainly something Tomoe would do. For if there was something that occupied Tomoe more than her study of poisonous

substances, it was her unrequited passion for Shizuru. Shizuru herself knew it, and suspected that the woman refrained from most of her nefarious activities whenever she was around, afraid of being seen through by the person she admired the most.

Shizuru wondered why her absence from Hime always seemed to come with events in that city that made her feel as though she should have been there to stop them. Another example would be the news she had received from both the letters of the Princeps and the Senator Tokiha: the two told of a certain group of foreign noblemen in Hime who seemed to be courting the less scrupulous politicians around the city, feasting them and making much of them in general.

*What I do not like is that they are said to be-and I believe it!-* Mentulaean, *Fujino-san*, had been the impassioned words of the Senator Tokiha's letter. Both Mai Tokiha and the Princeps, Reito Kanzaki, had expressed their concern and suspicions for what the Mentulaean visitors were doing in Hime. It was possible, they thought, that if Shizuru found it necessary to write to the Senate requesting more troops, she would find it very difficult to get it granted, as a result of these foreigners' efforts with some of the less upright members of the House. And there were a great deal of those! No doubt they were filling their pockets with foreign gold, promising to oppose any resolution that would send more resources to the North.

*Let them keep their gold and their unblooded legions*, Shizuru thought, unable to suppress a flash of anger at the idea. She could win this war without additional help from the Senate if it came down to it. She would show them. Even if they did persist in saying it was not a war to which they had sent her.

She thought of the words of the Princeps telling her of the currents in the House. They still refused to call it an actual war, regardless of the overwhelming portents showing that it was going to be one. They preferred to call it-in Sergay Wang's twist on Reito's words-a "mere potentiality" and "no great one, at that". A mere potentiality, where a small Himean force had been thrust into foreign country with an overwhelmingly large enemy around it: an atom cast into a hurricane...

She sighed heavily, letting the sound seep out of her like water, a catharsis. Yes, she *did* feel tired.

She started at the feeling of something touching her knee. It was her bodyguard, who was looking at her with eyes that showed so much concern that she inhaled sharply at the sight. After a few seconds of staring at her, the dark-haired woman broke the spell that held them both frozen by turning the most furious red Shizuru had ever managed to see yet, making a move to withdraw her hand from the Himean's knee.

Shizuru clutched at the hand and kept it where it was. Natsuki's eyes returned, doubly alarmed now.

She was met with a soft smile.

"Thank you, Natsuki." Shizuru held the hand in hers tighter, to prevent the girl from withdrawing it. "You are so kind."

The Himean commander then pressed the hand on her knee, feeling the bones twitch through the bandages that her bodyguard wore wrapped around the palms-ostensibly to protect them from her own weapon when she was obliged to enter battle. Eventually, Shizuru felt the young woman's hand go limp, the ridged protrusions of bone retreating underneath the linen bindings. She relaxed her own fingers in response. Lifting her hand, she picked up the younger woman's and it turned it so that the palm faced up, ignoring the other's puff of surprise.

Her eyebrows lifted.

"So many scars," she observed, noting the marks on the fingers that were not covered by the wraps. "From the daos, Natsuki?"

The other nodded shyly.

"I see."

She felt one scar with her fingers, feeling the other girl tense up as if by instinct. She gave Natsuki her most calming smile, feeling again that prickling sense of curiosity about this enigmatic creature consuming her, the desire to break open all those secrets Natsuki

seemed to be holding behind locked lips.

"These must have hurt," she said, noting the depth and shape of several of the scars. "And they look very old. When did you start training in the daos, Natsuki? Were you very young?"

She was given an affirmative gesture.

*The price for being skilled in such a weapon*, she decided. She recalled her first images of the girl wielding the deadly instrument, managing to shock even the generally acerbic Nao into grudging respect. Yes, the price for such skill would be high. A natural talent for fighting lived only inside the person, after all: it was up to the outside, the body, to suffer the injuries it often took for that talent to be given form properly.

"I see."

She continued to feel the exposed skin of the other's fingers, running her own gently over them. *Softly now, softly*: she had the feeling of running her hand over the flank of a new horse, still very much a filly and still very willing to buck and flee. There was the tremble underneath the skin, the willingness to run at any moment.

"And even now, you are so young."

Natsuki tried to clench her fist. Shizuru stopped her by spreading her palm with her own.

Looking at the girl's pink cheeks, she realized what was bothering Natsuki.

"Oh, come now, Child," she said in surprise. "It is nothing to be ashamed of. I do not find it unsightly at all."

She removed her fingers from the other's and turned it up.

"Here, look," she said, exposing her hand too. "I have them too."

Natsuki looked at the palm next to hers, fascinated by the many crosses and patches of scar tissue on it. She looked up at the older woman.

"Touch them," Shizuru told her.

A small, reluctant shake of the head.

"It is nothing to be ashamed of," she said again. "Go on, Natsuki. Touch them and see. Mine may be deeper than yours, even."

A short interval of stillness, then a hesitant touch on her hand from the one next to it, which now hovered above her own. She smiled at the shyness of the fingers brushing over her palm, pleased that she had managed to get her reserved companion to touch her so familiarly.

"You see? Everyone's hand has scars."

Shizuru sighed, finding herself enjoying the delicate touches. Natsuki was surprisingly-or was it really surprising?-gentle with her hand.

"Sometimes, you cannot see them. But all hands are scarred."

The lucent green eyes flicked up to meet hers, shining.

"Sometimes," she added, "the most beautiful scars are the ones you can see."

A silence fell between them as the girl went on with her examination of the other woman's hand. Shizuru let her, feeling the warmth spreading through her palm. Neither of them spoke, simply looking at their hands where they were touching, and soon, the explorations of Natsuki's shy fingers seemed more like caresses to their recipient.

They were interrupted when Natsuki suddenly jerked her hand away and stood up, startling the Himean. Thinking that she had offended the younger woman somehow, Shizuru stood up as well with the intent of apologising to her. However, she soon realized what had prompted Natsuki's actions as she heard the sound of people approaching, their footsteps dulled by the snow. Soon, she could see the shadows, approaching them from the left.

"General!"

She recognized one of her legates along with two Otomeian officers. Picking up her cloak from the ground, she and Natsuki went to meet the group.

"Toshi-han," she said, as the party reached them. "What is it?"

"Their scouts are back," he answered, puffing misty little breaths.

She waited for him to regain his wind.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Siege. The Mentulae." He paused to inhale sharply. "Chie-san has already called the rest of the legates to council. Their people are in it too," he said, indicating the two Otomeians with him. "I was sent to inform you."

"Then we must be going."

They set off quickly. They made their way to the room where the council was being held and were let in by the guards, and found a dozen or so people already seated. They were at a large, round table that was not as low as the rest of the Otomeian tables but set at a height that permitted chairs. Everyone stood as they entered, including the king of Otomeia. He came to meet Shizuru and led her to the seat next to him. Natsuki took a stance nearby.

"Fujino-san," the king said. "We have news."

"So they tell me. Where are the scouts?"

They sat back down as he indicated two rather scruffy men seated with them. They bowed their heads in deference.

"Do they speak Himean?"

"One of them does. Both speak Greek."

"As do all my officers. Greek, then."

"Of course."



"May I hear of the news from them? I would like to hear their own accounts."

"Of course, Fujino-san. Report," he said to the men.

"I would like to hear first about why you took so long to return," Shizuru prompted. "Or so Hyodo-han tells me-that it was not usual for scouts sent to those parts to take this long to come back."

"Yes, Fujino-san," one of the men said, speaking fluid Greek. "It's the Mentulaeans who stopped us from getting back earlier. They're up on Stych Gorge."

"Stych Gorge," interrupted Hyodo, who was sitting on the other side of the king. "Is where we usually pass to get to the lands in the west, Argentum included."

"We nearly ran into them," the other scout said. "When we realised they were there, we though it was better to scout them a little-they're pretty well-camped there. It's not a small force either. I'd say they know you're here, General Fujino, and don't want any interference with their doings further west."

"How many?" Shizuru asked. "In the gorge."

"About ten thousand or more, I think."

"All foot?"

"Yes, infantry. Didn't see too many archers, but mostly spearmen."

"Very good. Please go on."

"We took a separate route when we were headed to Argentum, so I guess that's why we didn't run into them then. A good thing. Our orders were to pass by Sosia first, so we spent about a week going around. The closer we got to Argentum, the more rumours we got about a siege going on. It was when we got close enough to Argentum that we saw it for ourselves. The siege. It was the Prince Artaxi's army, we found out. We tried to get back as soon as possible and that's when we found the garrison at the gorge."

"Artaxi," the king said. "Is one of Obsidian's sons. It would be a large army, Fujino-san."

"I see," Shizuru replied. She looked at the scouts. "Argentum. It is heavily invested?"

"Very, General," said one of the men. "Not a lot of siege machines. Some chariots, but not for fighting. Looked more like a royal guard for the Prince. But they brought people, all right. We reckon there were about fifty thousand foot in there."

Chie, sitting a seat away from Shizuru, hissed.

"Argentum has no garrison," the senior legate muttered. "They won't last long. Not with an army that big."

"True," Shizuru said reflectively. "No horse, you say?"

"None, General."

"I can't think why they'd bring such a large force," one of the Otomeian counsellors at the table murmured.

"They were planning on going on after Argentum is why," someone else spat decisively. "Those bastards were set on getting the thing done in one swoop."

Shizuru tapped a finger on the table to draw their attention.

"Well then," she said coolly. "We must relieve Argentum."

"But can we?" asked an Otomeian. "We have only conducted three days of joint manoeuvres, General. I doubt we can all get there in time too."

"Not all," Shizuru responded. "The bigger the army I take, the slower it shall march. No, I am not taking all the legions or auxiliary. The troops are well-drilled enough for work, Chie-han?"

"They'll do, General," Chie said. "The Otomeians are just as well-trained as our legions. They'll follow command."

"Mm." She turned to the king. "It is certainly a great credit to your nation, Your Majesty, that your military is so efficient."

Kruger inclined his head at her compliment, the lines on his face showing that he was itching to smile at it.

"If you want to go, Fujino-san, then of course we shall give you what you need," he said gravely. "And you are right. We cannot simply leave Argentum without succour when it is our ally too. It would be shameful to wait."

He paused for a heavy moment, his deeply-lined, age-spotted brow furrowing.

"Yes," he decided quietly. "We must relieve Argentum."

The rest took this in silence. Hyodo was the one who expressed what everyone was thinking.

"So," he said, taking a deep breath. "It is *war*."

"Yes," Shizuru answered calmly. "It is war. Perhaps a little earlier than we expected, but it is here, nevertheless. It has been coming here all this time."

"Well," said the king, shifting suddenly in his seat so that his braided beard waved in front of him. "Better now than later, when we do not expect it at all! Shall you go through the dispositions, General Fujino? I suppose you are eager to make them as soon as possible."

"Yes, of course. Have you a map?" she asked the Otomeians, who produced a large one made of calfskin and recording the geography of the area to which they were headed as well as where they currently were. One of them pointed out the locations of the cities and the routes that were possible for them to take.

"This is Stych Gorge," he said, pointing to the illustration with his finger. "And this is the route we usually take to Argentum. Since that's blocked off, we probably have to take this other pass and skirt the Eutychine Hills, then go through here. There's another route, but it's even longer and would take close to a month for an army from

here to get to Argentum. The other route will take only three weeks, at most."

"And if we were to take Stych Gorge?" Shizuru asked.

"About a week. But since we cannot use that-

"We shall go through Stych Gorge."

Every face in the room turned to her.

"But General Fujino," the king said, recovering from his surprise the quickest. His dour grandfather's face regarded her with confusion. "You would be ambushed. The gorge is garrisoned, as they said. Unless you plan to take it from them?"

She shook that idea away: "No, not at this moment, much as I would like to. The simple fact is that we do not have spare legions to garrison and hold on to the gorge, even if we do happen to take it from the legions they already have there. I am simply aiming for speed. From what I have heard, it seems as though Argentum is in dire condition. We cannot waste time. The matter of the gorge will have to be settled later."

"But General," said one of the Otomeians. "A route through Argentum would mean an ambush-a fight. We could take even longer than if we took the other routes."

"No, we shall not," Shizuru replied, already working out numerous possibilities and routes in her head for the march. "One way or another, we shall get through the gorge. I am taking all the cavalry and archery units with me, along with two of the legions we have brought from Hime. I shall leave the rest here, along with your infantry, to ensure that Otomeia is still garrisoned. In case they try something, you know, because I do not like our foes being as close as Stych Gorge. Although I may well send for the rest of the forces later too. Well, we shall see. Simply be prepared to move all forces at a moment's notice. I have a bad habit of demanding that troops be moved out in an instant, as my officers shall tell you."

"But General, that is all?" spluttered out another of the Otomeians in

the room. "Pardon me, but the cavalry you named makes up no more than three thousand altogether! You shall be facing so many!"

"Indeed."

"You need not worry about Otomeia-our walls are not easy to break," another chimed in. "Please, Fujino-san, take more soldiers with you! And consider passing through the other route instead."

Shizuru only continued to smile, bereft of any discernible distress or tension. Her legates recognised this as the expression their general wore when she was readying herself for battle, and began to relax. They knew there was little to be done save follow orders when the force of nature that was their commander got into this mood. The Otomeians were hardly privy to this wise advice on resignation, however, and so merely looked more and more frazzled by the moment.

"Now then," Shizuru said, standing up. "I would like someone to explain the lay of the land to me as I see to the preparations. We shall march tomorrow at dawn, so get everything ready tonight, even if it means several of us shall not be able to sleep due to that. You can get your sleep on the march at camp, anyway. I would like these good men-" She indicated the scouts. "-to come with me for now. I have several questions they might answer. Now please excuse me, King Kruger and the rest of you. I have a lot of things to see to tonight."

The rest stood up automatically as she left, her bodyguard, legates, and both Otomeian scouts trailing after her. The Otomeians left in the room stared at the last figure going through the door until it disappeared into the darkness. They were silent, still wondering what had happened. It was a good while before anyone spoke.

"By the gods," one of the king's ageing counsellors finally got out. "Is she *mad*?"

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Much though the Otomeians thought it, the Himean commander was not mad. She set out at a brisk march for the gorge the very day

after the war council with her half of the army: two legions of Himean infantry with three thousand horsemen, including archers. There was no baggage train: with only two legions, Shizuru pointed out to her legates, there was no pressing need for one anyway.

The rest she left in Otomeia, true to her word, under the command of her chief primipilus and the only legate she left in the Otomeian citadel, Taro. Nao understood the meaning behind her general's decision and continued to drill the remaining legions while the others sped for Argentum. And 'speed' was the word for it. This was the first time the Otomeians witnessed for themselves how quickly the Himean infantry could move, marching at a pace that kept them level with their mounted allies very comfortably. Thus they covered the distance to their destination with great efficiency.

It was a mere four days before they came within sight of the gorge, only having stopped very briefly to make camp whenever nighttime fell. As they neared the defile, Chie squinted, trying to estimate what time they would reach it.

"What do you think?" she asked Shizuru, marching next to her.  
"Looks suspicious, all right."

Shizuru flashed a brilliant smile: "Chie-han. Nervous?"

Chie laughed: "Don't tease, Shizuru-san."

"All right," her general replied. "We are right on schedule, so do not worry. We shall be there just before sunset." She paused to survey the area. "And everything is as I expected it to be. Yes, we shall follow through the plan."

"This is going to work, isn't it?"

"You doubt me?" she asked, the teasing tone there again.

"I'd eat my helmet first-if you don't make me eat it yourself!" the legate replied, making the legionaries marching next to them laugh as well. They knew their general, and if she said this was going to work, it was going to work. The Otomeians, who had initially harboured doubts, had begun to be infected by the Himean soldiers'

confidence, and had taken to looking forward to reaching the gorge as well.

By sundown, the army was at the gorge, and directly under the scrutiny of the Mentulaean officer sent to garrison that canyon: a certain Ramis. He watched curiously with his legions as the Himean and Otomeian troops began to throw up earth and rocks, working frantically to-it seemed-build fortifications. Only half of the troops worked, while the other half stood watch. The cavalry separated itself to move ahead to the gorge's mouth in order to graze their animals.

Ramis laughed at the sight after a while.

"The idiots!" he said, blowing through his nose derisively. "I thought they were going to try to get through, but here it looks like they want to take this pass from us instead."

"Don't you think they can? Himeans are supposed to be good soldiers," said one of his junior officers. The man happened to be a close friend, and now joined in looking down at the activity. "They outnumber us too, here."

"It doesn't matter," Ramis told him. "We're too well-entrenched here for them to defeat us. They can wear themselves out trying, but they'll never take the gorge. By the time they've even made any headway in doing that, Prince Artaxi's army will have come closer too. All we have to do is hold for a while."

"They're really making that camp sturdy," observed another Mentulaean officer. "They must be serious about taking the gorge off our hands."

Ramis snorted with derision again and resumed watching. It was dark by now and the army below them had lit torches to be able to continue their work. The Mentulaeans watched, fascinated by the progress of the foreign, bizarre fortifications. It was well into the evening when the torches were finally extinguished, the camp having been completed.

"Idiots," Ramis said once more as he and his officers retired for

some wine and to discuss the folly of the enemy army. "I intended to ambush them when they marched through the middle of the gorge, where they would have been completely swallowed-up by it. Looks like I won't get to do that. Pity. Would've been easier."

"At least we still have the upper hand," replied an officer. "They can throw themselves on the rocks trying to eject us. Prince Artaxi will be finished with Argentum by then."

"Get a good sleep, boys," said Ramis, getting up and heading for his tent. "We'll show these idiots how the Mentulae defend a position."

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Ramis never got to show them his defensive skills, however. The moment the sun came up and shone its light on the fortifications in the ravine, it also showed no people behind them. There in the distance was the dust that showed where the Himean general's army had slunk off to during the night, headed for Argentum.

Dismayed and feeling very much like the idiot he had called their foes the day before, Ramis sent off a messenger to Argentum at full speed, to warn Prince Artaxi of the enemy's approach. He could not pursue the army in the distance as to do so would mean losing his advantage of the high ground, spelling out sure defeat. Furthermore, his orders were to garrison the gorge, and he predicted that his superior would flay him if he abandoned it without any orders to do so.

"The deceptive little pricks!" he ranted to his officers, watching helplessly as the dust and the column faded farther into the distance. "A trick like that-even I didn't see it coming!"

The Mentulaeans listened to their superior rant, wondering who could have thought of the manoeuvre that had just outwitted them so soundly. While they were all burning with humiliation at having been made fools of, every one of them also felt awe for whoever had orchestrated the plan, as well as for the sheer nerve it must have taken to try to get a whole army out of a ravine absent detection. *Of all the monumental bluffs -why, it beggared description!*



Thus it was that while the defenders of the gorge lamented their oversight, the relief force for Argentum continued along its path, unhindered by obstacles and buoyed by general merriment for the trick they and their commander had just done.

## Chapter 6

### **Vocabulaire :**

1. **Imperium** – Complex idea, possible to express as the degree of authority owned by a magistrate of Rome. There are varying degrees of it, and subcategories such as the "pro[office] imperium", which is basically a kind of authority that is comparable to that vested in the holder of the stipulated office in the title but which is held by a person not actually holding said office. Hence, with a **proconsular imperium**, the one holding it acts with the authority of a consul but is not in office as consul.

2. **Pedarii** - The senators at the back rows of the seating arrangement in Senate. One might think of them as the 'backbenchers' in that sense. They are not permitted to speak/make speeches but they may vote on decisions. From this, you gather that it is a reflection of a senator's prestige if he or she has the privilege of speaking in the Senate.

3. **Siege and engineers** - Engineers had an important role in sieges as they were the ones who drew up the plans for and supervised the actual carrying out of water diversion systems and the like.

4. **Verpa** - Latin obscenity; actually refers to the erect male organ with the foreskin drawn back.

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### **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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When Ramis sent a messenger to Artaxi about the army heading for Argentum, he calculated correctly that it would reach his commander before the said army would. The news electrified the leader of the Mentulaean force, prompting him to send officers scurrying to alert

the men. His troops began to take up positions around the city, further terrifying the citizens quartered within the walls with the noise of their armour and orders. Every eye was on the lookout, every ear waiting for the sound of rattling metal and marching footsteps.

Argentum sat on a wide plain bounded by patches of wooded area on every side. The city walls had three entrances: the main gates at the south; the north-western gate; and the eastern gates. The assaulting army before it now dispersed troops to form concentrations before each entrance, the bulk of the forces remaining in front of the southern one. The rest of the army massed in lines before the other two gates to prevent entry and exit through those portals.

The Himean general seeking to succour the city watched all this with a thoughtful eye, standing on her lookout point on a woody hill. With her were two of her legates and her bodyguard, who often left her own division in the hands of a subordinate so that she could watch over the general-as she did now, looking impassively at the older woman as the latter turned to the rest of the company with a grin.

"Rather disorderly, are they not?" the Himean commander remarked, drawing grins from her officers. "Do look at those lines. Really!"

"What do you expect from uncivilised barbarians?" asked one legate.

The general shook her head playfully at him.

"Uncivilised?" she echoed with a lift of the brows. "We often say that war is the expression of humanity's most uncivilised side. If one excels at the organisation of war as we Himeans are supposed to, does that not mean one is-or *we are* the most 'uncivilised barbarians' of all, Toshi-han?"

The legate named Toshi frowned, a little confused as to whether she was serious or poking fun at him. The senior legate laughed and clapped him on the back.

"The general's teasing you, Toshi-san," she told him. "Don't kill

yourself thinking about what she said."

She turned to the tall woman looking out at the Argentinian plain.

"What do you want to do, Shizuru-san?" she asked her.

"I want to enter the city, I think."

"Enter the city?"

"Yes."

All of them turned their eyes to the army in the distance, once again.

"How many enemy scouts have been found thus far?" Shizuru asked.

"Five," returned her senior legate, grinning. "Oh, I love the Otomeian scouts-so stealthy! I doubt any of the Mentulaean ones have seen us yet or escaped to tell the tale, if they have. They're either dead or in our hands. They're quite lax for scouts, so the Otomeians tell us."

"Do you hear that, Natsuki?" said Shizuru, giving her bodyguard a wide smile. "Otomeia has impressed all of us, truly, with the calibre of her men and women... especially that of *my own* Natsuki, of course."

The girl responded with a half-choke when she heard the words 'my own Natsuki', turning a brilliant shade of red that fast approached purple. The other members of the party quickly brought their hands up to their mouths, stifling their laughter.

"Are you all right, Natsuki?" said Shizuru, still holding up her hand to her mouth as she smirked. "Is *my* dearest bodyguard going to protest and tell me I cannot call her that?"

The Otomeian gave her another fierce-and very purple-glare, shaking with indignation as she pressed her lips tightly together.

"Tsk," clucked the senior legate, when she had recovered enough to speak. "You lose this one, Shizuru-san. It looks like Natsuki-san's still not talking to you."

There was muffled laughter again. Ever since the senior legate had found out about the general's vow to make her bodyguard finally say a word to her, the information had spread to the other members of the general's staff-not least because it was impossible to ignore the way the general attempted to tease or bait the uncommunicative girl into finally saying something. As a result of this little eccentricity on the part of their commander, the legates had taken to making bets among themselves on when the girl would finally crack. The pot on that bet was now large, since officer after officer had been coming in to place his or her own wager. Secretly, of course.

"I seem to have lost again, Chie-han," the general sighed dramatically, ruffling her hair where she had tucked it into her cloak. "Well, as she is my bodyguard in truth, I do not see any reason why I cannot say she is my Natsuki as well. It sounds so much better, do you not think so?"

The subject of this comment drew her brows further together as Chie chuckled.

"Easy, Shizuru-san," said the senior legate, casting a teasing look towards the indignant girl frowning at them. "Or you'll give her a stroke."

Shizuru returned her friend's smile, then turned back to the scene before them.

"The Argentians speak Himean, I recall?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Chie. "It's their chief language, actually. And most of the Mentulae speak it too."

"Of course."

"I'm glad we don't have to get more interpreters," said Toshi.

"Hmm," was all the general said. She paused in her contemplation of the city and looked down to the earth at her feet, a small crease on her forehead as she started playing with a large, sharply-faceted rock by rolling it under her boot. The others waited, saying nothing.

"The first sally should be from the northwest," the commander said a

moment later.

Toshi stepped forward to squint at the area she indicated.

"Thinner troops," he remarked. "Hm. Why don't they form a perimeter that's closer to the city? Surely that would make it easier for them to create a barrier against any relief from outside. All they have to do is form the line closer to the city itself."

"And get themselves killed by arrows from the city walls?" Shizuru asked, amusement quirking her lips.

"Oh."

Chie slapped him again, this time on the shoulder.

"You are really quite green, aren't you, Toshi-san?" she said good-naturedly, only pointing it out because he himself said it so often. "Whatever made you sign up for this?"

He rubbed the stubble of his jaw in a way that managed to convey self-deprecation.

"You know why, Harada-san," he said gruffly, amused as well. "I've spent long enough in the House, just doing paperwork and listening to the rest who aren't *pedarii* yammer on. Never a proper campaign to my record! Rather embarrassing at my age, I say, so I felt obliged to do some time in the legate's post."

"Come to think of it," Chie mumbled, doing some quick calculations in her mind with slight agony-numbers had never been her strong suit-before squinting at him. "You've been in the House since, oh..."

"Longer than the two of you," he continued for her, seeing that she had trailed off out of politeness. He grinned at the two women, who sent him apologetic smiles. He flapped a hand at their expressions.

"Oh, don't worry! It's no shame on me if it's the two of you we're talking about," he told them. "Your status is deserved, as far as I'm concerned. But sometimes I can't stand the other senators-the ones who don't have a grain of sense in them, because if they had that much, at least, they'd know they could serve the House better by

sitting down and shutting up!"

He stopped to let them laugh, shaking his head with mock dismay even as he smiled at the sound of their giggles. It brought to his mind an image of his soon-to-be-of-age daughter, whom he had left at home with his wife.

*It's times like these that I remember how young they are,* he thought to himself, his eyes settling on the erect, slender figure of the general in particular. *Or maybe it's the other way around and I'm simply old.*

"Anyway, if I get through this in one piece I won't have to settle for just listening in the House like a speechless idiot. And the general was nice enough to grant my request to serve with her, so here I am, greenness with military strategies and all," he said with a grateful look at Shizuru, who beamed that stunning smile of hers his way.

"Come now, Toshi-han, the 'niceness' is all on your part for lending me your strength on this endeavour. I am sure you will prove yourself worthy of at least a consul's position before this ends," she replied generously. She chuckled at his renewed embarrassment before looking away and returning to their earlier topic. "In any case, I must say that your earlier idea, while it had merit, cannot apply here. No matter that their forces outnumber us. They still cannot spread themselves out enough to cover so large an area without thinning some places. Besides, the only important places to cover are those before the gates. Hence they are drawing into blocks there."

"Are we doing a straight charge, then?" Chie asked.

Shizuru shook her head.

"No," she said, folding her arms around her waist. "At least, not in the sense of one deployment. What a pity Argentum doesn't have a garrison! Otherwise we could have driven the bulk of their army straight against the walls and had the Argentians finish them by attacking from the rear."

"That's a fine idea," said Toshi, making a mental note of it in his mind. "Yes, that's brilliant, Shizuru-san."

"I am glad you think so, Toshi-han," she replied, amused by the realization that he was cataloguing her ideas for later reference. "But it does not apply here. Besides, it would be rather risky, with them spread out and outnumbering us. No, I have another plan."

"I can't wait to hear it, Fujino-san."

"Then shall we return to the others?" she said, drawing her long scarlet cloak about her tall form. "I would rather everyone hears it instead of having to repeat myself."

She stepped off the boulder she had been standing on, and began making her way back to the army. The others followed, as ever.

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Thus it was that around noon of that day, the Mentulaean troops at the north-western gate found themselves subject to an attack from an Otomeian cavalry that hit them in a rush. It began with a devastating volley of arrows that was followed by another, equally devastating volley of spears. These were succeeded by another wave of arrows that preceded a head-on charge, breaking the Mentulaean frontline on that side, which had been attenuated by the first ranged attacks.

It took only a short while for the Mentulae to gather their bearings. Rallying to fight off the intruders, the call to arms was sounded to warn the other troops that the enemy had attacked at the northwest. The commander of the army, the Prince Artaxi, bared his teeth in a wicked grimace at the sound.

One of the king's sons from his favourite wife, Artaxi had made a fairly good name for himself even amidst the rest of his father's brood when it came to war. He had a predilection for deceptive tactics that often drew the enemy to an apparently weak flank, only to unleash a sudden onrush of reserves that would overwhelm the enemy force with a merciless assault of mass and numbers. What really got him notoriety was his regular procedure following the fight:



after the battle, he would request prisoners from his men to torture for amusement. His soldiers and officers had learned to set aside more than a few living members of the enemy force to appease their commander's taste for hearing a person scream. They learned what sorts of captives were ideal as well: the prince liked them young, preferably with unmarred skin, and virginal-looking. The sex did not matter. That they could scream to a soprano did.

Ever since receiving the message from his subordinate at Stych Gorge, Prince Artaxi had readied himself for his usual trick, wanting to draw out the enemy forces from wherever they were undoubtedly hiding. Hence he had ordered that the northwest entrance be garrisoned most lightly, with most of the troops from the southern and eastern blocks already prepared to rush to that area once it drew out the enemy. This was why neither the Mentulaean army nor its commander was surprised that the offensives had occurred in the northwest: they had intended it.

"As expected, they hit the thinnest spot," Artaxi said to the officer with him, running to his chariot and ascending it. His charioteer whipped the reins as they drew closer to the front of the troops at the southern entrance. The prince shouted for the bugle to be sounded, and the blare of the horn soon filled the field, sending a thrill to every soldier in the fray.

As arranged, the troops at the other sides of the walls thinned as their bulk rushed to the northwest, ready to catch the foe in the trap. To their surprise, however, only about two thousand units' worth of Otomeian horse were rushing in and out of the lines on that side, wreaking havoc and roaring to make enough noise for a full army as they danced around the Mentulaean infantry in the northwest. Artaxi frowned and ordered his chariot to stop.

"What is this?" he yelled to one officer. "This is what Ramis calls a relief force? This paltry army? Just this?"

Unable to tear his eyes from the mêlée, he furrowed his brow in confusion as he realised that the enemy cavalry seemed to be drawing out his own forces farther and farther from the city walls.

*Well, let them try!* he sneered. *Do they think we'll bite all the way?*

*Two legions of cavalry! Are these fools belittling me?*

The Otomeian cavalry was in almost full retreat now, and Artaxi smiled smugly as he watched them withdrawing from the battle, apparently heading for the forest beyond the plain where Argentum lay. His men, on the other hand, began to reform their line before the northwest entrance, refusing to be drawn into the forest but preparing for another assault by forming a defensive block.

*Truly idiotic, to attempt to draw my forces off into the forests with such small bait.*

He started as the halt of the horns from the northwest suddenly let another sound, thus far drowned, split through the air: another shrill horn trumpeting the Mentulaeen call to arms. Artaxi's eyes widened, his mind racing.

*Another attack so quickly?* he thought, bewildered. A whisper of alarm rose from some corner of his mind. *But it's coming from...*

"The eastern gates! They're coming in through the eastern gates, you fools!" he screamed at his men, spurring his chariot towards the eastern part of the plain. "Re-form! To the east! Leave the northwest to the troops assigned there!"

Indeed, Artaxi had been correct in recognising the cavalry attack as bait. However, he had made a mistake in thinking it was bait to draw them into the forest-a ruse to enable the outnumbered enemy forces to play on guerrilla tactics, thus lowering their disadvantages.

No, the true purpose of the bait had been to draw the bulk of his troops to the northwest, leaving the eastern entrance lightly guarded. The Himean fox had fallen into his trap only to slip out and reveal that it had set a trap of its own. Just as most of the soldiers from the east had gone off and been reinforcing the north-western lines, the remaining Mentulaeen troops at the eastern entrance had found themselves on the receiving end of a barrage of arrows, followed by an infantry charge so swift, so strong, that it smashed a hole right into them and caused a panic that folded the thinned eastern line into itself.

Near the very head of this charge was the Himean commander herself, who slashed open three men before any of the soldiers by her side could even draw blood. Flicking her naginata in perilous circles, she opened space for her soldiers to follow into the charge, all the while crying out to the men on the ramparts of the city before them.

"Open the gates!"

She stopped shouting to lift her weapon to the air as a Mentulaean soldier leapt from a chariot towards her, brandishing his sword. The end of the naginata's blade caught him in the gut as she swung it to the left in a vicious arc, splitting the man. Two of the rankers flanking her and intent on ensuring that nothing would harm the commander went in for overkill, their teeth bared as they slashed viciously at the savaged body even before it fell to the earth. The man was decimated, his entrails flinging out and leaving blood splattered all over those in the area, including the general herself. The general continued pressing forward with the rest of the leaders of the charge, resuming her cry and joined in it by the other Himeans in the fight.

" *Open the gates , Argentians !*"

The defenders of Argentum who stood on the walls called to open the eastern gates, giving entry to the four charging columns of Himean infantry and Otomeian cavalry archers-for the Himean commander had split the cavalry archers between her half and the half with the cavalry that acted as bait in the northwest. The gates opened just in time: Artaxi's officers had begun to return their men to the eastern entrance, ready to pursue the intruders straight into the city. As they approached, however, they were met with a thick volley of arrows from both the defenders on the walls as well as the Otomeian archers-who had wheeled around and reformed at the flanks of the columns even before the last infantry troops made their way into the gates.

Due to the rain of arrows, the disordered Mentulae were unable to follow Shizuru's army into the city, and the gates were shut before they could attempt to do so. Finding themselves subject to another hail of projectiles before the entrance, they rushed off to a safer

distance, panting from the exertion of having been made to run back and forth from the east to the northwest. Their commanders, however, were unsympathetic. They cursed the hapless Mentulaeen footsoldiers for what had happened, now seeing the trick for what it was. The 'bait cavalry' in the northwest had disappeared into the forest while the attack by the eastern walls had taken place. The enemy had slipped out of their hands: one group into the walls of the city, another into the walls of the wood.

Inside the city, just within the eastern gates, the Argentians were busily crowding around their rescuers, who were busy themselves with wiping off the gore from their faces, taking off sweat-soaked helmets and dismounting from horses. The magistrates of the city were soon at the fore of the crowd, praising the gods loudly for the new arrivals.

Some of the Argentinian officials stepped forward.

"I am the head magistrate of the city," said one of them: a stocky, grizzled man with piercing blue eyes. "I am called Livius Silo. Who is the leader of this force?"

The answer came from his right.

"Greetings to you, Livius Silo," said the clear voice. It was coming from a statuesque figure whose once-polished armour was now covered with blood. "The one you seek is I."

The rest of the Argentians turned to face the person, watching as the helmet was removed. There was no disappointment once it was done: the removal of the helmet revealed a face somehow unmarred by the spatters of blood on the fair cheeks and unforgiving nose. Most of the onlookers started, partly due to the woman's unexpected beauty, but more due to her eyes, whose colour matched the blood on her skin.

"I am Shizuru Fujino, Senator and Envoy of Hime to the Northern Territories, commander of this army," she said, breezing through the formal introduction. "We have been quartered in Otomeia for the past weeks, and that is from where part of the army I carry with me comes. We are here to relieve you of those who besiege your walls,

in honour of the allied status you hold with both the nations of Hime and Otomeia."

Livius Silo stared with lips slightly parted at the woman before him, resisting the unexplainable urge to kneel. Something flashed in his memory and he started out of his trance.

"Shizuru Fujino... Ah! Yes, I have heard of you! They call you the Red-eyed Con-"

"None of that, please, Livius Silo-han," Shizuru said, waving her hand in a gesture that seemed to say she was embarrassed. "I actually find the nicknames people give me quite ridiculous, not to mention trite. I am Shizuru Fujino. That is all."

Livius Silo nodded uncertainly, still awestruck-as were the rest of the Argentians observing his conversation with this splendid young woman. Who knew Hime had senators who looked like this? Oh, how wonderful to have a saviour who actually looked the part! Irrational though the thought was, many of the people were already convinced of their salvation from the besiegers, simply because it seemed impossible that the gods would send someone who looked so, well, *heroic* without actually granting that person a triumph of heroism.

"What concerns me is that over half of my cavalry is still out there," Shizuru told him, pleasant smile an odd contrast to the blood all over her. "I made arrangements to that effect, but I still need to see the state of your defences before I go on with my plans."

She looked around for her legates, and found the one she was looking for nearby.

The two women nodded to each other, unspoken words clear to them.

"Let us go to the battlements and survey the field," Shizuru said to the Argentinian magistrate.

"Of course, Shizuru Fujino-san," Livius Silo responded. "Please follow me as the rest take care of your people."

He snapped his hands at someone who appeared to be a servant.

"Give me that towel," he told the man.

He then offered the towel to Shizuru, who took it as gracefully as though she were accepting a gift from someone in a formal reception.

"Oh, that feels better," she said, wiping her face carefully with it as they walked, several other magistrates and citizens following them like an entourage. "Thank you, Silo-han."

"Whatever we can do for you, Fujino-san," he said, heading for the stairs that would take them to the tops of the walls. "We've been strung out for a good while, so your arrival's a godsend. We were getting worried about starving to death without even offering a fight to those *verpa* out there."

"Indeed, I am sorry we could not come sooner."

He shook his head.

"Nothing to be sorry for, General," he assured her. "We're just thankful the gods have sent you to aid us. We tried sending out messengers for help, but they caught them each time."

"How unfortunate. You have no standing army, correct?"

"Yes. To keep one costs far too much... besides which, we are not a military people by tradition, so it would be a waste of resources unless we hired mercenaries from outside." A frown. "Too costly."

"I take it you have been beating the Mentulae back with just those arrows?" she asked, tilting her head to the archers on the walls.

"Yes. We have that, at least."

"How many archers?"

"It depends on the day. Just about anyone who can use a bow can be an archer here. We're all defending the city that way."

"I see. How many bows, then?"

"Around three, four hundred. We've been making more to help repel them when they try to come too close."

"And arrows?"

"We make them every day, so there are a lot of those. We still have enough wood in the city to spend on that, thank the gods."

"In any case, may I ask how the people have been holding out?"

"Fairly. Argentum has large vaults, although we've also been rationing heavily, to be safe. We're not in the starvation stage yet."

"That is good. You are well-victualled, I hope? And no shortage of water? I do not see anything to indicate they have blocked your water supply."

"They can't," he said, letting a broad grin split his face. The seams on his face ate deeper into his skin as he smiled. "Or they haven't yet. Our water is led off beneath the bed of the river at hundreds of points. It would take a very long time, and Prince Artaxi is not known for his patience with such undertakings. Or his engineers, for that matter." He emitted a relieved sound. "That's part of why we've held out so well until now. He's been having problems with his siege machines. He fixed them two days ago, though, I think, so he's been using them on us since then. It caused some problems."

"Yet your walls and gates still stand for the most part."

"I think his machines aren't perfectly fixed, Fujino-san. Either that or he must be afraid of having issues with them again. He probably has no decent engineers to rely on in that army of his."

"More fool him, then," Shizuru, a natural engineer, said.

She stopped as they reached the top of the walls, looking out upon the field. The Mentulae had apparently reformed once again, now choosing to mass all their units so that they faced the southern walls of the city. She narrowed her eyes as she peered farther into the distance, into the forest beyond the plain.

*They should be there now, waiting, she thought. The rest of my army and my Natsuki.*

She caught herself and shook her head. Why tease the girl with the possessive when she was not there to hear it?

*Really, that is becoming something of a bad habit,* she scolded herself privately.

"It appears that he has thought it better to consolidate his troops into one block," she remarked, brushing her damp hair out of her face.

"Well, now, what are you thinking over there, Prince Artaxi?"

Suddenly she paused and gave Livius Silo an odd smile.

"Those are the tracks of the enemy artillery, are they not?" she said, pointing to marks and ruts of the earth in the distance.

"Yes, Fujino-san."

She hummed for a bit, the smile playing on the edges of her mouth.

"You use simple bows, yes?" she asked him.

"Yes."

"You are familiar with composite bows?"

"I have... heard of them. In my travels. They are used in the drier climates... But why do you ask, Fujino-san? We do not have them here."

"Ah, I simply chanced to notice something."

The clanking of armour and voices from behind them made her turn around.

"Chie-han."

The legate smiled, stepping forward to stand next to her as Livius Silo stepped back to speak with another of the Argentinian magistrates.



"I've told the legionaries to take a breather. They're all resting and enjoying the attention, anyway. The Argentians are treating them like heroes."

"Indeed."

She continued to look out into the direction of the woods.

"You told them not to use the daos yet, right?" Chie asked, not needing to specify that she was talking about the unit that had led the cavalry charge at the northwest earlier.

"Yes," Shizuru affirmed. "Risky, I suppose, but it was for the best."

"Well, they handled it well enough, even if they weren't using their favourite weapons. They're not elite for nothing, I guess. May I ask why you made them do that?"

Shizuru had a pensive expression on her face.

"From my talks with the Otomeians, it appears that the Mentulae have scarcely encountered them in battle, particularly the Lupine Division. I have a feeling they have never seen the Lupine Division, in fact. Or the daos."

Her senior legate lifted her head, then nodded.

"I see," she said, looking thoughtful too. "Saving the shock for later?"

"Yes."

Chie looked out at the army before them, admiring the sparkling of the Mentulaean armour worn by thousands and thousands of persons. She sighed and lowered her voice.

"Here comes the hard part."

"Quite." There was a pause. "We shall bring in the Argentinian archers to man the walls. Silo-han estimates about four hundred or so."

"That's a help, I'm sure." She turned to Shizuru, her eyes searching the brilliant red ones. "That was pretty good fighting back there,

General."

"Perhaps we will see even better fighting later, Chie-han," Shizuru said.

"If your plan is going to work, Shizuru-san, we better." She paused, then added with a grin: "From our troops, that is."

"Oh, I have every faith in them," the general said, her smile wider than before.

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The commander of the Mentulaean army, however, was far from expressing a similar faith in his men. Seething with anger at what had happened, Prince Artaxi had called together all of his officers, ranting and raving as he proceeded to explain why the debacle had been *their* fault, why *their* carelessness had allowed the Himeans to get into the city. Finally running down after nearly an hour of this, he took to his uncomfortably jewel-encrusted seat and glowered at them.

The most experienced of the officers, a man who had seen his fair share of battles over the years and whose face bore an ugly scar that bisected his left cheek, stepped forward with a deferential bow to the commander.

"At the very least, Oh Great One," he began. "We know that they are truly a smaller force than ours. And that they are now walled up in Argentum, subject to the siege as well. Never mind the cavalry force we ran up against earlier, they are far too small to worry about. What we must do now is return to the siege."

Artaxi looked at him, chewing his bottom lip in thought.

"What if they sally out to try to destroy our artillery?" he asked. "Those cavalry troops in the forest could do that, you know. Simply ride out and try to get the siege weapons. Oh, I should've brought cavalry!"

"We can handle them, My Lord."

"Like you did earlier? Or even the legions that got into the walls!" He sneered with true royal contempt. "Himean legions, eh? I don't see why so many people are afraid of them, even among us. If there are a lot, I suppose-but this army we're facing is a paltry little thing!"

"They may try to sally out," answered another of his barons, returning to the original question. "But to no avail, Great One. For we only have to send a strong escort with our artillery when we set up to resume the siege. They would hardly dare a direct engagement with us now, since it would involve a head-on charge. They are too outnumbered. Even if they do try it, they would be eradicated."

Artaxi nodded slowly, continuing to chew his lip. He stopped, worked his mind furiously again, then grinned.

"I wonder what they were thinking," he said with great malice. "Shutting themselves into the city like that. Very bad tactics, especially if you're trying to relieve an invested city. Did they think Argentum had a garrison they could assimilate into their ranks?"

He laughed a thin, piercing sound.

"Yes, resume the siege," he said, waving his hand. "And send a third of the army as guard with the artillery, just to make sure those bastards inside the walls don't think of coming out and trying anything. Kill them if they do."

# Chapter 7

*Good day and thank you to the reviewers, particularly the ones who were so lovely as to send me good wishes throughout what has been occupying me these days.*

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## **Vocabulaire :**

1. **NOTE on Artaxi's battle tactics** - *He follows the pattern set by the Ancient Persians, who often vastly outnumbered their enemies and thus engaged in battle by sending out massive waves of their troops in a policy of "shock and awe".*
  2. **Cohort** - *Roman military unit of 6 centuries.*
  3. **Dis** - *Alternative name for the Dark Underworld (Hades, in Greek) or Pluto (the god).*
  4. **Vulcan** - *God of the forge and of fire, equivalent of the Grecian Hephaestus.*
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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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Afternoon of the same day Shizuru Fujino's troops entered Argentum, the city's besiegers resumed their attacks. The defenders on the walls watched as a large part of the Mentulaean force detached itself from the bulk sitting to the south of the citadel and drove forward, pushing and pulling their artillery with them.

The array of siege machines Prince Artaxi had brought with him was largely a fresh one, even if it had been giving him some trouble in this investment. The pieces were newly-made, precious engines still

bearing-if one was close enough to smell it-the scent of freshly cut and oiled wood. These were not great machines, truth be told: had the Himean engineers inspected them from up close, they might have scoffed at the practical limitations of their designs. They would see the shorter range, the weaker shot, the shabby sinews. But the Mentulae were not a people of great engineering abilities, and all things considered, these were still the best they had. Besides, weaker than their Himean counterparts though these were, artillery was still artillery, and it always made a difference.

With the Mentulae at Argentum were catapults of various makes, some meant to cast incendiary missiles, as well as the more common ones used to hurl large boulders and bricks at the gates and towers. These were drawn up before the city in an ordered line with the rest of the Mentulaean footmen sent out under the prince's instructions. There might not have been many machines to speak of, but there were certainly sufficient soldiers with them to make up for that. The line as it drew up was an impressive sight, and certainly one that could have easily worried anyone on the opposing side.

Yet, had any of the Mentulaeans coming forward been able to see the faces of the defenders, the men and women on the city's ramparts showed more eagerness than apprehension. Soon, the Mentulae had formed a line before the city and the artillery was drawn into place for the bombardment to begin. When the last siege unit was in place before the line, however, the defenders did what seemed to the Mentulaeans an odd and very futile thing: they began to lift the bows in their hands and got into position.

One of the Mentulaean field commanders, a man named Ordo, squinted at the distant figures. He could barely make out their images against the light of the sky, for Ordo's sight was rather weak. When not in battle, he served as one of the head wardens of the king's dungeons, where the only light to be found was from torches-and the occasional fireplace-or the scalding iron. A lifetime of working under such conditions had reduced the keenness of his eyes to their present state. He cursed their weakness now, just as one of his subordinates wondered aloud what the Argentians thought they were doing. Ordo turned to the man, one of the handlers for the catapult beside him.

"They're aiming their arrows at us?" Ordo asked curtly. "I can't see too well anymore. Is that what they're doing?"

"Yes, Sir, looks like."

Ordo scoffed.

"Desperate," he sniffed. "What makes them think they can even shoot this far? They tried that before, and it didn't work."

The soldier nodded, then frowned suddenly as a thought occurred to him.

"Maybe the soldiers who got in there earlier can shoot better?"

One of the soldiers near them snorted.

"It doesn't make a difference if those Himeans can shoot better," said the soldier, joining in the conversation. "There's no way they can shoot far enough to reach us at this range. That's the point of our taking position here and not any nearer."

Ordo made a brusque sound of agreement, nodding his head. He took off his helmet and wiped at his brow.

"We're going to start," he said, motioning for them to get into position and load the catapult. A flash of light caught his eye and he returned his attention to the tops of the walls, open-mouthed in confusion.

"They're... lighting their arrows," said one of the soldiers, his face showing his own mystification at the Argentinian's actions. "Sir, they're-"

"I can see that much!" Ordo barked. "What in the name of Lugh do those fools think they'll be able to hit?" He shook his head at the enemies' desperation. "We're too far away for that! What a bluff!"

They continued watching until all the arrows aimed at them had been lit, some even laughing at the ludicrousness of it all. They kept laughing until the first volley was shot, and the array of meteors sped forward and up.

But when the meteors began the descending part of their arc, all laughter stopped.

"No, that's not right," Ordo mumbled to himself, realising what every other man on the Mentulaean line was coming to see belatedly.

"They're going to-!"

A fiery shaft buried itself into his cheek and ended the sentence prematurely. The soldier beside him screamed.

The defenders did not let up. Another volley of arrows came, then another, and yet another, all of them lit with fire. By the time the Mentulae had gathered their wits and begun to reform at a safer distance, dragging the precious catapults with them, most of the artillery had been touched by the sparks from the relentless arrows, for the defenders had focused on the machines for their targets. Further panic ensued as the stunned soldiers clamoured about the burning engines, trying to pull them out of range of the shots. And the question on all minds was this: *How in god's name were they able to shoot that far?*

It was a fair question. By rights, the basic bows the Argentians had been using before should never have been able to execute a volley at that range-but the bows of the new arrivals, the Otomeians, could. This was what had prompted Shizuru Fujino to pause during her survey from the top of the walls, noting the marks in the earth below that showed where the Mentulae had often set up their artillery for the siege, having found the range there. A quick assessment of the distance of the tracks from the base of the walls and a few rapid calculations in her mind had ensued. The Himean general had concluded that, while the distance could not be covered by an arrow from a simple bow, one from a composite bow would do the job.

"A wonderful opportunity," she had said to her senior legate, who looked about as delighted as she did. "They are not expecting composite bows, so they do not allow for the greater range those have. If we are lucky-and I think we are-they shall not have realised it from our skirmish earlier and will again move their artillery to that distance marked by the tracks, thinking it safe."

Chie had nodded, as excited by the opening as her general.

"So we're making the Otomeian archers man the ramparts?"

"No," Shizuru had replied, to her surprise. "They are far too precious not to have on the field, where they can do the most damage to the enemy. We shall need them there. I intend to have them change bows with the Argentians, instead. Using a composite bow is not all that different from using a simple one, in any case, so there should be no problem. They shall probably have sore arms from all the smacking later if they are unused to it, but as long as we get as many experienced archers and strong-backed and strong-armed people up on the walls as we can, I foresee no difficulty. As for the Otomeian archers, the difference in range will not matter so much since they are mounted and mobile. It will work, I am sure."

Indeed it had. The Argentians were so dedicated to the task Shizuru set to them that they ignored even the pains in their arms and backs, loosing volley after volley and effectively setting most targets aflame before the enemy could pull them completely away. By the time most of the Mentulae managed to move out of range, nearly all the artillery was burning beyond redemption.

To Prince Artaxi, watching from a distance, it was a ghastly sight. He was almost pulling his hair out from consternation as he lamented the loss of his siege machines. What made him stop was a roar issuing from the direction of the city. Eyes widening in horror, he watched as two legions of Himean infantry barrelled out of Argentum's southern gates and into the still-disordered Mentulaean line like demons on the field.

Unknown to him, some among his own foes had shared the same thought earlier, while listening to their commander speak to them before the battle. This had been during the time that the Mentulae were still moving their artillery into place. The Himean commander had been standing on a small, makeshift platform then, addressing her troops before they opened the gates.

"I have told you what to do," she had declared loudly, eyes burning so bright that more than one soldier had felt as though he were staring into either the fires of Vulcan or the eyes of Dis. "I have told you what to do and now all that is left is for you to do it. You know that out there, beyond those walls, lies an army that far outnumbers



us. You know it and so do I. But I know as well that they can never outstrip us! They may be more-but they are also less! They are sitting out there, smug and contented, thinking themselves the ones with the upper hand in this battle. They are wrong! *We* have the upper hand! *We* are the ones who shall win!"

At this time, the Argentians on the walls had begun to draw their bows.

"Were any of you to ask me how I could say this, whether I feel no fear at all at the thought of meeting that host outside, I would tell you plainly: *I do not!* I have no fear at all! How could I feel fear with such men and women at my side as you, fighting with me? What fool would feel fear, even were he to face a hundred thousand more than that army waiting for us, if he knew that such legions would be with him? Shizuru Fujino is no such fool."

The arrows were being lit.

"Shizuru Fujino cannot wait to go outside and show the Mentulae how little their numbers mean," the Himean general had proclaimed. "Shizuru Fujino cannot wait to show them what fear is, what a fool is. *For we are fear, we shall bring it to them, and the fool is the one who would stand his ground before us!*"

The first volley had soared through the air.

"Out there are our comrades, waiting in the forest," Shizuru had announced, gesturing with her hand. "Waiting for us. Waiting for the slaughter of the Mentulae. Waiting for the lesson we are going to teach these arrogant fools sitting before Argentum. Well, I would have them wait no longer! I will run out of those gates and end that wait, along with the life of every Mentulaean fool enough to come near me! For that fool has not learnt the lesson, and the price of that failure is his life! I shall collect that price from every fool standing out there! Now shall I do it alone, Boys and Girls, or are you with me?"

The army had answered with a deafening yell, just as the last shower of arrows was shot by the archers and the gates fully open. Shizuru had not even paused to take a breath after her speech and simply leapt from the platform, leading the first four columns of

legionaries at a run towards the Mentulae.

In demonstration of her tactical foresight, she made her army halt halfway through the dash. This let the soldiers recover their breaths right before continuing the plunge through the Mentulaean front ranks. It was a complete rout. The Mentulae, still in disarray and recovering from the shock of the arrows, were hardly able to draw themselves into formation before another round of arrows hit them- this time from the Otomeian cavalry archers charging forward from the gates- right before the first column of the Himean infantry slammed into the broken line with a vengeance.

This was the horrifying sight that Artaxi now watched with the rest of his army, all of them stunned by how swiftly the deployment of the Himeans had followed the archery attacks. He saw his men cut down right and left, and his sight grew dim with rage. It was with satisfaction when he noted, a little while later, that the Mentulae in the fray had managed to regain formation. Yet this satisfaction vanished when he noticed the formation waver, then start to collapse. He called to his officers, shaking with fury.

"Send the second group," he barked to them. "Flank them with our chariots and tear them apart!"

Meanwhile, the opposing army's commander was cutting a wide swath through Artaxi's troops, slaughtering men left and right with an economy of movement that those she killed had only seconds to admire before they died. She went on this way, leading the others on her side.

"Kill her! Kill that one!"

Flicking her weapon to slit an enemy soldier's throat, she searched for the source of the cry, brows drawing together when she saw that it was coming from a Mentulaean in unusual armour- *an officer?* - charging towards her.

She stepped forward to meet his advance. The blade of her pole-arm glanced off the thick metal of his shield as they lunged, and he took advantage of that by bringing his sword down upon her as they passed each other. To his chagrin, all he caught was her cloak,

tearing a scrap of red fabric from it. It floated in his eyes, the last thing he saw before he found himself skewered through the chest, the spike capping the other end of the naginata lancing into his back.

Bringing a foot behind her and onto his bowed back to use as leverage, Shizuru pulled her pole-arm out of the dead man at her rear. She ducked as a blade came slicing towards her temple. She was about to lift her weapon to kill the one attacking her when a recklessly flung sword caught him in the neck, tearing through skin and flesh and exposing even the white bones beneath. The one who had flung it followed in with a hack that stove in the skull at the temple, and soon there were several more soldiers yelling to reinforce the ranks surrounding their general.

"Fujino-san!" It was her senior legate, who had moved up closer during the fighting. "There you are!"

Shizuru smiled briefly while barking another encouragement to the legionaries around her, knowing the other woman had likely made her way over out of worry. Later she called out her legate with a grin, "Yes, here I am!"

This went on for a while. Minutes coalesced into an hour, formations were held and rearranged, and still Shizuru and her officers stayed in the fighting, knowing this was the sort of battle that needed such dangerous and inspiring heroics. Oh, but were her boys and girls ever heroic! She felt pride swelling in her chest even while fighting, lauding the efforts of the men and women fighting valiantly for her even as the carnage went on. It was with contentment that she was able to note, not long after the fight had started, that the soldiers had fought so bravely that they had reduced the Mentulae on the field to a mere fraction of the number earlier, overcoming the odds despite all statistical predictions to the contrary.

Suddenly, she discerned a rumbling sound that made her look into the distance, where the rest of Artaxi's army stood waiting. Her mind identified the sound before her eyes did: half of the army that had remained with Artaxi was rushing towards them, the second group to engage. Nerves humming with anticipation, she cried to her soldiers to prepare for the impact, seeing that the sheer disorderliness of the

charge as well as the mass of the people in it would provide a lethal momentum that might well dislodge them from the ground they now held. It was a tidal wave coming towards them, one filled with spikes and steel.

Standing near the front as well, Chie Harada saw the coming wave at the same time as her commander and rushed closer to the younger Himean, cursing her general's ridiculous and unnecessary courage. Oh, certainly she saw the justice of Shizuru's decision to fight with the men, saw that being outnumbered as they were might intimidate some of the soldiers into flight if they did not have some inspiration as monumental as what Shizuru offered-but by Jupiter, what if Shizuru fell? Shizuru her commander, Shizuru her friend, Shizuru the patrician Fujino: it would be a catastrophe if that happened! Yes, yes, the fabled Fujino Fortune was all well and good when you were talking about it in a calm setting, but it hardly gave sufficient reassurance now!

She should have done more to prevent her from leading the charge and fighting so near the front, she thought, although it was decidedly too late for that. So she just marshalled more of the centurions to reinforce the space around their commander, shouting for the Himeans to hold and screaming to the soldiers all around her that their general was among them, that they had to hold as they never had before if they cared at all for the commander they loved so well.

She shot a fleeting glance at the woman herself, who was tearing a shield from an enemy corpse. Chie turned her attention back to the front and saw why: the legionaries' ranks were closing in, tightening and forming the wall with their shields in preparation for the enemy. Closer and closer the wave came, the rumbling morphing into a rolling thunder, and then, with a shrieking cacophony of metal and men, it hit.

The moment after impact found Chie in the middle of a tempest that had temporarily knocked her off her feet, kept upright only by the legionaries next to and behind her. The new wave of Mentulae fell upon the Himeans eager for blood, pushing even the Mentulae at the front as row after row of soldiers crashed into each other from the rear. The force piled up, angry cries echoing as more were rolled under the gears of the military machine. Stunned by the brute

strength of the onslaught, the Himean line shook, faltering.

*No, no, push, damn it*, Chie found herself screaming in her mind, even as a meaningless cry came from her throat. Her muscles strained as she dug her heels in the earth, her shoulder against her shield as she struggled to add her force to the total. All around her, the Himeans were baring their teeth and grimacing as they did the same. Fresh sweat was on everyone's face, rolling so fast and so continuously that it washed their countenances clean.

Still the Mentulaean wave threatened to engulf them, building up more and more force from the rear. Muffled screams came from those who had been unlucky enough to be trampled underfoot—mostly by their own comrades. There were also people breaking loose of the crush now by climbing atop their fellows, sometimes trying to leap on the heads of the Himeans at the front lines and sometimes unlucky enough to run into a falx sticking up from the mass, killed by their own comrades and carelessness.

Then Chie saw something that nearly took her mind off the Mentulaeans pressing against them from the front. She growled, feeling her muscles trembling from the exertion, and started praying to the gods again, with the sort of religiosity she hardly ever evinced in normal times. The small group of Mentulaean chariots had come in and was now attacking a flank. The Himeans at the side swiftly turned to execute a defence by forming another wall there, but it was clear that they were becoming overwhelmed. Meanwhile, the Mentulae at the front were beginning to push back the Himean line, whose ranks had thinned due to the departure of those who broke off to defend the flanks from the enemy cavalry. Only their rear was still safe, as Shizuru herself had predicted it would be with the Argentians on the walls covering it. Even so, the Himeans were now almost completely surrounded, and still the enemy kept pushing, gaining more ground inch by inch.

*" Hold !"*

The voice, devoid of any tremor or panic, rang through Chie's ears. She recognised it immediately, as did every other soldier in their area.

"Hold them off, they are coming!"

Chie managed to turn her head enough to look at their commander, whose eyes were blazing as she glared over the enemy shield she had thrown up before the Mentulae hit them. Shizuru was pushing into it, jaw clenched tightly. Chie winced as a rivulet of blood trickled down into the general's left eye-an enemy falx had split her eyebrow sometime after the wave hit them. Elsewhere the sound of continued clashes could be heard, but here in front were merely the screams of the two armies ramming into each other, locked in a many-armed embrace as the Mentulae pushed the Himeans back through the force of numbers.

"Hold your ground, Legionaries!" came another cry from the Himean commander as her cut bled more profusely, painting one eye's white a glossy pink. Chie groaned at the sight of their general blinking and trying to clear her sight, scowling terribly at the annoyance of having her vision partly impaired.

"Push!" Shizuru yelled again, one side of her face now dripping with blood. "Push and hold the line! Our comrades are coming!"

The soldiers with her were her veterans, men and women of legions she had blooded and brought to several victories in other wars. All of them loved her deeply, and to see her bleeding with them, fighting beside them this way and asking them not to give in was all it took to stiffen their aching sinews and take away the pain. They replaced it with only a blazing, burning desire to kill the enemy.

Hence, the weary Himeans renewed their efforts even as the Mentulae surged forward once more, ignoring the screaming in their own joints and backs and holding as their commander had asked. Groans and sounds came from everywhere as cuts were opened and joints strained almost to breaking point, a horrible stalemate developing between the participants. For what seemed an eternity, they stood there and were locked, one side too large to be moved back, another too determined to collapse.

The break came when a roar rang from the Mentulaean rear. The Himeans looked up, felt the strange shudder go through the mass pushing against them, and several thought themselves finished. The

roar had to be the rest of the Mentulaeen army, coming in to finish the deed. More roars, uncoordinated, followed by strange screams. Another shudder followed, then even more screams.

And then there was the slight and surprising give, the opportunity.

"Now!" came the yell, screamed by a hundred, then a thousand voices. "Now, do it!"

It was fast and chaotic and even they were surprised by it: the Mentulaeen line broke.

"Forward!" came the new screams. "Push forward!"

It took a while before they could see well enough into the fray to find out what had happened to the Mentulaeen side to give them the breathing space they needed, but eventually they saw it: the roar had *not* come from the rest of Artaxi's army coming into battle. It had come from the Otomeian cavalry, who had issued from wherever they had been hiding and had cut down nearly all the Mentulae at the back as arranged. These had caused a panic that spread from the Mentulaeen rear all the way to the front. Meanwhile, the Otomeian cavalry archers had taken to picking off the Mentulaeen charioteers, dispatching them and going off too quickly for the less adept enemy horsemen to retaliate. The chariots were slower, less able to manoeuvre on the field. The Otomeians simply ran their horses in and took the shot, then ran off while taking a shot again.

It turned the tide completely. The Himeans began to push back and regain their formation. Sparks flew left and right as more than one enemy falx or sword found its blade meeting a determined Himean one. And still the yelling continued, the officers from both sides screaming their throats raw.

"Follow the general!" the Himeans' senior legate yelled, urging the soldiers on with the rest. "Himeans! The general is fighting at the front! Fight with her, by god!"

Gritting her teeth as the legionaries complied, Chie was about to resume her yells when she saw something that took her breath away even as the Himean side began to overcome the panicked

enemy.

*Oh, by Jupiter!*

She was looking at Shizuru. The Himean commander was now well into the enemy ranks, leaving a bloody trail of bodies behind as her own maddened charge left increasingly more space between her and the Himeans who had been flanking her. One of the Mentulae, however, whether out of luck or military skill, had positioned himself in the exact place on her left that was her blind spot due to the blood from the wound swelling above an eye. Poising his spear, the man lifted it and aimed. Shizuru fought on, unable to see him.

The man tensed, ready to release. Before the shaft could leave his hands, however, a scream left his throat. Even Shizuru was startled by the utter anguish in the sound and turned to see the source, noticing the danger to her life as well as her saviour belatedly.

"Natsuki!"

Her bodyguard had somehow managed to find her amidst the chaos. Seeing the man about to send his spear through the Himean commander, Natsuki had spurred her horse into a frenzied gallop, killing at least two foot soldiers by trampling them into the ground on the way. Once within range, she cast the chain of her daos around her target's throwing arm, pulling it back with the spear still in hand.

She took the spear as she passed him. She had then leaned down one side of her mount in a way that appeared to those around them as though she were falling off the saddle, keeping on the horse only by hooking a leg recklessly around the reins. This was when the man's scream came, for she had slipped herself so far down one side of her steed only to place the scythe of her weapon between her enemy's thighs, dragging the blade up while the horse continued galloping. All the males on the field close enough to see this vicious attack felt a spark of horror, regardless of their allegiances, as Natsuki cut the man cleanly from the groin, then lifted him momentarily in the air as the blade met resistance from the pelvic bone. Well-sharpened metal won out, however, as the girl concentrated her strength upon continuing the scythe's upward slash. The man was rent in two, blade, blood and bone erupting



from his hip.

Righting herself on her steed with stunning dexterity, the Otomeian warrior retracted her chain and wrapped it around one leather-sheathed arm, brandishing the spear she had stolen. She threw it as the horse continued on its charge. The missile impaled one of the Mentulaeans around Shizuru, who took the opportunity the distraction caused to dispatch the other enemies around her. Just as she finished off another man and found the rest slain by the legionaries rushing forward to protect her, Natsuki reined in to stand by her side, glaring terribly at the fresh enemies approaching.

"Natsuki!" Shizuru called again to her, immensely glad and grateful. "Oh, well done, Natsuki!"

Eyeing the Mentulaeen leading the charge towards her, Shizuru scanned his armour for gaps-only to feel her eyebrow lift as his head exploded with grisly fanfare. This happened again and again as more Mentulaeans came within range: it was Natsuki's daos.

The girl simply continued to work around Shizuru like a destructive satellite orbiting the Himean, flicking out the weight end of her weapon as soon as an enemy soldier came close enough to threaten her charge and always aiming for the head or the gaps of armour at the neck. Out would come the paw of the daos, a lick in the air, and another neck or head would shatter as the tiny lump of metal gained explosive force at its peak velocity. Hence, soldier after soldier continued to drop before they were even close enough to scratch either the Otomeian captain or the Himean general, although Natsuki herself ended up covered with streaks of blood due to the gore her weapon was flinging around and at her. The linens on her hands had turned crimson in the entire.

Shizuru watched her with amazement, only able to kill the very few who managed to escape Natsuki's slaughter and forced to suffer this odd cessation of activity as the girl resolutely stayed close, apparently unwilling to leave her by herself again. The general shook her head wryly, unable to help an amused smile from coming through: the Mentulaeans themselves were to be blamed for the ease with which the Fury guarding her was dispatching them.

*More of them might have gotten through had they come in one solid line, she thought. But coming in uneven formation such as this-they might as well have queued up for her to kill one by one as they approach.*

More soldiers were coming in now and pouring around the Otomeian girl, spoiling to get some Mentulaean blood and protect the commander as well. Shizuru took a deep breath and looked away from the fighting for a moment, towards the Otomeian who had been protecting her, and practically laughed upon seeing the girl's face.

*If ever there were a look of boredom, she thought, clapping to herself. Oh, bravo, Natsuki!*

The girl lingered a while longer around her, leaving only when the rankers had pushed in so far into the Mentulaean line that Shizuru herself was no longer at the very front. Then she left, heading for her troopers still working the collapsing back and centre of the Mentulaean force. Once she was gone, Shizuru surveyed the field again. Yes, no doubt about it: the Mentulae were now in full rout. Shizuru felt new strength course through her limbs as she saw that most of the enemy had taken to flight, some even shedding their armour and weaponry as they tried to get light enough to flee quicker.

"Shizuru-san!"

She looked around for the voice calling her.

"Shizuru-san!"

"Here!" she said as she saw who it was. She moved towards her friend. "Chie-han!"

Pushing away the soldiers who got in her way, Chie continued to work towards the general, clasp the other woman by the shoulders as soon as they were close enough. Around them, the Himeans continued the slaughter. They shouted at the officers first, yelling to the men to keep the formation, then yelled at other to be heard above the din.

"Thank the gods you're safe!" Chie was saying. "When I saw that-" She stopped to duck a wildly thrown spear that appeared out of nowhere. "-bastard set to throw that spear at you- *formation*, Men, hold the bloody *formation*!"

"Natsuki was there!" Shizuru called out in reply, nodding in thanks at the two officers bringing her horse to her: they had been trying to do it earlier, but she had been so far into the thick of battle that it had been a battle in itself just to reach her. She swung onto the animal. "Did you see?"

"Yes," the other replied in a shout, turning away to face some legionaries at the back of the mass. "Hey! You two! Get me a horse too, damn it, and be quick!"

She turned to Shizuru again.

"Oh, that was a nice thing she did! I love her for it, Shizuru-san!"

Soon both were horsed and scanning the field. They could see that several other legates were horsed already, waving to them from where they were. There was time enough to wave now, for the conclusion was undeniable: they had won. The Mentulae had gone into complete disarray, shocked by both the pincer attack they found themselves subject to, as well as the unleashing of the Otomeian cavalry-which had only pranced before them earlier in the day to veil the true threat they presented. Added to this was the terror of seeing the Otomeian Lupine Division for the first time, a black-uniformed mass with gigantic horses and weapons so alien that one could not anticipate their attacks. Why were they all wearing black? Where in the world did they get horses that large? What sort of people went around waving scythes and chains that way? The Otomeian elite cavalry absolutely confounded their foes, who literally ran away before them, only to be cut down from behind.

Satisfied with what she saw, Shizuru went on and led her troops as they decimated the formerly massive number of Mentulae pressing against them. Meanwhile, she saw Natsuki directing the Otomeian cavalry into blocks and leading them into dashes through the foes, further preventing the Mentulae from getting their bearings and reforming. They fought ceaselessly, unmindful of the hours, and by the

time the sky showed it was nearing sunset, Shizuru and her army had thinned out the Mentulae so much that they could actually see Artaxi's camp and remaining troops where they still sat in the south, apparently too aghast at the destruction of over half their forces to do more than gawp.

Calling to her legionaries to re-form, Shizuru proceeded to sweep the field with her soldiers in a tight line, killing any Mentulae still standing. The Otomeian cavalry flanked them on either side, dispatching the enemy at the edges of the line. They could see Artaxi's remaining army milling about on the southern front. At first it seemed they would have more fighting before them, but then they saw it: even the Himean general paused as she realised what was happening and why the movements of the remaining Mentulae in the south were so disordered.

"A rout!" one of her centurions said for her, roaring with glee. "Look, the pricks are running!"

A great shout came from the general's army as they charged, thirsty for blood. Shizuru and her officers were hard-pressed to keep them in formation, as the soldiers were absolutely spoiling for carnage. They managed to tighten them enough to present a solid wall during the charge.

The fleeing Mentulae in the south looked up to see it, and the sight of all those orderly ranks practically running for them was enough to turn the fear into blind panic. They started throwing off their gear, choosing to cast it off rather than be burdened by its weight, and forgot all about their personal effects as they fled. Some of them still chose to make a stand, coming to meet the army as it rushed upon them in a clean and unbroken formation. Brave though it was, the Mentulae who chose the path of honour found it futile as well. It took only another hour before the battle was practically finished, the enemy camp torn apart by the furious Himeans. Thrown into rout with almost a third of them choosing desertion, the Mentulae lost the battle.

In the aftermath, the Himean general stood surrounded by dead bodies, her hand coming up to swipe at her eye. She brought her fingers to the cut on her brow and found that it had dried, encrusted

with blood. She smiled and looked out at the field.

Her legions were now occupied with running down and ferreting out the remaining enemy in the camp and the field, an easy task as there were only a bare few left. Most of the centurions had drawn their soldiers into cohorts to make the undertaking more orderly-they knew their commander preferred it that way. Shizuru could now clearly see the officers of her army, pride growing in her chest as she found each one more or less strong enough to still carry out his duties, bellowing out orders to finish off the foe.

Seeing Chie busy at the head of one cohort sweeping the turf, she suddenly wondered where her bodyguard had gone off to with her own troopers. The Otomeian cavalry was running through the field, and she started searching it for the girl she wanted to see, the one who had saved her life so valiantly during the battle. She thanked the gods that the Lupine Division had a different uniform, as it made her search easier. Yet after some time had passed, she had not yet found the young woman anywhere on the plain. She swung her head around, feeling a slight, unreasonable fear creep into her skin.

"Where is she?" she muttered, frowning.

She scanned the field once more, searching among the dark-uniformed figures dotting it. There were still a good number of Mentulae straggling across the battleground, some still fighting, some still attempting to escape, and more simply lying half-dead and groaning from their injuries. The Lupine Division's members as well as the other cavalry were finishing off these stragglers, swinging their scythes or weapons to kill them as they rode past, or sometimes just using their horses to open their brains or chests with a heavy hoof. Shizuru looked among all these busy figures, wondering why she could not see *her Otomeian* among them. It was so strange: she always found Natsuki so easily. She was conscious of a strange dread rising, a fearful fatigue setting in all of a sudden.

*Where is that child?*

Her eyes roamed the field, flicking away as soon as she realised the person they alighted upon was not the Otomeian captain. After a good while of doing this, she grew impatient and made her way

through the soldiers that had begun to crowd around her. She nodded and gave each one close enough to hear a compliment for how he or she had fought. Thus she strode through the plain, dispatching any remaining Mentulae she ran across. She did not even care that some of her officers were following her, all speaking fervent praises for the victory. A nod to one, a smile to another: it was rote, a mask of routine. Her mind sought only one thing at the moment, and that was Natsuki.

*I should have looked out for her more*, she thought angrily, coming to an enemy soldier who lay groaning on his face. He was in the throes of agony due to a severed leg, and Shizuru ended his pain by swiftly flicking her naginata's blade over the cluster of nerves in his neck that she knew would bring immediate death. It was another act of rote. She was thinking of the unbearable possibility of Natsuki having been lost, that wonderful girl who had not only saved her but possibly the army with her heroics with the cavalry, that ever-present-if-silent companion she had come to grow comfortable with in the past weeks. She heard her own words to the army return to the fore: *living heroes, not dead ones*.

A sharp breath, a self-castigation. *I really should have looked out for her, damn it!*

There was hardly any fighting now, and her army had begun to congregate around their commander, who only barely masked her frenzied search among the ranks as they began to give her the grand accolade-the title given by Himean armies to their commanders only if they had won a great battle.

"Imperator!" they cried, filling her ears with it. "Imperator!"

The imperator was breathing hard, still trying to find the pale face, looking among the soldiers for the striking green eyes she had grown so used to having for company in the evenings. Oh, her Natsuki! Her heart began to sink further, a strange weight in her belly even as her army continued to give her their applause. She registered their exultant expressions, the beating of swords and spears against shields, the face of her senior legate-profusely bleeding on one cheek-grinning at her and joining in the cries. And through all this exultation, her heart was heavy.

*I cannot have lost her!*

Unexpectedly, another sound pierced through the clamour, growing louder and louder. Eventually, it was loud enough to rend the air around the gathered army, giving pause to the cheers for the Himean general. It was a buzzing at the back of the ranks, then the sound of hoof-beats and laughter and someone screaming imprecations and threats.

Shizuru turned to the direction of the noise, just as a cheer roared from the Otomeians, along with more bursts of laughter and taunting. The Himean legionaries too began to cheer and laugh, clapping their hands and slapping aching thighs with hilarity.

*Is that you*, Shizuru thought, feeling hope rise again. *Let it be you.*

As if hearing her thought, the soldiers parted to make way for a gigantic and black, blood-covered horse with an equally blood-covered rider. The rider's face was a grisly mask of crimson, nearly all features obscured by the gore. The horse came up to the general, and the rider turned to face her, revealing green eyes shining through the shocking mask. The green eyes she had been searching for-and they bore exultation.

The general was still, her own red eyes settling upon the young woman.

So great was her relief at having found Natsuki safe that Shizuru did not notice immediately what the girl had brought that was causing laughter-or rather, whom she had brought with her. The Otomeian was dragging by her horse, the chain of her daos looped about his neck, a filthy man with armour that must have been quite impressive before the mud and battle reduced it to its present state. He was the source of the screams and insults that had interrupted the army's hailing their "imperator", as well as the object of the soldiers' hilarity due to his comical attempts to get free of the noose around his neck.

"Dogs!" he was crying, actually attempting to spit at the faces around him as he clawed at the chain again. "Bastards! You will pay for this, by Dagda! You will rue the day you touched Artaxi! My father will tear you limb from limb! Ah, let me go, you filthy bitch!"

At the last insult, Natsuki turned her head from Shizuru and peered at her prisoner, startling him with her glare. She yanked violently on the chain, making him choke as he attempted to catch his breath.

A hush followed by murmurs had descended upon the rest of the army, the officers signalling to the rankers behind them to be quiet. They were dumbfounded at the prisoner's declaration of his identity and watched, amused and amazed, as the royal captive began to rant once more.

"Oh, filthy louts! I swear I will have your heads for this! Artaxi swears it! Bastards! *Cunni* !"

His captor, however, seemed to have tired of the game. She yanked on the chain again to draw him up abruptly and choke him into silence, then kicked him squarely on the temple with her heel. Artaxi lost consciousness at the blow, dropping like a dead weight to the ground. The others stared at his limp figure while buzzing quietly to each other, still finding it difficult to believe the capture of their royal prisoner.

The general moved and the buzzing quieted. She stepped forward, coming closer to Natsuki's pawing horse. She could feel its heat steaming off the skin as she stood next to it, laying a hand on the huge beast's sweat-drenched mane. Looking up at its rider, she conveyed her admiration for this achievement through her smile.

The girl on the horse surprised her by returning the smile, her white teeth stark against the blood on her face. Then something happened that stunned many of the people around them even more than Artaxi's identity.

"His chariot."

Shizuru froze, eyes growing large.

"It was stuck," came the husky words, spoken in perfectly accented Himean. "Trying to escape."

Shizuru stared on as a dead silence fell, brought about by Natsuki's first words to her. For her part, the girl on the horse was unfazed by



the shock she had caused among the Himean command-including the woman she was talking to-and simply continued to look down at the general, her smile developing into a smirk.

As if this shift had been all that was necessary to bring her to her senses, the Himean commander's eyes softened. The smile returned to her lips, wider than any she had ever given before without calculating its purpose or effect.

"Well done," she said, so softly that perhaps only the two of them heard it. "Well done, my Natsuki."

## Chapter 8

*Many thanks to the reviewers.*

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### **Vocabulaire:**

1. **A note on scribes and senatorial correspondents** - There were many types of scribes in a campaign, most of them employed by the officers to write their words for them . Chie Harada takes on some duties akin to those of a scribe, in that she is asked by Shizuru to keep an account of events during campaign and send these accounts to Senate as dispatches (to keep that body informed). Sometimes, it was considered preferable to have someone else telling the tale of one's doings-especially since praise for the general would be better received coming from someone other than herself/himself.

2. **Capite censi** - (L.) the proletariat or masses, so to speak. They were the poorest in Rome/Hime and were also the most numerous. Another way of referring to them in the story is "**Head Count**".

3. "**Ecastor!**" - An exclamation considered proper for Ancient Roman women to utter, even in formal company. Men tended to use "Edepol!" instead.

4. **Fortuna** - The Roman/Himean goddess of Fortune, a very important figure in their pantheon.

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### **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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Shizuru lowered herself to the steaming water, sighing as it

welcomed her taut and exhausted body. She seated herself on the shallow pool's bottom, leaned back on the edge, and closed her eyes. Soon a hand came up to rub her temple, the movement stirring small waves that lapped at her collarbone.

"How I needed this," she mumbled. "After these past couple of days, I was ready to drop."

Two days had passed since the Battle of Argentum, and those two days had been consumed by work. Always meticulous, she had insisted upon overseeing the many things to be done afterwards, which were almost as tiring as the battle itself. There were wounded soldiers to attend to, damaged walls to be repaired and, of course, dead to be given funerals. Long hours had been spent gathering all the corpses strewn on the field and divesting them of their armour-which could be put to good use later-so that the deceased could be burnt after the necessary obsequies.

Shizuru ordered, to the mystification of the Argentians, that even the corpses of the Mentulae be treated with the same respect as the bodies of her dead soldiers. Her army said nothing: they knew that it was necessary to burn *all* the bodies, whether in a proper funeral pyre or not, for to leave them lying about would invite disease to the area. The only difference lay in their ways of viewing it: most of them saw it as standard procedure for clearing a battlefield; the general saw it as that too, but also as the honour due to the dead.

Of casualties to the Himean general's army, there were unbelievably few: less than a century had died. This paltry number was taken by many to be further proof of her genius-and for others still, her supposed ancestral divinity-but the general herself said nothing about the matter, save for a quiet comment to her senior legate about her only regret being that she could not have spared those soldiers' lives.

As for the Argentians, they were overjoyed by the deliverance. They did their utmost to assist the army and made much of them, offering the best that they had. The siege had not so depleted them of their resources that they had been reduced to utter destitution. Thus it was that, after two days of duties and feasts that she would have preferred not to attend but was obliged to suffer, the Himean

commander found herself enjoying a relaxing bath in her private quarters, half-asleep with weariness and alone at last.

*Well*, she amended, cracking open one eye to look at her companion. *Not quite alone* .

Her bodyguard was still following her about doggedly. The younger woman was seated on the floor of the room, leaning against a wall and looking resolutely away from where Shizuru bathed-also as usual. The Himean general opened both eyes and looked at her bodyguard ponderingly, thinking about the change in their interactions.

The girl was talking to her now, or uttering words in response to question every now and then, at the very least. But they had yet to have a real conversation, strangely enough. Shizuru attributed it to the whirlwind of the past days. Both of them had been so busy that they had hardly a moment's peace together. For some reason, she was certain that Natsuki would not be inclined to having a conversation when others were present. This hunch had been confirmed when she found the younger girl almost as silent as before when others were with them, choosing to reply then with her standard nods and facial expressions. Such was the Otomeian captain's vigilance with her tongue that some of the Himeans even began to wonder if the words she had spoken after the battle had been true or if they had imagined them. These musings had been brought to Shizuru's ears by her senior legate, who laughingly admitted considering the same thing.

"She still doesn't say anything, after all," Chie had sighed. "I even tried to get her to talk to me, but all I got was a nod and a small smile-although I have to say I'm grateful for what I can get! She's never so much as smiled at me before, Shizuru-san."

"Is that so?" Shizuru had replied, immensely amused by her legate's statement. "She looks even more her age when she smiles, do you not think so?"

"Oh she's lovely when she smiles, quite ravishing! She's nineteen, you said?"

"Yes."

" *Ecastor* ! I can't get over how young some of these Otomeian officers are," Chie had mused. "Captain of an elite division at that age? Anyway, I'm sorry to say she hasn't smiled at any of the others yet, poor bastards."

Chie had laughed at the general's perplexed look before going on.

"Oh, they've been trying to talk to her-probably to see what riddles the Sphinx will finally put to them, now that she's broken the vow of silence." She chuckled heartily at the idea. "Besides, most of them are interested in her, you know, *that way* ."

Shizuru's only reply had been a polite smile.

"Not that she's answered any of them, mind you, man or woman," the senior legate had continued. "All they get through is one come-on sentence and that awful glare sends them off with their tails between their legs."

"Indeed?"

"So we were all wondering..." Chie had trailed off with a meaningful tilt of the chin towards Shizuru. "You know?"

"If I have fared any better?" Shizuru had filled in, looking pensive. "Now that you mention it, we have barely spoken to each other since the battle-we have been too occupied. Simply an odd word or two, usually when I ask what the surgeons say about her wound."

"Well, at least you get 'an odd word', Shizuru-san. The rest of us have to content ourselves with a smile at most and a horrific glower if we annoy her."

*I certainly do not plan on being content with any of those things,* Shizuru thought, eyeing the figure against the wall. She would be damned if she chose to let this particular opportunity pass, as the two of them were finally alone. She licked her lips.

"Natsuki."

A slight stir was all the acknowledgement she received.

"Oh, really now," she went on. "You need not look away, you know. We are both women here."

No response.

"And besides," she added, to get a rise out of the girl, "I do not mind *my* Natsuki looking at my body."

This brought the other's head to face her, eyes narrowed-and determinedly fixed above her neck. Shizuru almost laughed, seeing how intent the girl was on letting her gaze stray no lower.

"Do be at ease, Child. It is nice to get a reprieve, yes?" she said, smiling. "I imagine you have been much harried as well in the past few days. Here, for this brief time before we get ready to join the others at headquarters, no one shall pester you. Well, except for me, and I daresay you could always tell me to stop if I ever annoy you so much that you cannot stand it. Mind that I am not trying to annoy you by talking to you now, however. It is only that I find talking to you soothing. You should know that by now."

Her bodyguard's expression softened. Soon, she bestowed Shizuru with a tiny smile.

"At any rate, you should take a soak as well," Shizuru continued. "Have a long, warm bath. It is wonderfully therapeutic for one who has just been in battle. Or shall it hurt your wound to stay too long in the water?"

The girl looked surprised that she remembered. *Of course she remembered* -had she not hissed upon seeing it? No one had noticed it at first, for the Otomeian warrior had shown no signs of being in pain and had been so covered in gore that the tell-tale tear in her uniform was obscured at the time, but Shizuru had seen it while covertly scanning the girl as they directed the clean-up of the field. She had then startled Natsuki by suddenly dropping to her knees and giving the Otomeian an order to hold still, so she could inspect the injury on her side.

A *falx*, she had thought, eyebrows knotting in displeasure. Calling for one of the medics, she had proceeded to interrogate Natsuki as to whether it hurt or not, earning the Otomeian's nonchalant denials and shrugs. Yet she knew it must have hurt. It was a clean slice and judging from the looks of it, the blade had reached a rib.

Watching Natsuki shake her head again as if to say that the wound was nothing made Shizuru tighten her jaw. It was not just that she was growing immensely fond of the young woman: it was also that she had a great appreciation for beauty, and when she saw the gash that would undoubtedly leave a scar on that beautiful white skin, she had been intensely vexed by the idea.

"I have a notion," she said, wicking away the thought and turning to a more light-hearted topic. "Why do you not join me here, then? Shed your clothes and come into the water."

That earned her a purple glare. She stifled a chuckle, having been aiming for that.

"Always that refusal." She sniffed, batting her eyes for good measure. "Am I so offensive to you that you cannot stomach the thought of being in the same pool as I? Or perhaps you think me so predatory a character?" She smirked at the deepening blush on her companion's face. "I would not harm you, Natsuki. I am quite trustworthy, much though it may surprise you to learn it."

The young woman answered by giving her a dry look. Natsuki then pointed to the darts and daggers she carried on her uniform. It took Shizuru a good while before she saw what the other meant.

"Are you saying it is because you are my bodyguard?"

A nod.

"And you think it would be hard to protect me if you were, er, naked?"

A blush.

Shizuru tilted her head. She lifted a hand from the water to rest on the edge of the tub, making a small splashing sound, and asked,

"But if you are indeed my bodyguard, does it not stand in line with your interests to join me?"

Natsuki responded with a lifted eyebrow.

"It would be easier for you to guard this body if you were closer to it," came the teasing words, prompting a new blush to appear on the Otomeian's cheeks.

Shizuru laughed a little, then apologised.

"Forgive my mischief-I do not say these things to be mean," she said. "I shall stop teasing, Natsuki, only talk to me. I would like that so much."

The glare turned into a bewildered expression.

"After all," Shizuru continued, knowing the other was wavering. "You have only done so of late, and we both know it is something I have been looking forward to for a while now. I would like nothing better now than to talk to-no- *with* you."

There were even brighter spots of colour on the girl's cheeks at this, and she dropped her eyes, biting her lip in a manner that the older woman found almost unbearably fetching when done by that countenance.

"I was ever so happy when you finally spoke," she told the young woman honestly, smiling in reminiscence. "And surprised. I must admit I did not expect you to talk to me at such a time."

She gave a short laugh at the sly lift of the girl's eyes before continuing.

"Nor did I expect your first words to me to be those you said then."

There was a quiet chuckle from the figure against the wall.

"But I am happy, all the same."

A few moments of silence passed with the other fidgeting with her uniform, plucking at the dark cloth of her sleeve.



"Why did you take so long? To talk to me?" Shizuru asked softly. "Or is that simply the way you are? With strangers, that is?"

The other nodded.

"I see."

Closing her eyes in resignation, Shizuru let her head rest on the edge of the tub once more and emitted a deep, drawn-out sigh. She supposed she had to accept herself beaten again by this young woman, who seemed to dole out words as a miser did his coins.

A coin came out just at that moment, however, and surprised her so much it felt as though it had struck her on the head.

"Wuh-why?"

The general's eyes snapped open at the stammered word. She lifted her head, staring at her heretofore-silent companion with a startled look on her face, one that soon turned to delight as she realised that the girl was willing to speak to her after all.

"Why," she echoed, trying to keep her voice calm. "Why *what*, Natsuki?"

There was a pause. After a few moments of what seemed to be internal struggle, the other decided to open her mouth again, putting butterflies in Shizuru's stomach each time she hesitated and looked as though she would think better of speech after all.

"Why do you..." came the hesitant words, laced with an undertone of curiosity. She stopped again, as if considering her query. It took all of the Himean's considerable self-restraint to resist prodding her on. "Why do you *suh*-speak funny?"

At these words, a slow smile came to Shizuru's lips.

"It truly amazes me," she said, looking wonderingly at her companion. "How well you speak Himean, Natsuki."

The girl turned a shade pink, then glowered, obviously annoyed at having her question ignored. Shizuru's smile widened and was

joined with an apologetic look of the eyes.

"If you would allow me to say this first, before I answer your query: I notice that you speak our language perfectly," the general went on. "And without an accent. How so?"

The other hesitated again, then seemed to decide that it was best to answer.

"His Majesty taught me," she said.

*That voice!*

"I see," Shizuru said, remembering how the king's Himean had been as natural as that of one born in Hime. "So that is why you speak it so well." Shizuru smiled. "What did Natsuki ask me earlier-why I 'speak funny'?"

Natsuki nodded, eyes trained on the red ones.

"How strange that someone who has only learned our language from another foreigner is able even to discern the difference," Shizuru remarked. "It is due to my birthplace, you see. I was born in a certain part of my country where the language is spoken a little differently, although essentially the same. I was raised there for only the first few years of my life, but as those were the years that I learned to speak, I retained the rhythm later on, if not all the features of the actual accent. You notice how I address my companions too with 'han' instead of 'san'?"

Yet another nod. Even if the girl was willing to talk, it seemed that she was bent on saying as little as possible.

"Well, it was the custom there to do so-although it is an old custom, granted. Most of the commoners from the region no longer use these forms, I understand. It is considerably limited to the upper classes, who are more traditional in language. And other things."

Natsuki nodded again but more slowly, as if assimilating the information.

"What do you think of it?" Shizuru enquired. "My accent?"

Natsuki seemed to pause before answering.

"It is... funny."

Shizuru lifted an eyebrow: "Then I am glad I could be of some amusement."

"No, I-no. I am sorry," said the other, obviously afraid that Shizuru had misunderstood her. She looked panicked, displayed with her eyes what Shizuru realised to be the true girl inside the warrior, and tried to explain.

"I huh-huh-have not-I wanted to say it was good," she stammered out, redder in the face than Shizuru had ever seen her to be. "Not funny."

*Dear me*, the Himean thought gleefully . *She does not seem so haughty anymore when she talks.*

"I am glad you think so," Shizuru said. "I find your way of speaking good as well."

Natsuki nodded, bowing her head in mortification at what she considered her gaffe. She had to raise it again soon, however, when Shizuru moved on to a new topic.

"Natsuki," said the older woman. "I do not think I have thanked you for what you did, during the battle. You were given honours during the victory ceremony, but you have yet to receive the gratitude I owe personally. Forgive me for that."

The green eyes returned to her, a faint glimmer animating them.

"I know we would not have won the battle if you had not done your part so well. I knew we could rely on you, and you certainly validated that faith. Indeed, I would not be here now were it not for you coming to my side that time. And for that, I thank you personally."

Ever so slowly, a smile crept onto Natsuki's lips. It was not one of the small smiles she generally gave. It was a full-blown grin, one like that she had shown when she had first spoken to the Himean commander, one that knocked said commander's chest now and

robbed her of breath. She really could not get over it: the girl had such a face.

"Thank you, Natsuki."

They smiled at each other, a comfortable feeling settling in the room.

"You were magnificent," Shizuru said, resting an elbow on the tub's edge so that she could bring her hand to cradle her chin. "I was certainly very lucky you arrived. Otherwise, I suppose I would be on one of the foe's spits by now. I should make an offering to Fortuna soon for her having you turn up in that particular place on the battlefield. What were the odds of that? That is truly what one calls 'a lucky encounter'."

The other shook her head, making Shizuru's go up.

"What do you mean no?"

"I was..."

The girl paused, then looked away. After a few seconds of silence passed, Shizuru decided to speak.

"Were you..." She trailed off, then went on. "Were you perhaps looking for me, Natsuki?"

It seemed to take forever before the other nodded, although Shizuru knew the answer even before she did. Her heart swelled with gratitude, the warmth inside her suddenly far more powerful than the heat of the water of the pool.

" *Ookini*. "

Having said this, the general opened her eyes to see the confused expression on her companion's face.

"Ookini," she repeated. "It is a word used in the province where I was born-from the dialect, however, not Himean. It means 'thank you'."

She watched as the other's lips parted and formed an 'O'.

"Oo-" Natsuki began, then cut off as she furrowed her brow.

"Ookini."

"Oo-ki-ni."

This, with a slightly apprehensive, expectant look.

"Yes, perfect." Shizuru smiled encouragingly to reassure her. "You said it perfectly."

She caught her breath as the girl surprised her with another smile as bright as the one earlier. It knocked her on the chest again, scalloping an indefinable, exciting-yet-frightening emptiness through her belly in a manner she could not understand, had never felt before in any way.

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As the general was having her morning respite, however, her senior legate was developing a stiff headache, courtesy of the captured Mentulaeen royal. It had been her particular task to see him that morning, as the general was not yet out of her quarters and the soldiers guarding his cell reported that Prince Artaxi was getting increasingly violent, throwing his room into disorder. Out of fear that the man would try to kill himself, Chie had decided to see him—something she grew to regret terribly when he greeted her with epithets and curses.

" *Cunni* ! All of you are *cunni* !" he screamed as he struggled with the ropes on his arms, which had been restrained due to Chie's orders. "How dare you place ropes upon my person? May you rot forever for this, you curs! I shall see you die before long! I shall skin you, strip by strip, and boil you alive!"

Chie's eyebrows went up as she shifted in her seat opposite the enraged Mentulaeen.

"Well," she drawled sardonically. "That's very creative of you."

"Bitch!"

"Listen," she said, silencing him by drawing out her sword with a hiss of metal. "Stop screaming and maybe we can actually get somewhere!"

*At least I know he's not going to be killing himself any time soon,* she thought, noting his obvious apprehension at the sight of the weapon in her hand. *Should've known he was too much of a coward for that.*

Chie sighed.

"Now that I have your attention, Prince Artaxi," she said, being careful to keep her tone polite. "May I ask what is the cause of all the ruckus? We are treating you well, we did not bind you before you started throwing a fit, we have not even placed you in a dungeon. We are giving you the finest food Argentum can offer at present, and have outfitted your room with as much comfort as one of our officers would get. We have not maltreated you in any way. So what is all this?"

He seemed to fume inwardly at her before replying.

"My father will make you pay for this, mark my words, woman!" he spat. "I am a noble prince of the Mentulaeans, and my father is the King of Kings, the Emperor of the Lands of the Mentulae, the-"

"Yes, yes, the greatest of them all," she cut off, managing to hold in her sigh. "All right, Prince. But why must you act in such a way? If you want to know the truth, you wouldn't be so well-treated if it were some other army... or if the general weren't here. I have a certain red-haired friend who would probably have skinned you alive and set you to boil without turning a hair, as you said. But she isn't here now, and she would never do that while the general is around. So why insult our hospitality, Prince Artaxi?"

He gave her a fierce stare. Unfortunately for him, the legate was unmoved, having stared down worse faces in the past-some of them from the Himean Senate, even. She simply continued to look politely enquiring, the hand with the sword hung loosely at her side.

"You may save your hospitality, Himean," he announced loftily. "I

shall not tell you anything! Not a word about my homeland shall you wrest from me, whether by this false kindness or by torture!"

"Not that any of us think you actually know things worth telling that we don't already," she replied with an amused smile. "We're being kind to you because it is not our policy to insult the honour of our foes, Prince, especially when they're already beaten. And because our general would insist on the policy. That's all."

"Lunacy!"

"No, *dignity*," she replied calmly, fighting back the urge to pinch the bridge of her nose. "It is part of Hime's dignity that her enemies retain theirs, even in defeat. It's for Hime's dignity that we ensure this. We're not savages to torture a noble, Prince, especially when there's nothing to be gained from it."

She sighed, getting up.

"I'll tell them to relieve you of your bonds," she said, running a hand through her hair. "After they've fixed this mess in your room. If you should want anything, please ask the guard outside your door. He'll get it for you. Good day."

Leaving to the sound of his parting insults, she shook her head as she instructed the guards waiting outside to find someone to clean Artaxi's cell. Chie then gingerly returned her sword to its sheath and headed for the inn that the Argentians had given to them for headquarters, a few houses down the road from the edifice she was leaving. Striding quickly along the path, she breathed in the fresh air of the morning, feeling a smile come to her lips at the sweet scent of bread from a bakery.

*Might as well get something to eat first*, she thought, feeling her stomach rumble in complaint. She stopped by the store and began to eye the pastries, finally settling on some freshly-baked tarts that were sticky with honey and a sort of custard. Asking for a dozen, she began to count out the coins for payment when the shop's proprietor stopped her, shaking his grey head.

"I'd be embarrassed to take money from one of our saviours," the

man said, eyes crinkling. "Take it, please, as a way of showing our thanks for what you did."

"Oh, no, no, I couldn't," she replied, embarrassed. "You people already given us so many feasts! Those are enough. Please let me pay for this."

"I insist," he said, pushing the package of tarts towards her. "Please, Legate! Let me do this much."

After a few more protests on her part, she finally gave in and took the pastries. The old man waved her on as she left. As she made her way to the headquarters, the smell got to be too much: she took one of the tarts in hand, put it to her lips and ate on the way. She knocked her boot against the door of the edifice the Argentians had lent them for army headquarters, both her hands being occupied: she was on her second tart.

The door opened and she was let in by one of the other members of the general's staff.

"Hmm," she mumbled, looking about the room. "Only three of us here? I guess everyone's still sleeping like a log." She held out the food she was carrying to the other legate. "Here, Toshi-san, Shohei-san. They're good."

As the other two helped themselves to the tarts, she took a seat near the window. One of the men placed the rest of the tarts on the table nearby before returning to his seat.

"Three of the tribunes were here earlier," Toshi said, smacking his lips at the goodies. "Sent them off to some errands. I gather the general told the scribes to sleep in today-makes sense when you consider that she worked them late into the night yesterday with all those things she was dictating!"

"I see. And did the couriers go already? The ones bound for Hime?"

It was the other man who answered this time, for Toshi had taken a mouthful of one of the treats.

"Yes," Shohei said. "We sent off all the letters already."



"Good."

"How long-" Toshi stopped to lick his lips. "How long do you think it'll be before your account of what's been happening reaches the Senate, Harada-san?"

"Who knows? Almost a month? Half a month?" She shook her head to show she had absolutely no idea. "They're not riding on proper roads, after all. Depends on too many things. But one thing's for sure. It will shut Armitage's yap up when they read the part about the battle we just won."

"May the gods strike me down if it doesn't!" Toshi replied, laughing. "All they'll be able to hear again from the people will be *Shizuru Fujino*, *Shizuru Fujino*! How I'd love to see their faces!"

"I don't know about that, Toshi-san-they're pretty ugly," Chie returned.

The men laughed.

"Well, the general is everyone's heroine, anyway," Shohei put in. "They should get used to it already."

"I think that's exactly what they don't want to get used to, Shohei-san," Chie replied. "Anyway, you sent off the letters bound for Otomeia, too, I hope?"

"Of course."

"All's good, then."

"They're for Nao-san and Taro-san, right?" asked Shohei.

"Yes. Shizuru-san wants them to bring up the rest of the Himean legions-the Otomeian infantry is to be left at Otomeia as garrison, I think," she told him. "Oh, yes, and they're also to eject the Mentulae at Stych Gorge. If the Mentulae are still there, that is."

"Really?" asked Toshi, eyes lighting up with interest. He finished the pastry in his hand, then strode over to the table to pick up a jug of water and a basin. "What did the general tell them to do?"

"I just said it, Toshi-san." She gave him a funny look. "Eject them if they're still there."

"I mean *how* ." Toshi poured water into the basin and set down the jug. He brought the basin and a rag as he returned to the other two, who were done eating as well. As they washed their hands in the water, he lifted an eyebrow at Chie. "What plan did she tell Taro-san and Yuuki-san to use?"

"Well, I don't know what they will be planning."

Toshi looked at her in amazement: "Didn't the general send them a plan?"

The other two turned amused expressions towards him. Unlike Toshi, who was serving as legate to Shizuru for the first time, they had been with her and these legions before, so his surprise at the information was particularly entertaining. It was Shohei who answered, drying his hands on the rag.

"She doesn't need to send one. Does she, Chie-san?"

Chie nodded.

"But why?" asked the bemused Toshi. "Oh, I know generals usually just tell you to do this and that, but I think I've seen the measure of Fujino-san by now to know that she wouldn't trouble a subordinate by making him solve a difficult problem by himself. And that thing at the gorge is a difficult problem, isn't it?"

"Let me put it this way," Chie told him. "When you good subordinates, most problems aren't all that difficult."

Toshi's eyes widened.

"I hope this doesn't come out the wrong way," he said. "But I never knew Taro-san was so esteemed in military strategy."

The other two exchanged brief looks.

"Well, he's not brilliant," Chie qualified. "But he's *good* . And he's working with a co-commander who happens to be more than good."

Why do you think Shizuru-san actually stipulated that the Ninth Legion's primipilus be the other head of that part of the army when she left, Toshi-san? You have to admit it's not normal for a commander to go so far as to specify it, not to mention to practically put a centurion on equal footing with a legate in the command tent. It may surprise you to know this, but Nao Yuuki is pretty much a great military mind too-oh, not like the general, I doubt anyone's in the same league as she is-but still a great military mind, all the same. She isn't the chief primipilus of our general's favourite legion for nothing. Shizuru-san's actually tried to elevate her to higher positions and even social status, but she kept refusing. I understand, it isn't really her thing, being part of the actual politics. And she fits remarkably well in the world she lives in."

"Really?" he asked, surprised. "Is she that good?"

"She's very good," Shohei told him. "Just take our word for it, Toshi-san. Yuuki-san doesn't need to be told what to do, and she'll help Taro-san do what needs to be done the way our commander would want it."

They stopped talking, hearing the sound of faint footsteps. The three of them turned to the door when it opened. The new arrivals turned out to be the general and her bodyguard, both of whom were offered greetings that only Shizuru returned-verbally, that is.

"A pleasant day, is it not?" the general said, taking the seat at the table as her companion stood behind her. "I feel so rested. I hope you are the same?"

"Yes, thank the gods!" said Chie. "Finally got a good night's sleep. You too, Shizuru-san?"

"Mm, it was refreshing. And Toshi-han? Shohei-han?"

The two in question gave affirmative replies.

"Oh," said Shizuru, looking at the package of tarts on the table. "What is this?"

"Tart pastries. Try them, Shizuru-san, they're delicious. Sweet."

Shizuru smiled and thanked her, then picked up the package. She took one tart, then held it out to her bodyguard first to the surprise of the other three.

"Try it as well, Natsuki," she said. "And sit next to me. Here."

The general tipped her head towards a stool by her own. After only a second's pause-wherein she flicked one of her cautious glances towards the other occupants of the room-Natsuki pushed off from the wall she had been leaning against and complied with Shizuru's wishes, taking the tart and seating herself on the stool. She did the latter in a way that allowed her to draw up both legs up onto the seat. She sat cross-legged on the small area the stool afforded, perfectly balanced. This provoked an amused chuckle from Shizuru, who was taking a tart for herself. After giving the Otomeian a smile, Shizuru turned to her legates.

"Is there any news?"

"Ah," said Shohei, recovering from his surprise at the commander's interaction with her companion. "Yes, we've sent the letters to Hime and the ones to Otomeia. The couriers set off this morning."

"I see."

"And we're giving the troops one day of rest without drills, as per your instructions, General," Toshi followed. "They seem to be sleeping it all off. Along with everyone else given permission."

Shizuru laughed. "As they should. They need it after the past days."

"I should've done that," Chie sighed, earning their attention as she glanced wistfully out of a window. "Slept in. Then I wouldn't have had to deal with that overgrown brat of a prince-do you fancy choking him again with your daos, Natsuki-san? Please do!"

The Otomeian smirked.

"How *is* he?" Shizuru asked, looking almost naughty with amusement. "Perhaps I should see him again."

"No, don't, please," Chie said. "He'll just ruin your day. I'll make you

pay this, I'll torture you that-why, he can't even get up enough courage to slit his throat! And the things he says! Oh, they'd be more impressive if he actually changed his repertoire, but stay with him for a quarter of an hour and you realise he's simply repeating the same things over and over again. All he ever talks about is what he's going to have his father do. Well, I wouldn't be surprised if Father Dearest were so angry at his son's being trounced that he did all those things to Artaxi himself!"

The rest laughed at this tirade.

"I take it he still refuses to settle down, then?" Shizuru asked.

"With a vengeance," Chie answered. "Tore up his room again, like a kid having a tantrum. It's getting comical, Shizuru-san. He even thinks we're going to milk him for information about his homeland. What are we, invading the Mentulae?"

Shizuru smiled at that and took a bite of her tart. Swallowing the morsel she had taken, she squinted one eye at the wall across her.

"I would not be surprised if his father does send another army," she said, making her subordinates snap their heads towards her in alarm. "He will have heard of his son's defeat by now. Surely the 'Great King of the Mentulae' shall not take it sitting down. It is not unlikely, is it?"

"Do you mean..." Chie slowly began. "That we shall be facing another battle so soon, Shizuru-san?"

The general seemed to consider this with calm, the placid smile never leaving her face.

"It is a possibility," she said, at length. "But fear not, Chie-han. I will do all I can to prevent it."

It was a few moments before Chie answered: "What do you mean? How can you?"

But their general merely shrugged and smiled away.

"We shall see," she said, looking around. Realising what she was

searching for, Toshi got up and brought the basin of water they had used to wash their hands earlier. He set it onto the table with the rag. Shizuru smiled and thanked him, then proceeded to wash her hands.

"Natsuki," she said, turning to the dark-haired girl beside her. "You are finished? Wash your hands in this basin as well. The tarts were rather sticky, were they not?"

The younger woman nodded and dipped her hands in the water, then finished by drying off with the rag as Shizuru had done. The others in the room watched all of this with rising interest, none daring to make the comment hovering about all their heads.

Shizuru got to her feet.

"Excuse me," she said apologetically. "I suddenly have the urge to see the town. You three really should leave the command post for now, you know. It is unnecessary for you to work when I have allowed everyone a holiday, even myself."

"That's fine, Shizuru-san," Chie answered, unable to help a chuckle from slipping out. "We're not working anyway. We'll be staying here in the meantime, blabbering away like the old gossips we are."

Shizuru nodded: "Then send for me if anything of importance happens. I shall be roaming the streets around the market, and it should be easy to find me."

"All right."

She swept out, her bodyguard in tow. After the door had closed, Chie grinned.

"Her little habit," she explained. "She likes to go around new places to-how does she put it? Oh, yes, she says it 'expands her horizons'."

"You do the same thing, Chie-san."

"Yes," she said with a laugh. "But in a different way. I'm more interested in getting to know the points of their culture, the designs that mark their buildings and arts. She's more interested in talking to

people."

"Ah, yes," Shohei said. "That."

"Why?" Toshi asked, brow furrowed. "I noticed that, even back in Hime. She actually talks to anyone, even if it's just a member of the *capite censi*."

Shohei grinned: "Just the way she is."

"That's not an explanation," Toshi grunted humorously.

"It's because she likes to, and it's good politics," Chie cut in. "But she is really made that way, like Shohei-san says. What's that Kanzaki-san calls her? Ah, yes: *The Philosopher-General*. Fits her, somehow."

Toshi nodded and rubbed his newly-shaved chin.

"So she's probably out there making more people swoon," he said, thinking of how many of the women in Hime would ooh and ahh over her every time they saw her exiting the meetings of the Senate. "By the way, I meant to ask the two of you, is she always *that way*?"

"What do you mean? We just told you that's her-"

"No, I mean the way she is with that Otomeian girl."

That made the other two pause and look at each other.

"That's hard to say," Shohei began. "The whole thing's not usual, is it, Chie-san? I mean, she's never taken a bodyguard before Natsuki-san so we don't really know if that's how she'd treat someone in that position regularly."

Chie waved him off.

"No, it's not just that," she said reflectively. "I'd say it's different. Definitely not usual."

The men looked at her.

"Anyway," said Shohei. "Natsuki-san seems fond of the general, doesn't she? It surprised me to see her doing what Fujino-san told her to... meekly too. She didn't even glare!"

Chie turned a sly smile to him.

"Could it be you tried to get her to talk to you, Shohei-san?" she asked, eyebrows quirked comically.

"You can't blame a man for trying!" he returned, laughing right along with them. "But Jupiter! The look she gave me sent me scurrying off, I tell you. I'm not ashamed to admit it. The girl looks like a Grecian Artemis-but I swear that glare feels like a dozen arrows coming for your eyes. Or a daos," he added, grinning.

"You probably pestered her into it," Toshi grunted, in between laughs. "Didn't your mother tell you not to bother Sphinxes?"

"Sure, but how was I to know the Sphinx was a Gorgon?"

They hooted with laughter.

"No one won the bet, right?" Chie asked, referring to the gambles the other officers had placed on when Natsuki would finally say a word to the general. "All a little ahead, I think?"

"Yes!" groaned Shohei. "And here I thought I was going to get the pot for sure-but the girl had to talk three full days before! Oh, how close!"

"You're lucky it's just a gap of three days to your bet," Toshi retorted. "Mine was two weeks!"

This set them off another bout of chuckling, which was interrupted when the sound of heavy and rapid footsteps preceded the door being thrown open. It was one of their aides, his face flushed with excitement.

"Harada-san!" he called, gasping. "One of our scouts... came back"

He stopped to draw a shuddering breath.



"Said he saw another army of Mentulae..." Another gasp. "Over the border and headed for us!"

The legates looked at each other in alarm.

"Jupiter!"

"Is this supposed to be a joke?"

"How large?" asked Chie, voice crisp and cutting off any further comments from the stunned men. "How far off?"

"I don't know-the scout's downstairs."

"Let's go, then," she said, rising with her fellows. She turned to the man who had brought the news. "Catch your breath first, Kamo-kun. Then send someone out to find the general-tell them to stick to the streets around the market in the city. She'll be roving there."

He nodded as they passed him, going to the stairs.

"I'm beginning to think Fujino-san is prescient," Shohei muttered. Chie sent him a sideways look that he caught. "I mean, this turns up just as we were talking about it-one would think she were a seer!"

Toshi interrupted. "It doesn't really help in this situation even if she was able to predict it."

The senior legate gave a dry laugh before replying.

"Like she said, Toshi-san, *we'll see*."

They scurried down the stairs, cloaks flapping behind them.

## Chapter 9

Some artwork for the story has been done by **Fade9Wayz** . I have put her artwork in my favourites on my DeviantArt page, so all you need do is click on that to see her piece. Her lovely drawing illustrates Artaxi's capture.

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### **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Consular** - A senator who has served as a consul at least once.
2. **Client-patron relations** - In much the same way as Rome had client-states, Ancient Roman politicians had 'client-persons'. These are people who enrol themselves under the protection and welfare provided by a prominent and powerful politician (patron), who then has them under his or her authority, more or less. In exchange for this power over them, the clients may seek the patron's help for such things as monetary aid or the protection of their interests in legislation.
3. **Galatea** - A mythological figure. Originally no more than a marble statue, her sculptor fell in love with the beauty he had created and prompted the gods to grant her life.
4. **Triumph** - This word is sometimes not used in the sense of "victory" in this story. As you recall, Shizuru's troops gave her the army's accolade for a great general after the Battle of Argentum: they hailed her as "**imperator**". If this happens to a Roman general, he/she must petition the Senate to grant him/her a triumph. The Senate almost always sanctions the triumph or approves the request.

The **triumph** is a parade of floats with actors depicting scenes from the campaign, entertainers, carts bearing spoils, the army, the commander, and prisoners of war. (The Senate participates as well.) If the prisoner was a particularly noteworthy personage, he was suitably dressed up for the parade, to make it known to those

*watching that he was a person of great import, thus enhancing the honour of the one who had conquered him.*

*This was done as a celebration of a general's success, as well as that of the army. Another supposed reason was to impress the captive enemies with the glory and grandeur of Rome (here, Hime), to show the prisoners the splendour of the culture and nation that had conquered them.*

5) **Tace** - "Shut up!"

6) **A note on geography:** *There are disparities between this story's geography and the actual Roman Republican map . Details will be forthcoming in later chapters, as needed.*

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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Shizuru Fujino received the news of another enemy army's approach with more calm than even her senior legate expected. Upon finishing interrogations with the scout who reported the intelligence, the general simply smiled at her staff, then shrugged with a disturbing lack of care.

"So it appears I was right, yes?" she asked the dumbfounded officers, seeming satisfied about it. "They must have been encamped rather close to be able to move so quickly. Or moving in at the time. We really should have given the scouts more rein after the battle. At any rate, it would seem that King Obsidian is truly committed to the expansion of his empire. Ambitious king we have here!"

"Yes, yes, that's all true," replied one of the legates, trying furiously to restrain his impatience. "Shall we call the soldiers to arms?"

He received another maddeningly calm smile.

"I think not," she said. "According to the information, they should arrive no earlier than three days from now. That is, if they are to move at the regular speed for a Himean army... and given what we know about them from the reports, they certainly are not capable of that. Six days would be more likely. Perhaps even seven."

She paused and seemed to consider something.

"It amazes me how little regard for speed these foreign armies have," she noted. "They should accustom their soldiers to more marches, as we do, I think."

"Fujino-san!"

All heads snapped at the sudden outburst. The general herself lifted her eyebrows with a pleasant air and looked at the speaker.

"Yes, Aidou-han?"

The person in question stepped forward, brow dark with annoyance.

"This is not the time to be musing over what can be done to help the enemy's shortcomings," the older man said between clenched teeth, his grey-speckled eyebrows frowning heavily. "Order the centurions to move, I say! You should be mobilising our army now and getting ready for the coming-"

" *Tace*, Aidou-san!"

Aidou broke off and turned to the one who had cut him off abruptly.

"Nearly all of us here hold the title of senators," came the words, spoken harshly and riddled with reprimand. "And you are among the more senior ones, in that respect. But you are still a legate of this army, and you are still under its rules. You *will* address its commander with deference."

"Chie-han, please," interrupted the mellifluous tones of the general. "That shall do."

Chie stopped and looked at her friend, whose calm had not been diminished in the least by this little exchange. She tipped her head

before sending a final warning glance to Aidou, whose lips thinned in response.

A terse silence descended on the room.

They were gathered in the inn where they had set up headquarters, in the large room the command used on the top floor. After sending for the general, the senior legate had also rounded up the rest of the staff by sending people to rouse them from their beds, thinking that Shizuru might want to have them on hand in case she needed to put plans in motion. They had come swiftly, shivering at the news of another enemy army. Most of them had expected the commander to roll out directions as soon as she arrived, truth be told, so Aidou was not alone in his befuddlement. He was also one of the oldest people in the room, so it was not really all that surprising that he was the one to have broken rank and questioned her for her easygoing attitude.

The veteran Fujino officers, however, looked very much as though they were about to slap him for it.

Understanding this, and realising that the all-too-loud quiet could go on forever, Shizuru broke the stillness once again.

"I understand your concern, Aidou-han," she said, dipping her head gracefully. "But you must understand as well that any mobilisation at this point is futile. For one thing, the army has only recently been in an exhausting battle. To ask them to come to arms and do something such as go through drills when the enemy is not even in sight would not only be a pointless exercise but a detrimental one. Furthermore, we are fairly certain that the enemy shall not be in sight for a few more days. Surely we can afford to let the legionaries spend a day out of their heavy armour. They deserve that much."

She stopped to smile at him, then at the other people in the room.

"I am aware that Aidou-han's outburst was merely due to his concern for everyone's welfare-and that this very concern is so great that it has caused him to overlook a few things, perhaps. Such zeal for our cause should be admired. How can I worry with such men to aid me in times of crisis?"

*Well-played, Shizuru-san*, thought Chie. The younger woman had just bestowed a pardon that was not a pardon. She understood why Shizuru had done it: the proud old consular's dignity was not made to suffer if the forgiveness for the outburst came in such a way. So deftly had Shizuru administered clemency that Aidou only managed to stare at her with a stunned expression for a good moment before finally opening his mouth to speak an apology.

"Yes, that's so," he harrumphed. "I'm sorry, Fujino-san."

She smiled and told him to think nothing of it.

"But Fujino-san... How are we sure they shall not arrive early?" he stammered again, brow still furrowed deeply.

"Ah," Shizuru replied. "Yes, I was about to tell you-forgive me, I was sidetracked. You see, when I apologised for being late for this meeting earlier, I failed to mention that it was due to my consultation with the head of the scouting unit."

She paused as the members of her staff unconsciously leaned forward, their attention piqued.

"I have given instructions for half of the scouts to be arranged in a formation that ensures an intelligence perimeter for us," she continued. "At least one lookout will cover each salient point on the map. I have arranged it such that we should be informed if any enemies are within proximity at least two days before they reach the city. I hope that puts your fears to rest, Aidou-han?" she asked amiably.

He nodded, stunned.

"In any case, we shall continue with this day of rest. Please call the centurions tomorrow at regular hours, and tell them to put the soldiers-"

"To arms?" came the excited words, spoken by one of the other officers.

The general's eyes sparkled.

"Oh no!" she said. "To shovels. Tomorrow I am going digging and everyone is coming with me."

This elicited mixed reactions: half of the officers put on confused expressions, while the other half nodded, smiles on their faces. Before anyone could ask any more questions, however, the general spoke again.

"I trust those of you who do not understand yet can be enlightened by the others. Preparations should be fairly simple, and I do not think you would need me for them. It should take no more than an hour today, I suppose. Now perhaps we should be off enjoying the rest of the day, yes? There is much work to be done tomorrow."

She rose to her feet, pushing her cloak behind her, and the rest followed suit, stiffening reflexively as she surveyed them.

"Are there any more matters to discuss, perhaps?" she asked.

The senior legate answered readily.

"That's all," she said, blocking any of the others from putting forth any further-in her opinion, *senseless* -queries. "Shohei-san and the rest know what to do with everything else." A nod from the legate mentioned, as well as several others who knew what to prepare for the morrow. "Are you going back on your rounds?"

She received a chuckle.

"You know me so well," the commander said.

"Well enough to know that," the short-haired woman replied, mouth twitching. "May I accompany you, then?"

"Of course."

Chie turned to the officers.

"Then, Shohei-san, can you oversee the preparations?" she asked. "Make it short-the general did say she wants everyone to enjoy the holiday."

Shohei accepted the assignment. That having been done, Chie turned to the general, who bade the rest a good-day and walked out with legate and bodyguard flanking her on either side. The three women left the room and proceeded down the stairs, silent until they reached the street.

"Aidou-san is getting on my nerves," Chie said as soon as they stepped into the open air. She received an amused look. "He's too rash. The gall of him!"

She stopped talking momentarily as several legionaries going for a walk saluted them. One knew they were legionaries because the soldiers wore their standard-issue tunics even when out of the gear.

"To talk to you like that," she resumed, scratching the hair on the back of her head with irritation. "He might be the elder, between the three of us, and is a consular-though he only ascended to the consulship by bribing to the high heavens and because there were no better candidates during his term-but that was just plain *unacceptable* . And even if he is a consular, you're the commander."

"Rather earnest and eager, is he not?"

"I love how you manage to make everything so understated," came the laughing reply. "But, yes, he is 'rather eager'. Not very competent as a soldier either, no more than an idiot who's only lasted this long by standing away from the fighting."

A familiar twinkle came into the red eyes: "Not every legate is like Chie-han."

"Oh, I know, I know!" Chie returned, waving her hands. "It's the prerogative of legates to stay out of the battle-valuable strategists and whatnot-but when everyone else is fighting since we're so undermanned, and *even the general* is at the fore, why, I should think even he would doff his sword and pretend to come out to help, at least!" She grunted, made a face. "You see why Nao hates him."

"Does she?"

"Like a sore," Chie grinned.



Shizuru laughed.

"I confess I do not mind so much as you do, Chie-han," she told her friend. "The only thing that concerns me about Aidou-han would be his carrying out orders properly, and he has not yet failed in that respect, although he has been rather sluggish in doing so, but not to an extent that I am forced to take action to spur him on."

She paused as they approached a juncture in the road.

"Ah, let us take the right," she said. "I believe there is a nice little park that way. Was it this way, Natsuki?"

Chie chewed her lip in thought while the girl confirmed it, deciding their route. She spoke up after a few more paces down the path, ignoring the titters of a group of adolescents passing by and eyeing them with artless interest.

"I wonder now, Shizuru-san," she said. "Why didn't you refuse when he volunteered for this post?"

"Should I have?" Shizuru said. "You know why he volunteered-quite reluctantly too, I might add-do you not?"

"Finances?" Chie ventured. "Word on the grapevine was that he was in some straits over debts to Hime's moneylenders. Pretty bad, so they told me." She tilted her head with an amused expression. "They'd have to be pretty bad for him to be desperate enough to join this campaign, wouldn't they? Like you said, most of these old birds aren't really fond of you. Not that old Aidou-san can do anything about it-this was the only campaign available at the time, or the only one that looked like it had a remote chance of bringing in money."

"Yes. And I suppose that was why he was so earnest earlier, Chie-han. You cannot blame him, if he is pinning his hopes upon getting as much booty as he can on this campaign."

"Huh."

"I was aware of this when I took him on, naturally. And truth be told, I would have preferred to lend him the money instead to pay off his debts-had he only asked. But Aidou-han is of the old school. He

would consider it an immense blow to his dignity to ask me, a 'young upstart' of the House, for financial aid. That would have made me his patron, and he, my client."

"True, he'd not swallow that."

They had reached a quiet path, now, and were the only people to be seen. Chie was walking on Shizuru's right, the general's bodyguard taking the left. It had been shady thus far, but now the sun peeked out of a cloud and bathed them with light. Chie turned her face upwards with sheer animal pleasure. Soon the weather would be turning cool, she knew, for summer was coming to its end. And then they would have to suffer what were most likely awful temperatures, for the North was said to be brutal in its falls and winters.

"So," she said. "You accepted because it was the only way you could help him, Shizuru-san."

A laugh came from the other woman.

"That makes me sound so philanthropic," Shizuru said, letting a polite amount of embarrassment seep into her voice. "That would be a secondary reason, Chie-han, if one at all. The point is, one does not easily refuse a consular when he volunteers for a position, especially when said consular is nicely tied to the conservative group by blood connections. It would be far better to take him on and be politic, as well as possibly make a new friend where a near-foe once was. You know better than I do the way things work in Senate."

Chie laughed suddenly, making the keen red eyes turn towards her.

"Well, I don't know how far you'll get with him," she said, shaking her head at Shizuru. "But you *are* philanthropic, Shizuru-san, aside from being politic."

"It is nice to have it thought so. But I wonder."

Lapsing into companionable silence, they continued along the way. As she walked, Chie thought of the truth behind her friend's actions. No matter how much the general would insist that her only reason

for not being able to refuse Aidou's offer of legateship was politics, claiming that she could not have refused him, the truth was that she *could have* refused it without any damage to her own reputation, and Chie knew that. And as for the argument on gaining a new friend: perhaps Shizuru was right in that she would manage to charm him eventually to thinking better of her-but what did that matter when Aidou was not even one of the better-known, better-regarded consulars, one of those with the most clout in Senate? No, Chie thought, Shizuru had primarily refrained from refusing him a legateship so because it would have damaged the man's dignity irreparably and she thought it little trouble to aid him in the long run.

*At least, that's what I think*, Chie thought.

She looked up as a flash of colour caught her eye. A young couple had entered the path and were headed in the opposite direction. They were prattling happily to themselves and almost failed to notice the party of soldiers until they were passing each other, whereupon they bowed shyly to the Himean general-everyone in Argentum knew who she was by now, of course-and her companions. Then they skittered off, chattering more excitedly than ever.

"How nice it is to be young."

Broken out of her meditations, Chie turned a laughing face towards her friend.

"Shizuru-san, you say that like you're a doddering old woman!"

That earned her a laugh from the commander and even a grin from the Otomeian with them.

"Well, pardon me," Shizuru said. "I meant, rather, that it is nice to be young of heart. Perhaps I mean 'innocence'?"

"Ah," Chie nodded, albeit dubiously. "I get what you mean. I suppose we don't really fit into that category, relatively young as we are in years compared to our colleagues. More so you than myself."

They had reached the end of the path now, and found themselves at the entrance to the park Shizuru had spoken of earlier. They could

see in the distance that a few people were already strolling about, and there were even some Otomeian and Himean soldiers among them. As they walked into the grounds, distant laughter and conversation reached their ears, mingled every now and then with the odd bark from a romping dog scattering pigeons.

"It's good to see everyone so relaxed," Chie commented, stretching her arms above her head. "I'm almost glad Aidou-san irritated me now. I wouldn't have come along otherwise, and I needed this."

Shizuru stopped walking beside a large stone bench, prompting the other two to follow suit.

"Shall we sit here?" she asked, bending to slip off her footwear. "I wish to sit with my feet on the grass... it feels so pleasant."

"Oh yes."

The three of them settled on the seat, smiling at the fresh, clean scent of the grass under their feet. A breeze came up and ruffled their hair.

"You are missing her, are you not?"

Chie chuckled: "You know me too well, too, Shizuru-san."

Shizuru threw her a smile, then turned away and looked around.

"Do you regret coming along with me, Chie-han?" she asked, tone still light. "On this campaign?"

Chie lifted her eyebrows.

"Of course not," she said.

"Even when you could be in Hime instead, with her?"

There was a short silence broken only by the sound of the people nearby.

"What's on your mind, Shizuru-san?" asked the senior legate. "Is something wrong?"

Shizuru turned to face the other woman, an apologetic smile on her lips.

"I was merely wondering, Chie-han," she said. "Forgive me if I have said something out of place."

Chie shook her head with a laugh.

"Oh no, I don't mind being asked that and you know it. I was just surprised that the question would come from you." She paused and smiled mischievously. "And to answer the question, no, I don't regret coming along at all. You know I did it of my own will."

The red eyes softened ever so slightly.

"Then I thank you," she said.

The senior legate tipped her head in acknowledgement.

"What about you?" she asked. "Miss anyone back home yet?"

Shizuru seemed to pause. No surprise there-it was quite a question. Chie understood this and reflected on her own query, wondering what had possessed her to dare to ask it. Her friend did not seem to her to be the type to "miss", for one thing. She had spent so much of recent years on campaign too that she must surely be used to being away from the city. Why ask that, then?

*Because they all miss you*, she thought, speaking the words only in her mind. There was a truth, at least in Chie's opinion. The Senate was just a bit less exciting, the Forum lost a bit of its thrill, and the politics of their world became just a bit less exhilarating. It was the nature of the brightest stars, she thought, that their absence affected so much more of the sky than did the absence of smaller ones. Everyone missed them, even those who only ever got to look at them from a distance. The sky turned a little darker.

*Even the people who hate you miss you, because they're all a little less themselves without you to stand opposite*, she noted inwardly. *But do you miss anyone back, Shizuru-san?*

She had always wondered this, wanted to ask the other woman ever

since they had first met. And when had that been? Oh, years and years ago! It had been at a dinner given by Chie's parents for some of their friends-a dinner Shizuru's parents had attended, bringing their only child with them. Chie was already mature then, the elder by nearly seven years, for the Fujino heiress was only eleven. Yet, even then, the younger girl was the already the more famous, already making a reputation for herself as a prodigy, a genius in everything she put her hand or mind to. As was the case with most sources of brilliance, rumours had abounded regarding her. Chie had been naturally curious as to what the child was like.

*Undeniably patrician*, had been her first thought, for the younger girl already had a way of composing herself even then that spoke volumes about the nobility of her ancestry. And she was so fine-looking! Chie had been tongue-tied for a few moments by the sheer beauty of the face, the lustrous sheen of the tawny hair, the long-limbed form of a body that, while still a bit gangly at the time, was already beginning to promise a shape to set Hime on fire-as it had, soon enough. But what had really caught her attention, when they began to know each other better, was the permanently set expression on Shizuru's face: an affable, seemingly open smile that never faltered. It took a few more meetings before she realised that while it was open in the sense of being inviting, it was actually the opposite in terms of revealing anything about its owner. For that was the point of the smile: to invite but never give away. An unusual thing in a child and in a person. A lonely thing, in fact .

That was her friend's tragedy, perhaps. Shizuru was so-what was the word?-e *levated*, perhaps, in every respect, so different from everyone else that people sensed it at once and, as if by some primal instinct, kept their distance. With the result that she learned to sense it as well and also kept her distance from others, even while seeming to cultivate their confidence and affection. She would speak to a member of the highest aristocracy and the lowest of the *proletarii* with the same amiability of manner, setting aside all notions of her own high-unapproachable social rank to set them at ease. And yet, one still felt it on some deeper, inarticulate level: that she was unlike everyone else. And not just in the sense of her aristocracy. It was something else, something about her that could not really be understood, a thing more sensed than seen...

Maybe this was why most of her friends refrained from addressing her without an honorific. Chie was one of them, and for some reason, she could not bring herself to do it either. *Shizuru* always came with *san* for her. In return, Shizuru hardly ever addressed anyone without an honorific as well. It was an odd formality between friends. A sense of distance.

*She doesn't show it, but I can feel it*, Chie thought. A quiet, constant solitude. Always at the centre of a crowd, yet always alone. What was it, exactly, that made her this way? Years after that first meeting, Chie still had no definite word for it.

"Or is there anyone worth missing?" she asked again, looking intently at the face turned in profile, the perfect lines aglow in the light of day. It took a moment before her friend replied, and when she did, she had that smile on again.

"Well, now. I wonder..."

A few seconds passed. Sensing that her friend was not saying anything further, Chie sighed quietly, the sound carried away by the wind. A shrill yap made her turn her head.

A small dog, no more than a pup, had approached the trio on the bench, its stubby little tail wagging furiously. It launched itself at the closest target, the general's bodyguard. The young woman bent down with her hands out and caught it easily. The animal licked her hands, making little snorts as it sniffed the dark-haired woman's uniform. Shizuru laughed, whereas Chie smiled at the change in the Otomeian's normally deadpan expression, which had turned into one of delight.

"Natsuki likes puppies, I see," said the general. "Friendly little creature, eh?"

Natsuki looked at her and they shared a smile. The creature in the girl's arms yipped.

"And it seems that they like Natsuki as well."

As Shizuru reached a hand out to pet the animal, Chie found herself

pausing at the words her friend had spoken. What was it that had caught her attention? She furrowed her brow, trying to bring it to mind as her companions fawned over the pup.

The sound of laughter. She turned her eyes to the two women, considering their cheerful countenances.

*Complementary.*

It was quite a contrast, she observed. From the colour of her hair to her demeanour, Shizuru just seemed so warm, whereas the Otomeian gave off the impression of having been sculpted from ice. A frosty Galatea, that one, her hair the colour of the darkest night-although when she smiled as she was doing now, the ice seemed to suddenly melt away.

*They're so good-looking*, she sighed ruefully, knowing it was probably not doing a great deal for her to be sitting next to such spectacularly attractive women. She joined their laughter, however, when the pup freed itself from Natsuki's arms and began to chase its own tail. After it dropped-probably having disoriented itself from running in circles-she got to her feet.

The other two looked at her.

"I'm going to go, Shizuru-san," she said. "I suppose I'd better see if the others have started rounding up shovels yet and all that. It's a simple job anyway, as you said, but I'd rather check still. The real work starts tomorrow."

"Of course." Shizuru winked. "Do try to enjoy the day off, Chie-han."

"I will," she grinned. "I'm glad to see you're doing it already."

"Mm." The other woman laughed as the dog at her feet sneezed. "It seems I have this puppy to keep me company, in any case. And Natsuki, of course," she added with another wink at her bodyguard, who lifted an eyebrow. Chie held in a chuckle at the Otomeian's slightly reddened cheeks.

"Well then, I'll leave you to that ball of fluff and Natsuki-san."



She took her leave, treading the path they had taken before. She was already out of the park by the time she realised what had caught her attention earlier.

Shizuru never called her bodyguard 'Natsuki-san'. Only 'Natsuki'.

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The King of the Mentulae was angry. Yes, he was decidedly angry.

The first reason for his discontent was the news that, while he worked on expanding his empire, one of his cousins had been steadily gaining popularity at home. Ever wary of potential rivals to the throne, the king had immediately dispatched one of his officials to accompany the ones who had stolen away from Court to report the possible usurper. The order was simple: to execute his cousin and any others who might cultivate thoughts of replacing him.

A thankless job, being king. How many challenges to his position had he put down, how many relatives killed? Among them were his mother, two of his brothers, and even some of his own sons-for that was the price for being the Emperor: to be constantly on guard, to distrust everyone, particularly those who were close enough to the royal bloodline to stake a claim. Pretenders to the throne were easy to dispatch, for they had no lineage to boast of... but if the threat came from one whose blood was the same as his, then it was another thing.

*Kill them immediately*, his father had shown him. *Kill them if they start to assimilate power, because it shall be your downfall if you fail to do it*. Wise words from the man who had ruled over the Mentulae for nearly half a century-until he was executed by his wife, Obsidian's mother.

Obsidian learned the lesson. He applied it too... by killing the Queen Mother as soon as he reached twenty, sensing correctly that she would never yield the power of the throne to him so long as she lived. Born Artai the Fourth, he immediately adopted the name Obsidian upon his ascension, seeking to distinguish himself from all those before him. He swore to push the boundaries of his empire until it rivalled that of Alexander's, to become the King of Kings, the

Great Emperor. He would conquer the North, and having done that, would conquer the South. Such were his dreams as a young sovereign, and so they remained until now-now, that he was not so young, now that he had several dozen offspring of his own and was finally ready to take on the other nations around his territories.

If only it had not taken so long to consolidate his power! He would have begun his plans long before, had he only the strength to do so, but several decades' worth of internecine squabbles among the Mentulae had taken up his time and resources. By the time he had finished subjugating or executing the last dissident, he found himself a grizzled man of sixty-four, still hardy enough for a war or two, yet no longer having the stamina he once had at the beginning of his reign. Then there was the matter of the other powers in the north, the ones who had colonised the areas he had so wanted for himself. How he ground his teeth and cursed his ill-luck that they had arrived first! It would have been a simple enterprise of invasion had they been anyone else. But no, they happened to be among the few that he genuinely feared: they happened to be *Himeans* .

That wretched nation! Why did it have to be so strong, so terrifying in the breadth of its influence? What did it have that caused the gods to favour it so? Throughout his life, he had listened to the tales of this southern nation's victories, the seemingly endless litany of conquest that her people wrought upon the lands on every side of the Great Sea that was found to the south and east of his own empire-and which the Himeans even had the gall to call "Our Sea". *Their* Sea indeed! *Insufferably arrogant*, he thought, wondering why no one ever seemed to have enough strength or determination to repel them. Then he had seen a Himean for the first time, and he understood why.

This had taken place in his twenty-sixth year, on one of his stealthy excursions through neighbouring lands. Seeking to familiarise himself with the loyalties and particularities of those he would one day invade, he travelled under disguise as a merchant, with his bodyguard posing as slaves. They had stopped for refreshment at a small town near Sosia, one of the Himean colonies, when one of the natives informed them excitedly that a legion was passing through and a famous general leading them. Eager to see what Himeans

looked like, Obsidian pushed his way through the crowd, only to be frozen at the sight of the Himean soldiers marching perfectly in step. They formed a single, glittering line of red cloaks and flashing armour.

So entranced was he by the sight of those disciplined legionaries that he almost failed to notice the general until the man's horse was nearly in front of him. He stared, startled by the brightness of the golden cuirass, then nearly turned to stone as the man turned his face towards him. He had the impression of an overpowering nobility and unassailable confidence—two things that he had long despaired of. For, King of the Mentulaeans though he was, he knew that many considered him an unsophisticated, blustering barbarian with a sceptre.

*If only I had been like that man, he thought, chewing on the inside of his lip. If only I had been as confident of my own powers, then I would have secured my throne earlier and begun my plans long before!*

This was the crux of his shortcomings and he knew it: he was unsure of himself. A complex man, he was both arrogant and proud, yet terribly insecure. He knew, for one thing, that he was no great general. Oh, he was a great warrior, with that impressive build and height of his, but what was important in commanding armies was to be a great commander, not a great warrior. And he was not the former, he was sure. Hence he had to rely on his advisors and his grown sons and daughters, for they were more knowledgeable about military tactics than he—all the while keeping a close watch on these same people for fear they would take over his crown.

Now that his plans for expansion were finally in motion, he had distributed his armies among him and a number of his sons. One army remained with a favoured son, who was being monitored closely. The purpose of this army was to guard the heart of his empire should anything happen in his absence. Another army went with another favourite son, Calchis, who had been sent to conquer the lands to the north. The last two armies had gone to himself, as well as to his son Artaxi, who had been tasked with beginning the push across the river boundaries of the east by investing the nearest city, Argentum. It was the result of this latter enterprise that had

Obsidian gritting his teeth now.

"How could the fool lose?" he bellowed, causing those around him to drop to their knees. "Do you mean to tell me that an army not even half the size of his managed to beat him?"

It took a good while before anyone got up enough courage to answer.

"Perhaps it is also because some of the soldiers with Prince Artaxi fled, My King."

He growled at that.

"Fled?" he echoed. "Where are they now?"

The same man, one of his chief advisors, answered.

"Some of them are here, my lord. They were the ones who brought the news."

The king looked black as night: "Kill the cowards!"

"Yes, My Lord."

"And save some for the ritual sacrifice."

"Yes, Great King."

With a snap of Obsidian's fingers, one of the lower officials left to execute the command. Meanwhile, the King seemed to take on a meditative air, frowning at his golden-slippered feet.

"Himeans..." he mumbled, looking very gruff and grim. He looked up suddenly, bringing the others to attention. "So fast. Are they sure?"

"Yes, My King." The man paused, then ventured further. "They say that there were Otomeians with them, and that they were led by a famous Himean general, one they call Shizuru Fujino."

There was a palpable tension from the presence on the throne-for the king always travelled with a throne-that made the officials'

anxiety rise. They waited, hearts pounding, as the king mused over the information and the lines on his brow grew deeper and deeper. Finally, he spoke.

"What do we know of this Shizuru Fujino?"

"Not a great deal, My King," came the answer. "Other than that she is highly esteemed by Himeans and seems to have won many awards, including their so-called co-"

"Spare me the decorations," the king snapped, effectively silencing the speaker. "I mean what do we know about her? What kind of woman is she? Sly? Underhanded? Methodical?"

His advisors exchanged uncomfortable looks.

"So you don't know," he muttered. "Looks like I'll have to see for myself."

He spent a few more moments muttering unintelligible things, then stood up, which brought everyone scrambling to stand as well. He glared at them, all the same.

"What are you standing around for?" he said. "Hurry up and get moving! I want to see this woman for myself before I beat her army to the ground with mine."

So they eventually set out for Argentum, a fearsome host of soldiers and slaves, nobles and nobodies. It was with great pleasure that the king noted their speedy progress, not knowing that it would be considered slow by Himean standards. Past two weeks into their march from the river borders, they finally reached the city and sat themselves before it, on the very spot where Artaxi once made his camp-which had been dismantled by the Himeans. Unwilling to make the first move, Obsidian contented himself with riding at a good distance from the city walls, staring at the curious sight that presented itself.

He had not known what to expect, but he certainly did not imagine anything like what lay before him. He was looking at the product of the Himeans' work, what their general had jokingly referred to as

"digging". The walls of Argentum now stood behind three ditches, each one twenty feet wide and possibly just as deep. The first ditch was filled with water, the second with stakes and various sharp implements, and the last with water once again. There were three pathways, each one corresponding to one of the city's gates. All in all, the sight was most forbidding. The King goggled at it, keeping his stunned face away from his attendants. He had never seen such a manner of fortification. *What a strange thing!*

He had just returned to his army when a messenger rode up. His chief advisor, Lysander, brought the news to him.

"Oh My King," came the fawning tones. "A messenger from the Himeans. They request a parley."

He straightened, drew himself up: "A parley?"

"Yes, Great and Powerful Lord. The Himean general wishes to speak with you."

He narrowed his eyes, chewing his lip in indecision. Finally, he stared at his advisor.

"What do you think, Lysander?"

Lysander stiffened imperceptibly, mind racing.

*What a predicament!* the advisor was thinking, wondering what would be a safe answer to such a query. If his answer was not to the king's liking, he well knew that the man would not hesitate to have his head lopped off-and judging by the temperament the king had been showing these days, that was a distinct possibility. If he did not answer swiftly enough, it would be lopping off too that was the likely result. He groaned inwardly at the dilemma, measuring his reply in quick, tactical bursts of thought. It was fortunate that he was used to thinking quickly-it was a necessity if you were to survive in the king's court or presence.

"I think, My Lord King, that it would be prudent to accept the parley," Lysander replied, after another moment of rumination. "There is nothing in our accounts of the Himeans to warrant any suspicion that

they would resort to attacking you during such an event. They seem to hold it sacred, at any rate, and under the protection of one of their goddesses, whose name is Concord. All the same, the army should be kept at the ready, close by, to be sure. Milord should also take several good soldiers with him, to ensure against any treachery."

The chief advisor held in his breath as his sovereign appeared to consider his words, no expression flickering over his face. Finally, the king ended Lysander's mental agony by nodding and agreeing to the parley.

"When does the Himean want to meet?"

"In an hour's time, Glorious One. At the end of the path through those..." He paused, tried to think of a word to describe them. "Things. Before the southern gates of the city."

"Good. Tell the men to get into formation and be ready. Pick out some good warriors, too. Maybe ten, twenty. Make sure they're horsed."

"At your behest, Majesty."

"Be ready by the time I come back."

As he headed for the enormous tent that housed his effects, the king occupied himself with his thoughts, even while beckoning to four of his slaves to help him put on his royal armour.

*Parley*, he thought, shrugging off the richly-embroidered robe he was wearing. *What do they want or think to achieve with a parley? I wonder if they'll try to strike a deal. But what could they offer me?*

Perhaps they would try to offer Artaxi in exchange for leaving Argentum? He laughed aloud at that thought, startling the slaves lacing up his cuirass.

*They have a surprise coming for them, by Dagda!* he said gleefully to himself. *I don't need that idiot son of mine-he always was too impetuous. I wouldn't be surprised if he came after the crown soon! And to lose a battle that disgracefully... Oh yes, I don't want Artaxi anymore. He's just wasted one of my armies, damn fool boy. They*

*can have him.*

He sneered, lifting his foot as one slave strapped on his boot.

*But I'll take Artaxi, he decided, if they try to offer him . But I'll behead him on the spot. Then I'll take Argentum as we planned. Yes. Yes, good. That's the right idea. I can do that.*

His eyes caught his image in the long plate of polished metal-a mirror-that his entourage carried along with his throne whenever he travelled on official business. At the flash of silver and gold from the reflection, he felt suddenly an echo of the memory from his first encounter with a Himean, the awe he had felt at seeing that godlike general. It scratched at his pride as it had again and again for decades. He scowled and brushed it away.

*No, he told himself. Never mind those Himeans. What are Himeans, after all? People. They were only people and they could bleed. He himself was going to prove that today.*

He grinned, admiring the imposing figure he cut in his armour. He looked every inch a king no matter how much his detractors ridiculed him for being no more than an unlearned savage. For a man of over sixty, he was still a fine specimen: tall and broad-shouldered, thicker than he had been in his younger years but not rotund, most of his weight in solid flesh, and a fine full head of hair. Who could think, upon seeing him, that he was anything less than a king?

*I'm the one to fear, he thought, bolstering his confidence with a private monologue. I'll crush them so thoroughly that everyone on the edges of what is going to be Our-not Theirs any longer-Sea will hear of it and tremble. What is this general I'm going to meet, anyway? Just another of their senators, just another of those toga-wearing ponces I've seen parading up and down these parts time and time again, sniffing at every little smell that tickles their delicate noses! Weak, they're weak, they're just riding on their nation's old achievements. They're toga-wearing ponces, that's all they are.*

Whereas he was the King of Kings.

Thus it was that when Obsidian set off for the parley an hour later,



attended by ten of his most fearsome warriors, he had an aura of overwhelming pride suffusing every part of his person. He and his entourage rode forward, leaving the Mentulaeen army arranged for battle behind them.

*Is that the woman?* he wondered, spotting the distant figures already at the meeting site. Setting his broad face into as haughty an expression as he could manage, he was nonetheless surprised at the sight that met him as he came close enough to see the figures in detail.

There were two chairs facing each other at the rendezvous place, and one of them was already occupied. Next to this seat stood a tall, dark-haired girl who met his eyes so impassively that he found himself wondering who she was and what her presence meant.

*Choice little piece she is*, he thought idly, bringing his horse to a stop once close enough. *What gorgeous eyes she has, and so noble-looking! Noble, probably. But what a bizarre costume that is. Is that armour?*

For a moment he wondered if the girl he was staring at was Shizuru Fujino, but then decided against that notion. After all, if anyone before him was to be the Himean general, it would surely have to be the oddly garbed figure sitting in one of the chairs, waiting for him to take his own seat.

*Surely this is the woman.*

He considered the figure from his position atop his horse, unable to see her face. The person in the chair was wearing a white, robe-like tunic that reached her knees. A thick, blue-violet cloak had been thrown over her shoulders, one fold pulled up to hood her face. Perhaps to shelter it against the rays of the sun, which was now directly above them at this point, or from the cruel wind blowing on the plain. The cloth stirred with the wind, but did not fall away.

The figure spoke, revealing an accent the king found strange. He had heard Himeans speak before, after all, and his own Court spoke the language. But the odd tones he heard from her were alien to him.

"Greetings, King Obsidian," said the voice, unmistakably that of a woman's. "I am grateful you have chosen to entertain the invitation. Shall you not take a seat, please?"

Obsidian hesitated. To stay on his horse would give him the advantage of being on the higher position, and thus looking down on the other commander. Yet it would also brand him as uncouth if he refused to take up the polite offer, and might even convince the enemy leader that he was truly the savage his critics accused him of being.

Taking another moment to consider the conundrum, he made up his mind and slipped off his mount, gingerly lowering himself to the offered seat—a far too simple one that did not suit his station, he noted with a fair amount of annoyance.

Composing himself and hiding his vexation, he looked at the figure opposite him, but was irked to find that he still could not make out her face. The hood drawn atop the head fell in such a way that part of it hung almost where her eyes should be, and cast a harsh shadow over her features. The only thing he could make out was the mouth: a reddish, beautifully-shaped mouth that was moving as she spoke to him once again.

"Forgive me for the hood, King Obsidian," she was saying to him, a smile seeming to tug at her lips. "But I am rather sensitive to the sun, you see."

He nodded, feeling more certain of himself now.

*As I thought, he told himself. She is no more than a fragile woman. Sensitive to the sun! Surely they were wrong about all those claims of her being a great commander. Why, perhaps some other actually generals the troops while she takes the credit!*

Putting on his most arrogant air, he leaned forward in his chair and peered at the face under the hood once again. A breeze ruffled the cloth, bringing out a few stray strands of darkly golden hair from beneath it. Still he was unable to see more of the visage itself.

*Never mind her face, then . It's probably not worth seeing.*

He drew himself up in his seat, speaking in rumbling tones of great self-assurance.

"Shizuru Fujino," he began, adopting a casual expression. "It's a pleasure to be able to meet you here."

"And here I thought it was anything but," she replied smoothly. "What brings you to Argentum in such a manner?"

He blinked at her forthrightness.

"Argentum falls within my territory," he said, after a brief pause to reconsider his opening lines. "I am merely repossessing what is mine."

"Repossessing?" came the easy reply, perfectly polite, yet biting in its content. "Surely you know that Argentum has long been a sovereign state, of itself."

"It is not," he replied, starting to get rattled and ending up speaking more stiffly and with less confidence than intended. Why was the accursed woman so straightforward? He had expected her to work around it more! "Rather, it has been wrested away from the rightful rule of my ancestors. I'm here to restore it to its proper place."

"By sending your son to besiege its city, to tear down its walls?" She sounded amused, *curse her!* "That is a queer way of restoration, King. Did you mean to restore it to the earth by reducing it to rabble?"

The King of the Mentulaeans scowled, smarting from the verbal barbs.

"My son..." he began, only to trail off, at a loss for what to say. "Artaxi."

"We have him in our custody," she said in voice devoid of malice. "But I am afraid we cannot turn him over to you. He is guilty of waging battle against clients of Hime as well as Hime herself, in my person and that of my army. He is now legally a prisoner of Hime, and shall be held captive for a triumph in our city."

Stunned, the king attempted to recover from this by giving her his fiercest glare.

"It is customary for those who battle with Hime," she said, as if in explanation. "They are brought to the city after losing the battle. One that, in your son's case, he should not have entered."

"Of course he entered battle!" he said, wondering why he was defending the son he had meant to execute earlier. "Was he to stand back meekly in the face of your attack?"

"We were defending the city. When I say *entered*, I mean *started*. He attacked Argentum first, King." A pause, then a slow smile. "As I said earlier, for your, um, 'repossession'."

"Argentum tried to resist," he spat, too irritated to calculate his replies any more. "Such foolishness must be taught a lesson."

"Of course they resisted. Argentum is not yours, after all, but theirs. More precisely, it is under the sovereignty of the Argentians, who have ruled their city longer than you yourself have ruled your own lands."

She sighed, further infuriating him.

"Go home, King," came the clear, tranquil voice. "This is a farce you are attempting to achieve."

"I will not go home," he said sharply, his voice growing louder. "Nor will I be ordered about by some woman who can't even show her face to me. What has Hime to do with this? It's between Argentum and me. I repeat, I will not return to my lands!"

To his amazement, the Himean merely chuckled softly.

"You see how you slip up, King," she said. "You say you will not return to your lands, yet did you not claim before that these were part of your lands too? In that case you would already be home at this moment, would you not?"

He stared at her, feeling a vein steadily throbbing in his temple.

"This is not your affair, Himean!" he cried, vexed beyond control.  
"You have no part in this!"

"It is Hime's affair, hence mine as well. Are you paying attention at all? Because I have a horrid feeling you shall keep us going around in circles if we keep at this."

That was too much. He clenched both fists.

"You go too far, Woman," he hissed. "Do you think you can defeat me? With that miserable little army within those walls?"

He swept his hand furiously toward his own legions, his famous temper raging beyond control.

"A hundred thousand!" he roared to her. "I have a hundred thousand over there and a hundred thousand more in reserve if need be. I would swallow you up-and Argentum too-in a heartbeat!"

Still the lips beneath that hood retained their smile.

"You may try," she said in that terrible, polite voice. "And you shall fail. As your son tried and failed. These are Himeans you face, King, and Otomeians as well. Not helpless civilians unschooled in the art of war. Your army is nothing, for all its size. Please be reasonable and go home."

"And let them say a mere woman with no face cowed me?" he snarled sarcastically.

She lifted her arms and brought her hands to the veil. He watched, fascinated, as she brought it down, revealing a face that both stunned and horrified him.

*Ye gods!* he thought, feeling awe shoot up his spine like ice. So much for her face not being worth seeing!

Then he saw her eyes and felt the ice followed by a skittering horror.

*Horrible!* his mind screamed, as he met the abnormally red gaze. Pink eyes he was familiar with: he had seen albinos before and had even fathered one himself. But her eyes were not pink in any way.

They were red through and through, not a hint of brown in them, a fearsome and fiery, undiluted red. They were bloody in a way his albino son's were not, and he wondered how his advisors had not warned him of this beforehand. Surely people would think to warn you if you were about to face such eyes!

"There," she said cheerfully, never taking away the steel in those frightening eyes. "I show my face to you, King Obsidian. Now that we have settled that, would you listen to reason and run back to your lands? I imagine your court must be unsettled without you present."

He stammered through his reply, having been so disturbed by the mingled admiration and horror her appearance caused in him that he nearly lost all his royal composure.

"You taunt me, General," he said shakily, trying to calm the panic. "I could kill you now! In fact, I think I will-to make sure you do not meddle in our business again."

All this elicited was a menacing change of stance from the figure beside her. The dark-haired girl he had admired earlier started forward, only to be stopped by the general's hand on hers.

*What is this?*

Eyes narrowing to slits, the king eyed the raven-haired one, only to be met by a glittering emerald gaze that triggered something in the back of his mind. An intuition warned him that there was more beneath her youth and obvious attractions. Looking closer, he shivered as he realised what was hidden in the glitter of this one's eyes: there was a perfect, unflinching killing intent in those depths, sitting behind the veil.

*I see, he thought, collecting his self-control. So this girl is no mere girl at all.*

The king turned his eyes back to the general, grinning manically.

"Your army cannot reach you in time to save you," he said. "And this single soldier you have with you will not be enough to keep my men

from tearing you in half. Your soldiers will be too busy running mad after seeing your head roll to the ground to avenge you. And then we will take them in a rout! You will all die here!"

And still the immaculate creature before him only smiled and smiled and smiled. He felt shudders threatening to wrack his frame as memories of his first awestruck encounter with Himeans returned to him yet again, her perfect lips signalling an awful portent, seeming to him those of a god suffering a posturing mortal.

"You would not be so foolish as to do such a thing," she said patiently, as one would to a child. "Do you think you would achieve anything by killing me?"

She clucked.

"You would not," she stated. "If you killed me, King, you would bring down the wrath of Hime upon you. I am Shizuru Fujino, endowed with my *imperium* by the Senate and People of Hime, winner of my people's greatest military decoration, and descendant of Venus herself. Think about that, King, for I assure you all of it is true, including the part about my lineage. One of my ancestors was the son of a god! I am not one to prate about my own worth, but I daresay that if you killed Shizuru Fujino here-on parley, too-you would soon find these lands overrun by Himean legions beyond any force you could imagine. And they shall destroy you."

She leaned forward then, pinning him with those awful eyes.

"Do you think Hime would suffer the outrage of my murder?" she asked, now putting the steel in her voice as well. "You would sign your own death warrant by doing such a thing, oh King of Kings, and I would imagine there is little pleasure in ruling an empire from within a grave."

He was pale by the end of her little speech, hands shaking with anger.

"*This*," he said, attempting to control his voice. "This will be remembered. You will pay for this one day."

She inclined her head as if to acknowledge his threat.

"Now that that is settled," she said, voice soft once more. "I will say it one more time and only one more. These are the orders of Hime, as her People and her Senate have empowered me to speak to you."

She levelled the full strength of her stare at him.

" *Go home*, King Artai."

He almost gasped, every cord in his thick neck bulging. She had cast the salt into his wounds, choosing to address him with his given name instead of the imperial one he had chosen upon ascension. *Damn her, damn her, damn the bitch!* Growling in impotent fury, he gritted his teeth and rose to his feet-avoiding her eyes-and then spun on his heel. A few moments more, and he had mounted his horse, his bodyguards following him as he galloped towards his waiting army.

The pair left by the chairs watched as the king and his companions disappeared into the Mentulaean lines. Neither of them said anything to each other until a good while later, when they saw the great army before them begin to move. It took only one look to see what was happening.

King Obsidian was leaving, and he was taking his troops with him.

"This is when they say 'the king stalked off in high dudgeon'," Shizuru finally said, watching them go. "I suppose it was just as well that I decided to hide my face at first. I have always thought it odd how people seem to be disconcerted by my appearance, my eyes in particular. They are just eyes, even if they have an unusual colour. But at least I can use them for purposes such as this."

She exhaled through her nose while enjoying the display of an army in full retreat.

"The King of the Mentulae," she said thoughtfully to her companion. "Such a childish king-a brat in his ambitions. He has more of a healthy fear of Hime than his son, as expected from one of his generation, and I am thankful for that. To be honest I did not expect



that he would be the one leading his army this time. But all is well that turns out well, as they say, and we are spared more fighting for now."

She paused, something seeming to have occurred to her.

"He is not too old," she noted. "Still quite young, as far as kings go. And very powerful, for all his uncertainty. It may be easy to cow him now, but we would do well to be wary of him in the future. Do you not think so?"

She looked up at the girl, only to find her frozen, a strange expression on her countenance. Natsuki was scarlet-faced, eyes locked upon something near Shizuru herself. Curious, the older woman followed the direction of her bodyguard's eyes to the arm of her chair, where she found that their hands had somehow laced together.

"Oh, " she said, feeling a little warmth creep into her own cheeks as she looked the other way to hide her face from the younger woman. Yet she did not attempt to loosen her fingers. "Pardon me."

After taking a pause to get herself under control, Shizuru turned back to her companion and flashed a teasing smile.

"I did not know you were so concerned about my welfare earlier that you felt compelled to do this to my hand," she said, even while wondering just which of them had begun to link their fingers this way. "Thank you," she said, wiggling her eyebrows playfully.

"I duh-duh-did not," the girl stuttered insensibly, to her amusement. "No, I-"

"You?"

"Thuh-that..."

Face still flushed, Natsuki gave up trying to come up with a coherent explanation and attempted to retract the trapped hand instead. She stopped, however, when the older woman's grip tightened. Surprised by this action, she turned her eyes to Shizuru, whose face was turned to the field before them again.

Natsuki stared.

"Rest easy and stay here for a while, Natsuki," the older woman said softly, trying not to sound as nervy as she felt. "The others shall be coming out shortly. But for now... let us stay here for a while."

# Chapter 10

*Several of the readers have been kind enough to make illustrations, and I refer them to you now, as they deserve to be seen by others: Fade9wayz (fade9wayz. deviantart. com) as well as invisiblejohnny (invisiblejohnny. deviantart. com) have made some drawings for the story. My profound thanks to both of them .*

Note: remove the spaces after the full stops when you copy the above addresses to your browser tab.

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## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Aegis cape** - An effect often attributed to be in Athena's use; a cape that scatters men and women in rout when it is spread before them, particularly in battle. It carries elements of Fear, Discord and Panic
2. **Cunnus, cunni** - Latin obscenity, a slang word for the female genitalia.
3. **"Ecastor!"** - Latin exclamation used by women. It is acceptable even in 'proper' company. The male equivalent is "Edepol!"
4. **Libation** - More a Greek practice than a Roman one, it means spilling some drops from your wine cup as an offering to the gods.
5. **Plebeian** - Anyone who is not patrician by birth. This is a person not noble in the sense of having traditionally aristocratic lineage, but who may still be noble in the sense of having rich/old families. Regarding the latter, it means that many plebeians are aristocratic in their own right, though not by descent from traditional 'blue-blooded' or patrician families.
6. **Praefectus fabrum** - A civilian put in charge of managing/acquiring the army's provisions and necessities; in this story, it is Takumi Tokiha.

7. **Sestertius** [s.], **s estercii/sesterces** [pl.] - A common Roman coin; made of silver. 25,000 of it make a silver talent.

8. **Sol Indiges, Tellus, Liber Pater** - Ancient deities invoked by the Romans when they wanted to make an especially binding oath.

9. **Tace!** - Latin for "Shut up!"

10. **Verpa** - Latin obscenity that refers to the male genitals when erect.

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## **Inter Nos**

*Par ethnewinter*

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"So they just up and left?"

Toshi laughed at the incredulous face of his companion.

"Yes," he replied, thoroughly enjoying his role as story-teller and the reflected glory from their commander's doings in it. He had a suspicion he would be telling this particular story for the rest of his life, so unbelievable was it. "Oh, I couldn't believe it either! But our scouts shadowed them and it turns out they betook themselves all the way back to the river and across it, then kept going." He grinned, took a swig of wine. "Suppose Obsidian thought it would be safer to expand closer to his northern borders instead of the eastern ones after all."

The other legate shook his head, mouth still open.

"And you say you didn't have to lift a sword?" he asked Toshi. "All Fujino-san did was talk to them-him, rather?"

"Yes."

"Jupiter!"

"You can say that again."

Taro shook his head again in disbelief, lifting his cup to his mouth as the other did the same. They were in Toshi's room, telling each other of events that had transpired during the time the two halves of the Himean army had been separated. It was the younger legate who had come knocking on the older man's door for a recap of the dealings in Argentum-over a bottle of the best local wine, of course. He had just arrived a few hours earlier with the other half of Shizuru's army, which she left in Otomeia under his and the primipilus Nao Yuuki's care.

Following the general's orders to continue drilling the legionaries in Otomeia, their half of the army had been waiting eagerly for action ever since the general marched off to Argentum. They had thus welcomed the orders for them to move out-which they received at around the same time Obsidian had his parley with their commander. That had been some weeks ago. After a brilliantly short and successful engagement with the Mentulaeans at Stych Gorge, they had pushed on to Argentum only to find a thriving city with nary an enemy soldier before it and stories of their general's doings buzzing on every tongue.

"So I'm afraid you've already missed out on the battle," Toshi chuckled, wiggling his eyebrows at his younger friend. "I was amazed too, Taro, I can tell you that."

"It's unbelievable, still!" cried Taro, a hand clutching his head. Well, there went his chances of getting in some prime glory for the win at the gorge! No matter how well his half of the army had done, it could hardly compare to the general's recent achievements-both of which would surely enter the annals of Himean military history. Oh, it was hard to keep up with the woman!

"So, it's like this," he said, still coming to grips with what his friend was saying. "First you tell me that you ate up an army four times your size with a miraculously small number of casualties and now you're telling me that the general sent another one off on her own? With mere *words*?"

Toshi nodded, a smug smile on his face. "She's a force, isn't she?"

"If anything!"

Taro lifted his cup after this exclamation and stared thoughtfully into the liquid swirling inside it, setting it down with a shiver after realising that it reminded him of the general's eyes in shadow.

*Wicked colour for eyes to have*, he thought to himself, before making another remark. "One would think that the goddess had spread her aegis-cape behind Fujino-san. To be able to scare Obsidian off without a single blow!"

"Oh, I don't know," his friend replied, rubbing the stubble on his face and making a mental note to shave it later. "I wouldn't say she didn't strike a single blow. I've since learned from being around her and the others that Fujino -san doesn't necessarily have to resort to using brute force when she wants to strike."

"Yes, that's true, actually..." Taro mumbled, before holding out his hands in exasperation. "But it just doesn't make sense! If she did do as you say-came out to meet him with only that girl of hers with her-why in god's name didn't he take the chance and kill her? And why would he actually back down after what she said? These savages don't stick to the rules of parley, so why should he have respected it now? He did have the advantage of numbers too, you know!"

"So did the Prince Artaxi, and look where he is now."

"Oh, that one's a dimwit," Taro returned. "I don't think they'd make the same mistakes he did after that, do you?"

Toshi sighed before answering.

"No," he said. "They wouldn't. But, see, I don't know war and weaponry all that well just yet, so I'm not going to talk to you about that. What I do know is politics. Fujino-san's threats to that King of theirs weren't idle ones, just so you know! If he *had* touched her, I have no doubts that the Mentulae would soon find themselves under attack from all the Himean legions around Our Sea. Let savages murder a patrician Fujino *and* commander of our legions? She was right when she said it: much though some of the senators dislike her, Hime wouldn't take her death sitting down."

"I see it now," Taro said. "Yes, that's true. The whole of Senate would cry foul, even those most opposed to her. Well, good old Obsidian might not be privy to the currents back home as we are, but it's fair enough to say that he probably caught the tone of truth from her. Fujino-san has a knack of making you believe everything she says."

He exhaled and finished: "So he was afraid of getting put on Hime's chopping block, was he?"

"Smart of him to be."

"Oh, definitely."

"Besides, Fujino-san told me that she expected him to be more wary of us than his son," Toshi added. "It makes sense. He's an older man, and probably lived to see or hear about some of the last wars Hime waged around Our Sea. Pretty well into the past-the king must've been just a brat then-but I imagine it'd have made a good impression on him. His sons didn't know any big Himean wars until we got here, I bet."

"I took a look at the one you have here, anyway," Taro harrumphed, frowning in distaste. "And he's a regular idiot, isn't he?"

"Imagine what Harada-san has to put up through when he starts screaming-he usually calls for her by name, just to complain and spew threats again."

The two men shared a dry look, then drank from their cups at the same time.

"So how was Stych Gorge? You haven't told me all that much about it yet."

Taro smiled wryly: "Not much to tell. We sent them packing, as per the general's orders."

"Why the face?" the other asked, catching the change of expression. "You don't seem to have suffered any great number of dead either."

Taro drained his cup mutely, then reached for the wine jug to refill it.

It was true it was partly the fact of the general's recent accomplishments having eclipsed his own victory that was souring his face-but there *was* another thing. How to put it to his friend, however?

"You know that the general left me in charge with Yuuki-san as support?" Taro said, finally.

Toshi nodded.

Taro sighed, ran a hand through his hair.

"Oh," he blew out. "How do you say this?"

A curious look: "Just say it."

Taro looked at the older legate uneasily, then clucked.

"All right, but it can't go further than the two of us," he warned. "I don't think I'd like anyone else hearing this... even the other legates."

His friend squinted, the warm brown eyes sparkling with interest.

"Right, then," the older man said, to soothe his friend's unease. He straightened in his seat. "By Sol Indiges, Tellus, and Liber Pater, I swear that no word you speak shall go beyond this room, My Friend."

Taro nodded again, a slight smile on his pleasant, almost-boyish face.

"I'd believe you even without that oath." He paused and lowered his voice. "It's this... I don't exactly feel comfortable with that woman."

Toshi wrinkled his brow, looking gravely disapproving: "Of Fujino-san?"

"Oh, no!" Taro was horrified by the idea. "Of course's not! I'm talking about the chief primipilus of the Ninth Legion."

"Yuuki-san?"



"That's her."

"Why?"

Taro paused, then pushed out a huffed breath that his own nose registered as heavy with the scent of alcohol. He twisted his lips into a grimace.

"She's quite barbaric, isn't she?" he said.

"Barbaric?"

"First, there's the way she talks."

Toshi grinned crookedly.

"I didn't take you to be such an old lady, Taro," he said.

Taro scowled at him.

"Come on, doesn't it bother you a little?" he said. "She talks like-like any of the rankers would, and in front of us! There's no respect there!"

"She's just a soldier. It's natural and it's how they talk normally."

"She's not just any soldier. She's a damned top-grade centurion, chief of the centurions of one of our most decorated legions, at that. Not to mention someone Shizuru-san asks into the command tent often for council. You'd think she'd have enough gratitude to get a little polish!"

The older man rested his elbows on the table and folded his hands; he dropped his chin on the interlocked fingers.

"All right, then. It used to catch me off guard, I admit," he said pensively. "But I guess I've become used to it. Yuuki-san is a little brusque. But no more than some of the other soldiers, I think, and if the general can forgive her roughness, I think we can all afford to do the same. Besides, from what the others have told me, her lack of polish doesn't get in the way of her abilities."

Taro sent him a dry look. "It doesn't, I can assure you."

"Oh?" Toshi blinked. "What happened in Otomeia? Or in Stych Gorge?"

There was a short silence, broken only by the sound of the younger legate's gulping down wine. Having drained the cup again, Taro set it onto the table with a sharp thud and looked the other man in the eye.

"The general said I was in command and should be supported by Yuuki-san," he started, licking his lips. "And that was supposed to be how it was. But the primipilus makes me so edgy, Toshi-san. Such an overbearing sort of woman-won't listen to anything that goes against what she wants or thinks is right. She doesn't even have the civility to consider anyone else's ideas carefully or tell you why you might be wrong in courteous terms. Just out and slams you."

"I take it you didn't see eye to eye?"

Taro looked aggrieved.

"The worst of it," he said, "was that the soldiers treated her like she was the one with full command! Because that was the thing, you know, that obliged me to put up with her, more than Fujino-san's order that we work together: the Ninth's soldiered with Yuuki-san as its primipilus for years and years already. They know her, not the way they know me! Who's to say she'd not have started a mutiny if I'd rubbed her wrong when we'd discuss what to do and where?"

The other turned incredulous eyes towards him.

"Surely she'd not do that!" Toshi cried. "Yuuki-san's a decorated primipilus, you know, and partly due to her loyalty!"

"Oh, I wouldn't put it past her," came the vexed response. "And do you know, I think she even got some of the others in on it, on questioning me, I mean. Once, I even told Takumi-san-our *praefectus fabrum*, Senator Tokiha's brother, you know-to do something for me, and he even asked me if Yuuki-san was aware of it! But they didn't ask that when Yuuki-san was the one telling them

to do something, did they? I only ever found out about half of the things she did afterwards, after they'd already been done or were being done!"

"So did you talk to her about it?"

Taro growled, "I tried."

"Tried?"

"I told you, that woman makes me *uncomfortable* ." He stretched an arm over the table and began to refill his cup once again. "I asked her about it, but she just smiled that awful grin of hers and said that she was sure these were the things I would have wanted done, sooner or later."

Toshi chuckled softly.

"I wouldn't say it's an awful grin, " he said, displaying his own smile at the surprised Taro. "That Yuuki-san has a pretty face. She's still very young as far as top-ranked centurions go, isn't she?"

Taro nodded, a little vexed by his friend's response.

"All right," he nevertheless allowed. "So it's not awful in that sense. But it looks so *sly* ."

"So what about these orders of hers, were they good or bad?"

"If you talk about that, they're fine. But she still shouldn't have gone behind my back!"

"What-she tried to keep them secret from you afterwards?"

"No, not exactly," the other admitted with reluctance. "But I might have had a problem with some of them, you know, and it's still protocol to tell your superior officer," he grumbled sullenly, swishing the wine in his cup.

Toshi took a sip of his own drink. He was aware that some of the other senatorial officers were also somewhat uneasy with the chief primipilus, although mostly because of the occasional bursts of

sharpness she had in her personality, which could fluctuate like a flag in a storm. The woman had a notoriously cutting tongue, as well as a shifty way of eyeing a person that set most people on edge. True, she was naturally amusing in her unpolished way and could fit well into a party when camaraderie was required-but at times, particularly when dealing with people she disliked or felt a general irritation for, she seemed so tremendously *predatory*. And the change into a predator could come so quickly that it was frightening.

*And she is barbaric in that sense*, he thought. Whereas the general had a similar trait of intimidation, she was able to discipline it to the extent that it would show only in her eyes. A strangely civilised sort of intimidation. Nao Yuuki, however, simply let her entire stance show it when she was angry: the danger radiated from her as from an unsheathed blade. Someone of Taro's personality would truly be set back, something that would wound the high pride he held, not only for his office but his family's status as one of the older plebeian clans. The latter quality actually complicated the matter.

It was no secret that the primipilus had a general aversion to people of status-although she did make certain exceptions if the person proved his or her worth, some examples being the general and the chief legate. If it was someone she had not worked with before, however, it was understandable if the centurion would choose to disregard the person for the most part... especially if that person was unable to meet her standards.

*Or so Harada-san told me*, Toshi thought to himself. *And she would know.*

"What of Stych Gorge?" he prodded. "What happened in the battle? I heard that Fujino-san didn't send you any instructions, other than to eject the Mentulae there. I'm guessing you and Yuuki-san drew up your own strategy, then."

He received a glum stare. "You mean *she* drew it up."

"What?"

"She did it," Taro replied, frowning. "Most of it, anyway. I tried to offer my ideas, but she just kept finding fault with them, then ordered

everyone around and ignored me, all the while telling them that her orders were really mine. How am I supposed to enjoy taking credit for that, then?"

"Ah."

"I'm the damned legate," Taro continued, growling softly. "I'm the one supposed to be in the command tent and drawing up the battle plans. That, at least, is where we're supposed to be above the centurions, no matter how much Fujino-san loves them. Yuuki-san may be a primipilus, but she's still a soldier of the army under us. Under me."

Toshi studied his friend.

*There's something else, isn't there?* he mused, stroking his chin. Taro rarely spoke in such a careless way. Perhaps it was the wine: the man might have had too much to drink by now. And then there was the matter of pride, too. Both things could get a man drunk on vexation very quickly.

Well, Toshi decided, he might find out what it was soon and he might not. He coughed and lifted his cup to drink again, only to find that it was empty. He reached for the jug, which Taro pushed towards him.

"Anyway, I'm guessing Yuuki-san is keeping the general up to date as well, like you're doing with me," he mumbled to the younger man. "Did the general tell you to talk to her later? She went off for a walk with Harada-san and Yuuki-san first, didn't she?"

"Mm." Taro twisted his mouth and shrugged. "Well, Yuuki-san will probably fill her in, like you say. I wonder what she's telling them."

Toshi noted that, although he did his best to look nonchalant, his friend looked worried.

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"Nice place they have here."

"I am glad you approve. I myself find it refreshing and have come

once or twice just to walk about."

"That's an understatement. She comes here every day, Nao."

The chief of the primipilii laughed and looked about.

"Aren't a lot of people, though," she noted.

Chie followed her friend's gaze, her own eyes alighting on a trio of Argentians walking along the park's routes and glancing at them. She sighed and lifted her eyebrows at the mist from her breath.

"That's because it's getting dark," she said, brushing her hair out of her eyes and looking up at the sky, which was indeed turning a dark grey. "And it's been getting colder these past days."

Nao snorted, which brought the legate's eyes back to her.

"After where I've been stranded for the past weeks, I'll say this is warm as a bleeding rug," she muttered.

"Forgive me for that, Nao-han," the general said, smiling apologetically. "Has it been intolerable up there?"

The primipilus shook her head.

"I was just kidding, General," she replied, piercing green eyes twinkling with humour. "I'm just glad to be in a warmer place, that's all. It is warmer here, isn't it?"

"At this much lower altitude? Gods, yes!" Chie answered. "After all, where you've been-Otomeia, that is-is so high up in the mountains. Though I think the snows will be coming here soon, too."

"I know. The cold's been following us." Nao shifted in her seat, then fixed the fourth member of the party with a furtive look. "Makes me wonder how you can stand it, Na-tsu-ki, being a summer child and all."

The others watched to see if the girl would rise to the bait, but were disappointed. She merely turned a chilly glare to Nao and looked away haughtily afterwards.

"Anyway, what were we talking about before this?" Nao asked. "I forgot, I'm sorry. You know how I am."

"You just finished telling us about Stych Gorge," the senior legate prompted. "And a good job that was, by the way."

"Yes, very efficiently done, Nao-han," came the general's voice. "I knew I could rely on you."

"Oh, it's piddle when compared to what you've been doing here, General," Nao replied honestly. "Wish I'd been here to help."

"You did help, just on a different field. The legions look wonderfully fit too, and I have you and Taro-han to thank for that."

Nao's face changed, shifted closer to the feral, nasty expression it often had when in battle.

"That reminds me," she said grimly. "I have to talk to you about the legate, General, if you'll give me permission."

Shizuru gave it. Nao looked both uneasy and disgusted as she started talking.

"It's damned bad form, this," she said. "I know that, General. No officer should be talking like this about his superior officer. But I'm hoping you'll see why I'm taking the risk, though you could let me go with a dishonourable discharge if I keep going."

Shizuru cut her off.

"No fear of that," she said. "Speak your mind."

"It's like this," the other replied after another uneasy look. "I don't want him commanding the Ninth, if you can see your way to giving us a different superior officer. They're good boys and girls in my legion, General-you know that! They've given you good service time and time again and they'll give good service each time you ask. But Taro's just, well, he's not good enough. He's fine for normal service if you put him in with someone like Kenji-san or Shohei-san-by Dis, I think even Suou-san'd do the job, even if I don't know her all that well yet!"

"What, no mention of me?" Chie interrupted, prompting Shizuru to laugh.

"All right, and Harada too, naturally," Nao continued, unfazed. "But his strategies just aren't the sort I'd trust, you know what I mean? Line up here, stiffen the flanks there-just, well, it's all pretty obvious, is that the word?"

"Textbook," Shizuru smiled. "You are trying to say he is a textbook commander."

"That's it, General."

"I know," Shizuru said, drawing the other women's eyes to her. "Or it would be better to say I suspected it. Still, I had hoped that he would do better if put in a position where he would be forced to bring out his more creative side. He is not actually a fool, after all, and can be relied on quite well for challenges in other areas, such as in politics. I hoped he would show the same ability to extend himself beyond the norm if obliged by circumstances to do it. Apparently, it did not work."

She flicked her eyes quickly to the heavens, a kind of shrug.

"Well, I knew you would not let him fail one way or another, even if he did fall short personally," she told her primipilus. "In which case I should tell you now. Very well done with Stych Gorge. I am certain most of it was you, going from what you have just told me."

Nao looked properly embarrassed, losing her slouch as the soldier in her snapped to attention on her seat.

"It was nothing, General," she said.

"Any other complaints?"

The redhead looked sheepish.

"Just one, begging your pardon for it, General," she confessed awkwardly.

"What is it?"



"Well... see, this one's a bit embarrassing."

"Oh, speak freely, Nao-han, do!" Shizuru grinned. "Given our time campaigning together, I thought you would have known me enough by now to know that I know you."

All three of them laughed at the circuitously phrased statement, Nao unbending enough to begin to slouch again.

"It's about the Mentulae we trounced at the gorge," she said. "See, we dismantled their makeshift camp-poorly done thing it was, too. Anyway, it turns out they were carrying some nice bags of gold with them and a few precious other things. Stuff that belonged to their command, I bet. A proper little sum, actually. Lots of nice silverware and fancy stuff too. Plush!"

"I see. And that booty is now where?"

"With our *praefectus fabrum*," the centurion said, exhaling with contentment. "I thought it'd help if we came to chewing on our bootstraps here, just in case those *verpa* back home try to prolong our stay here without adding to the war chest. And it's your army's booty, General. Should be used for it."

"You are a woman after my own heart, Yuuki-han."

"But," Chie interrupted. "What does that have to do with Taro-san?"

"I was getting to that," Nao smirked, red lips turning up into an acidic smile. "See, he tried to take it when we found it. Said he would keep it with him, for safety." A loud snort, sharp and cracking in the cold air. "Safety, my bleeding eye! You can say I'm imagining things, but you know I've never been one to put a gloss on shit to cover the stink. What I mean is, I didn't like that look on his face then, like someone who'd dug up treasure in *his* yard."

She paused, then lifted a shoulder uncomfortably, getting it to pop.

"It's fine for a commander to get rich from a campaign," she went on, warming to her subject with a fury. "Rights to the spoils and sestercii, and all. But it's another thing to keep it all for yourself when the army could be having problems with funding in the future. You

talked to us about it, Fujino-san! You told all of your old campaigners, the legates and me too! Now I don't know if you'll believe me or agree with me on this, but I thought that damn well meant that the legates had to be a little less grabby than usual practice for a while, just to make sure we all get through this mission them stingy senators put us in. And I would've thought that've been fine: we all know how much of the booty you give up, even part of what's rightly yours, after each campaign, just so you can make sure everyone gets to go home rich and stuffed in the pockets. But that dog would've kept it all for himself. I saw it in his face. Damn his itchy fingers-he even took one of the bags of gold and some of the bits, you know, before turning over the rest to me and telling me to have the *praefectus fabrum* catalogue it. Oh, I let that go, to settle him, but I couldn't let him take the rest!"

She scowled, brow dark as the sky above them once she was done.

"He's been pretty stand-offish ever since, you know," she said. "Like I care. Let him rot on his fucking high horse!"

There were a few moments of silence, during which the three seated members of the party eyed each other thoughtfully. Nao stared at the general with a pleading eye, waiting for her answer.

"All right, Nao-han," the fair-haired woman said at length. "I believe you, and trust that your testimony was tendered with everyone's interests at heart. No one can fault you for this."

The centurion smiled crookedly at her in relief.

"Yes, you did the right thing," Shizuru said. "I confess I had my doubts about Taro-han in that respect as well-he's always had a certain weakness for money, in my opinion-but had no concrete evidence to base it upon. Well, it takes something like this to expose it, I suppose. In any case, how many people know that you refused to allow him to have all of the gold in his keeping?"

"Just the two of us... though I can't be sure. We were arguing about it during camp, in the command tent."

"I see."

Chie groaned loudly, deeming it high time she was back in the conversation.

"Why is it so hard to find good officers these days?" she grumbled. "Most of them don't even have the discretion to set aside some of the plunder for the army's expenses or the soldiers' benefit. Taro had better hope the legions don't get wind of it. They won't love him much as a commander after that."

"Not that they love him all that much, to begin with," Nao scoffed. "Never mind, that's over with."

She looked to Shizuru again.

"I wanted to ask what your plans were, General. I'm sure you don't plan on snoring it up here in Argentum, especially now that you've sent the Mentulae scooting off with a scolding-I still can't get over that, by the way."

"I was here to see it, and I still can't get over it either, Yuuki," Chie laughed. She stretched her legs out happily. "Oh, it was nice to see the Mentulae running away with their tails between their legs!"

"Why not? They don't have anything else hanging there."

"Oh, Jupiter- *face!*" the legate cried to Nao, even while joining in the general's laughter. "I swear that mouth of yours gets dirtier each year."

"I'll take that as a compliment, Legate," said the centurion. "So what about it, General? What's on the schedule?"

Shizuru tipped her head and bent over, picking up a stick by her feet. She held it in her hand and used it to trace patterns in the gravel as she considered for a moment. The other two watched her quietly, well-used to her little eccentricities.

"You probably know what I am planning, Nao-han," she said softly. "But I must ask a question of you first. I shall be taking a tour of Sosia and Argus, so as to inspect and strengthen their defences-as well as to assess how they are doing in other respects, of course. The Senate did entrust me to look them over, even if only to report

back to the House whether the regular accounts we receive, back in Hime, are *res ficta* or *res facta* . You know how the senators at home are always worried that the accounts being sent to us by the governors are more literary than literal. So, my seeing to this shall be standard procedure."

Her companions nodded.

"Given the present state of affairs, now is the perfect time to undertake this proceeding, since Obsidian and the Mentulaean army have moved back into their side of the border," she went on.

"According to our reports, they are presently engaged in expanding further north, and shall be occupied there for some time. So Argentium as well as our territories do not stand in any immediate danger for the moment, and I can afford to go about and do my other tasks."

She stopped drawing and dropped the twig in her hand, straightening her seat.

"So what I would like to know, is whether you would prefer to come with me or stay here, as part of Argentum's garrison."

The centurion looked surprised, dropped her eyes as she mulled it over.

"What would you prefer I do, General?" she asked after a while.

Shizuru lifted her hands, the palms up as she shrugged elegantly.

"There is a reason I am giving you a choice," she told the other woman. "I would not like to influence your answer. Either choice is fine for me."

"Still," Nao insisted, obviously amused by the general's reluctance to state her own preferences. "I'd rather know, General."

Shizuru tipped her head demurely.

"Well then," she started, her eyes shut. "I would be happy if you stay in Argentum, since I would be then relieved of a great burden. If it so happens that the city comes under attack while I am away, I would

be secure in the knowledge that it is someone of great skill who shall defend it for as long as may be necessary before I can return with the rest of the army. After all, Argentum would most likely be the first city they would hit if ever they did hit anything. Recent experience as well as the lay of the land justifies this idea."

"Then again," she continued. "I would be happy if you choose to come with me instead. The assessment and building up of fortifications and military camps is part of my aims, and this would be done far more quickly if I had someone as knowledgeable as you with me, to share the burden. Furthermore, there is the matter of having to prepare and inspect local militia in the provinces, something in which you have always excelled. Another relief to me if you were present, and with your legion."

Nao started chortling.

"It's awful how you reply without really giving me an answer, Fujino-san," the primipilus sighed, her eyes dancing. "So, I'll just make up my mind for myself, like you wanted. I'll join you, if it's all the same to you."

Shizuru gave her a bright smile in response.

"Always glad to have you on board, Yuuki," Chie said, grinning too. "So, Shizuru-san, when are we leaving?"

"Day after tomorrow, Chie-han. I shall make the dispositions then, as well."

"All right!" the legate cheered, getting up. "I'm feeling pretty famished. I think I'll go have some dinner at that nice little inn I found the other day. It's nearby. Wonderful roasts they do there: you know the type, with the skin still crispy and just a bit of fat running under the meat. Are you coming?"

The general declined.

"I think I'll stay here and enjoy the fresh air a while longer, Chie-han," she replied.

Nao got to her feet.

"I'm hungry too," she said, patting her torso's lower section for effect. "And I wouldn't mind pouring a few libations right now-I'm feeling religious," she said, with a smirk at Chie, who well knew her to be an unreligious rascal.

"Then I bid you two to enjoy your dinner," Shizuru replied, grinning. "Have a good evening."

The two returned her farewell and started walking away. As soon as they were out of earshot, Nao clucked to her friend, who looked at her with a question.

"I thought you said The Sphinx was talking now?" the centurion said in accusation. "Here I was expecting something shocking, and not one peep."

Chie rubbed the back of her neck.

"I said she was talking-not chattering away," she told her friend. "Besides, the only one she really talks to is Shizuru-san."

"Hmph." After a few more steps, the primipilus spoke up. "What's with that, anyway?"

"What?"

"You know. That."

"What are you talking about?"

Nao took her time before answering, shaking her head as though exasperated at the other woman's inability to understand her.

"When Fujino-san goes on her walks, like you said, does she bring someone else along or is it just that girl?" she asked.

The legate's steps slowed slightly.

"Well, most of the time it's just them. But that's because Natsuki-san's her bodyguard, so she has to go with her, doesn't she?"

"Huh. Around what time does she take her-their walks?"

"I don't know. Usually this time, I guess, going on nightfall." Chie stopped walking at the sound of her friend's huff. "What, don't tell me you still don't trust her, Nao-she saved Shizuru-san's life, for heaven's sake. I told you."

"It's not that," Nao snapped, looking irked. "Don't be dense, Chie. I don't distrust her *that* much-and I don't dislike her, just so you know. The kid's all right," she said with a grudging tone. "She's fine."

They stood staring into each other's eyes for a moment, trying to decipher the other's expression. Finally, Nao looked away and started walking again, the senior legate joining her.

"So then," Chie said, listening to the music coming from a nearby pub, where a glance inside the window showed some musicians playing some local dirty ditties for the customers. "What's on your mind? Why so many questions about Shizuru-san and Natsuki-san?"

"Funny how you say their names together immediately, isn't it?"

"What?"

The primipilus sighed with immense forbearance.

"And here you've spent more time with them than I have," she muttered, before giving a short laugh. "I'll say it straight out, then: don't you think they're getting cosy, the general and that girl of hers?"

Chie's eyebrows went up as head snapped to Nao.

"Are you implying what I think you are?" she demanded.

"You thinking what you think I'm implying?"

They peered at each other, the steady rhythm of their footsteps never faltering. A group of legionaries obviously out to enjoy a night in town hailed them with salutes, and they broke their eye-lock to return the greetings as they passed. After the soldiers had gone, they resumed their discussion.

"See now. You wouldn't even take my words to mean *that* if you hadn't thought about it, yourself, Chie."

"Shizuru-san..." Chie started, trailing off as she thought over her words. "No. Shizuru-san isn't the type to start things like that, you know. She's never been, and gods know how many opportunities she's had, on campaign or off it."

"Did those opportunities look like that girl?" Nao retorted. "Jupiter's cock, Chie, have you seen *her face*?"

"Even so!" Chie snapped back, thoroughly disturbed by the notion. "Shizuru-san wouldn't, I think. Highly irregular for her and you know it!"

She ran a hand through her hair, adding: "She doesn't get into things like that. Ever."

"No?" Nao pulled her cloak about her. "You sure?"

Chie threw her an adamant look.

"Fine," Nao said, throwing up both hands. "Fine. I know she doesn't. But that doesn't mean it can't happen. And don't you tell me you didn't notice she's not been all that regular with the girl from the start, anyway. I've been watching them ever since I got here and it's damned *out there*. Are you going to tell me it's absolutely impossible?"

Chie looked pensive.

"That..." she murmured. "It's just a possibility, I guess. Not a likely one. But of course it's possible."

"It's what it is. I'm telling you, I'd even make a bet on it."

This brought on a short silence that the senior legate ended.

"If it's true," she said quietly. "It would be a surprise."

"I'll say!"



Nao kicked a pebble in her path, smiling as it flew neatly into a barrel lying on its side on the street. She smirked suddenly, as though a thought had just occurred to her.

"Hey, now. Look here, wouldn't it be interesting if some half-mute girl from the barbarian north wins the most-eligible bachelorette in Hime?" She started laughing. "Oh, those stuck-up *cunni* back home would roar to see Shizuru Fujino with a foreigner-shit, it'd be priceless!" she snorted, still laughing heartily. "Someone finally makes her fall and it's a barbarian!"

"Shhh! Would you be quiet, you ass? And even if that happened..." Chie said, unable to help smiling a little at her friend's mirth. "Anyway, you shouldn't say anything about 'falling' and all that stuff. Even if you're right and our general's having her already, like you say, it doesn't mean we're talking about-well, that!"

Nao peered at her, an eyebrow lifted disbelievingly.

"What makes you think," said the centurion. "We're not talking about that?"

She stared the senior legate in the eyes as if daring her to say something.

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The general watched her officers leaving, smiling fondly at them as they got farther away. She then turned her attention back to her remaining companion-only to find that the younger woman was occupied with watching the parting Himeans' backs as well, although with rather more seriousness. She let this observation go on for a little longer, then chose to break the girl from her concentration.

"Dear me," she exclaimed, drawing Natsuki's attention. "You are looking at them so intently, Natsuki. Should I be jealous?"

As per usual, Natsuki blushed. Shizuru laughed at the occurrence that was growing more and more common, giving the girl a friendly pat on the arm to calm her. Instead of dropping her hand afterwards, however, she gripped Natsuki's arm and pulled her around from

behind the bench, leading the younger woman to take a seat beside her.

"So," she said cheerfully. "Shall you tell me what you find so interesting about them?"

The girl took her time replying, apparently still rattled.

"The centurion," the girl began, then trailed off as she pondered over what to say. "No, the primipilus..."

Shizuru lifted her eyebrows curiously. She chose to speak after the girl continued to show signs of hesitation about going on.

"You mean Yuuki-han, Natsuki?"

A nod.

"She is not, um." Another internal struggle, the girl wrestling with her uncertain tongue. "She is not-not *just* a legionary."

She paused, then looked questioningly at Shizuru as if to ask the older woman to either confirm or deny it.

"You are quite observant," the Himean said, nodding to show that she understood. "How did you know?"

The girl considered it, mouth turning up very slightly on one side.

"The stance," she said. "The walk. So quiet."

She cocked her head and squinted at Shizuru.

"Always," she said, "such vigilance."

"Ah." Shizuru smiled. "I see now. Nao-han is not just a normal soldier, as you say, Natsuki. You mean that she has received training in another field, do you not?"

Natsuki nodded, loosening a silky lock of hair behind her ears. The older woman watched her tuck it back.

"Yes, the primipilus is more than an ordinary soldier," she explained.

"She used to be-and sometimes still serves purposes similar to it-an intelligencer of no mean talent. She comes from the Sulpician territories of Hime. You are familiar with them?"

The dark-haired girl gave her a slight smile, a knowing look coming to her eyes.

"I read," the girl said shortly. "You call them... 'spies'?"

"Yes," Shizuru said. "There are some schools there known for producing excellent professional spies, intelligence gatherers, really. They receive special training and often end up joining the legions as parts of a small unit that the army sometimes calls on to do extra intelligence work to supplement the scouts. They also usually make up the torture detachment. Someone picked her up from there long ago and asked her to be a centurion. She joined the army officially, soon after that. When I met her, she was already a superb army officer as well as training marshal." She sighed reminiscently. "That was a long time ago, or so it seems."

She smiled at her companion.

"She is a very good warrior," she told her. "As I am sure you can already tell, given such perceptiveness. Are you interested in sparring with her, perhaps?"

The girl lifted an eyebrow as if the thought had never occurred to her. She shook her head, to Shizuru's surprise.

"Really?" The general smiled. "I would have thought you would be interested in it, Natsuki, even if only for the sake of testing yourself. After all, Nao-han once expressed her interest in sparring with you and your daos. But then, I think she wanted to try to learn how to use your weapon too, after she saw how you could wield it."

The Otomeian looked down at her side, where the instrument in question hung from her belt. She lifted the many loops of the chain, setting the metal clinking.

"You-" She stopped, brought her head up shyly. "Do you want to?"

The general's eyes widened.

"You would show me?" she asked, provoking a quick nod from the younger woman. "Then let us have a look. I confess I have been consumed with curiosity about those things too."

They got to their feet and stepped away from the bench, making their way to the middle of the clearing in the park. Upon reaching it, they looked around.

"It is well that there is no one else about," Shizuru noted, checking their surroundings in the dim light. "I did not realise that we were talking for so long. It is well into the night now."

She felt a slight shiver as the wind bit at her skin, the fine hairs on her arms standing to attention. She folded her arms around her waist.

Suddenly her companion ran off.

"Why-where are you going?" she said, startled.

The other had headed back to the bench. It occurred to Shizuru suddenly that she rarely saw Natsuki run, and seeing it now made her smile.

*Could it be that she is actually excited to teach me,* she wondered, rubbing her arms as she tried to make out what the Otomeian was doing in the dark. She had not long to wait: Natsuki soon returned, holding something in her hands.

"Um," the girl said, urging her to take it.

Shizuru lifted her hands mutely to take her cloak-the one she had left on the bench earlier. She stared at the thick red cloth in her arms, then turned her eyes to Natsuki once more. The girl was shy again, but smiled.

"You-I am-thank you, Natsuki."

She paused, feeling oddly at a loss for words and wondering what was the matter with her that she could not even get through a simple sentence of gratitude without bumbling. What was wrong with her all of a sudden?

"I thank you," she said again. "I was cold."

*Wonderful. As if she did not notice that, Shizuru.*

The Otomeian tipped her head in acknowledgement, then waited as Shizuru donned the cloak. Once this was accomplished, she looked questioningly at the older woman as if to ask if they could start.

"Yes, let us start," Shizuru mumbled, still irritated with her lapse.

"Yes."

Natsuki eyed her curiously, which Shizuru only noticed after another moment of brooding. When she did perceive it, however, she quickly smiled to settle the girl.

"Perhaps you should give me a demonstration first," she suggested.

"Then I shall attempt to do as you have."

Natsuki obviously thought it suitable. She turned her head and began to survey the area, seeking out a target-and blissfully unaware of the eyes studying her from behind, full of disturbance and self-inquiry.

"Um. That."

Shizuru turned to look at what Natsuki was pointing to: a slim young tree that was twice as tall as herself, she estimated. Natsuki indicated that she should watch first, so she stepped aside and back.

The girl removed the daos from her side. She held the sickle by the handle and dangled the weight by the chain. Swinging it almost like a lasso, she lifted her hand and threw the part called the paw so that it drove the chain forward in a straight line. Then she jerked the chain to force it to curve and wrap neatly around the tree's trunk, the metal weight of the paw locking the binding into place. Afterwards, she made another flicking movement with her wrist that loosened the chain and brought the weight back into her hand. She turned to Shizuru, who sent her a wide grin before coming up.

"I wonder if I can do it half as well as you do," the older woman said with a laugh. She was stopped in the act of taking the instrument by

the younger woman mumbling something in Otomeian, however, and motioning for her to wait.

"What is it, Natsuki?" she asked, wondering what the girl was thinking now and why she was fiddling with something on her wrist. "Is something wrong?"

"Hand," came the soft reply. "Please."

Shizuru watched the girl strip off the bandages covering her right hand. She then reached out for the older woman's own palm, wrapping it all the way to the knuckles with the linens. She nodded again when the procedure was done.

"Thank you again, Natsuki," the older woman said, so sombrely that the girl paused before pointing to the target. "That was thoughtful."

The girl moved off.

"Well then," Shizuru said humorously, wondering how she could minimise the possibility of looking ridiculous in the situation. "Let us see if I can touch it, at the very least."

Giving the weight a few good swings, Shizuru let her instincts take over. She flexed her arm muscles and threw the iron weight in what she felt to be a fair imitation of her bodyguard's actions. Her feeling was right: she smiled exultantly as the chain wound around the trunk of the tree and locked around it with a satisfying clank. Turning to her tutor, her smile grew wider upon seeing that the girl looked almost as pleased as she was.

"Not bad for the first time, Natsuki?"

Natsuki nodded, grinning. She tipped her head at the chain still in Shizuru's hand, as if to say that she should pull it back now. Shizuru did so.

With no success.

"Well, it seems reluctant," Shizuru remarked, giving the chain another strong pull. "I do not seem to know how to unwind it."

Natsuki walked up and held out her hand, flicking her wrist in a way that seemed as though she were holding a daos chain between her fingers. She emphasised the wave that Shizuru would have to send up the chain to unlock it, drawing the shape in the air with a finger.

"I see," Shizuru said, as the girl moved away once again. "Like this?"

She imitated the movement, but the chain held fast, to her chagrin. She grimaced, then looked at Natsuki with a wry smile.

"Apparently, I cannot do it."

Natsuki shook her head and repeated the hand movement, stretching her arm forward in the air.

"Do this." She showed the motion. "Wider. It will loosen, you will see. Then you pull," she told Shizuru, who almost laughed when she realised that Natsuki had forgotten some of her shyness in her seriousness at coaching a student.

"All right," Shizuru said, getting herself ready. "I think I understand."

She took position, still holding the end of the chain, then copied the flicking motion her tutor had just presented. A smile came to her face as she felt the taut chain slacken, the end coming loose from around the trunk. In that split second, she remembered the second injunction Natsuki had given her. Using all of her force, she pulled heavily at the loosened chain and it came swiftly back to her-so swiftly, in fact, that she realised the weight was going to hit her squarely in the face unless she ducked. So she did just that and let go of the end holding the rest of the chain as well, mind full of horror at the idea of pounding a hole into her own skull.

A whizzing sound above her head.

" *Ecastor* !"

Listening to the dull sound of the weight and chain hitting the ground behind her, Shizuru drew herself up and turned to look at the daos stretched out on the grass, shaking her head with a frown as she appreciated how close she had been to getting her brow smashed in

like an idiot.

*What a dangerous weapon*, she shuddered, marvelling now at how easily the Lupine Division seemed to sling it around, causing devastation around them without ever hurting themselves in the process. Well, handling it herself gave her a whole new appreciation for them, certainly! She turned again, intending to make a comment to her companion along those lines, but stopped with her mouth half-open when she saw the girl-who was pressing a fist to her mouth and seemed to be in acute agony. It took her a few seconds before she saw what it was.

"Oh!" she cried, eyes going wide. "You wicked girl!"

Unable to keep her composure after this outburst, Natsuki responded by letting go of the fist she had been biting on and let loose an awful laugh, doubling over as she went on guffawing in what seemed to be near-hysterical laughter. The general watched in astonishment as the Otomeian kept laughing, something she had never seen her do before.

It was, the woman who could not stay vexed at this thought, quite a sight.

"I suppose I must have looked silly ducking like that," Shizuru allowed after a while, half-grinning and half-grimacing at the young woman. "But it is evil to laugh when I might well have killed myself just now, Natsuki."

The girl straightened up, mirth still shining through her eyes. She walked over to the older woman and, to the latter's surprise, patted her shoulder for comfort.

"I am sorry," she said. "It was not so bad, Shizuru."

At the reflexive rise of the older woman's eyebrows, the Otomeian apprehended her gaffe. She drew back as though stung by her own words or the shoulder she was touching, the colours of embarrassment and apprehension working on her face.

"Forgive me," she stammered, still backing away. "Forgive me,



General."

A bow, followed by another. The downcast eyes of a girl expecting to be scolded or struck.

"Forgive me," she said again, the fear in her voice tugging at something in Shizuru's chest.

"Stop that."

The Otomeian froze midway through another bow, too nervous to lift her head.

"Natsuki. Look at me. And stand straight, please. I do not require such bows."

She complied.

"You will call me *Shizuru*," the older woman said, saying it in a way that made it sound as though she could not decide herself whether to make it an order or a request. "Call me Shizuru. Only Shizuru. Remember that."

The Otomeian reacted with a confused expression.

"Not 'Shizuru-san'," the Himean clarified. "Not 'General'. Just 'Shizuru'."

Natsuki blinked.

"All right?" Shizuru asked. "Do you understand, Natsuki?"

The girl nodded, even if she did look as if she did not.

"Please remember it, then."

Her bodyguard's forehead wrinkled again. She opened her mouth to say something and Shizuru waited on edge, wondering what that something would be.

*Perhaps she will say she cannot do that, she thought sadly. Or she will say it is not fitting for her to address me that way because it is*

*improper. Is it? Perhaps it is. Her king did assign her to me as an attendant-cum-bodyguard, after all, and it would be ludicrous for her to address me so familiarly when she is in such a position. Or perhaps she will note that people shall notice and find it bizarre, shall criticise her even more than myself for taking such liberties. It would be understandable if she refused-and she is quite a proper young woman.*

Shizuru sighed, a curious disappointment heavy in the pit of her stomach.

"Shizuru."

That was unexpected. She stared at the girl blushing before her.

"Shizuru?" Natsuki whispered again, testing it out. "I will get now... the daos?"

Shizuru smiled at this, giddier than the girl had ever seen her. Relieved, the girl smiled brightly back.

"Thank you," the older woman said. "And yes, pick it up, Natsuki."

The girl nodded before going over to where the daos was on the grass, folding her body to reach it without bending her knees in a graceful display of flexibility.

"I suppose we should get some dinner now," Shizuru mumbled, her eyes fixed on her bodyguard. She watched contentedly as the younger woman went about her task, pulling up the chain into loops to hang once more from her belt. "Yes. They should be serving dinner at our quarters by now."

*Strange, she thought. It does not seem so cold anymore, yet the wind is still up.*

She loosened the folds of the cloak wrapped about her, ignorant of the colour on her cheeks. The girl was finished and stood before her, waiting. She nodded to the young woman, then started walking, the two of them smiling at nothing in particular.

# Chapter 11

*A few illustrations are available for the story. S arcasticdog has done a lovely sketch of Shizuru fighting. Also, if you have not yet seen Fade9wayz's impressive drawing of a mounted Natsuki attacking and being attacked by Mentulaean soldiers, please do so. The addresses are the following (remove the spaces after the full stops) : ([fade9wayz. deviantart. com](http://fade9wayz.deviantart.com)), ([lazy-chicken. deviantart. com](http://lazy-chicken.deviantart.com)), ([ethnewinter. deviantart. com](http://ethnewinter.deviantart.com)).*

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## **Vocabulaire:**

*1 . **Cohort** - There are ten cohorts in each legion, each with about 600 persons (500 soldiers and 100 non-combatants). This means that ten cohorts per legion is the standard, although there are occasions when legions are "plumped" or "fattened", giving them more than ten cohorts. It is also possible to "thin out" a legion if circumstances make it impossible to form ten cohorts.*

*2. **Vulcan** - The god of the forge and fire.*

*3. **Priapus** - Roman deity of fecundity, depicted as having a perpetual erection; phallic god.*

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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True to her word, the Himean general set her army in motion again a scant two days after the contingent from Otomeia reunited with the one she had in Argentum. She left that latter city with a garrison of fifteen cohorts, with instructions to send to Otomeia for several thousand more of local infantry to add to that defence force for the

meantime. Charged to oversee these troops were two of the Himean legates: Shohei Nagayama and Aidou Yuji.

Shohei was a veteran of the general's army-he had served with her on another campaign before this and been requested specifically by Shizuru for this one-and a staunchly loyal adherent. The other, though the elder man and more senior in terms of past office, was new to the general's staff and held no great love for her, truth be told. As Shizuru herself had confessed to her senior legate, had not financial problems back home pressed him into joining the "senatorial upstart" on this expedition, Aidou would never have volunteered himself into her command. The former was the general's man through and through: the latter had half a foot in the opposing political camp, with the second foot tiptoed on the general's side. Yes, thought the rest of the officers: *an odd pair to put together* .

Not that anyone questioned the general's dispositions to her face, of course. They knew that everything she did had a reason behind it, and this was surely the case for Shohei and Aidou as well. Only one person actually asked the general about it, and it was more out of curiosity than critique.

"Simple," the general had replied. "If you notice, they get along well enough together despite the differences in their political opinions. Something I attribute to the long history of their families being friendly with each other-the Nagayama and Yuji houses have excellent ties as well as intermarriages, as you know."

"Yes."

"Furthermore," she went on. "They balance each other out supremely well. Shohei-han is obviously exceptional at making decisions, but performs best when he has no rival minds to compete with his strategies. He needs assurance of his own superiority in that field, and leaving him with one who is not of the same mettle in that area gives him latitude to let out his natural creativity. Aidou-han-much though he may protest a decision initially, should he find it not according to his tastes-carries out instructions to the letter afterwards. Oh, he complains *a lot*, certainly, but he does the job very well because he is a stickler for orders, from whomever they

come. His precision goes well with Shohei-han's resourcefulness."

She smiled contentedly at her own choices.

"Besides, I have noticed that Aidou-han is better than anyone else in my staff-excepting you, naturally-at organisation, and that is something essential to the garrison of Argentum: setting up the military fittings they now deem necessary for preservation. Finally being under attack again after nearly a century seems to have reminded the Argentians that they should start training some of their own to be on hand for battle, even if only for a rudimentary defensive militia should sudden attackers strike."

The senior legate had agreed with the reasoning.

"I see," she told Shizuru. "As much as I dislike him, Aidou-san is as you say. But aren't you a little worried, Shizuru-san? After all, this is the same man who didn't even join in our fight against Artaxi-just sat out the battle pretending to make himself useful outside of the field."

Shizuru had only chuckled at this last word of caution.

"True, not very admirable," was her rejoinder. "But still understandable, given that he is *quite* well on in years, Chie-han, and could hardly be expected to contribute much to the fray. You recall that you once described him as being incompetent. Well, it may be true as far as actual physical war goes, but you yourself have admitted to my statement that he is very competent in other ways... ways that Shohei-han is only passable at."

"I'll concede that." Chie had smiled then, suddenly. "Of course, there's also the point of the pool you're drawing from, isn't it, and how to spread people out?" she asked shrewdly, getting a laugh from her commander.

"Yes. Oh, I would love to leave someone as capable as you or Kenji-han or even Suou-han with Shohei-han, but I am afraid I cannot spare any of you at the moment."

"Because there are other things to consider and more work to be done."

"Precisely."

"All right, I'll admit it. It just might work, Shizuru-san."

"It *shall* work. Both men, besides, are in fact very much set on winning this campaign, albeit for different reasons. They may actually be among the most determined people in this army, you know. Yes, I have no doubts, Chie-han. It shall work."

And so it did. The appointed legates proceeded to acquit themselves well of any doubts of their partnership as soon as the general and her part of the army passed out of the city: Shohei immediately set to work on building the military fortifications and Aidou began to organise a programme for raising local militia. Thus Argentum found itself under good care whilst the general set off for Sosia, the more northern of the two Himean provinces in the region.

With her went three over-strength Himean legions, for the five cohorts left over from the legion that had been split up to provide five of the fifteen cohorts in Argentum were spread out among the rest. These were escorted by the three legions of cavalry from Otomeia, as well as a baggage train carrying, among other things, their captive Mentulaean prince-who screamed up a storm at the outset of the march until the chief primipilus paid him a visit that ended with him bound and gagged in his carriage.

The army went along at a brisk pace that would have sent another army under another commander complaining. As it was, not one of the soldiers could find the heart to do so given that their general did not ride, but walked beside them nearly the entirety of the way, her feet trudging the same monotonous rhythm theirs did. Besides, how could one mind anything when the general was always making the rounds through the ranks for a chat? She was so impressive and confident, as inspiring as the ideal commander should be. And she was so *nice* ! Not something you really expected from a general or even from someone so high up the Himean social stratum she was descended from divinity through some ancient ancestor. Never mind the pace then, thought the soldiers: never mind the growing cold, the brutal wind chilling their bones-what was that before the warmth of their general's presence?

So they marched relentlessly yet cheerfully from sunup to sundown, pitching camp in semidarkness and going off again in semidarkness. No one complained about this. After all, they had their general's light to guide them, and it was very strong, very bright.

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On the fourth day of their march, Shizuru's army pitched camp beside a river, all of them welcoming the opportunity to bathe and cleanse their effects of any dirt that might have soiled them since their departure from Argentum. The camp was made and fortified properly first, of course, for that was the general's custom: no matter how short the stop, no matter where, a proper camp had to be made. It was thus evening by the time the soldiers who wished to go to the river were able to do so, cursing each other jokingly for having taken so long to set up camp as they dipped into the water-whereupon nearly all of them broke out into fresh curses.

"Shit!"

"Vulcan, this is freezing!"

"Sure, why don't you call on him and maybe he can warm this damn water up!"

"Oh, Jupiter, I think my balls just pulled back all the way to my gut!" another laughed shakily, as the rest cackled. They bathed quickly, groups of women and men taking turns and bathing in separate sections of the river-for it was still custom for soldiers of different sexes to bathe separately, as a matter of modesty. Their friends stood guard at the banks and waited for their turns as they splashed in the water, rubbing down quickly and shivering in the cruel temperature.

The Otomeians with them seemed not to mind, perhaps since they were accustomed to it where they lived. They voiced no complaints, although they did let out some comments of amusement at the Himeans' discomfiture. They also watered their horses by drawing pails for them, although each rider was careful to make sure that the beasts would not come near the river itself, lest they contaminate it.

It was well after the rest of the soldiers had left the riverside that the chief primipilus finally sauntered over, taking her time to look for what she deemed would be a relatively safe place from prying eyes. She had meant to bathe earlier, had it not been for other duties detaining her from doing so. How she had itched for a good dip in the water, watching the others go off to the river while she herself had to stay and oversee the final touches to the camp! For, barbaric though she knew some of the other, more high-born officers might have thought her, she was actually a woman who took her hygiene seriously and liked to be meticulous with her rituals. Indeed, she was nearly as meticulous with personal cleanliness as the general herself, who was famous for her obsession with bodily care.

She strode furtively through the brush, habit making her unconsciously take the path that would betray the least noise of her passage. A moment later, she was looking at the spot she decided would do nicely for her purpose. She was about to start forward when voices from nearby reached her, and she paused to listen.

*That voice sounds familiar.*

She strained her ears, trying to identify the speaker. After another second, a smile came to her lips. Yes, the voice *would be* familiar-it was one of the non-combatant girls in her legion, her body servant, as a matter of fact, and one of whom she was extremely fond. This last was due to her having an unusual relationship with the girl, whom she deemed more or less under her care. Not words that many would dare to associate with Nao Yuuki, and so some even told her. Her only answer to that, however, was: *Yes, well.* All she would ever say, if pressed for more information, was that they "had history together".

The truth of this "history" was known by only a few people, all of whom chose not to talk about it. All that the rest knew was that Nao had been the one to bring the girl to the army to serve as one of the non-combatant helpers, and that, though the girl was not strictly a slave, she was nonetheless part of the centurion's household as a seemingly high-ranking and possibly favourite servant.

What was not so well known was that the girl came from the slums outside the walls of Hime, the stewards of poverty by the great river. It



was Nao who found her there. This came about during one of Nao's jobs-one done not as a centurion but as an intelligencer-where she had had to pose as a poor woman with a child in order to better carry out her orders. As she most certainly had no child of her own, the primipilus had alighted upon a ragged yet oddly composed street urchin with a shy and engaging smile, one that she calculated would work wonders with gullible adults if trouble arose. A quick question if the urchin had family to look for her and an offer of a fresh meal after the job later, the new partnership was in business.

The trouble was that Nao found herself to be one of those "gullible adults" she had hoped to catch with the girl's smile. After the job, she found herself reluctant to leave the girl in the squalor where she found her, to her own chagrin. The girl could be so much more useful elsewhere; she could be raped before she even understood what rape meant; she could be killed on that street corner where she slept and picked at the scraps some well-meaning shop-owners regularly chucked at her, with nothing to her name. So many possibilities, not one of them good!

*A waste of a fine girl*, thought Nao, who hated wasting things. Besides, she found the girl entertaining. She was so genuinely nice, so innately honest, and yet so understanding about mischief and deception when it had a purpose-and that was unusual, to say the least. So Nao decided to bring her along when she left that cesspool of poverty beside the ebbing banks of the Tiber. An offer and agreement happened, and then they were off to the army. Thus the girl passed from one danger to another, although she found that the new one was preferable to the old. The girl herself often reflected in those first few months in the army that there was remarkably more kindness in the legions than there had been in the streets. A reflection that had the centurion laughing the first time the girl had voiced it out.

*All grown up now, cheeky little bugger*, the centurion thought with a smirk as she discerned another, unfamiliar voice replying to the girl's words. It was a deeper voice, a rather husky one, in fact, although it had a quality to it that implied youth. A thought struck her and her eyebrows lifted, a smirk building on her mouth.

*Ooh, don't tell me you're having night-time trysts already, you sly*

*bird.*

She moved carefully towards the direction of the voices, stopping in a grove that hid her from the ones speaking. She stood behind a tree, one hand against its damp and peeling bark as she made out the two persons outlined in the moonlight. The first thing she registered was that the voice she identified earlier was indeed her girl. The second thing was that the girl and the other figure were standing quite far away from each other as they talked. The girl was bending by the riverbank, seeming to be washing something in the water. The other figure- *another girl*, Nao noted with interest-was seated on a boulder a few meters away from the one by the river's side.

*So it isn't a tryst*, Nao thought. *At least, not if you're planning to stand that far away from each other.* She smiled as she wondered whether it was the girl's shyness responsible for that, for the child had always manifested a tendency to be bashful, for all her amiability.

The real question, of course, was what the two were doing here and by themselves at this hour.

"Really, don't you think it's pretty?" came the familiar voice again, soft and sweet as always. "You hardly see the moon this bright."

"It's the full moon," was the answer from the other figure.

"I like it."

A long pause, interrupted by splashes of water.

"It's nice," the other voice said, finally. "I guess."

"I think so."

Nao smiled to herself, thinking that she would leave the two to their chat now. She was turning away to leave when the other voice-that of the girl who was unfamiliar to her-rang out.

"Who's there?"

She stopped and turned back to peer from behind the tree.

"Who's there? Speak, or I will attack!"

Lifting an eyebrow at the challenging tone, Nao paused to eye the figure by the bank first. Her girl had scrambled up to stand behind the other one, the one who was handling two spears in a way that conveyed no hesitation to throw them. That one was glaring in her direction. Nao's eyes widened slightly as she realised that this strange soldier-an Otomeian, from the looks of the dress-was very young, despite the confidence of her threat. Perhaps about the same age as the girl standing behind her, who had only turned seventeen a few months back. And yet, there was something in this foreign youngster's stance that bespoke a composed alertness that reminded the centurion of someone-though she could not place exactly who that was.

"I asked you to speak!" came the voice once again, followed by a whistle as the spear was cast and nearly sheared off a lock of red hair, had the centurion not put her exceptional reflexes to use. Righting herself, Nao grinned as she realised that that cast had only been for warning, and that the warrior knew exactly where she was standing.

"The next one will be aimed at your head. Come out!"

Nao's grin grew wider. *Oh, I like her!* she thought gleefully, stepping out into the moonlight. There was a gasp from the girl behind the one levelling the remaining spear.

"Nao-senpai!"

The centurion winked. "Erstin. Having secret meetings already?"

"I-no!" The girl rushed up, pale blond hair waving. "I'm so sorry about that! Nina was just trying to-"

Nao cut her off.

"Nina?" she asked, turning her attention to the other girl, who was ducking her head apologetically. "Ah, that's the mystery girl's name?"

The girl called Nina bowed deeply, her stilted movements betraying her discomfiture.

"Forgive me," she said in perfect Himean, keeping her eyes to the ground. "I did not know-"

"Yes, yes, don't worry about it," Nao said, smirking. "Not a bad throw you have there, by the way."

The girl bowed again.

"Otomeian, hm? Light cavalry, right?"

"Yes," she returned respectfully and with a nod of great formality.

"So what are you doing with Erstin?" Nao asked, trying to sound stern. "And in such a suspicious place?"

Nina looked at a loss, her gaze turning to the other adolescent for help. The centurion almost guffawed at the sheer panic in the girl's face.

"I asked her to come with me, Nao-senpai," Erstin said, coming to the other's aid. "I needed to wash some clothes and I felt safer with someone."

"Oh, is that so? I see now." She threw them another round of malicious smirks. "So why did you ask *her*, specifically?"

This time, even Erstin looked slightly embarrassed, although she was still able to reply.

"She's- *we're* friends," she told Nao, who grinned at the statement.

"Friends."

A short, painful silence ensued-although it was painful only for the two girls, whereas the older woman endured it with obvious enjoyment. After a while, the primipilus finally let her smirk drop and looked up at the moon, trying to gauge what hour of the evening it was. She decided that she had best get on with her bath before the night wore on even further.

"Are you done here?" she asked the pair. "I'm going to take a bath now, and maybe you girls better go back and get some rest. We'll be marching early again tomorrow."

The Otomeian nodded, a lock of dark hair falling over her eyes as she did. Nao was wondering again who it was, exactly, that this girl reminded her of, when Erstin spoke up.

"If you like, Nao-senpai, I would be happy to help you," she said. "If it's fine with you, Nina, to go back alone, although I could walk you back and return to help Nao-senpai bathe-"

Nao was about to tell her not to bother and to just go back to the camp, but the Otomeian beat her to speech.

"No," Nina said, shaking her head. "I will go. You stay here, Ers. It's fine."

*Well, well, calling her by that moniker already, hm?* Nao felt a corner of her lip turning up again just as the Otomeian turned her way.

"May I go, Centurion, or would you like me to stand guard for the two of you?"

Nao considered it, wondering what to choose. Oh, it would be amusing to get to know the girl-perhaps figure out why she so reminded Nao of someone, whomever that was-but then again, it would be even more amusing to tease and question Erstin about her, once she left. Screwing up a corner of her mouth, the primipilus made her decision.

"That's fine, you can go," she told the girl. "We'll need everyone in tip-top shape tomorrow, since we'll be getting up early as usual. Go get some shut-eye. And thanks for taking care of Erstin."

Nina bowed formally again and went off, making her way through the brush almost as quietly as Nao had. The two watched her go before turning to the task of getting the primipilus good and ready for bathing.

*Interesting girl,* Nao thought, making her way to the river and slipping off the pack she was carrying and letting it fall to the earth.

She mulled over her course of attack as Erstin helped her shed her clothes, then stood in the shallow water with her, long tunic pulled up and tied into a knot well above the knees. The girl used the sponge Nao had brought to scrub the centurion's back thoroughly, almost painfully-which she knew was the way the older woman wanted it done. Teeth chattering in the cold, their breath misted as they went about the motions, talking to each other companionably as was their wont.

"So, do you like her?" Nao asked, getting straight to the point.

"Nina? Oh, yes. She's nice," the girl replied, preoccupied with scouring the milky white skin striped with scars. "She looks stern. But she's really nice."

"Don't get vague with me, Erstin."

Erstin smiled, her pale eyes lighting up: "Sorry, Nao-senpai."

"So?" Nao paused to curse as the girl used a ladle to run water over her back and another tremble ran through her body. "Damn, damn, *damn* ! Icicles better not be hanging from my arse yet!"

Her companion laughed, the soft, tinkling laughter making her smile too.

"The others were saying the same thing earlier," Erstin told her, handing the sponge to her so that she could rub down her own legs as she bent over. "They were so loud. Cursing, too."

"What?" Nao asked, giving a chuckle. "You weren't cursing along with them, girly?"

A giggle. "You know I don't curse, Nao-senpai."

"It's a miracle, is what it is," Nao retorted, biting back a shiver as she focused on rubbing her legs raw. "Given how much you're around me."

Another giggle.

"So tell me more about this Nina." Nao closed her eyes as she

straightened, the girl bending over to splash water onto her legs. She closed her eyes and worked on her bare chest as Erstin washed her thighs carefully. "You know, she reminds me of someone."

"Natsuki-san, perhaps?"

Nao's eyes flew open.

"Yes!" She paused, shot a curious look at the blonde bent over before her. "Now how did you know that?"

Erstin straightened. She had grown a little taller, Nao noted idly, and her body was also beginning to fill rather well in certain areas.

*Better than mine, even*, she sighed to herself, mildly amused as opposed to being envious.

"They're related," Erstin explained to her. "Nina told me that Natsuki-san was her cousin."

"Really," Nao hummed, before nodding her head. "Yes, there's some similarity there, though they don't exactly look that much alike, now that I think about it."

She paused, trying to imagine the faces next to each other.

"Pretty faces. Though I think The Sphinx does have more impact. Could be the eyes. More striking, even with that god-awful glower of hers. Though I'm certainly not about to tell the brat that!" she added with a laugh.

"I like Nina's eyes more."

"Oh?"

The girl let a moment go by before explaining: "Natsuki-san's eyes are too unsettling... even if they are beautiful. Nina's are *softer*, I think ."

"They weren't soft earlier when she was about to skewer me, hm?"

"She's not always like that," Erstin laughed easily.

"Neither is her cousin," Nao mumbled, an image of the general and her bodyguard coming to her mind. "Downright soft sometimes, I think."

Erstin had taken the sponge and doubled over to wet it in the water again.

"Sorry, Nao-senpai," she said. "What did you say?"

"What colour are they, Nina's eyes?"

"Yellowish brown. Amber, I think?"

"Amber! I much prefer green."

"Could it be because your eyes are green too, Nao-senpai?"

The centurion smirked, looking pointedly at the pale, sea-green eyes of the girl.

"Same to you! Cousins, eh?" Her eyes narrowed, her features betraying a pensive moment. "What are the similarities? Aside from the black hair and pale skin, obviously. Are there any?"

The younger woman knew better than to think the centurion was restricting the topic to the physical traits. She thought on it.

"I think so," she mumbled, scrubbing the older woman's arms. "They sort of act the same. A little. Nina is usually serious too."

"But at least she talks more!" Nao laughed, eliciting answering laughter from the other. "Or... don't tell me she actually made you wait before she finally talked to you, like her cousin did with the general?"

"Oh, no!" Erstin replied with a laugh, finished with her work. She started to ladle water over the centurion's body, apologising as she noticed the elder woman shudder from the cold, her teeth tight together. Nao wrapped her arms around her sides and shook her head at the girl, urging her to continue.



"She *was* very quiet when I first met her," the girl said. "But she'd talk to me if I asked her something, still." A small chuckle. "Though she was short with anything she said."

"I see," said Nao, smiling. "And you like her?"

The centurion found herself smirking at the girl's reddening face.

"Yes," said Erstin.

"Hrm."

There was the sound of splashing water as they made their way back to the riverbank, Nao deciding that she would be better off not washing her head for the evening.

"I'm cold! I don't want to turn into an icicle," she remarked to the girl, who giggled as she dried the centurion off with a cloth and helped her put on a tunic. "And I still have to talk to the general after this: she said she'd see me and the other officers. Bet it's about these bastard Mentulae that's been shadowing us just past their borders."

Erstin smiled at her quietly, then seemed to pause, a thought hanging unsaid in the air.

"What?" the centurion prompted.

"I just remembered something Nina told me," the girl answered, her pale brows lifted at her master. "About Fujino-san's bodyguard, Nao-senpai. About Natsuki-san, I mean."

The arched eyebrows went up too, the green eyes betraying curiosity. These eyes were sharply acidic, Erstin thought, and very unlike those of the general's bodyguard, which were a deeper yet oddly more vivid green. These were eyes speckled with frank flecks of yellow, beautiful eyes in themselves and worthy of mention too.

"What?" the centurion asked her.

"She said it was unusual for Natsuki-san to do what she did." The girl draped the cloak about Nao's body. "With the general."

"What?" Nao said again, her brow creasing. "You mean The Sphinx actually talks to people *more*?"

"No," Erstin said, giving a shake of her head. "Not exactly. Nina didn't say anything about that. She just said that it usually takes a longer time. For Natsuki-san to talk to people she doesn't know, I mean. She said she didn't expect her cousin to start speaking to the general so soon-talking, like the two of them talking, the way they do now, she said. Not just talking like officers in an army."

"Chatting, you'd say."

"Yes. That's what she meant, I think."

The girl wondered at the odd look that came to the older woman's face: a blend of interest and vindication sparking there even as a smile came to the thin lips.

"You mean," Nao said, her smile widening into an ever slyer one than what she usually had tickling her mouth's edges, "that that girl, that Nina, thinks her cousin is treating the general special? Or better than she usually does other people?"

Erstin nodded.

"She said that she thought Natsuki-san liked or seemed to like the general." She smiled brightly at this, seeming to find it natural. "But everyone does like Shizuru Fujino-san, right, Nao-senpai? I can see why she'd warm up to the general faster. I mean, / liked her soon as I heard her talking to you way back when-"

She trailed off at the sight of the centurion's countenance, an unreadable expression on it.

"Nao-senpai?" she said, when her silence went unnoticed. "What's wrong?"

The older woman looked at her, the odd look still on her face.

"I knew it," she said. "I can't wait to hear what Harada will say to this."

"What, Nao-senpai?" Erstin asked in befuddlement, not understanding how the senior legate had entered their conversation. "What about Harada-san?"

Nao just smiled her feline smile and reached out with a hand. She ruffled the girl's hair roughly, as she had used to in the times when the latter had been younger and needed reassurance that she had found a place, was no longer an urchin of the streets.

"Nothing, don't worry about it, Girl!" She grunted, threw both eyes heavenwards. "Though I don't know if this makes it better or worse."

She bit her lip, making the girl more instead of less concerned.

"I don't know if any good'll come out of it," she muttered. "But worrying won't do a bloody thing. So let's just go about what we have to do. And let's go back to camp, it's getting more chilly."

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A little way down the length of the same river was a similar though also different scene: there were two figures as well, one naked and one not. But here the naked one was in the water, and the clothed one standing against a tree by the bank. The one in the water talked while the other made an occasional reply but remained quiet for the most part.

"Good gods," said the one bathing. "It seems that the water *is* as cold as they say."

The one under the tree said nothing.

"Even so, one must admit this is a lovely sight. I love nights when you can see the start of the autumn chill!" A splash, followed by another. "It has been an age since I bathed in the open and under the sky instead of in a tub or proper bath. There is something to be said for nature's beauty, after all, that merits a return to it every now and then. What do you think, Natsuki? Surely you must see many nights such as these, given your country."

A mumble of agreement, to which the one washing herself answered as though it had been a full-fledged paragraph of a reply.

"Of course, it makes me miss the warm summer nights in Hime," she said, giving a little quiver as she cupped her hands to bring more water to her neck. "But this is beautiful, in its own way. I wonder what a proper, full-blown summer is like here."

Damp strands of golden hair turned into a pale and icy brown as tendrils slipped from the knot of it she had piled on her head.

"In Hime," she went on conversationally. "Nights like this come on in winter. And everyone would bring out warm, mulled wine and have the fires lit. Braziers and hypocausts working at full force, the thickest rugs and blankets brought out for comfort, and for those sensible enough to ignore the fact that they are not exactly fashionable when you are wearing formal Himean dress for company, the best and thickest socks for the feet!"

She chuckled at the picture she had painted, the sound coming out a little shaky as she shuddered from the cold working its way into her skin.

"We are not really a people accustomed to extremes of temperature, I suppose," she confessed. "Even the summer is mild there, compared to that one gets in Fuuka's south. There are some scorching summers, you know. They would likely horrify you."

She fell quiet for a moment as she focused on sloughing off any invisible dirt that might have gathered on her legs, brow furrowed slightly as she attacked her own skin with a vengeance. The rumours of her being obsessive about cleanliness were not all exaggerated: she could slog through days and days of sweaty and bathless marching like a proper soldier, granted, but after that she often fell into frenzies of bathing where she practically rubbed her skin raw in an effort to cleanse herself of what she perceived as unconscionable filth.

A soft voice interrupted her midway through her work on the second leg, giving her cause to look up towards the figure on the banks.

"Um, Shizuru?"

"Yes?" she said. "What is it, Natsuki?"

Natsuki took a moment before answering, her low voice carrying clearly through the stillness surrounding their little private place.

"What is it like," she finally said. "Hime?"

The general straightened, letting drop to her side the hand carrying the rough-woven cloth she used to cleanse herself.

"What is it like," she echoed. "The weather, I suppose? You are asking about the climate?"

The other nodded.

"Well, let me see," she said, turning her eyes up as though attempting to glimpse Hime's skies in these foreign ones. "It is warmer there, no doubt. It can be quite cool-perhaps as cool as this-when winter comes around, yet it never truly snows as it does in Otomeia, save in the higher altitudes. We have more rain or sleet than snow, so the winter is more wet than white."

She brought the rag up to her bare arms and started working on them, all the way up to her shoulders.

"Why do you ask?" she said. "Could it be that you want to visit Hime sometime, Natsu- *oh*, how cold that is!" she exclaimed, as a stiff and sudden breeze rushed past her, touching off an eruption of gooseflesh on the skin above her waist. She had waded only so far as to let the water reach the top of her hips. "Oh, the things we do for hygiene!"

A chuckle came from the figure standing under the shadow of the tree and Shizuru mock-pouted.

"It helps you understand why the rankers were blaspheming so much earlier," she laughed suddenly, taking in a sharp breath to steel herself against the cold. "Ah well. I am not about the curse the gods for my own eccentricity in selecting a river bath instead of having water heated for me."

"Why?"

She turned her head: "It *would* be a foolish thing to blaspheme for

such a thing, Natsuki."

"No. Not that. Why is it that..." The other paused, thought over her query. "Why are you afraid of not bathing?"

The Himean responded with a grin.

"Noticed it, hm?" she said.

Natsuki smiled too.

"I like to be clean, you see," the older woman explained. "I have what some people call a mortal fear of the things that tend to sprout on dirty bodies. Pests, lice, disease, stink-all of those things. I am lucky I come from a line of fairly smooth and hairless people, so to speak, so I do not have to trouble about plucking out more body hair than most to ensure absolute freedom from these horrors, but I would certainly endure the added pain if the case were otherwise. Oh, some of my friends make fun of me for this mania-I daresay it amuses even the cleanest of them! But I do not mind." She quirked a brow at the girl, who had smiled throughout the explanation. "As long as I am clean, that is."

She nodded at the girl.

"You know, since we are on the subject," she said. "You seem wonderfully clean to me too, Natsuki. I noticed: you are always near me so I have occasion to appreciate how sweet-smelling you are. Yet I never seem to catch you off on bathing trips or errands that take half as long as mine! When do you find the time to do it? I have feared for some time now that you are not given sufficient time away from me to do what you must for yourself and your own needs, though you always seem to find time to cleanse yourself just as well as I do-and I can take quite a time for ablutions, you know that."

"Often morning. Or night."

Shizuru was surprised.

"Never midday?" she asked.

"Sometimes," the girl allowed. "Wuh-when you send me away for a

while?"

"When I tell you to take time for yourself or see to your troopers?"

"Yes."

The older woman looked thoughtful.

"Morning or night?" she said. "Truly? You mean earlier even than my waking up?"

There was a nod, which she only barely made out.

"Was it the same in Argentum and Otomeia? You slipped out of our room in the dark hours?"

There was no answer.

"Or could it be you used the baths in or attached to our rooms?"

This time, she discerned another faint nod.

"Both," the young woman said afterwards. "I, um, I do both."

She was quick to add: "Always, I change the water after. And I clean. The bath."

"I believe you: they never looked used when I would use them. I see now."

Shizuru paused to conjure an image of the girl washing herself in the tub or pool she herself had used when they had been in the aforementioned cities. The thought made her feel a little weak in the knees, and she shook her head to clear it of the picture. Now why had it been so easy to conjure the image and not so easy to stand it?

"Odd how I do not hear you," she said, talking to take her mind off her mental disturbance. "Ye gods, you are stealthy! I am not an extremely light sleeper, certainly, but neither do I slumber like a log. And come to think of it, who gets the water for you when you bathe? Unless you ask the servants to come in and fill up the tub with warm

water-but I would have heard *them* coming in, at the very least, and woken up."

She mulled over the question. There could only be one answer.

"Do you mean, Natsuki, that you use the cold water in the cistern?"

There was a nod at which Shizuru grimaced, the sharp line of her nose wrinkling.

"And so early in the morning or night-that means you have been washing in water just as cold as this, for the past two months!" And, most likely, had been suffering that cold longer than she needed, in order to ensure that her ablutions were quiet enough to avoid waking up her charge slumbering in the next room. "Of course you do not soak?"

A mumble of confirmation.

"Still..." the older woman sighed, a little uneasy at the thought of the girl going through such uncomfortable rituals. It was hardly going to inconvenience her to let the girl have time enough to take her bath at leisure during midday, after all! Or to have another bath drawn up for the young woman after hers, for that matter. Natsuki would probably decline both: she would say she could not afford to be so profligate with her time when her charge was going about unwatched, most likely, and answer to the second that it was unseemly for her own charge to have water drawn up especially for her too. Shizuru had the measure of the girl now, and she thought that the girl's sense of honour and dutiful dedication could be a problem sometimes, as in this situation. Really, they should just bathe together for convenience! Although that would be the hardest proposition of all to put to the Otomeian, probably.

A *pity*, she considered. It was not just convenient, but somehow preferable. Yes, she rather liked the idea of it. It still disturbed her, but it an odd, thrilling sense.

Oh, she *was* getting eccentric!

"You could simply leave me during the day, you know, to go off and



bathe," she said, choosing to start sensibly, with the proposition least likely to get turned down. "I have no difficulty with it."

"Sometimes," the girl said shortly.

"Ah, yes. You said you go in midday on occasion?"

"Mm."

"When I am with Chie-han and the others, I hazard?"

Affirmation.

"I see," Shizuru said. "Yet you are never gone long during those times. You must bathe very quickly or rush through it. You should not have to, you know. You may take your time." A laugh. "Gods know I do!"

There was a shake of the head.

"It is all right," the younger woman said.

"No, really, Natsuki. I would not mind if you did. Or you could spare both of us all the calculation and scheduling and just agree to what I have been proposing for a while now. Bathe with me."

A huff told her the other had been expecting her to say this, and she laughed at it.

"Come now," she said, smiling. "Do not tell me you are prudish after having seen me bathe so many times-might I point out this present situation as one of them, by the way? We have had this conversation before, but I suppose I might as well tell you that I truly would not mind. Perhaps I would even welcome it."

As she said this with a smile, the other took the last statement to be another of her jests, and shook her head patiently at her in response. Shizuru was highly amused by the irony of this. She knew she was much admired for her form, whether it was by the males or the females of Himean society. Not to blow her own bugle, but she was very much aware that there were countless persons who would immediately say yes to the chance of bathing with her and seeing

her body. And now that she was finally offering the chance to someone, here she was, turned down and considered a joker.

"I wonder if this is what they call poetic justice," she mumbled, grinning. "Now that I finally offer it, I am declined. What, shall you not even honour me with an argument, Natsuki?"

The only answer was a smirk that told her the other knew she was being baited.

"Well?" Shizuru persisted, a teasing smile on her lips. "At least say something to explain. A shake of the head can only be so eloquent."

"I..." A pause, then a look of impressive gravity. "I have to guard you."

Shizuru burst out into laughter at the delivery.

"Oh no, not that old thing again!" she cried later, still laughing. "At least think of a new defence, please. You have flogged that one to ribbons already!"

The other deigned to laugh with her, albeit a little more quietly. During the final chuckle, the girl stepped out of the shadow of the tree against which she was standing and showed off another of her rare smiles-which were not so rare these days, Shizuru was pleased to note-as she came to stand by the river's very edge. The general returned the expression, noticing, not for the first time, that the other had beautiful teeth: even and fierce and white.

Natsuki tipped her head in a questioning manner, as if to ask the Himean if she would finish soon. Shizuru started to wade out of the water, blowing out a series of quick, sharp breaths as she did.

"Yes, you are right," she muttered as she went. "I have spent long enough here."

She came out, shivering when the wind cooled the water still sheeting off her body. Shutting her eyes, she stepped deliberately if a little stiffly towards the boulder on which she had placed her effects. Her arms wrapped tightly about her sides and she felt the coolness of her body, the sensation of her clammy skin chilling her

even more.

Moving this way, she opened her eyes only when her feet set on the damp earth of the bank instead of the pebbly riverbed-and started when in the unveiling of her gaze, her eyes met another glittering pair less than a metre away.

"Natsuki. What is it?"

A cloth was swiftly draped about her shoulders, hands rubbing the thick fabric against her arms as the girl busied herself with drying off Shizuru's form. The older woman stood still, receiving this unexpected attention mutely-which must have worried her companion a little, for the girl stopped her ministrations and peered up with a concerned expression on her face. It was then that Shizuru noticed that her bodyguard, for all the ease with which she had gone about her actions, had a furious blush on her cheeks. Before Shizuru could recover enough to make the teasing comment that had obviously been expected, however, the girl spoke ahead of her.

"All right?" she asked quietly. "Still cold?"

Shizuru smiled at this.

"Ah, no," she answered. "No, I'm fine, Natsuki."

A nod, then a motion asking for permission to go on drying her. She let out a small, foggy breath as she bade the girl return to what she was doing.

"Thank you," she said, attributing the change in her voice to the deepening cold of the night around them. "Would you go on helping me, please?"

Natsuki did. Her bandage-swathed hands carefully patted the general's dripping body to dry, her head averting with modesty whenever she reached a delicate area, to Shizuru's amusement. Although amusement was certainly not the most powerful reaction Shizuru was feeling just then to the attention she was being given so freely, this common practice of camaraderie that the legionaries often engaged in with their closest mates; she knew it was often

done in the friendliest of attitudes in the army, a thoughtful gesture for one who did not want his fellow to chill from taking too long drying himself. Yet what she felt now was not entirely friendly, easily distinguishable from the earlier friendliness in their conversation, in fact, and not even remotely similar to the almost-negligible pleasure she felt in having her servants dry her on the rare times she asked them to help her bathe, back in Hime.

*I must be mad*, she accused herself, feeling blood warm up her own cheeks when her bodyguard knelt and started to dry her legs from the bottom up. There seemed to be a slight quiver in the hands patting her limbs, yet she knew it might only be her own body shivering. She clenched her teeth and held herself deathly still when the cloth started to move upwards, passing her knee and moving to her upper thigh.

She was no fool and she was from a society where the sexual and sensual were freely spoken, obvious things. Which meant she had a good guess of what was happening to her body under the Otomeian's innocent assistance. She shook her head at herself in amazement, wondering why she would be having such feelings now. Was this what they meant when they spoke of the pleasures of intimate touches? Not a woman famous for being lavish with the physical expression of affection, she nonetheless had enough knowledge both intellectual and social to know the enjoyment one took in being kissed by a parent on the brow, a friend on the cheek, or even a-not 'lover', she had never had a lover-another on the lips.

*But this feels different from all of them. It feels different. Indeed, perhaps it is that it simply feels.*

Her mind went back to the past, to the times with her school companions-for, though her parents could have easily hired the best private pedagogue for the entirety of her former education, they had insisted upon her attending a private and exclusive school with other children once she reached her ninth year. It was with these other young boys and girls of senatorial families that she first grew to appreciate the beauty of the human form absent cloth, the lovely symmetry of muscle, sinew, and bones all put together. Before they came to that age, all of them, male and female, thought no more of the statues of naked women and men littered around them than to

wonder why these figures were unclothed when it was obviously so much more comfortable to wear a tunic, especially when winter came. In those days, they did not see why their elders in the institution-those at the stage of puberty-smiled so furtively at the life-sized and dauntingly detailed statue of Priapus in the peristyle garden of the building where they held some classes. The older ones giggled, whereas they simply goggled at it.

Well, when they finally reached the age of understanding what it was that set those older boys and girls to smiling at the statue, Shizuru had not been among those giggling at the handsomely-sized organ jutting out from between Priapus's legs. Instead, she went through a tour of the immense Fujino household, stopping from naked statue to naked statue from the Greek masters, several priceless works of art. She perused each one with new eyes, pleased that she was better able to appreciate the beauty of the human anatomy now, yet disappointed that she seemed to feel no urge to titter at the nakedness of the figures as her schoolmates had, boys and girls both.

She also found then that, though she could admire the statues of a bare Adonis, Achilles or Priapus even, she found something vaguely obscene in the organ hung between their legs. *Too obvious*, her young mind had pronounced dismissively. *Not very pretty, somehow*. Better to keep it hidden, was her verdict: hidden like a treasure that one knew was there but could not see. Better the female statues, like that exquisitely done Venus in their house's atrium.

So she attributed it to her particular tastes in art. It was only a little later on that she realised it was due to her particular tastes in another field. This she found out after an innocent game of "spin the stick and kiss" with her closest companions, around the time she was thirteen. A kiss with a girl; another with a boy. Both were smitten by her, she knew with some regret, as she did not feel the same way. Still choosing to go along with the game, she had found a physical pleasure in one's kisses, and only a morbidly detached amusement in the other's. *I see*, she had reflected and proceeded to test herself in various ways to confirm it before telling her mother nonchalantly of her self-discovery. Whereupon the older woman only

replied the same thing: *I see* .

As it turned out, it little mattered. Though she knew from then on that she preferred women over men, she also knew she had no particular urges to find one to be with at the time-or at any time over the years. Nor did she feel any of the urges her friends spoke of, the ones that sent them into having secret and not so secret trysts with their lovers of the moment. When they asked her why she did not indulge in an affair of some sort at the very least, she simply answered that she did not need one: first, because it was not important to her; second, because she had her friends to tell her about their own dalliances.

*Yours are so much more interesting*, she would laugh, whereupon they would indulge her and tell her as much as she could ever wish to know, without any more prodding on her part than a few well-placed nods. So she learned about such things, knew about such things, without ever really feeling them herself. *I love vicariously*, she once said in jest to a friend, who understood that there was more truth to the words than Shizuru let on.

*Vicarious until now*, she thought upon finishing her reflections, savouring the sensation of the hands still pressing the cloth against her skin. So this was what it meant to feel that urge lovers and poets often bruited about, the desire that seemed to drive so many into insanity? What of Natsuki, then? What did she see in the body she was drying so carefully? Did she admire it, as Shizuru had admired those Greek statues of women in her early adolescence? Did she feel anything like a similar urge, a sudden and unexpected *wanting* ?

All too soon, Natsuki finished with the task, cutting off further considerations. She held out the older woman's clothes for her, quiet and still again as Shizuru swiftly donned them. The older woman's movements were fluid once more: the chill from her body had seeped away.

"My thanks, Natsuki," she said, finishing by pulling a thick cloak over the rest of her attire. "That was very kind."

Natsuki inclined her head regally: an unconscious hauteur that made the older woman smile and forget, momentarily, her sexual

awakening and renewed self-discovery.

"So shall we go?" Shizuru asked, picking up her things. "Or is there anything you yourself want or need to do here by the river?"

Natsuki shook her head, then seemed to realise that there could be a misunderstanding by not answering verbally in this case.

"Let us go," she offered.

"Very well."

The Himean turned and led the way. The Otomeian sped forwards to range herself next to her general, whereupon they went off silently shoulder-to-shoulder, saying nothing as they walked back to the main camp perimeter and walls. Natsuki wondered privately as they walked why the older woman looked so uncommonly pensive all of a sudden. Nor did it escape her that Shizuru sent several looks her way that gave her the feeling of being scrutinised, appraised anew and as if never-before-seen by those strange wine-tinted eyes. It troubled her a little, truth be told, but she said no words and asked no questions.

She was not called a Sphinx for nothing, after all.

# Chapter 12

*Thanks to the reviewers, as always.*

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**Bianca216** did a lovely picture of Shizuru and I thank her. The image is at [bianca216 . deviantart . com](https://www.deviantart.com/bianca216). Remove the spaces for the appropriate URL, if you please.

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## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Aedile** - A valuable magistracy or office responsible for the care of Rome's public buildings, streets, water supply and drainage, games, etc. They had the power to fine citizens and non-citizens of Rome for any infringements of regulations appertaining to any of the above.

2. **Capite censi** - The lowest rank in the social order; the masses (without Marxist connotations, of course!), people so poor that they had only the citizenship of Rome to distinguish them from foreigners, as they were too poor to belong to even the lowest of the five social classes. The lowest "recognised class" is the Fifth, after which are the capite censi-who are thus technically classless, property-less, almost virtually worthless (to a politician, given that they had no voting power) members of the population.

3. **Military tribune** - Part of the staff of an army. These were unelected officers ranking below legates but above cadets who sometimes did command work.

4. **Noble/Famous Families** - In Rome, there were several clans known as the Noble or Famous Families, which meant they were the most august clans of all. This was due to their being able to trace the line further back into Rome's history than most of the other families could, as well as their having produced a good number of prominent socio-political figures. Typically, almost all the members



*of the Roman Upper Class belonged or were related to at least one Famous Family.*

*Within this category, however, were a few who could boast of being "truly noble". All of these were patrician, since they descended from the original aristocrats. Among these illustrious families were the Julii (clan of Gaius Julius Caesar Dictator) and that of Lucius Sergius Catilina (the subject of Cicero's Catilinarian speeches).*

**5. Praetor urbanus** (L.), **urban praetor** (Eng.) - Recall that the praetorship is the office that a politician must ascend before attempting to become a consul, the highest position in the political ladder. The number of praetors elected in a year varies from six to eight. One of these is the urban praetor, who is the highest-ranked of the lot, second only to the consuls in his authority in the city.

*The **urban praetor** is tasked with the preliminaries of all civil litigation in the city. This story follows the Roman custom which has it that he/she cannot be out of the city-whether Rome or Hime-for more than ten days since his/her duties are necessary to the metropolis. Take note as well that the **urban praetor** is traditionally the praetorian candidate who comes in with the most votes.*

**6. Quaestor** - Chiefly a fiscal officer in the Republic, and often the manager of a provincial governor's funds.

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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Two more figures swept into the tent, joining the others already huddled around the table. Greetings were exchanged cheerfully and as the new arrivals seated themselves, one of the persons already ensconced in a chair and swaddled in his cloak decided to speak, his voice more guttural than usual.

"Stiff joints too, Taro-san, Toshi-san?" he asked jokingly, giving the pair a smile to show he was suffering from the same thing. "Not

frozen your posteriors off in that glacier of a river we bathed in?"

"Ye gods-nearly!" returned Taro, pulling his cloak more firmly about him. "One more bath like that, Kenji-san, and I might develop an allergy to water!"

There were chuckles from the rest as he went on.

"What terrible weather," he continued, rubbing his sides. "And they say it isn't even full on winter yet! But this cold is awful and it's getting worse by the second, I'll swear to it!"

"That means the snow's coming," someone remarked. "It'll be upon us any day now."

"It snows regular here?"

"I'd give it two or three days. Four, maybe."

"Jupiter! I suppose *that* 'll be insufferable, then. And I'm already sick of this!"

This earned him a leer from the Ninth Legion's primipilus, who sat a few chairs away while listening to the exchange.

"The soldiers get tougher shift, Legate," she said acerbically. "They don't get no warm wine to help them, you know, among other things."

Taro scowled at her, saying, "Do you see me with a cup in hand now, Centurion?"

A cough from the person sitting at the head of table stopped them. She had been chatting to her senior legate quietly about something before, but redirected her attention upon seeing the developing exchange.

"Has anyone seen Takumi-han?" she asked.

Nao blinked at Shizuru, then sent Taro a small, unrepentant grimace before turning back to the general.

"You want me to get him too, General?" she asked.

"No, thank you, Yuuki-han," Shizuru said smoothly. "I merely wanted to know how he is handling the climate. He had a bit of a cold that was maturing in Otomeia, I heard."

"He was doing fine on the march," another of the legates said. "Seemed in fair condition to me, Fujino-san."

"He's all right," interrupted the senior legate. "You don't have to worry, Shizuru-san. I passed by his place earlier."

Shizuru cocked her head: "And how was he?"

"A little blue in the nose, but we all are. Akira-kun's making sure he's warm, anyway."

"In what way?" Nao mumbled not-so-quietly, causing several of the people in the tent to start sniggering.

"Er... I am glad to hear that, Chie-han," Shizuru said, after swallowing a chuckle of her own. "In any case, shall we move on to more pressing matters?"

"Such as the Mentulaean army that's been shadowing us ever since we left Argentum, for example?" Chie ventured, eyebrows quirking. "That *is* our topic, right, General?"

"Well, yes, but only in passing," Shizuru replied. "We have another thing to get out of the way. But we might as well start with this one, I suppose. Did anyone have concerns about it?"

"Do you think they're going to attack?"

All the people in the tent turned their heads to the one who had asked the abrupt question: Toshi.

"They've been shadowing us for a while now," Taro replied to him, eyes rolling upward. "I'd like to know what they're about, if they don't plan to!"

A derisive snicker brought all eyes to the chief primipilus. Shizuru

invited her to speak.

"They won't," she said simply, showing off one of her nastier smiles—one she managed by showing the small, pointed canines of her teeth, looking for all the world like a big red cat snarling. Several people eyed the expression with patent discomfort.

"I don't know what the rest of you think, but I'll lay bets they don't attack," she told them.

"True, it's just a show of paranoia," agreed Kenji, leaning forward to place both his elbows on the table. "The *cunni* aren't so much thinking of jumping on us as making sure we don't jump on them. Right, Fujino-san?"

All heads swivelled to the commander, eager for her opinion.

"I concur," she said. "They *have* been staying too close to their borders to intend anything else. I predict that in the next day, they shall turn around and be off. Methinks they only want to make sure we do not get any ideas of passing into their territory—it seems that King Obsidian is fearful of anything such as an invasion from Hime into his lands."

"It makes sense," said a female legate, twisting her chapped lips into a smile. "They're simply too far for us to have any worries. Besides which, this army shadowing us is not as big as the one Artaxi was carrying, so the scouts tell us. We have other problems, as the general said."

The general bestowed a beautiful smile on the officer.

"Something on your mind, Suou-han?" she asked.

"Nothing grave, Shizuru-san," the woman replied, returning the grin with one just as stunning. "Just a little caution."

"Caution?" echoed somebody.

Suou nodded, her flaxen hair freeing itself from behind her ears.

"From what our scouts tell us, what we really have to be wary of is

that stretch up ahead that is hedged round with forest. We shall reach it by tomorrow, at this pace."

"What's with it?" someone asked. "Bad road?"

"Depends on what you call a bad road. See, there's another route connecting Argentum to Sosia-where's a map? A map, if you please."

One of the military tribunes quickly spread one out on the table, having had it ready from the beginning. The others bent over it as Suou proceeded to trace the locations she was speaking of, talking as her finger glided over the calfskin.

"See, we were supposed to take this one," she said, pointing to a thick brown line depicting a path. "This is the main road and the one the traders and travellers use. The problem is, we can't use it just yet."

"Why not?"

"It seems that it's bisected by this channel-a tributary of one of the main river borders, the River Atinu," she said, showing them the irregular blue stripe on the map. "Most of the time, the route is passable because a bridge sits there. Not at this time, though."

She drew the length of the river, pointing to where it was joined to another distant watercourse.

" *This* is the problem. The River Atinu, as you can see, is further up and reaches to the land of the Mentulaeans. It originates in the mountains in their north."

"So how does that influence which path we can and can't take?" someone asked.

"Because the Mentulaean mountains have odd seasons."

As expected, this gained her looks of bafflement from the others-save from the general, who merely looked as though she was enjoying Suou's little exercise in drama. The legate putting on the play chuckled, flicking her fringe of very fair hair as her frosty eyes

met the general's warm ones.

"A curiosity of the area," she explained to the table. "Their winter comes in two parts, or so the Otomeians tell us. The latter part is when they get the snows, and the first part is when they get rains instead. This would be towards the end of summer and runs all through their fall, in most years. The worst rains usually take place in the northern part of Obsidian's empire, apparently, which means these mountains. Interesting information, you know."

A murmur of assent went around the table.

"So at this time," she continued. "The rains from the north should be affecting the headwaters of the river. Typically, it floods beyond its normal levels, then swells into its tributaries. That's why we can't take that road-the flooding makes it impassable. The bridge itself is eaten up by the water."

There was a buzz around the table.

"I see it now," came a mumble from Chie. "So if what you said is true, everyone else should be taking the other road now, along with us. Is it the road traffic you're worried about?" she asked doubtfully, knowing that someone as intelligent as Suou would hardly deem something like the crowdedness of a passage worthy of mention. As she thought, Suou denied it.

"Of course not, Chie-san," said the woman, her aristocratic features showing surprise at the senior legate's query. "See, this is the time when traffic winds down between Argentum and Sosia. Most of the locals prefer to wait for the river waters to subside if they need to get from here to Sosia or vice versa, instead of taking the other road. *But*."

She took a slow breath.

"Some do go ahead and pass through the other road. There are people in a hurry." She smiled suggestively while lifting a pale eyebrow, so fair it was near-invisible in the lamplight. "Like that nice little trading party the scouts said is a little ahead of us."

Ever a consummate actress, she decided her production would be better if she affected a yawn-which she did, adding: "Perhaps trying to make a deadline or contract date, you know."

There were several confused expressions as she finished this aside, although she was pleased to note that several faces seemed to be lighting up in interest and waiting for what she would say next.

"Anyway," she said. "Only those who *absolutely* can't wait for better times actually hazard going through the other route, you know, which some say is damned foolery."

"They take the road in the forest, you mean," Kenji said.

"Yes."

There were several nods.

"Bandits?" Chie asked, voicing what everyone was suspecting.

"Yes," Suou said. "But more than that. The Otomeians said the ones that tend to strike along that road are not just ordinary ones. They're actually exiled Mentulaeans-or people from the conquered tribes that now make up the Mentulaeans, anyway-that went across the border and made a new home in these areas. It isn't said so, but my suspicion is that they're made up of the remnants of armies from other factions that their king purged some years back, or that the nucleus of the force is so composed. In other words, soldiers-turned-bandits, and probably armed like soldiers too. Quite a lot of them: they have been dwelling in these areas for some time and have naturally gathered other burrs to their coat."

She stopped to sigh and lift her eyebrows playfully: "They are a fairly well-organised lot, so the local scouts tell me."

"Any numbers?" someone asked.

Suou shrugged carelessly. The centurion at the table was similarly dismissive.

"Numbers don't really matter in this case, anyway," the red-haired primipilus grunted. "Organised or not, they're dead if they try

anything."

She sneered and declared: "We'll chew them up and spit them out."

Suou sent a grin towards the primipilus, who answered with a wicked one. Chie watched the exchange, now understanding exactly what the point of all Suou's information had been. For each comment, she knew, had been calculated, not at all carelessly thrown even if the younger legate's manner made it seem as though it were. She marvelled at her fair-haired colleague's just-revealed flair for delivery, not having had opportunity to see it before. Interesting to think of what she would be like, once she entered the Senate properly: she was probably something to look forward to, once they returned to Hime.

*Might turn out to be another great political force, much like her elder sister.*

"Thank you for telling us about this, Suou-han," came Shizuru's voice. "We should indeed do well to be on the alert, if nothing else."

"Any orders, General?"

Shizuru nodded.

"Please see to it," she said, "that all the centurions receive this order tomorrow: once we come into sight of those woods, they are to make sure the legionaries have their shields in hand and not on their backs. No drawing out of swords unless actual provocation comes, and have the cavalry troops near the baggage train. They can protect it and themselves."

There were several nods.

"In any case, we do not stand to fear anything from them, even if they do attack," she continued, a small smile coming to her lips. "Whereas they have *everything* to fear from us."

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Words that proved prophetic, as usual. The army entered the forest road by late morning of the following day, and was soon set upon by



a large force of bandits. These had been observing the glittering length of the Himean line as it entered their territory, wondering what stupidity led the foreigners to use such a long, thinned-out formation when they were obviously in a prime position to be attacked.

Not that the brigands meditated too much on it. Rather, they thanked their gods that the Himeans were silly enough to give them a wonderful opening for taking their baggage, which they suspected held a good amount of gold as well as supplies. Thus it was with high expectations of quick success that they charged towards that part of the Himean column-where, to their dismay, they found themselves fended off contemptuously by a solid wall of no less than Otomeian cavalry troops, the most feared horsed warriors in these lands.

Strangely enough, however, the Otomeians seemed more focused on pushing them back and away rather than on killing them, something that the chiefs of the outlaws realised after a few minutes had passed with relatively fewer losses on their side than expected since they were facing notoriously deadly warriors. Who had not suffered a single casualty yet, come to think of it. And the Himeans did not seem to be in a hurry to join in the fun either! What, by the gods, was going on?

"I don't like it!" cried one of the bandit leaders to his fellow, after a while. "They're too calm! It's like they were waiting for us!"

His friend spat angrily on the ground before replying over the din.

"Keep on, Titus!" he yelled. "And tell the archers to stick to the woods and aim at them. Carefully, or we'll be caught too!"

"Right!"

Just as he was giving the order, however, the sharp sound of arrows whizzing through the air was heard... but it came not from behind them. Rather, the arrows had come from their front. Then came the groans from behind the trees, followed by the dull thump of many a body hitting the earth.

The Otomeians at the back had raised their bows and begun to pick

off the bandits still in the forest. They did this with unbelievable accuracy, eyes seeking out each figure behind the cover of the trees and letting fly a superbly aimed arrow that rarely missed its mark. Hoarse screams of dying men disturbed the area as the bandits rushing out of the forest to join the pass were killed before they could make it to their target, the unerring shafts of the Otomeians speeding them on to another, more final destination.

Seeing that they would be overwhelmed if they did not retreat now, the bandits began to move back, fighting all the way as the Otomeians suddenly pushed forward and pressed them into the woods. Just as they thought they were in the safety of the trees, however, more screams came from the forest behind them. The bandits at the fore slackened, taken off-guard by the sound. Better they had not done so: their heads were lopped off immediately by the Otomeians. These had apparently grown tired of merely pushing the enemy to retreat. Besides, those screams in the forest had actually been the signal for the Otomeians to start doing what they did best, and now, as they fell to the enemy with a will, the true carnage began.

From then on, the intended raid developed into a debacle. The brigands had missed the true purpose of the columnar formation of the Himean army: to emulate a snake, with all the advantages of its flexibility and lethal strike. Were any part of the Himean snake attacked, the rest of it would simply curl around the aggressor, catching it in its coils before swallowing the hapless enemy whole—which was exactly what happened to the outlaws, as they fell helplessly under the suddenly bared fangs of the monster hedging them all around.

Little did the bandits know that this was a prearranged battle. The Himean general, foreseeing that the baggage train would likely be the target, had instructed the Otomeian cavalry to dash to its defence as soon as any bandits were sighted, though only to repel any initial attacks—for the snake's coil needed a little time to whip out and slink through the trees until it surrounded the enemy. Hence the result that the outlaws had nowhere to go but straight into the blades of the enemy, eager to dispatch them.

Watching the slaughter a little distance away was Shizuru, shaking

her head as she regarded the near-effortless way her troops finished off the foes. The woman at her side smiled at this gesture, and chose to comment on it.

"Want to spare a few of them after all, Shizuru-san?" she asked teasingly.

Shizuru turned an amused face towards her.

"I would if I could," she said. "But as it is, that would only mean taking them along with us as prisoners, Chie-han, to be tried for their crimes against any Himean citizens they may have assaulted, robbed, or even slain in the past... and from what we have learned from the scouts, there are scores of those, not including the ones from other nations."

Chie nodded thoughtfully while replying; "And the penalty for that is flogging followed by death."

"Yes," said Shizuru with an answering nod. "Hence it would be a futile exercise to take them prisoner, not to mention a waste of our resources. We shall not be able to sell them as slaves if they are to become corpses. And besides, Natsuki assured me that there are no longer any rewards out for them to make it worthwhile, since they have inhabited these woods for decades now and the people have accepted their presence with resignation . "

She turned to the girl in question, who stood beside her: "That is correct, is it not, Natsuki?"

Natsuki nodded, then returned to watching the bloodbath. Shizuru regarded her for a moment, then tilted her head in thought.

"Why do you not join them, Natsuki?" she asked. "Go on, you might still catch some action if you do. Your comrades are out there, anyway, and seem to be enjoying themselves-although I notice not one of them is using the daos."

The girl scowled at the figures in the fray, her nostrils pinching together in disdain.

" *Weak*," she sneered, enunciating the word with pronounced scorn.

"Not worth my time."

A stifled gasp brought her eyes as well as Shizuru's to the chief legate. Who stared at her, hand above the mouth. The light brown eyes were wide and held astonishment.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Chie managed to say as she lowered the hand covering her lips. It revealed a wide grin that had no trace of apology at all. "It's just that this is only the second time I've heard you speak, Natsuki-san."

Shizuru gave a chuckle as Natsuki's cheeks flared, the haughty set of the Otomeian's face suddenly melting into acute embarrassment. The girl attempted to resume watching the fight with her usual aloofness but failed miserably at it, thought Shizuru, who patted the girl's shoulder as if to commiserate in the loss of her frosty dignity.

Just as she was doing this, however, a tickle came to her throat and she was obliged to cough strongly.

"Forgive me," she said to her companions, clearing her throat. "I think I need some water. I have yet to drink anything since breakfast."

She made as if to go to obtain the said need, but was stopped by her bodyguard, who tipped her head to indicate that she would be the one to get it.

"Are you sure, Natsuki?" Her eyes went to her servants, also standing nearby and watching the spectacle. "I can get my slaves to do it."

Natsuki insisted.

"All right then." She bestowed yet another soft smile at the young woman. "Thank you. And take your time! I am in no hurry."

The girl went off and Chie chose that moment to speak.

"Natsuki-san," she said, "is becoming uxorious."

Few people ever truly amazed Shizuru Fujino, and her friend

amazed her now. She stared at Chie wide-eyed, then burst into hilarity.

"Oh, Chie-han," she said, a hand holding her stomach as she continued to giggle. "Why that word?"

Chie grinned, letting out a chortle of her own before appraising her friend with a shrewd look.

"Maybe that's not exactly the right word," she said.

"I should think not," Shizuru said, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye as the mirth finally subsided. "After all, I am not Natsuki's wife, nor is she mine."

Chie pursed her lips for a second.

"I know," she replied. "But you might as well be, don't you think?"

The general seemed to grow still, her gaze probing the soft brown eyes before her. After a few seconds of this, Chie looked away first. She resumed her old, cheerful demeanour.

"Anyway," she said flippantly. "It's as good a word as any."

Shizuru nodded.

"In any case, this is still a fine development," she said after a while, looking out at the activity winding up before them. "Not only have we rid the forest of the bandits, but we have also caught their catch in corralling them."

"Oh, lovely," Chie said, pausing to admire her friend's wordplay.

Shizuru smiled indulgently.

"And, yes," Chie said, a moment later. "Brilliant of Suou-san to see that they'd still be carrying the booty from their last raid when they attack us, the greedy pigs!"

She stopped abruptly, turning her eyes to her commander with sudden apprehension.

"But I have to say, Shizuru-san, that I never thought Suou-san would be that devious," she said with care.

"Devious?"

"She might have told us earlier about that trading party, you know, and we could have saved them if we'd moved a little faster." She blew her dark hair out of her eyes, blinking when her breath fogged her sight. "No booty, sure, but at least they'd be alive."

"Ah, that. I did ask Suou-han about it yesterday," Shizuru confessed. "Apparently, she only found out about the merchant party itself before she came to that meeting last night, because she overheard some scouts talking about it. I would like to believe-no, I believe, rather, that she was telling me the truth."

"Oh. I see then. " Chie tilted her head back to look at the grey sky, pointing her nose at the clouds. "Well, I don't think she's the type to lie about it either. So it would have been too late even then, eh?"

"I am afraid so."

She turned to Shizuru with an apologetic grin.

"I have to admit I'm glad that was it, Shizuru-san," she said, making no secret of her feelings. "I don't really know Suou-san-not as well as you do, definitely-but I like her. And of course, there's her elder sister to consider."

Her grin softened as she thought of the woman, the one they had left back in Hime.

" *She* wouldn't like hearing that her little sister did anything like let innocent civilians get killed just so we could take their wealth off the bandits responsible. She wouldn't like it at all."

The general nodded, her own face softening as she thought of their mutual friend: she was currently serving as urban praetor in Hime and had thus been unable to lend her services to Shizuru's undertaking, much though she had wished to do it. Certainly *not* out of any pressing need for prestige or money that the campaign could offer, for if there was anyone who could rival Shizuru Fujino in Hime

for sheer eminence, wealth, beauty-oh, in any aspect, in fact-it would be she. Another heroine of their city, another of the same brilliance in her career.

Yet she would have joined the campaign as a subordinate officer for the sake of her crimson-eyed friend. Not out of any sense of romance! For she, everyone knew, was madly in love with a certain shy little lady who had the misfortune to be born of extremely obscure ancestors-part of the *capite censi*, in fact. Thus it had caused a near-furore when Shizuru's friend announced her marriage to that lady-not-born-a-lady, breaking one of the strictest traditions of their class and flouting the rules of the social hierarchy. She did not care, of course, and neither did her truest friends.

That marriage scandal happened a year or so before Shizuru's deputation to the north. When the latter action had been debated upon in Senate, that friend had been absent from the meeting, for she was carrying out an especially important hearing in court at the time-and had thus been unable to lend her voice to those crying foul at the House's decision to appoint only five legions to the expedition. When she did learn of it after the session, however, she was livid.

"I would go with you if I could, My Friend," she had told Shizuru with obvious regret, even while her face retained the serenity for which it was famed. "But as you know, the urban praetor cannot leave the city for more than ten days at a time. There is little to be done, at present. However, my younger sister asked if she could join your campaign in my place. I favour the idea, and ask you to consider it. She is bright, as you know, and quick in everything she does."

"Good to hear you approve of me," that younger sister had interrupted, coming into the room with her long, languid strides. "Good day, Shizuru-san and good to have you auditor to that just now. It's always nice to have a witness when my sister compliments me, in case she forgets she said it."

The elder sister had given a slight smirk in reply.

"Although as you can see," she had gone on, as if her sister had never walked into the room. "Suou is prone to a *rather wide* streak of levity."

Shizuru smiled through her recollections of that day. She had ended with accepting the younger sister's legateship, of course, which had seen the bastions of the Traditionalist faction-to which most of those opposing her belonged-baulking in incredulity. One simply did not make someone a mere twenty-three years of age a legate, even if she was of *that* illustrious a family. Why, the woman was not even a senator yet! Of course, the 'senatorial upstart' leading the mission herself had something to say about her choice of appointee, and she said it in ringing tones that brooked no dissent in front of the senators' faces.

"I am a scant year older than she," she had enunciated when called to explain it in the House. "If my age has not been sufficient reason to prevent me from the generalship, then I fail to see why hers should be cause to prevent her from the legateship. And if the complaint is that she has not yet entered this House as one of its members, may I remind this esteemed body that she had been planning to run for quaestor soon anyway? Surely no one here doubts that she would have been elected, given her name. She would then have been entered into the membership rolls of the Senate. May I remind this esteemed body too that its members have given me absolute command of the enterprise, which means I am free to appoint whomever I wish without having to answer to any other senator? Yes? Good, now you are reminded. I wish to appoint Suou-han. That is all."

She knew she would not regret her choice. Suou was definitely an adornment to her army, even if only judging from her performance thus far. Some might have thought it odd to think this was merely the young woman's first time to be a legate, but then again, as Shizuru knew, brilliance did run in Suou's family.

*And so do those fair looks*, she mused, thinking of the white-skinned, ashen-haired Suou, whose eyes were such a light blue that they often seemed emotionless, cold as ice. They would have seemed colder had it not been for the easy smile that often graced her lips. Yes, Suou was an archetype of her particular family's good looks. It was her elder sister who was the anomaly in the line as far as appearance went: for that friend, while retaining the icy white complexion of their lineage, had dark blue eyes instead, and hair so



black that the highlights showed blue instead of red-hair much like Natsuki's, in fact.

Because of the disparity in physical colouring from the rest of the clan, there might have been a temptation to question the authenticity of this friend's parentage, were it not known that her looks had taken after her mother, a famous dark beauty. Besides, there were other similarities between her and the other members of the family. The colouring was misleading, that was all: the woman still had much the same features as her fair-haired, light-eyed sibling. The two of them also had the same strange air of indolence, sharing the deceptively slow pace in which they strolled-due to the length of their legs, for both were exceedingly tall-and even the leisurely way they smiled, which was always as if their lips wished to take their time accomplishing the act.

*So different, and yet so alike*, she thought, imagining the two sisters next to each other. An easy image to create, since the two were often together. The elder was very fond of Suou, and had been nothing but unfailingly attentive to the younger as they grew up. Never mind that they were not full siblings, for Suou's mother had been married by their father a while after the death of his first wife. That mattered not to them at all, Shizuru knew.

"Indeed," Shizuru said to Chie, after a while. "She would not be pleased at all by such a story, I am certain."

Chie smiled, having gone through her own recollections of their friend.

"In a purely hypothetical pinch," she ventured, "what do you think Himemiya would do? Believe her little sister or you?"

"That's rather good wordplay too, Chie-han-it rhymes," Shizuru said, causing her legate to laugh. "And I think she would believe the person who was telling more truth according to her judgment. Chikane is too astute to be misled by her own allegiances. Or by her affections, I think."

"So she is," Chie replied. "But what an interesting choice of words, Shizuru-san: *more truth*."

The general nodded.

"I feel it is the proper phrase," she said. "People say things with varying degrees of truth, each according to how they view or choose to view a situation. There is outright fabrication too, of course, but that is different."

She smiled thoughtfully.

"Do you not wonder why there are so many differences in the accounts of our historians? There is no single truth, I think, as far as we mortals are concerned. Everything happens in different ways because it is read differently by different people. We all have natural predispositions to embellish history."

Chie chuckled at her friend's philosophical tangent-one expressed in front of a field of butchery, no less!

"Don't forget," she said to the general. "A lot of people say you're not mortal."

"Which shows you how a lot of people are often wrong."

Chie smiled: "Oh, is *that* ever the truth!"

A moment later, she turned to her friend again.

"Do you know, Shizuru-san," she said. "I get this feeling that Suou-san is a little more of a-I don't know-a wild blade, I suppose, compared to her sister."

Shizuru seemed to think on it for a second.

"You may be right," she replied after the pause, giving her cloak a flick to loosen the fold that had wrapped about her leg. The fabric fell loose, trailing behind her as the wind caught it. "Perhaps so."

"Not necessarily a bad thing."

A corner of Shizuru's mouth turned up: "Not at all a bad thing."

"She'll make a wonderful ally to have in the Senate, come the day,"

Chie mused. "I'd say that would set the dogs to yapping: both Himemiyas allied to the only remaining Fujino of that name-two of Hime's foremost families against those curs who call themselves the 'Protectors of Tradition'. Oh, what a loss for the Traditionalists, who like to claim they have the Noble Families backing them!" She giggled after her vocal imaginings. "I love it!"

"Chie-han is of august descent, herself," Shizuru retorted, grinning.

"But not august enough for Aoi's father, apparently!" Chie returned, wrinkling her nose as she gave her friend a wry smile. "And besides, dignified though the line may be, the Harada are not part of the Noble Families."

To which Shizuru made no rejoinder, as it was true. Long though the times of kings and queens had vanished from Hime, there were still several lines among the patrician clans that were known to have descended directly from the original blue-bloods. These were still regarded with greater respect than the others, for they were the descendants of the founding fathers and mothers of Hime. There were even some among them-no more than a handful-who could claim descent from the dynastic lines of the original kings and queens of the country. Among these were the Himemiya, as well as the Fujino. In a society where blood and ancestry was everything, that held no small meaning.

Turning from her thoughts of the intricacies of the Himean families, Shizuru beamed when she saw Natsuki making her way back to them. She turned to Chie.

"By the way, where *is* Suou-han?" she asked. "I cannot see her with the horsed command in there."

Her senior legate smiled, throwing her hands up in a helpless gesture.

"Jumped off her horse and into the fray," Chie answered. "Said she wants to have some fun. Nao is looking out for her though, General, so don't worry."

She added: "The two are pretty chummy with each other, so no

problems there."

"Quite," Shizuru sighed. Her next words elicited another laugh from Chie, who clapped jokingly. "Blades of the same mettle fight together in battle."

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And blades of the same mettle they turned out to be indeed. No weak warrior, Suou acquitted herself well as she killed opponent after opponent, her eager sword flicking many a bandit's life away. She fought her way to the very front of the lines, swinging and thrusting the short Himean blade with the precision of an artist. In this way she managed to kill a good dozen men in a little over half an hour, even with her late entry to the fray.

"Not half bad, Legate!"

Suou turned her eyes to the left. She saw Nao grinning and slashing a bandit's nose off, then deftly swinging back her blade so that the tip touched off a scarlet wound that bloomed on the man's neck, who gurgled before he collapsed onto his knees. The primipilus finished her victim with a hack where his collarbones met the gullet. Suou smiled her own lazy grin in approval and signalled to the legionaries to hold their line.

"Well, hello there, Centurion," she said, taking up a stance beside the army officer.

The centurion tipped her chin in acknowledgement, then returned to the brigands before them. Going about the task with equal eagerness, the two pushed on and led the soldiers at their sides. Their bright hair made them seem beacons of warning to the bandits that day, one white and the other red, as they blazed deeper and deeper into the enemy force's core.

Thus the Himeans fell to the task with ado, cutting down the enemy like stalks of wheat before the scythe. That the bandits were holding out so long was more a testament to the size of their band and the irregularity of the terrain than their own skills. Nao reckoned it would have taken less than an hour to finish the job had it only been a flat

plain on which they worked. As it was, it took over an hour before the last bandit fell, his gut split open by none other than the centurion. Which officer lifted her blade and eyed the blood on it with a smile, wiggling her eyebrows at the legate standing next to her.

Dropping her smile with comic speed, the primipilus adopted a dour look.

"I don't think," she deadpanned. "That they were 'well-organised' after all, Legate."

Suou threw back her head and laughed, thrusting her heavy shield into the ground and leaning on it as Nao hooted back. The other soldiers watched the two of them laughing amidst a sea of dead bodies that were ironically mirthless, lifeless forms littering the cold earth.

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They lost some time in clearing up the aftermath of the battle from the area, which meant they would have to march a little more quickly from thereon. Not that they minded, since the affair left them much richer. The bandits, as Suou had predicted, were indeed carrying with them the loot they had taken from the cavalcade of traders and businessmen that had been travelling ahead of the army.

"Louts yield some advantage on occasion," Suou had sighed in satisfaction, after having secured their booty to the baggage train, the gold bags and boxes of goods going to the care of the *praefectus fabrum*. "If they had only been less greedy, they would've passed us up and gone off to hide their takings. Now see what happened. All dead, to a man."

"I can't argue with that," Takumi had replied. "Although it has worked out well for us, Himemiya-san."

"Not that, please! That's what everyone calls my older sister. Call me Suou, if you please, Tokiha-san."

To which he had laughed: "Only if you call me Takumi, Suou-san, since that other name belongs to my elder sister too!"

Thus, when Shizuru's army finally reached Sosia after five more days, a good deal of plunder came with it, to the wonder of the local officers who received the visitors. Added to that which was taken from the bandits were the gold and presents given the army by the Argentians, who had seen them off from their city with great gratitude. It was thus a wealthy force Sosia found entering it on the same evening that the snows began to fall. This particular coincidence with the beginning of the snows was taken by the soldiers to be more of their general's proverbial luck. Not one of them had wanted to don his winter gear in the middle of the march.

"I don't exactly feel up to marching in white stuff right now," Chie admitted to her friend as they were ushered towards the rooms prepared for them in the gubernatorial residence, a couple of their personal servants behind them. "So I'm happy we made it here before it started to come down."

Shizuru agreed: "Fortuitous indeed."

"Not an effect of the famous Fujino luck?" Chie teased.

"More an effect of the famous flings of Fortuna," Shizuru retorted, making her friend chortle. "But it *is* a pity I shall not be able to meet the governor yet. I never had a chance to speak to him when he was still in Hime as a senator."

"Why isn't he here to greet us, anyway? It's only protocol."

"The quaestor told me he had to make a small trip to one of the outlying mining settlements." She paused as their guides turned a corner, the torchlight before them casting shadows and reflections onto the marble floor. "He said that the governor, Suda Yuuji-han, was actually expecting us to arrive a little later, as he thought we would wait for the river to subside instead of taking the forest path."

They turned another corner, entering a long, lighted hallway with several doors. At one of the portals stood another group of people. It was made up of two servants and two others Chie and Shizuru knew very well: the *praefectus fabrum* and his boon companion, the military tribune Akira Okuzaki. These two were about to enter the room when they heard the footsteps and looked up to see the

approaching party.

"Good evening, Takumi-han, Akira-han," Shizuru said, greeting them with a smile as she halted before their door. "All is well, I hope?"

Takumi grinned boyishly, his reddish-brown hair darker in the firelight.

"With the funds or with us, General?" he asked mirthfully. "Good evening to both of you, Shizuru-san, Chie-san. I see our rooms are not too far from each other this time."

"Takumi-kun, you look a little pale," Chie said, giving him a benevolent look-as was fitting, for she knew his sister very well, the two of them being of the same year and much the same political inclinations. In Hime, that usually made for strong friendships in Senate. The senior legate turned to the young man's quiet companion and addressed her next. "Has he been overexerting himself, Akira-kun, or have you been taking care of him?"

The tribune gave her a very slight smile.

"He's fine, Harada-san," was the answer.

"Please, Chie-san," Takumi interjected gently, giving a chuckle of embarrassment. "The pallor's due to the cold. You're starting to sound like my older sister."

The others smiled.

"I can think," Shizuru said, red eyes dancing, "of worse people to sound like."

Takumi laughed: "Oh, true!"

"Like a certain outgoing senior consul," Chie muttered with a grimace.

"Anyway, I suppose we had best leave you to your nightly repose," Shizuru said to the pair they had accosted. "I wish to speak to you in the morning, Takumi-han, after breakfast. Have a good sleep until then. You too, Akira-han."

"Thank you, General."

"Keep him warm, Akira-kun," Chie called lightly over her shoulder, as the two entered their room. "In *whatever* way!"

A soft choke floated from the only halfway-shut door that sent the general and her friend into giggles.

"That was evil," Shizuru remarked as they walked.

"I blame Yuuki," Chie said. "She rubs off on me."

Their guides halted before a door on the left, saying that this was where the senior legate would go. Chie stretched her arms.

"Well, it's off and beddy-bye for me, Shizuru-san," she said. "I'll see you in the morning too, so good night for now. And to you too, Natsuki-san," she said, with a nod to the thus-far-silent girl slinking by them like a shadow. The girl inclined her head as Shizuru returned Chie's farewell for the night in more vocal fashion. Afterwards, they left to be taken to their own room.

Chie watched their retreating backs from the doorway, waiting for her servant to light the lamps in her quarters. Once this was done, she asked the woman to lay out her sleeping clothes and herself entered the room before closing the door firmly at her back. She stood for a few moments in front of it, though, apparently too deep in thought to move from the spot just yet.

"Oh, now," she said aloud, to no one in particular. "Should I have asked her to keep Shizuru-san warm, too?"

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The girl Chie was thinking of was at the moment occupied with doing a survey of all the nooks and crannies of Shizuru's room, moving about quietly but efficiently even as Shizuru's slaves started their work. The general herself watched the Otomeian's doings with increasing amusement, shedding her armour quietly with the assistance of a servant.

Just as Shizuru finished removing her gear, Natsuki went past a



heavily curtained pathway to what the Himean assumed was the bathing area. As she did that, the older woman took the soft tunic her servants had brought her. She laid it on the bed and dismissed her servants, intending to give herself a simple sponge bath for the night. She would have taken a proper bath were she not so tired. Her servants lingered only long enough to arrange all she needed for her ablutions, including a large basin and jugs of water from the cistern in the washroom.

Once they had gone, Shizuru got started on a skin-peeling rubdown, which she followed with a wash of her hair.

A few knocks from the other room told her that her young bodyguard was still at it. Shizuru sighed and bent over the basin, using a dipper to get water from it and pour that over her head.

"She would have made a great aedile," she murmured to herself. "I daresay she would examine a building to its foundations in order to ascertain it is in keeping with the regulations. And fine every builder in the city a fortune!"

Once finished with her rituals, she donned her sleeping tunic and perched herself on the bed. The girl had come back by now and was promptly invited to go through her ablutions too. She agreed to with frank gratitude and with a shy request to do so in the other chamber. Shizuru shrugged and agreed.

It was when the girl had already vanished into the bathing room that Shizuru apprehended something.

*A dilemma.*

Their present room had only one bed. While they had slept in a room with only one bed before, in Otomeia, they had nonetheless slept separate from each other and it had not been so very obvious, since the Otomeian preference for furnishings low to the ground had made it possible for Shizuru to give her enough blankets to create a makeshift bed of her own. Later another mattress had been brought in. Then, in Argentum, they had been given a room with two beds, upon Shizuru's request. As for nights in camp, they slept on separate cots covered, even if they were in the same tent. But now

there was only one bed.

Of course, she could just ask for another in the morning. That would be simple enough. And since it would be poor of her to force the girl to sleep on the floor this time, she could just share the bed with the Otomeian for one night. Again, simple enough.

So why in heaven's name was she so worked up about it?

*Oh, you know why*, her inner voice answered, much to her chagrin.

Just as she was processing these thoughts, the younger woman came out of the bathroom and nodded to indicate that she was done. Shizuru gave her a smile that betrayed none of her inner confusion. In response, the Otomeian headed for a corner of the room, where she cast down what seemed to be a rug, then dropped onto it with her typical poise. Shizuru looked at her guiltily.

"That is very uncomfortable, as I recall I told you when you did that in Otomeia."

A dismissive shrug was all the concern she received.

*I could just give her one of these blankets as before*, she mused, before recoiling from the thought disgustedly. *But how miserly! Yes, there is only one way to go here. I must ask her to share my bed.*

She shook her head when the latter idea threw up a medley of images in her mind-images that she knew were not proper for her to have for her young attendant. Feeling a rush of warmth to her cheeks, the usually composed woman turned her head to the side, hoping that Natsuki would not see the blush on her face. And she prayed the girl would not know what had caused it if she did see, for although they were comfortable with each other by now, she was still aware of the romantic suggestion of their situation, the capital that could be had by the less-than-innocent in their setting. Lamplight and an empty room with only one bed and two women to share it? Heavens, but how could she herself have been so ignorant of its sensuality for so long?

*Get a hold of yourself, Shizuru Fujino*, she berated herself, frowning

at the idea. *You are turning into an old lecher!*

She donned her mask of composure. All she had to do was tell Natsuki to sleep on the bed as well. A simple thing. A thing Shizuru Fujino could handle. After all, there was nothing Shizuru Fujino could not handle, was there?

Strengthening her resolve, Shizuru turned one of her most charming smiles upon the girl. To her surprise, however, Natsuki was already looking at her with an expression of great curiosity. From the look on the girl's face, it was apparent that Shizuru had not been all that successful at concealing her discomfiture: the girl had been watching her internal struggles with acute interest.

Shizuru paused, redoubling her efforts at putting up the mask.

"Shall you do me a favour?" she asked as sweetly as she could manage.

Natsuki lifted black eyebrows in response.

"Shall you sleep beside me tonight?"

An eyebrow came down, the other remaining up. The older woman held her breath, cursing herself for suddenly becoming so prone to anxiety-an emotion she almost never felt.

*Decidedly, I am mad*, she thought, recalling her words to herself a few days back, when she had pronounced the same thing upon herself while letting Natsuki dry her from a bath.

"I am not joking this time. You see, it is uncomfortable for both you and me if you do not," she reasoned, dropping the teasing tone she had just employed. "If you stay there, it would make you seem ill-used and make me feel horrible for not sharing the... well, the amenity of the bed with you, when it is more than large enough for both of us. And I must confess, Natsuki, that it would sting my pride more than you could understand to have such an appearance of meanness touch my person. Both of us would sleep much better were we spared the discomforts I have mentioned, do you not think so? We can get another bed in here later, perhaps even tomorrow.

But for now, why not use this one?"

The arched brow seemed to settle down at a glacial pace. The older woman felt herself diverted from her worries when she realised that her companion was actually considering it-something the girl would not have done a couple of months earlier, she wagered.

*She trusts me now*, she mused with pleasure, a fond smile spreading on her lips. It vanished suddenly in the face of a sobering thought.

*All the more reason not to alarm her by letting slip my base desires.*

She frowned. Oh, that was easy to say, given that she had never had such longings before! She, Shizuru Fujino, wanting her attendant, her bodyguard in that way? And a mere child, at that! What a predicament! Not one she could solve with her usual rational expertise, she was sure. Not one she could ask her friends for help with, either. She nearly sighed aloud at the difficulty of it, and at the alienness of feeling actual *difficulty*.

A small, nagging thought sprouted from the back of her mind.

*But is it even a problem, after all?*

She finally sighed, her frustration with her muddled thoughts coming out in the sound.

"Shizuru."

Her head snapped up at the call, her train of thought broken but not destroyed. Natsuki was looking at her with a worried expression.

"Yes."

The older woman's eyes widened. It took another moment before she was able to process her bodyguard's word, short as it was.

"Yes?" she repeated, hardly able to believe she had convinced the girl she often found impervious to her most cunning arguments.

"Yes... Do you mean, you agree, Natsuki?"

Natsuki nodded.

"Well then," Shizuru said. "Come here, Natsuki."

She patted the bed before adding: "You may have this side of the bed."

Natsuki drew herself up in her usual lithesome style, then approached. She stood before it for a second, then perched herself on the edge. She turned her and looked at the older woman, who chuckled at her.

"You may lie down," she told the girl. "Do not mind me."

Natsuki simply gave her a look to mean that she would not rest until Shizuru did as well. Sighing theatrically, the latter gave in.

"Fair enough," she said, pulling back the covers as she shifted to lie full-length on the bed. "And Natsuki?"

It took another moment before the girl emulated her actions, leaving a good deal of space between their bodies as she occupied the other side. Shizuru regarded the girl from the corner of an eye, breathing becoming easier when she realised that her companion seemed stoic as ever.

"I will blow out the lamp?" the girl suddenly asked.

"Yes," Shizuru said.

Satisfied, she shut her eyes.

*So she does not know*, she thought with relief, praying she was right and that none of her actions would betray the images she found prone to running through her mind these days whenever the two of them were alone. *She has not found out yet*. She was sure the girl would put up her walls again if she found out, and Shizuru had spent so much time taking those walls down that she could not help but feel aghast at the prospect.

Still, if she had to be honest, perhaps there was that little persistent part of her that wanted to see what would happen if the girl did

discover her yearnings. A little part of her that wished to be discovered and discover a like reaction in return.

*The mad part*, she thought with wry humour.

A movement jolted her from her thoughts and she opened her eyes to see the girl in the dim light of the braziers, sitting on the bed again but seemingly rooting around its foot. She was about to make a questioning comment when the younger woman lay back down, but not before pulling the heaviest blanket-which Shizuru had pushed to the foot of the bed-over the two of them, taking care to flap it so that it covered the older woman as well.

"Thank you," Shizuru whispered when the girl lay down again. She added later, suspecting the girl would not know the meaning of it, "How uxorious indeed."

# Chapter 13

## **Dédicace:**

*Chère (avec vous, ce n'est pas «cher») potiron, permettez-moi d'inscrire votre nom ici ; car j'ai écrit, sur ce chapitre, une phrase qu'on a discutée, dans nos lettres. Cherchez-la, chère amie.*

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## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Censor** - Elected every five years, there are two of them elected to serve in tandem, like the consuls. There is no senior or junior censor, however, unlike the consuls. They are responsible for the census of Roman citizens (hence their name), the acceptance of **publicani** (s.v) contracts for the Treasury, etc. Take note that to be a censor, one has to be a consular (i.e. has to have served as consul at least once in his lifetime).
2. **Consul suffectus** (L.) / **s uffect consul** (Eng.) - Appointed by the Senate and another consul if one of the two consuls dies or is somehow rendered incapable of carrying out the duties of his office.
3. **Minerva** (L.) - Also known as Pallas Athena (Gk.), Athenaia, Tritogeneia; goddess of wisdom, crafts, and defensive war.
4. **Morpheus** - Sleep, brother of Death; deity of not only slumber but of dreams.
5. **Plato, The Republic** (in L., **Res Publica** ); **Ovid** - Plato and Ovid are famous literary figures from ancient times: Ovid more for his poetry (particularly the erotica), and Plato for his philosophical dialogues, of which "The Republic" is an example.
6. **Publicani** (L.) - Roman tax farmers/collectors. The taxes from Roman colonies abroad were collected ("farmed") by these persons, who were contracted by the state for that purpose. The actual nature of the contract is explained-in pared down form-below, in the chapter

itself. Note that the word *publicani/publicanus* refers to either the individual tax farmers or to the tax farming corporation to which they belonged, as *publicani* formed corporations of their own. Hence, tax collection was a business in itself and often a very profitable one.

**7. Traditionalists** - This is a term used for the political group most opposed to Shizuru. They are patterned after the Roman faction "boni" (The Good Men). The "boni" were ultraconservative. Note that being "conservative" does not always mean one is part of the Traditionalists.

**8. Tribune of the Plebs** - To avoid confusion with other "tribune" officers, this office shall generally be referred to in full. Only plebeians can be elected here and only plebeians can vote for election of these officials-because the tribunes of the plebs were meant to defend the lives, property, and rights of all the plebs as a group. The main power of the office lies in two things: 1) the oath taken by the plebs to defend the inviolability of the holders of this office; and 2) **the tribunician veto** . A tribune of the plebs could veto virtually any decision of fellow government officials (except for the Dictator). As they could enact or veto laws, they were important when it came to legislative action. Hence it was expected of political groups or powerful politicians to "have/own" (be allied to) at least one tribune of the plebs to help with passing legislation. Traditionally, a tribune of the plebs loses his office once he crosses Rome's sacred boundary or the "pomerium", but I shall do away with that tradition for this story.

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## **Inter Nos**

*Par ethnewinter*

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Shizuru did not sleep well that first night in Sosia Province. She wondered, during one of the fits of waking that spread themselves throughout the evening, if it was because she hardly ever slept so close to another person. If it was the simple fact of this unusual proximity that kept her restless, and whether or not that signified



great paranoia or some other form of distrust. But try as she might, she could not find an iota of distrust for the girl that had come to be such a part of her days as well as evenings, and so ended up dismissing the idea overly quick. As a result, it took her much longer than it should have to come to the answer, which was closer to a distrust of herself.

*I wonder if it is a mere matter of getting used to the propinquity of another being*, she thought after another sudden awakening, holding in a sigh and trying to make as little movement as possible while changing her position on the bed she was sharing. Lying on her side, she rolled over slowly to end on her back. It was with some surprise that she realised that beams of the ceiling were now vaguely discernible, and thus lifted her head slightly to peek at the window of the distant wall opposite. Between the slats of the shutters she registered the lightening sky, which was not black as it had been what seemed only moments ago, but a brightening grey.

The distant sound of people stirring outside revealed the hour.

*Wonderful*, she thought grimly. It was perhaps the fourth time she had woken-which gave her how many hours of sleep, in all? She did a series of rapid calculations and came up with a figure that hardly reassured her as to her own state of rest. She had perhaps slept no more than four hours, with three being even more likely. She repressed a groan at this, marvelling that she was not yet feeling any of the slight pinching sensation she often felt around her temples when she failed to meet the demands of her body for rest. Grimacing at the idea that the pain would come later, she strained her ears to see if she could catch any change in the rhythmic breathing from the other occupant of the bed.

*Still steady*, she observed. *And quiet*.

Not for the first time, she wondered at how little noise the girl's respiration made. It had hardly been possible to make out her breaths even earlier, even in the dead silence of the night. *Surely it is an indication of her athleticism*, Shizuru considered; she had long remarked that people of great physical prowess often breathed more quietly and easily than the average, such that they hardly wheezed even after a good run. All the more when they were at rest, then.

*Yes, she hardly makes a sound-or moves, for that matter,* she noted, making out the shadowed form from a corner of her eye. Natsuki was on her side, her back facing the older woman. Whose next note to herself was that, for all her stillness, the girl's presence seemed strangely overwhelming to her at the moment.

*Not in a bad way,* she mused, gaze slowly rolling to the ceiling again. *A dangerous way, perhaps, but not bad. Not unpleasant.* How did one put it? She searched for the proper description and touched upon one that pleased her in mere seconds.

*Like being next to a giant, untamed cat.*

She smiled at the simile, amused by the aptness of the image her mind had thrown up. There was indeed a sleek, silent beast in her bed. And there was always that question, was there not, when it came to humans dealing with the beasts of nature, that of who posed the danger to whom? Did the danger come from the beast or the human?

*Who is the beast, for that matter,* she added to herself, before cursing her brain for being awake enough to entertain itself with such remarks at this ungodly hour. Or perhaps not such an ungodly hour anymore, she amended, after a quick survey with her senses. The darkness in the room was now mostly gone, fled in the face of a chilly light seeping in from the cracks of the shutters. And she could hear other sounds also seeping in: the distant, humming sound of people going about for their commerce, the occasional neighs of an odd horse or two, and the low braying of a mule. All muted, as the governor's residence was fairly set back from the roads, what with the garden separating it from the main avenues.

She considered rising. After all, it was unlikely that she would be able to sleep any more. Far more constructive to spend the time doing what needed to be done, instead of lying uselessly in bed and tracing the dim outlines of things in the room. Yes, perhaps she should get up.

No sooner had she made her decision than a stir in the figure beside her made her freeze. Not knowing why, she decided to shut her eyes and feign sleep as she apprehended that her companion was

waking.

*Wait, you silly fool,* she rebuked herself, suddenly assailed by a great urge to slap a hand to her forehead. *Whatever are you doing, pretending to be asleep?*

She kept her act, however, and concentrated on relaxing her breathing pattern so that it mimicked the regularity of one in slumber. A few moments later, she felt the tremors of the bed indicating that the girl was moving out of it. Fascinated with tracing the movements through the vibrations, Shizuru held in a smile when she realised that the other was taking as much care as possible to get out of the bed without disturbing it too much.

She tracked the other's movements. Once the girl had gone from the sheets, there was the nearly inaudible sound of feet moving across the room and heading for the far corner, traceable only because the vibration travelled from floor to bedposts and finally to mattress. She very much suspected she would not hear the Otomeian moving at all had her own ear not been pressed to something in contact with the floor. After a while, she deemed it safe to peek at whatever her companion was doing and cracked open her eyes for a look.

The girl was facing the wall and had picked up, from the floor, the leather sack she used to carry her effects. After some rummaging, she extracted something dark from it. The implications hit the older woman after another few seconds, wherein Natsuki was engaged in replacing the sack.

She shut her eyes again before the girl could turn around. The footsteps started up once more and she followed their sound until they disappeared.

*So today she shall bathe here.*

A little while later, there was the sound of water splashing quietly. Shizuru's eyes flew open then and she shook her head at herself, wondering what had possessed her to engage in such a farce. Her gaze turned to the heavy dark curtains of the passageway that led to the bathing area, ears picking out the sounds coming from behind it. So her bodyguard had been telling the truth when she said she

sometimes awoke early just to bathe. But how odd that this was Shizuru's first time to see the truth of it.

*Or more properly, 'hear', she corrected to herself. I am not actually 'seeing' it.*

And unbidden and traitorous, her mind threw up an image of what her Otomeian attendant must look like at the moment. It was enough to prompt her into regulating her breathing, even despite the fact that she knew the girl could not hear. Another splashing sound, and there was another image of the girl. Shizuru felt her breath go shallow as her mind filled with it, the sight of long black hair plastered to the slick, lithe form of a young body.

*Ecastor!*

She shook her head wildly, shuddering. Her discovery of her own capacity to feel such physical longings was still far too recent for her to make her peace with it, so each occasion of this capacity being made clear to her still had the power to disturb her deeply. It was not that she found anything innately distasteful in having sexual feelings: she was Himean, for one thing, and sex was part of the core around which Himean life revolved, whether as graffiti on the walls or as another strand of the web of relations in Senate. No, Shizuru's problem was simply that she did not know what to do with this newly awakened faculty, this desire not only to gaze upon someone and perhaps entertain the thought of a touch or two but to actually gaze upon someone even with just the mind's eye and want to take said someone apart with more than two touches. Usually, one could sate physical desires by acting upon them. But she could hardly go and sate her newest animal longing on her Otomeian attendant, for god's sake!

*And is that not the nucleus of the discomfort, perhaps,* she asked herself, considering her dilemma carefully. The inability to solve her problem was as discomfiting as the discovery of the problem itself. A woman known for her powerful confidence and aware of it, she cherished the ability to deal swiftly and efficiently with issues, working out solutions for them almost as soon as they turned up. She could find no simple and non-abusive way to solve this particular issue, however, no matter how many times she turned it

over in her head. Inviting the girl to an affair might well turn into compelling the young woman given their military positions, and she was not about to do that to someone she had grown to like so deeply and so well. Seeking out an alternative lover on whom to slake her thirst was tossed away immediately, because the very thought of it seemed repugnant. What ill luck that when her sexual side awoke, it would do so with such strength and at the same time display such particularity!

She groaned softly when another wet sound brought back the pictures she had recently banished.

*Stop it*, she growled silently, turning her eyes heavenward in supplication. *What is the matter with me?*

Trying not to conjure up any more images that would set blood rushing to her head again, she applied herself instead to recounting those pieces of literature she had enjoyed enough to remember well after her schooling years. It was a technique she often employed when she needed to drown out the world-or a screaming speech from Senator Armitage. She would put on whatever expression the situation called for outwardly and then lose herself in the private world of literature, be it prose or poetry. As it was, she had been having more of a taste for poetry recently, so that decided which of the two she would be using at present.

*So, poetry*, she thought, gritting her teeth and trying to ignore the low splashing. *Think of poetry, damn you! But poetry by whom?*

She went through the gamut of poets she knew, smiling sardonically when Ovid came to her mind. Ovid, whose erotic literature was oft considered the height of classical sensuality. Ovid was rejected in a heartbeat.

Turning her head to the side as she pondered, her eyes fell upon the mural on the wall to her right. It was an exquisitely done piece of a cityscape under a starry night sky. She admired it for a moment before a memory surfaced, unbidden: Natsuki standing beside her in camp, a few nights before they had reached Sosia. Her hair falling free as always, her gaze turned upward as Shizuru pointed out the constellations for her sake.

Her pink, young girl's lips actually smiling.

Automatically, lines from Plato's *Aster* came rushing in. Shizuru voiced them only in her mind, and they took on a strange power in that bleak grey bedroom.

*Light of my life, to the stars your face is turned. Would that I were the heavens... looking back at you with ten thousand eyes.*

Feeling strangely sobered, she broke off her recollection. *Aster* had always been one of her favourites, one of the most beautiful. Yet it had never moved her as it did this day.

It was odd, she thought, that Plato wrote some of the most beautiful epigrams she had ever read, and yet condemned poetry-and the rest of the Arts, in general-in his book, *The Republic*. It made one wonder whether it was true when people said that feelings were the most dangerous swords of all. For that was similar to Plato's argument, was it not? That the Arts evoked emotion, and emotion was akin to danger and discord, if not the same thing.

*But still...*

Was it not perhaps a fair price for that beauty? To be part of the heavens, to burn up knowing what it felt like to be among the stars? Surely, Shizuru thought, *surely* to perish in such a way was one of the most enviable ways of achieving death.

After a moment she shook her head self-deprecatingly, smiling a little.

*You feel lust for the first time and suddenly get too sentimental,* were her words to herself.

Stirring from the other room made her snap out of her contemplations. Shutting her eyes again, she disciplined her breathing into subtlety once more and waited for Natsuki to come back.

Again the near-weightless footsteps.

Shizuru tracked her return, ears approximating where the girl was

moving. The sounds told her that the younger woman had gone to the corner where the sack lay, apparently to put her effects into the pack. After a few more sounds of shuffling, the footsteps returned and made their way to the other side of the bed.

The steps ceased.

A shift in the bed told her the girl had seated herself on the edge. There were a few more shuffles of movement. And then there was only stillness, and the sounds getting louder from outside their room.

Willing herself immobile, Shizuru strained to hear anything that might give her an idea of what the girl was doing. To no avail. After a few more seconds of silence passed, Shizuru surmised that Natsuki had settled herself to her contentment and was perhaps only waiting for her to wake. The girl was always up by the time Shizuru rose, so she guessed this was part of the routine. Well, it was not an unpleasant routine. And ever since the girl had talked to her, Shizuru had had the benefit of waking to a small but beautiful smile each day, the girl's eyes narrowing in cheerful greeting at her own slightly sleep-blurred ones.

She pondered whether to get up yet or not. She knew she should not keep her companion waiting for too long, yet there was something strangely amusing about secretly observing what the girl's usual rituals were when waiting. After a while, however, a sudden odd thought pushed its way to the fore.

*I wonder what she looks like with her hair wet.*

Yet more indication of insanity, she thought to herself. Why would she want to know that? It was such a curious point of interest! Still, she had to admit that she did want to know what the girl was doing at the moment. Perhaps it would not be a bad thing, after all, to take a little peek?

*Just to see, she reasoned. How could it hurt?*

Making her decision, she gingerly opened one eye to peep at the girl, taking care not to move her head as she did it.

Only to freeze when she found herself looking up into great green eyes.

*Ah.*

Feeling very much as though she had been caught doing something naughty, Shizuru's mind worked to assess the situation, regardless of her surprise. Contrary to what she had expected, the girl had not been turned away. While Natsuki was in fact seated on the edge of the bed, she was also half-turned to the Himean and had her upper body in a position that indicated she had been facing Shizuru for some time. Shizuru registered the girl's surprise at being caught in this arrangement, even as she struggled with her own shock.

Seconds passed without any movement in the room, save for two pairs of eyebrows lifting in unison.

*Was she looking at me too, I wonder,* Shizuru thought while slowly opening her other eye. Though far from extravagant, that small gesture seemed to push the girl out of her daze. The Otomeian snapped her gaze away and turned, leaving the bed. She headed for a window, put a hand to the shutters as if to open them, then seemed to think better of it and turned around again. She turned stiffly once more like one locked in a room with no way out, then headed for the wall at the foot of which her pack rested. There she stopped in front of the wall, her back radiating acute embarrassment.

*She was watching me,* Shizuru thought, not entirely sure of it but feeling it to be so. *She had to be watching me.*

Silence seemed to pervade the room, although a litany of unspoken words crackled in between the two women.

*Ye gods, was she really watching me?*

"Natsuki," she said, careful to keep her voice steady as always.  
"Good morning, Natsuki."

She exhaled as the girl turned again, this time to face her although she kept her head down.



*Why was she watching me?*

"Would you open the windows? It is morning."

The girl nodded. She went to the windows and began pulling back the shutters, flooding the room with the light of the dawn. By the second window enough light had entered the room to show the burning of her cheeks.

Shizuru gazed at their colour and thought, reflectively, that waking to this sort of face was not a bad way to begin a day either.

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It was much later that Shizuru and her companion were finally ready to leave their room: half of the time was spent with the former putting the latter at ease, and the other half spent with the former's own morning rituals. By the time Shizuru had finished bathing and dressing herself, both of them were comfortable with each other once more, Natsuki even unbending so far as to inquire why the older woman chose to wear a toga for the day.

"Oh, this?" Shizuru replied, plucking at the garment folded and draped over her white tunic. "I suppose it is because we are in a Himean province now. I shall not look out of place wearing it here."

Natsuki nodded, fascination clear on her face. She looked as if she wanted to take apart the odd bolt of cloth and dissect it, thought her amused subject.

"But to be honest," Shizuru continued, "it is also because all these folds..." She paused to indicate the burgundy cloth draped about her with a satisfied smile. "They provide so much insulation. Very handy clothing, you perceive. What do you think?"

Her arms lifted slightly at her sides.

"I never did ask what you thought of it when I first wore one," she told the girl.

The Otomeian tilted her head one way then the other, eyebrows drawing together as she considered it.

"Fine," she pronounced.

Shizuru chuckled: "Only fine? I *am* disappointed!"

"I luh-" the girl started, hesitating and colouring slightly. "I like it."

Shizuru smiled.

"You are sweet," she said. "And I am pleased. I shall wear this more often, perhaps. But only to please you, Natsuki."

She tipped her head at the door.

"At any rate, shall we go? I am famished and am eager to break my fast. Are you hungry too?"

The Otomeian shrugged, her usual reply to that particular question. The older woman was about to comment on it when a thought came unbidden to her mind and she halted, looking around the room.

"Why, I think I did not notice it so much before," she said slowly, eyes roaming. "Because it was night-time when we got here. But now that I look at it in the light of the morning, it occurs to me that this room reminds me of a friend's study, back in Hime. Oh, not the details, but... the theme and the general impression. She always did have a taste for moonlit themes-I daresay I teased her often enough for it."

She smiled, thinking of that friend whom she treasured deeply. She turned the smile to her companion.

"I myself tend towards crimson and purple," she confessed. "Which she always said was very *royal* of me."

She moved towards the door after this and the girl followed. No sooner had they opened it, however, than they came face to face with the senior legate, who looked as though she had been about to knock.

"Careful where you knock, Chie-han," Shizuru said, eyeing the knuckles about to rap her on the nose. "Some doors fight back, you know."

"Pardon, you surprised me!" The senior legate tipped her head at the girl behind her commander. "Natsuki-san, too. Good morning to both of you."

"Good morning. What did you need, so early in the day?"

"News."

"As I have been sleeping all night," Shizuru lied, "I am hardly the best source of it."

"Oh, no, sorry," Chie grinned. "I mean that I have news."

"Yes, and I gather it is important enough to bring you to my door at such an hour to fetch me personally." Shizuru cuddled the folds of her toga over her shoulder. "Shall we hear it over breakfast? I am hungry, and I am sure Natsuki is as well."

"Oh, yes, of course," said the other woman. "Actually, they're waiting for us in the dining room."

"They?"

The three women now began to walk, Chie leading the way.

"The local *quaestor* and someone else," she told Shizuru.

"So much mystery in the morning."

The legate laughed.

"Don't rob me of my small pleasures, please. You'll see," she said, turning a corner. "It's part of the news."

"Indeed."

When they finally entered the atrium where the governor had had meals for them arranged, Shizuru saw two men waiting at the table. The pair rose to their feet upon seeing the women enter, one of them mopping his mouth hurriedly with a handkerchief: they had just broken their fasts themselves. Shizuru eyed the pair as they bowed their heads in greeting, and she noted that both were wearing togas

as well. She already knew the quaestor, having met him last night, but she had yet to meet the other one-although she did know who he was. Most of the senators from good families knew each other by sight.

Chie interrupted her assessment of the two men.

"You've already met Homura-san, the quaestor of the province," she told Shizuru, as they seated themselves opposite the men.

"Yes. Good morning, Homura-han," she said to the shorter of the pair.

"Good morning, Fujino-san," he returned. "I hope all was well with your bedroom and you managed to get a good night's rest?"

The general only barely managed to stop her lips from twitching.

"I was very well rested," she said.

Chie moved on to introducing the other person at the table.

"And this is-"

Shizuru finished for her, giving the other man a welcoming smile.

"Takeda Masashi-han, correct?"

The taller of the two men nodded his head in acknowledgment. His eyes strayed idly past her for a second and, to the curiosity of Shizuru, who was watching him closely, he stiffened from top to toe, even the short hairs on the top of his head seeming to stand to attention. Shizuru wondered what it was that had affected him, and would have turned her head to see for herself, had she not recalled that her bodyguard was standing at her rear.

*Ah, I suppose he has never seen someone garbed in such a way,* she thought, waiting for the man to get over his surprise. When it became apparent that they he was not about to do so anytime soon-even Homura and Chie had noticed by now, and were looking at him askance-Shizuru decided she had better do something, all the while remarking to herself what an odd reaction the man was having to

Natsuki.

Turning her head to the side, she beckoned to her bodyguard, who dutifully came closer.

*She does not seem the least bit worried by Masashi-han's stare, at least.* If anything, Shizuru guessed from the subtle slant of the dark brows that the Otomeian was actually a little irritated. That made sense: Natsuki seemed to dislike being the subject of either discussion or attention very much; Shizuru had seen the girl grow intensely uncomfortable before when suffering either case.

"Natsuki," she said, keeping her eyes on the girl's face as the latter leaned forward so that she would not have to speak aloud. "Would you sit by me, please?"

Natsuki responded with a mildly questioning look, one that threatened to glance at the other Himeans around the table for argument. The older woman nodded her rebuttal.

Giving in, the girl pulled out the chair next to Shizuru's and settled on it, preoccupying herself with shifting her gaze about the surroundings-and not on the people at the table, who were all looking at her by this time. Shizuru saved her the discomfort by gaining their attention, addressing the still-stricken Takeda Masashi loudly and asking if he and Homura had already concluded their breakfast.

The two men affirmed it.

"And I must say, Fujino-san, it's a surprise you know me," Takeda said, finally having recovered from whatever it was about the Otomeian that had shocked him moments before. "I'm flattered that you should even know my name."

Shizuru shook her head.

"Only natural, Masashi-han," she returned, quietly noting the way his eyes seemed to flicker over to the Otomeian at her side every few seconds. "After all, you do have a reputation for being one of the best sport swordsmen in the land."

"Please," he deferred. "I'm hardly as well-known as that. Just a sportsman too."

"Who served in the Battle of Larentia, with great distinction, so I have heard," Shizuru followed smoothly. "Besides which, you were one of our tribunes of the plebs for the past term, I think?"

Chie interrupted: "Actually, Shizuru-san, Takeda-san is an outgoing tribune of the plebs."

The hint took. A light eyebrow went up.

"Outgoing?" Shizuru echoed, letting the tiniest amount of mystification into her voice.

"Yes. He's not actually been replaced yet, to be precise, in his seat in the Plebeian Tribunes' College."

A scant second went by, during which Shizuru's mind shot into lightning speed and began working out scenarios that might explain the irregularity of Chie's statement. Having listed all the possibilities in her mind, she then proceeded to question her legate, to see which case was correct.

"How can that be?" she asked. "Surely our elections must have been finished by now. In fact, I would have expected the elected candidates to have been announced and inducted to office at this time." She looked at them thoughtfully. "Unless the turn-over has been postponed due to some emergency?"

It was Takeda who let out a short breath, shaking his head.

"If only that had been what happened, Fujino-san," he said with a grimace. "No, the turn-over hasn't been postponed. It's the elections were put off."

This time, both light eyebrows lifted.

"I confess that is a surprise," Shizuru said. "Why?"

"It's actually do several things, Fujino-san. But before anything else, you must know that the junior consul's seat has been empty for the

past few months," Takeda said, assuming an even graver air than before. "Utada Asou-san is dead."

"Ah!"

"It's his illness did him in," Takeda said. "You know that he has the wheezing disease, Fujino-san?"

She nodded equably: "I recall he used to complain of it often, especially in summer and winter."

"It came upon him one evening and his wife woke up to find him turning blue. She sent for the doctor, but it was too late."

She shook her head with polite lament. After a moment, she sent him another inquiring look.

"But," she said, "I fail to see how this affects the elections, tragedy though it may be."

"That's because there's more," said Chie, deeming it time that she re-entered the conversation. "That's actually the second part of the story, Shizuru-san."

"Then it appears we have violated the rules of storytelling, yes?" Shizuru grinned. "Please be so good as to tell me the prologue."

"Takeda-san?" Chie prompted.

The man launched into his story.

"We'd been getting reports from Africa Province ever since you left," he said. "About the tribes living near the Mauretanians. The natives were restless and giving their king trouble. Nothing to make anyone worry at first. You know how it is, Fujino-san: the natives always come crying to us about every little thing, and we can't just indulge the savages with their paranoia, else they'll depend on us even just to pick out their clothes for them."

She nodded.

"Just when we were getting used to it, up came the news that some

subordinate tribal chief's son was inciting rebellion up in Mauretania. And they did. It's that civil war put our province in a bind."

"Ah." Shizuru smiled. "And since we have a treaty with the Mauretanian king, I suppose the governor of our Africa Province supported that side?"

"Yes," he answered. "But he got himself trounced in the first battle he fought for them. Not a military man. He retreated into the city after defeat, barricaded the gates, and prepared himself for a siege." Takeda frowned. "Good thing he still managed to send off for help from Hime, otherwise we might not have learned in time. Africa Province would've been eaten up quickly: it's not as militarised as it used to be, I think, now that most of your legions from your previous campaign have been transferred to new posts. And like I said, they're not led by a capable military woman any longer."

The woman with the red eyes squinted them thoughtfully.

"May I make a guess, then," she ventured, "as to how all of this involves the postponement of elections?"

Although he looked doubtful of her ability to guess it rightly, Takeda gave his assent.

"Then, please correct me if I am wrong," she responded, before launching into her venture. "I suppose that, when news from Africa came along, the Senate put to debate what the proper response would be. Whereupon it was decided-with *great* reluctance, I imagine-that it would be necessary to send a relief army to that province. Oh, not for the sake of concentrating efforts on helping the King of the Mauretanians win the war in his country! Rather to concentrate on keeping the war out of our own territory."

The tribune's smile faltered.

"Go on," he said.

"And the condition was this," Shizuru proceeded. "That the sent army would be under the command of one of the archconservatives, the Traditionalists being rather strong in influence at the moment-I



am thinking Armitage-han was chosen, as Kikukawa-han has just announced her candidacy for consul and that would be sufficient reason to prevent her from going on a prolonged campaign abroad. It would surely be more in their interests if she stayed and prepared instead for her impending election to the consulship."

Takeda's smile was gone by now.

"Correct, it's Armitage-san," he told her, trying not to show his amazement too much at her statements. "You know our fellows so well, Fujino-san."

"Just enough. And this is why the elections were postponed," Shizuru continued. "Because Utada Asou-han suffered his fatal attack a little after the senior consul departed for Africa. By the time the message reached Armitage-han, she was perhaps already heavily committed to the military engagement, which meant-if I know anything at all of Armitage-han-she refused to return to Hime just for the sake of presiding over election week."

She tapped a finger thoughtfully on her lip and concluded: "I am guessing that our dear senior consul has thus far refused to abandon her post in Africa Province despite all the calls for her return that Senate must have sent by now, no doubt citing the ongoing civil war and threat to the African territories as her reason for not returning. This meant that no elections could be held, for it is necessary that at least one consul be present when they occur. Is that correct?"

Chie smirked, watching the two men at the table stare at her friend with frank admiration.

"Yes," Takeda said. "That *is* what happened, Fujino-san."

"You left the city only recently, Masashi-han?"

"Yes."

"By that time, did anyone think to point out to our senior consul that she could simply return to Hime for a single day, just enough time so that the Senate could appoint the *consul suffectus*?"

Takeda shook his head bitterly.

"No," he said. "Refused even that, said she was too busy! So the Senate couldn't appoint a suffect consul and the whole city's in a bind."

He paused, face setting into severe lines.

"The city is presently without consuls," he told the Himeans around him. "And the Senate is helpless. I'm here now because I didn't see how I could be of any use to Hime at this time. Even the tribunes of the plebs are quiet, everything's gone into a kind of frozen state. I couldn't bear to stay there any longer, thought I'd go off for a visit to the north for a bit, especially since I had to see an old friend here as well. Still, I'll be going back south in two days or so. I can only pray to the gods that they'll have resolved this by then."

"In two days?" Chie said to him. "You must not know Armitage very well."

He sighed with great feeling, knowing she was probably right.

"It's embarrassing," he said. "Absolutely shameful! I can't believe Armitage-san is refusing to see reason here, to be frank. She always seemed such an upstanding person to me before!"

If he noticed that Shizuru's face took on a look of scepticism at this, he made no remark on it.

"She might be interested in prolonging her consulship," Chie suggested, only half-heartedly.

"That's impossible!" he said. "I doubt very much that Armitage-san would do that, at least. I think, rather, she's just being overly cautious. There's such a thing in warfare, really. She probably doesn't want to take the chance of leaving Africa Province without her command of her legions for a day."

"I am sure that is it," Shizuru said, again with a look of dry scepticism.

"Yes, what else can it be?" Takeda asked, blissfully unaware of the

other Himean's heavy sense of irony. "Still, I wish she'd unbend. I mean, surely there are sub-commanders-legates, for example-who can take over for a few days! Hime shouldn't be left like this, with the elections dangling over everyone's head. And no consuls, even suffect ones, are in the city too! It's against all the rules, all tradition."

Using his eyes to probe Shizuru's, he waited for a reaction, having invested quite a bit of his own passion into his speech. It was only natural that he hoped for a response echoing his feelings.

Shizuru disappointed him sorely in that hope, unfortunately.

"Quite," she sighed unconcernedly.

Having expected a more animated response, the tribune of the plebs as well as the quaestor of Sosia stared at the other Himean, who simply reached out and took a loaf of bread from the platter on the table, then tore the loaf apart with her hands. Chie hid a grin as the fair-haired woman went on to put one half onto her plate, then put the other half on the plate before her bodyguard. She did all of this with a cheerful smile that said she was troubled by absolutely nothing.

"There we are," she said after pulling a saucer of olive oil between her Otomeian's plate and her own. She stopped to look up after that and appeared to notice only then the silence of the men.

"Well, yes, it is a pity, as you say," she told them, still sounding far too nonchalant about it for Takeda's taste. "But do cheer up, Masashi-han! An unfortunate turn of events must not be allowed to ruin breakfast. I dearly hope it has not ruined yours."

She smiled at the girl next to her and proceeded to show her how to dip pieces of bread into the dish of olive oil near them.

"If Hime has no consul within her walls at the moment, then surely the other magistrates can suffice," she went on to say, dipping her own piece of bread into the oil. "What else do we elect so many for, if that is not case? Those of them we do not pay too much rob the Treasury dry of revenue wherever they can, anyway, so they should be able to stand a little overtime. Let them earn their keep, I say. Not

that it concerns me overmuch at the moment, given that I am part of neither the old term's elected officials nor the candidates for the next one. In the end, my opinion counts for little. So I say we just all enjoy our meal and ignore them back in the city."

She was about to put the morsel in her mouth before glancing at her senior legate and pausing.

"Why, Chie-han," she said, with complete innocence. "Shall you not eat?"

Chie's lips trembled right before she started laughing.

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"That was so good," Chie said later, wiggling her eyebrows as she walked beside her friend. "So very good! You had both Takeda-san and Homura-san gaping at you."

Shizuru grinned while recalling the events at breakfast.

"I wonder why," she said. "I fail to see why they should expect me to react otherwise. It is not as though my worrying-or failing to enjoy my breakfast, for that matter-could have done anything for Hime's situation."

"Oh so rational." A low chuckle. "I hope Takeda-san doesn't go back to Hime saying you're perfectly indifferent to the woes of the city."

"He just might, but it matters little," Shizuru said, letting out a giggle of her own. "Even were I to worry, it would be senseless. After all, if there are no consuls in Hime, it means that Chikane, being urban praetor, is now the highest-ranked magistrate the city possesses. There is no need to worry if she is present."

"Oh, damn it! That reminds me."

Chie stopped walking, prompting the other two women to do the same as they watched her fumble into the folds of her toga. After another moment of digging around, she finally produced a scroll and held it out to Shizuru.

"The latest batch of letters," she explained. "They came just this morning, you know, and actually tried to catch up with us on the march. The rest of your letters are in my room, but I thought you would like to read this one as soon as possible."

"Indeed?" Shizuru mumbled, opening the tube casing and pulling out the roll of parchment within it. Her eyes lit up as she recognised the seal of blue-black wax on the missive. "A letter from Chikane!"

"Yes," Chie said, grinning. "She hardly ever writes, so this probably means it's something important." A lift of the eyebrows. "Besides, like you said, she's practically in charge of the city now and is probably constantly busy, so her taking the time to write now is even more interesting."

"True," Shizuru said, breaking the seal. "I wonder what it could be."

Unrolling the parchment, she moved to the nearest window and skimmed through the letter, her eyes flicking rapidly over the characters and separating them into words and sentences.

"Anything interesting?" Chie asked.

"A few things..."

Shizuru trailed off as she resumed her reading. Chie waited on edge, dying to know what was inside the missive. After what seemed to her an unbelievably short amount of time, her friend rolled up the scroll and assumed a pensive look.

"Jupiter!" Chie exclaimed, frowning. "You're still as fast at reading as when we were younger, Shizuru-san."

Shizuru smiled: "You say that as though you do not see me reading every day at my desk in headquarters."

"Since I'm often occupied by my work as well at those times, General, I don't really notice how fast you are unlike just now."

"I see."

"So, what did it say?"

"Chikane merely talked about events in Hime," she said. "And something I must think on."

Chie's brow knotted; she wanted to know more.

"Perhaps we should move on?" Shizuru resumed, tucking the scroll into the folds of her own toga. "Takumi-han is probably waiting for us. I did tell him I would see him today."

Chie nodded, masking her disappointment at not being able to learn the contents of the epistle she had delivered.

"Yes," she said. "You're right. Let's go meet him."

They went to see the *praefectus fabrum* in the quarters set aside for his professional use. The room, they found, was already occupied by scroll buckets, abacuses, and rolls of paper. Three accountants-cum-scribes sat at the large table overflowing with quills and ledgers, busily jotting down figures and accounts for the army's supplies purveyor.

"The typical accountant's chaos," Chie whispered to Shizuru, as they received salutations from the occupants of the room.

The *praefectus* himself sat at a desk, conversing with a pepper-haired man with the look of a plutocrat-which he turned out to be, as the visitors found out.

"Fujino-san, Chie-san, this is Masao Shikishima-san," said Takumi, getting up from his seat to greet Shizuru and Chie. "One of the more prominent individuals of this fair province. He's here as the representative of Sosia's grain and vegetable merchants, so I'm drawing up supply contracts through him."

"I am honoured to meet you, Fujino Shizuru-san," said the man, bowing deeply where he stood. "The news of your victory at Argentum had all of us breathing easier."

"My thanks, Shikishima-han," the general returned, bowing slightly. "That victory was actually due in no small part to the efforts of my senior legate here, Chie Harada."

After a few more social preliminaries were made, all four settled to business. They drew up chairs into a circle beside the table-for Takumi, mindful of proprieties, did not deem it proper to occupy the position of power behind his table when the commander of the army was present as well.

"To say that we are pleased with the way you do business would be an understatement, Fujino-san," said Shikishima. "Takumi-san has told me that you intend to pay for whatever you consume in immediate cash and not by promissory notes from the Treasury. Indeed a surprise, and almost unbelievable given what the usual method is."

"I assure you that what Takumi-han says is true," Shizuru replied. "Whatever my army takes, my army shall pay for as soon as it can. I presume you have already agreed on the prices for the contracts?"

"Ah, yes," the man said, smiling. "Another thing that pleases us. Takumi-san readily agreed upon the prices in these parts, for which we are grateful. We gave a discount for the bulk sum, of course! But we gave it *willingly*."

Shizuru gave him a wry smile. She knew that some Himean officials often used their clout to force businessmen to sell goods to them at a far lower price than usual. Sometimes, it reached the point of actual extortion, she thought, especially when you were buying from someone who was Himean too: there was little benefit to the Republic as a whole when one member cheated another, in her opinion.

"It is only proper to conduct business so," she said.

"Alas, it is not commonplace."

That brought an amused smile to the red lips.

"I am sure that the great Fujino-san understands," the man added.

The smile became wider.

"I suppose *she* would, if she were here," came her reply. "As it is, I am afraid you only have a regular Fujino-san before you, and

certainly no great one."

Chie let out a peculiar sound that seemed a cross between a giggle and a choke.

"Although I can assure you that *this* "-Shizuru paused to indicate herself-" *very regular* Fujino-san understands," Shizuru continued, watching the older man's eyebrows climb almost to the top of his hairline before he started laughing.

"Oh, forgive me," he said once he had his composure again. "I must say I did not exactly expect the grea-the much-talked about Fujino-san, rather, to be so..." He flapped his hands while seeking the right term. "Agreeable!"

"I am pleased you find me to be to that," Shizuru replied.

"It makes the other business easier to bring up, perhaps."

"And that would be?"

The older man licked his lips, looking slightly uncomfortable.

"This is a more dangerous matter, Fujino-san," he said.

"How dangerous?"

"Dangerous enough that I worry over saying it even here, in the private rooms of your *praefectus* ."

Shizuru glanced at Takumi and interpreted his nod in an instant.

"Yet you have already told him of it, I see," she said to the man.

"Not all of it."

"I see." She turned her head to the other persons in the room, the assistants. "Please leave us for a moment. Give us an hour, at least."

The addressed persons got up and left instantly, shutting the door behind them. Shikishima noted that she did not ask the black-haired



girl with her to leave too. Well, that was enough: if she trusted the young woman, he would have to as well.

"Shikishima-han, if you please."

"It concerns the governor, Suda Yuuji-san," he started.

Shizuru inclined her head, maintaining her pleasantly enquiring expression. The man looked unwilling to elaborate even now that the room had been cleared, however, and it was the *praefectus* who finally decided to introduce the topic.

"Shikishima-san and some of the other worthy citizens of Sosia say they have an issue that has been making them uneasy for some time now," the younger man said, after a meaningful look at the local plutocrat. "It concerns certain... uh, practices Suda Yuuji-san has been carrying out as an order of business but that cross over into orders of state."

The only reply was another polite tilt of the head from his commander, although the senior legate did furrow her brow in expectation. Takumi sent a look towards Shikishima that seemed to say that it was his turn to explain now. The older man sighed.

"You've not been around Sosia long enough to notice it, Fujino-san," Shikishima said. "But you would possibly note, after a day of going about the city, that there is an excessive number of foreigners within the walls."

"Indeed?"

"An inordinate number, in fact, even considering that this is a city known for trade."

Shizuru nodded patiently.

"I am afraid that it is not exactly trade that concerns these foreigners," Shikishima continued. "But a different kind of commerce. Perhaps it may be considered trade as well, but it is an illegal one, and one that I and the rest of the Himeans within this city do not approve of in the least, for it threatens our very identities."

There was patent curiosity in the face before him now. Taking heart, he went straight to it.

"Governor Suda Yuuji-san," he said, biting off his words crisply to show his displeasure, "has been selling the Himean citizenship to foreigners."

He paused for effect but did not receive any powerful response save a raised eyebrow. He was about to go on when an audible huff from the other woman-the senior legate-stopped him.

"You have proof, Shikishima-san?" she asked.

"We have *witnesses*," he answered. "As well as people who have bought the citizenship themselves."

"Willing to incriminate themselves?" Chie asked, incredulous. "After all, they get themselves in trouble too by testifying that they bought the citizenship, even while they get the governor in trouble."

"We sent them to buy the citizenship for that purpose." His thin lips came up to form the shrewd smile of a businessman. "Everyone in Sosia has known for a while now that Suda Yuuji-san sells the citizenship to the unworthy. There has just been no opportunity to call him out for it. He is the legally-appointed governor, after all, and has the strength of his office-and the local soldiers under him."

He lifted his hands in supplication.

"But when the opportunity loomed, we knew we had to act. Once we learned that Senator Shizuru Fujino was in the north and nearby, we decided to present the case to her." He waved his hands eloquently and continued: "Of course, one does not bring allegations about a senator of Hime before another without garnishing one's case with proof. Hence the seemingly odd, ah, circumstance of there being witnesses as well as persons willing to step forward and give testimony to the crime."

Chie's lips turned up: "A set-up."

"Yes, Harada-san. So the witnesses are protected by the law, at least."

"They will have to be hidden after this is brought before court, if it is brought before a court."

"We shall see to their protection."

Shizuru shifted her position slightly, which brought all eyes to her despite the motion's subtlety.

"I shall see the witnesses later," she said in her usual calm tone.

"And I shall talk to the people as well. Should I be satisfied that the case is indeed as you say, Shikishima-han, I promise you I shall put a cease to this dastardly business. But first of all, I need to know that it is indeed dastardly. So I fear that I cannot promise to do anything for now, as I wish to be certain of the matter first."

Shikishima nodded. "A fair proposition."

"So that is settled for now?"

"Of course," he said, bowing his head. "Although this is only part of the reason I wished to see you, Fujino-san."

He stopped to look at Chie with an appraising eye.

"And we have Harada-san here too," he said. "Which makes my hopes a little better as we now have two senators to listen to our case. And senators are what we need. We need senators to talk to badly."

"Regarding?" Chie prompted.

"Taxation."

Shizuru stifled a giggle as her friend groaned audibly, falling back into her chair. The *praeфекtus*, in contrast, chuckled outright.

"As always," the short-haired woman mumbled ironically, sending Shizuru a wry smile. "Taxation."

Shikishima grinned as well, understanding the reaction.

"I know that Hime's other foreign provinces must bring up the issue

often," he said. "But it is the only way we can be sure that the problem remains at the forefront of the officials' minds, for it grows more and more pressing."

He paused to draw a deep breath, savouring the smell of ledgers and drying ink-scents he was used to, especially in his occupation.

"My fellow citizens are growing restive," he went on. "Not only are we being made to suffer the outrage of outsiders lording it about the city as though they were true Himean citizens, but there is also the matter of the tax rates having risen to excessive levels. We understand that it is necessary for Hime to tax us, as we are her province and members and many of us members of her people. But the taxes being demanded are far beyond the permissible amount now."

"May I ask for figures?" the younger of the two senators before him said.

He nodded and proceeded to quote the present against the feasible tax rate to her-to which she replied with more queries that startled him with her obvious grasp of finance. They bantered on for a little longer, his respect for the youthful senator growing by leaps and bounds when he found her as well-versed in accounting and business as he was.

The senior legate listened to this with an amused look on her face, only half-understanding the conversation. She had never had a penchant for figures, so she tended to avoid such technical discussions when confronted. No shame there, since most of the senators were the same. After all, that was what bankers and accountants were for. More efficient to compartmentalise functions and let the abacus-toters handle those aspects of government. There were no expectations of senators to be good accountants, so while Shizuru was most definitely impressive, she was not necessarily emulated.

*Still, it's a pity too*, she admitted. After all, the present attitude often reinforced the notion that politicians did not need to learn the ins and outs of fiscal policy-something many of them would do better to know since it enhanced their grasp of administration. One could

count on two hands those senators who actually understood economics, and if one were to talk about those who actually understood it well enough to be considered proficient in its management, she suspected the count would come down to one hand.

*No wonder people tend to view her as a god*, she thought with detached enjoyment, watching her friend and the Sosian plutocrat continue to trot out figures and debate the merits of charging this much interest and that. How intelligent Shizuru sounded, even compared to the mired-in-figures merchantman! She was so crisp and confident, so creditable. She really was much too good at everything.

It was perhaps what made her so unsettling, Chie reflected.

At this point, the two had finished their technical conversation. Shizuru's smile was dry.

"I see," she said. "Far too much indeed."

"I am happy you see our point, Fujino-san."

She sighed with obvious distaste. "How could one not? This sort of thing is becoming excessive, as you said, to the point where it cannot be concealed anymore beneath the usual bureaucratic paper layers. No wonder the foreign territories often complain."

"That bad?" Chie asked.

"Very." Shizuru paused. "Perhaps even worse. It occurs to me, Shikishima-han, that these are such high fees that not everyone can afford to pay them. Nor can everyone who affords to do so pay them with equanimity, I think."

Shikishima's heavy-lidded blue eyes turned flinty as the arrow hit the mark.

"You're right," he said. "Which means that the *publicani* often use the governor's legionaries to collect their fees under duress. Or use the same legionaries to force people into borrowing money from them... then taking that borrowed money as the tax due. It ends with

locals being heavily indebted to their own tax collectors."

The two women exchanged a look, whereas the *praefectus fabrum*, who had been listening to the conversation, felt his eyes go wide. He had heard the talk, back in Hime, of the *publicani* of the foreign provinces using Himean governors' troops to collect the taxes or terrorising the citizens when they were unable to deliver. Though he admitted the possibility, he had thought such reports to be more exaggerated than exact. Yet the way Shikishima stated it was so direct, so frank, that he could not help but believe all the worst rumours it now.

*Surely my sister should know about this*, he thought, his mind going to his sibling in Hime. *She should do something about this-I know she hates this sort of thing in particular.*

"Then," intruded his general's voice, a welcome and soothing sound. "May I presume they have been applying more force recently?"

"You may indeed, Fujino-san," said Shikishima. "That is why we decided to bring it up before you, in fact. Too much, just too much! Surely it is not in Hime's interests to impoverish her provinces or to ravage them when they are unable to deliver an impossible amount."

Shizuru smiled dryly again: "I would think it is not. You have incidents? Cases with evidence?"

"Enough to wet anyone's eyes with pity and rage, Fujino-san."

"No more be said on that, then. I am familiar enough with these things to guess at it."

"Then please help us."

She considered him for a moment, then leaned back against her chair.

"You know I cannot do much about it until I return to Hime," she said. "For only then can I introduce the necessary legislation to the House that will-let us hope!-alleviate the problem."

He nodded.

"We know," he said. "And we are willing to place our faith in that event."

He stopped, held out his hand in appeal.

"All that we ask now," he said. "Is that Senator Fujino-and Harada-san, if she wishes to espouse the cause as well-vow to take up the matter upon return to Hime and the Senate. In exchange, of course, we become part of your constituency." He paused to impress the weight of the offer. "By 'we' I really do mean 'we', Fujino-san. Nearly *all* the plutocrats of Sosia, in fact, from the mining corporations to those like me who deal in import and storage, have agreed to henceforth enrol as part of your clientele, should you only pledge to see to this issue."

The red eyes showed a spark of interest, although it was too short for the businessman to assess what the woman was thinking. After a few more moments, Shizuru turned to face her friend and fellow senator, who had a far more intrigued look on her countenance.

"Chie-han," she said gently. "It is a good offer. Are you interested?"

"I can't stand figures and you know it," Chie said with a wide smile. "But whatever you do, I'll support it."

Shizuru turned to the Sosia merchant.

"I accept," she said.

"Well!" said Shikishima, obviously delighted to have two senators on his side already. "That is wonderful! Consider us in your debt, Senators."

"I would be wary of talking about debt again, Shikishima-han," Shizuru replied, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "After all, that is one of your problems, is it not?"

He laughed appreciatively: "Do I have your leave to tell the others?"

"I suppose it is all right." She tilted her head back, the tawny tresses

waving softly with the motion. "But you understand, of course, that the only problem I can truly remedy with finality while I am here is the first one-that having to do with the illicit sale of the citizenship. I can stop that, I think, even without needing to take it to the Bribery Court in Hime. If I waited for the opportunity to take it there, it would take too long and too many potentially unsavoury characters will have gained the citizenship illegally by that time."

She exhaled softly and went on. "While I can perhaps alleviate the second now, it shall be only to a moderate extent. As I said earlier, the *publicani*'s contracts are made with the Treasury through the censors, so a more final solution shall have to wait until I go home to bring up legislation regarding it. Or have someone bring up that legislation for me."

She regarded him warmly.

"Patience is of value when you are working in a world such as ours, Shikishima-han," she told him. "As is faith in the right people. You have my assurance that I shall work on it, once I return to Hime, so have faith in me."

"We are eternally grateful," he said.

"Much though I appreciate it, it is not your gratitude that I would prize most," she said suddenly. "But your *loyalty*."

Shikishima blinked, his gaze meeting the unflinching one before him. After a while, he smiled, eyes sparkling with interest.

"And you have it, Fujino-san."

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"I wish," Chie said later that day while tipping her cup to her lips, "that the *publicani* would be a little less greedy and a little more realistic when they make their bids."

Shizuru nodded, nursing her own goblet in one slender hand. They were presently in her room, to which they had retired after the meeting with Masao Shikishima and Takumi Tokiha. The venue was calculated: here, they could speak more freely regarding the issues



that had just been brought to their attention, as well as mull over the possible solutions over a comforting goblet of warm and watered wine. Having finished discussing the alleged misdeeds of Sosia's governor-which they both deplored-they were now talking about the problem of the *publicani* .

An institution that had somehow managed to become indispensable to Hime's policy with her foreign territories, the *publicani* had come to represent, for most citizens of those territories, an unavoidable evil. The evil was in the way the *publicani* came up with the contracts allowing them to collect the taxes from a specific province. There were various *publicani* companies, of course, and these competed with each other to win the state contract to collect taxes in this or that province. The competition was settled through a bidding process.

At the start of every fiscal year, Hime's Treasury would announce the minimum amount of tax it was willing to receive (or collect, that is) from a province. The *publicani* interested in that province would then run up figures to estimate how much they could afford to give to the Treasury-always adding to that minimum figure, of course-while still making a profit for themselves.

To use a crude example, if the Treasury stipulated the minimum tax for a certain province to be 5 denarii, the *publicani* might post a bid saying that they would be able to collect a total of 9 denarii instead, where they would give the state 6 instead of the original 5 being asked-thus increasing the Treasury's revenue-and keep the remaining 3 denarii, to make a profit. To counter this, another *publicanus* might raise the bid to 12 denarii and offer 7 or 8 denarii to the Treasury, in an attempt to outbid the other.

The *publicani's* concern, of course, was to attract the State into granting them the contracts: they did it by offering it as much money as possible while still making a fat profit. After all, the Treasury only cared about the amount that it received, and not about that which the *publicani* got on the side. The result was that bids tended to escalate beyond reasonable figures, with the Treasury and the *publicani* benefiting, while the provinces were the ones left to produce the figures that the *publicani* had essentially drawn from thin air.

"The problem too," said Shizuru, meditating on these things. "Is that the censors, even if they do appreciate the impracticality of the figures, are obliged by law to choose the contracts with the highest profit for the State." She sighed, swished the wine in her cup. "These irrational laws need to go."

"Have an idea?" Chie asked, eyes twinkling.

Shizuru nodded. "I have given thought to the issue before, Chie-han. It has not escaped me that many of our foreign citizens complain of it. You recall we have run into the same thing several times before, during our other campaign."

"Yes, that's true."

"So," the younger woman went on, smiling meditatively. "Once I am able to, I think I shall legislate to remove all such contracts from the *publicani*."

"*Ecaster!*" The other stared at her friend, who merely regarded her with amusement. "Oh, you're mad! Even you can't get away with that!"

Shizuru tilted her head inquiringly, whereas Chie shook hers.

"They're an institution," the latter explained. "A powerful one, too, among the lot of them. There'll be definite opposition in those ranks—not to mention from their patrons in the House."

She frowned, a little exasperated when the smile on her friend's face did not even falter.

"And how are we going to collect the taxes without them?" she added. "It can't be done!"

Shizuru took a drink from her cup before replying.

"It can be done," she said serenely. "All we must do is to leave the tax collection in the hands of able governors or local officials. Quaestors can do it as well. At least, if the one collecting the taxes is already bound by office, there shall be no need for contracts binding him to the Treasury, thus ending the escalation of taxes by bidding.

Besides which, there is little fear of the local official failing to deliver the taxes to the Treasury, because he would be questioned by the Treasury officials immediately if the amount is lacking or missing. A direct case for the Embezzlement Court, so to speak."

She set her chalice on the table.

"Further, it greatly benefits Hime in that it streamlines the administration of the foreign provinces. They have become, I think, too bureaucratically necessary to Hime, perpetually adding expenses to the State due to layers of middlemen and the redundant paperwork they generate. If each district collects its own taxes and tributes, Hime still receives the money, but does not have to be saddled with the bother of collection. A little more effort for the government itself, but with generous rewards for all."

"Except for the *publicani* ."

"Oh, except for them." She smiled. "As for the local people, they do not have to fall prey to the ruthless methods of collection that the *publicani* employ, nor do they have to suffer the injustice of being made to pay for the unreasonably high revenues the *publicani* promise the Treasury. So I truly think it would be for the best if we did away with the *publicani* once and for all and replaced them with a specially arranged, properly organised tax collection system regulated by those in the actual provinces and administered by those who can feel the threat of the Embezzlement Court hanging over their heads. This means the Embezzlement Court shall have to be strengthened, naturally, but that may well be the easier part of the plan."

Chie took her time to consider it, blinking slowly.

"Now that you put it that way," she said, "it seems doable. No, it seems *right* ."

"I am pleased you think so."

The other shook her head, still mulling over the proposal.

"What really strikes me," said Chie, "is that it all sounds so rational

when you say it. Anyone else and it would probably sound like a fool's dream. But the way you say it... It almost makes me wonder why no one ever thought of that before."

Shizuru lifted her shoulders, a hint of mischief in her eyes.

"Perhaps," she offered cannily. "Because they are not as willing to murder unnecessary traditions as I am?"

Chie smirked.

"That," she said. "Is one of the best ways to describe it."

"Call me a murderer, do," Shizuru grinned.

"But what an idea!" the other exclaimed suddenly after a long swallow of her drink. "The dogs would be let out to howl as soon as you propose it to the House, you know-it'd be an uphill fight all the way. You'll get a terrible lot of opposition, even from the ones who aren't part of the Traditionalists or in their pay. Yet it makes so much sense! It's perfectly sensible, but it goes against all custom, and that's why it's going to come out as perfectly mad!"

She set her empty cup onto the table with a sharp clatter.

"The conservatives," Chie resumed, "will say you're trying to radicalise everything again. You know how they stick up for the old ways."

"The problem with the old ways," Shizuru responded. "Is that they are *old*. "

Chie laughed, her brow relaxing.

"Certainly it is laudable to have such a passion for tradition and the established way of doing things," Shizuru went on. "But what Haruka-han-and the rest of the conservatives-fail to see is that tradition itself is not static. It is being made every day and evolves continuously."

"I like that way of describing it," her friend replied. "It's rather like... like what the Princes once said: that instead of the other way

around, they're serving the machine, don't you think?"

"You see why they dislike change so much," Shizuru answered. "When they do talk of preparation, they merely end with projecting the familiar into the future."

She hummed.

"Creativity," she sighed. "Is sacrificed to the ashes of orthodoxy."

Her friend suddenly extracted a small roll of paper from the sinus of her toga, then looked about the room frantically.

"Do you have any ink?" Chie asked, sounding urgent. "Quill?"

"Oh... yes, I do," Shizuru replied, still puzzled by this reaction. "Over there, where is-ah, thank you, Natsuki."

Taking the implements from her hovering bodyguard, she then handed the ink and quill to Chie, who nodded her thanks and began to set up to write, placing the effects on the table.

"Wait," she told Shizuru. "Wait."

Feeling torn between mirth and curiosity, the general pulled in her lips to avoid either laughing or asking the woman what in the name of heaven she was doing. She turned in her seat and sent a bemused look towards the Otomeian sitting with them, who responded with a curious twitch of her eyebrows.

"Wait!" Chie muttered again, despite the fact that no one was rushing her. "Projecting... familiar... ashes of orthodoxy. Wait, let me get it down."

"*Ecaster*!" Shizuru cried, comprehension dawning as she laughed. "Chie-han, taking sound-bites?"

"Mm..." Chie said, glancing up and giving her a devilish smile. "Yours are always good value."

"Oh, you're awful!"

"Yes, yes, you know they make you even more famous." She stopped scribbling and regarded the neatly written lines with pleasure, the ink glistening wetly on the paper. "So may I use this sometime and attribute it to you?"

"Planning to popularise it?" Shizuru giggled.

"Oh, yes. I'll write an article," she smiled, taking on a dreamy look. "And publish it as ' *Shizuru Fujino on the Imperative of Change in Government* '. Impressive, don't you think? The Traditionalists will buy bucket-loads of copies to read and try to find something wrong with it, while everyone else will buy it just to see what the ruckus is all about. They'll eat it up."

"And be perfectly livid about it," came the laughing retort. "Harukahan and the others, that is."

"But it's a good idea."

Shizuru stopped chuckling.

"You know, it reminds me of something Chikane once told me," she said.

"Ah, Himemiya? You mean in that letter you read earlier?"

"No, not from that letter." An inhale. "Although I suppose that is why I remembered her now."

"So, what is it? And when was it?"

"Oh, a long time ago." The crimson eyes lost focus, their gaze turning inward. "It was when I proposed my first law to the House."

The hand holding the quill relaxed.

"Oh, I remember that! It was a brilliant law, too!" The senior legate winced. "Even if it got turned down because of those *cunni* in the Senate."

"Thank you for the compliment, at least," Shizuru said with perfect courtesy. "Well, I was young then, and still new to the way things

worked, so as you remember, I was quite down after that."

"Down?" Chie's eyes widened. "What do you mean 'as you remember'? I *don't* remember you being any depressed after that session."

"No?" the other smiled.

"Ah, I get it!" Che laughed. "Didn't notice. You looked as composed as ever, you know. But no-one ever could tell what you were thinking."

"Chikane did. She asked me to come have a drink with her that day."

"Really?" A long hum. "Well, it makes sense she'd see. The two of you are cast from like moulds-both of them broken afterwards."

"Now that is a good sound-bite."

Chie grinned: "You think?"

"Yes. Oh, wait, wait- *do* write it down."

"Don't tease *me* !"

They burst into laughter. Afterwards, Chie wiggled her eyebrows at her friend.

"So...?" she asked.

"So I came over for a drink. And dinner, actually."

"That must have been a long talk."

"Not really." She chuckled. "I suppose she wanted to prevent me from going home early to brood on the disappointment alone."

"Better to brood together, hm?"

"Or analyse the reason for it, at any rate."

"This was when she said whatever she said."

"Yes." Shizuru smiled reminiscently, leaning back. "It was good advice, actually. She said not to be disheartened, and that the law I proposed had been exactly what we needed. It had simply been beyond the Traditionalists' lights to see it."

"Sensible."

"I told her-and you must recall that I was truly more dismayed than I let on, Chie-han," she said. "I told her that it might have been simply because the law *had come from me* that it had met opposition."

She tilted her head to the side, looking slightly amused.

"And that if it was so, then my presence in the House might as well be for naught," she continued. "As I would be unable to contribute anything to Hime. Even if the laws I proposed were 'exactly what we needed', they would be useless if they were all turned down."

Chie leaned forward. "Go on. What did Himemiya say?"

The other woman shut her eyes for a moment, then opened them slowly, a grin spreading on her face.

"She said, in response to my inkling that the law had only met opposition because it came from me, that I was right." A faint but amused grimace. "So, she said yes."

"Well!"

"She said that it would always be my fate-as well as hers, to some extent-to have to work against the tide. That it was inescapable, given the opposition of the conservatives."

"Ooh, blunt." The dark eyebrows went up. "Himemiya said that? I wouldn't have expected her to be so frank."

"She also said that the conservatives, while still a significant force, were merely the dying waves ebbing out, whereas we were rushing in. She said *that* was inescapable too."

Chie chortled, bringing up her hands to clap as she chuckled.



"Bravo!" She paused, delight on her face. "Really, her metaphors rival those of the Princeps, no?"

"Plan to publish some of her sound-bites too?" the other asked playfully.

"I'll talk to her about it someday," Chie returned airily, before assuming a more serious expression. "But she is right. The Traditionalists aren't so much opposing you for your actions as for what you are-although I guess your actions are a part of that."

She nodded sagely as she went on.

"But it's the total of what you stand for. That's where you and Himemiya converge, you know." She frowned and angled her head to one side while admitting a qualifier. "Though you do tend to be more of an outside horse because you made it up the ladder so young. It's doubly offensive for those green sticks-in-the-mud."

"I know."

"I'm not saying that it's just the age."

Shizuru gave her a slightly searching look. Chie wrinkled her nose in response, searching her mind for what she meant to say.

"It's that you do things so differently," she said. "Or you think up new ways of doing things. What's the word? Oh! *Innovator*."

She nodded, pleased at having found the label in the recesses of her mind.

"The things you think up are so far into the future they're beyond normal sight, Shizuru-san." She gave her friend a jaunty grin and added: "Even mine."

Shizuru shook her head at that.

"I wonder," she eventually said. "I do grant you the fact that I am a bit of radical, as the Traditionalists say. It does get me into difficulty, does it not?"

"Oh, *undoubtedly*," the other replied, stressing the word with all her strength.

Shizuru laughed.

"But that's what makes you yourself," Chie followed. "And that's what makes you better than the rest. I wonder sometimes why they-Wang, Armitage, Akagi, all that lot-can't seem to see how much more sensible the changes you propose are, *even after* you explain them. Awful curtains over their eyes, really."

"It is because they wish to see a future that is merely an updated version of the present, Chie-han," Shizuru said, sipping from her cup. "They shall oppose every step I take, because it does not seem the proper one to them."

Her smile widened, yet at the same time assumed a more secretive aspect. *An expression only she could manage*, thought Chie, who nodded at her words feelingly.

"I know that now, and it no longer bothers me," Shizuru continued. "True innovation, after all, is bound to run counter to prevailing standards. Hence, they may counter me as they wish. It cannot be otherwise."

She stopped to raise her hand, reaching behind her to lift her hair from the nape of her neck. The gesture made the sleeve of her tunic and the fold of the toga covering it slide and uncover an arm that made the senior legate's eyes widen. Beneath that ivory-white skin lay a surprisingly taut and well-formed cord of muscle-the slenderness of the limb a deception hiding the fact that there was a lethal strength there, always ready to strike. It was so easy to forget, Chie thought, due to the relaxed atmosphere of their familiarity, that her young friend was commander of an army at her age for a reason. *The strength in the woman!*

"Yes," Shizuru was saying to her. "They are free to oppose me all they like, Chie-han. It matters not. I shall prevail and they shall give in." The perfect teeth came out. "For that cannot be otherwise either."

Chie nodded.

"I believe you," she said seriously.

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Shizuru escorted her friend to the door, watching the other woman walk down the marble-tiled corridor. The legate had taken a cup of wine with her, jesting that she needed it as she was about to have a chat with her friend, the chief primipilus of the Ninth Legion. After Chie had gone, it was Shizuru who shut the door gently. She stood there for another moment afterwards, her face only a foot away from the carved panel of wood.

*It appears, she thought to herself. That I have made my decision.*

She turned around and smiled at the other occupant of the room, who gave her an inquisitive look.

"Natsuki."

The girl's head tipped slightly upwards as a response.

"Come," Shizuru said, moving towards the table and pouring herself more of the watered wine. "Have a drink with me, if you please."

She stopped to look at the goblet in her hand.

"Although I am afraid we shall have to share this cup, as Chie-han has taken the other one. Do you mind? We can ask someone to bring another, if you wish."

Natsuki shook her head to indicate it was all right.

"Then please sit with me."

Instead of going to the chairs before the table, however, the older woman moved to the bed and sat on the sheets, her back against the pillows. Drawing up one of her knees, she chuckled when she saw the puzzled expression on her bodyguard's face.

*That look is adorable on her, she thought, before wryly adding: But I*

*am beginning to think I find every look adorable on her.*

"To be more comfortable," she explained. "Besides, I thought you would prefer being able to sit on a surface such as this instead of on the chair. You prefer to pull up your legs, do you not?"

The girl's lips formed a small 'O'. She climbed onto the bed as well and Shizuru made her shuffle closer until she was only about an arm's width away, the Himean pointing out that it would be easier to hand the cup of wine back and forth if they were closer to each other.

"I feel a little tired today," Shizuru admitted, speaking with the utter lack of restraint she had grown used to when addressing Natsuki. "But I suppose it is simply an after-effect of all the marching these past few days. The army did go at a much faster pace than usual, after all. Although I could not very well show them my own exhaustion, now, could I? Especially since I was the one who made everyone march faster."

She hummed and added: "I did not want us to be on the march when the snows hit."

A moment of silence went by, but it was not uncomfortable.

"What of you, Natsuki? Do you think..." she suddenly said, taking a sip from the cup. "Do you think the Mentulaeans shall desist from attacking again, in the future?"

She turned her head to find the intelligent green eyes looking her way and nearly dropping the cup as she fell into them as she often did of late. The girl's eyes enraptured her persistently, especially from up close. From this meagre distance she could see the ring of almost blue-green jade circling the brighter emerald colour of the irises, which were shot near the centre with minute flecks. She knew that an even closer look in brighter light would reveal that the flecks ramified into a hundred cracks, and that the fissures and flecking were devoid of yellow or brown but were instead of a light, greenish white.

*Like flames*, she thought once again, entranced as always by the

extraordinary eyes . *They say mine are like flames too, or so I hear.*

So absorbed was she in her inspection of those irises that she nearly missed the shake of the girl's head in response to her query.

"Neither do I," she said. "Here, Natsuki."

She passed the cup to the other, who took it but simply looked at the liquid swirling inside.

"Oh, really now," Shizuru teased, amused. "Do not tell me you are afraid of sharing a cup with me. Are my lips so sullied in your eyes that you would avoid what I touch with them?"

Natsuki frowned and proceeded to take a small sip out of the goblet, licking her lips after she did so. Shizuru took in the motion, her eyes following the small, pink tip of the tongue as it peeked out from between the girl's teeth and drew a quick arc against the soft lower lip. She held her breath until it disappeared.

"Well," she said. "So you do not believe in indirect kisses after all?"

Natsuki scowled again, although a hint of red did creep into her cheeks. She further rewarded her tormentor with a word.

"Silly," she growled softly, eliciting a laugh from the delighted woman.

Shizuru leaned back into the pillows.

"Yes, of course they shall attack," she said. "They shall attempt again and again to infringe on our borders, as well as those of the other states here. Why should what happened at Argentum convince them never to try again? The most I have done is to delay them- which I am still thankful for, at any rate."

She reflected on the events of the past months, her mind going back to the letter she had pulled out of her toga earlier while taking it off. She reached for it where she had left it on one side of the bed and then regarded the broken seal on it contemplatively.

*Another thing to consider from this,* she thought, setting the letter

beside her. *And I have considered it. Or have I? Has everything been taken into account?*

She shook her head, lips setting into a tight line. It was impossible to take *everything* into account, she told herself. Impossible, unless one were a god-which she certainly was not, despite some people's opinions to the contrary, and despite her distant divine ancestor.

*The most one can do, she thought. Is to hope everything that can be taken into account has been. One must exercise one's reason as far as possible, to that end. And as for everything else... everything else is up to Fate.*

She sighed, mumbling to herself: "Not entirely a welcome thing for many, especially those living here, but it is for the good of Hime. Yes. It must be done."

"What?"

She started at the husky voice.

"What?" the girl sitting beside her asked again.

Shizuru blinked in confusion.

"Forgive me, Natsuki," she began. She tipped her head inquisitively. "What do you mean 'what'?"

The Otomeian's brow darkened.

"What 'must be done'?" she said, to Shizuru's astonishment.

"Oh," Shizuru said. "So you were listening?"

The Otomeian's brow darkened even more.

"My apologies, I was muttering to myself," Shizuru smiled. "I did not realise you were even listening to that."

"I was," the girl said in a tone that gave Shizuru pause. It had a hint of reproach and a touch of injury. "I was... I..."

The older woman's mouth parted but issued no sound.

"I..." Natsuki pursued, obviously trying her hardest not to stammer.  
"I *do*."

She sent Shizuru a reproving glance that held no hatred, yet seemed to burn the older woman's skin. Shizuru bit her lip as the girl looked away and jerkily assumed her old stoic countenance... something she had not done in a while when only the two of them were together, so comfortable had they become in recent weeks. Yet now Shizuru saw the possibility of the silent chasm opening up once more, the yawning gap she had opened with her own thoughtlessness.

"Natsuki," she said. "Forgive me, please. I did not mean that."

The girl was unmoved, no change in her impassive expression save for two little scarlet spots on her cheeks. Had she actually turned and looked at the person apologising to her, though, she might have seen something very few persons had ever seen: Shizuru Fujino at a loss.

*Idiot!* the Himean was mentally screaming at herself. *Shizuru Fujino, you are a complete idiot! Truly, as Chie-han says, when you do something you do it well!*

"Natsuki," she said again, putting all her honesty into the name and the words. "Forgive me."

The girl nodded but still did not deign to look at her. Shizuru decided she should try again, dissatisfied with the response. She ran her mind over the many things she could say and wondered which was best, most likely to soothe the girl. It took her far longer than it had ever taken for her to think on what to say to someone. She had never felt so anxious when giving an apology before, yet had never been more conscious of the desire to give it. Was this why the words seemed so sticky all of a sudden, so inadequate?

"Forgive me," she said again, at length. "I was merely... chattering nonsense to myself that time. It was impolite of me, and I do apologise."

She stopped, feeling awkward.

"I should not have done that while I was talking to you," she said, before repeating the crucial point. "Natsuki, I *was* talking to you earlier. I simply forgot and fell into my usual routine. Like a fool."

The other's frosty demeanour started to thaw.

"I am very sorry."

After what seemed an eternal pause, the girl shrugged, easing Shizuru's anxiety a little.

"Do you forgive me?" she asked, actually interested in the answer.

Again an eternity seemed to pass before she obtained a reaction. She felt an immense degree of relief, however, when it did come.

The girl nodded to her.

"Thank you," she said. "I did not mean to offend you, Natsuki."

Another nod, but the green eyes refused to return. And how much she wanted them to do that!

"You know how important it is to me that you are always listening to what I have to say," Shizuru went on, trying to coax the girl into facing her again. "It is merely that I wonder sometimes if you do not get tired of hearing me speak. I must be a chore to look over just because of it. All I ever seem to do is assault your hearing with talk. Perhaps I should stop."

That worked. Natsuki turned to frown at her again, obviously in disapproval of the idea.

"So you do not get tired of it after all?" Shizuru prodded, feeling a great weight lift from her shoulders. "My blather?"

The other huffed and shook her head.

"Really?" Shizuru replied, mouth quirking after she obtained a nod. "Natsuki, I wonder at your attentiveness to me. I do run on and on,



after all! Do you always listen to what I am saying, truly?"

Though the girl still looked a little piqued, she deigned to nod once more. Deciding that her young companion needed a little more nudging, Shizuru smiled mischievously and asked another question.

"If that is so, would you remember what I was saying this morning, about the bedroom?"

The girl took the challenge. She even answered a trifle smugly, thought the older woman, who was fast falling head over heels for the charms of this unusual and unique creature assigned to look out for her.

"The theme and general impression," Natsuki said, her low and cool voice almost repeating Shizuru's words verbatim. "Remind you of a friend's study."

Shizuru was torn between showing her pleasure or her amusement.

"And would you remember what I said about my bedroom in Hime?"

Natsuki turned to Shizuru and rolled her eyes, unknowingly delighting the older woman with that relaxed gesture.

"You *never*," the Otomeian said haughtily, pronouncing the words with care, "said anything about that."

"But I did, I remember."

"No."

"I must disagree."

"You said," the younger of the two retorted with a look of burning conviction, "your preference, it is fuh-for crimson and purple. I know not if it is so in your bedroom. And your friend is right. Your preference is most royal."

Shizuru was unable to hold it in any more at such a speech. She folded over genuine mirth.

"I give in!" she said, shaking with hilarity. "So you really do listen to me!"

The younger woman watched her chuckle a few more times before letting her own lips form a tentative smile. When the last trickle of Shizuru's mirth had passed, the room was silent once again, though considerably lighter than before.

"Really," Shizuru said wistfully to her companion. "I wish that some of the senators back home would do me the same courtesy you do."

She was about to say more when the sweet scent of wine reached her nose. Natsuki was holding the goblet out to her. She took it and smiled, revelling in the little warmth rising from the liquid within-as well as that still lingering from where Natsuki had held it.

"Thank you," she said, cradling the cup in her hand. "Wine can be a danger, as one of my opponents in Senate always says, but I must say that it is only so when taken absent moderation. Most things are double-edged. Even this potentially mind-addling substance can be a comfort, can it not?"

She lifted the cup to her mouth and stopped halfway.

"I must say something to you," she said to the girl, not bothering to lower the cup hovering before her lips. "It is that I truly meant what I said earlier, Natsuki, about you always listening to me."

The Otomeian said nothing.

"I thank you for it," Shizuru said. "You are one of my greatest comforts here, Natsuki."

She knew, even before her eyes flicked surreptitiously to the side to see it, that the blood was already dancing beneath the girl's cheeks. She paused to admire the sight as stealthily as possible before lowering the hand with the cup to her side.

*Her face is killing me.*

She leaned further against the pillows, shutting her eyes away from the guileless killer. A while later, she felt the girl beside her shift to

do the same, and a smile built on her lips at the feeling of warmth very near an arm. They remained quiet for a time this way, neither moving nor speaking. Yet Shizuru felt no awkwardness in the silence, and let her body and mind have the moment's respite. She had not felt so comfortable in a long while, so she would certainly cherish it. And indeed, she did not even apprehend the fact that she was fast drifting off to sleep, nor did she feel it when her companion gently took the cup from her hand to set it on a stand beside the bed.

An odd thing for someone who was a light sleeper.

But perhaps it was because her mind, even in sleep, was not fully at rest. In the black, veined darkness of her sealed gaze, the words of the letter she read earlier in the waking world were rising up and occupying her powerful mind once again, their import chasing her to her dreams. In those dreams, she read over the last parts of that letter once more, the hand of Morpheus augmenting her memory as she mulled over what the letter contained and what it meant.

*The Traditionalists are proving themselves scurrilous as ever. As they could not denounce you publicly (although I confess I wanted to see them try, especially in public, so that the People eat them alive), they did the opposite, Shizuru. They lauded you to high heavens for having won a great battle with hardly any losses, as well as having prevented an actual war from breaking out by the power of your presence alone. The latter is the point they stress.*

*I wondered at that, as did some others. It is not like the Traditionalists to be twittering with their tonsils to praise you, and that is putting it mildly, as you are aware. I ask you to forgive me for my oversight here, for had I been more on guard, I should have seen what was coming. I do not know if I could have averted it, but I feel responsible for it, in a way, by failing to see it beforehand. You see, after they managed to drill the point of your having 'prevented war from breaking out' into everyone's heads, they suddenly declared that as a result, your campaign was henceforth no longer one of war, but a mere expedition of precautionary defence. Of fortification, to be precise.*

*You see the difference and the difficulty. By doing this, they can*

*lower the reserve allocation of the budget granted to you, so your funds will be even poorer. In fact, I doubt you will be able to get any more money if you were to ask for it now. Furthermore, they shall not be granting you any additional legions. They can also keep you there for as long as they deem fit, simply by claiming that the 'fortification' is yet inadequate-something they may well claim for eternity or a length approaching it. They have put you, in effect, in an underhanded form of exile.*

*All of this they put before the House, which was fool enough to be swayed. I shall spare you the euphemistic way in which they worded their resolution at the end. In sum-which is to say, in reality -you shall be stranded there for as long as they like, with no additional money to fund the actual enterprise of war (which is not recognised) that is going on. As you know, this means that you shall have to either give up your legions when the money runs out, or pay for them yourself.*

*You will find all of this in the official communication they have sent you. If you wish to spare yourself the euphemisms, as I have done, then cast it into the fire as soon as you receive it.*

*All this being said, I admit it was a good move on their parts, infinitely better than their other ones. Perhaps going up against a certain brilliant 'upstart' has rather sharpened the dull rocks they have atop their shoulders? But a rock, no matter how sharp it is, shall always only be a rock.*

*Although they may be right, in a sense, that outright war between us and the Mentulaeans has yet to break out completely, it eventually will. I feel it in my bones, and I know you do too. Repelling them can only succeed for so long, especially when they have already managed to push their boundaries all the way to the old river borders. They are a growing empire, and it is in the nature of growing empires to butt heads with every other power it encounters in its spread from its nucleus. Ultimately, we must go to war against them. And ultimately, we must invade.*

*We spoke about this before you left, and I recall that you said something to the effect that you had no intention of invading the King Obsidian's lands on this mission. But I know you, and I know*

*that the manner in which you phrased it should be indicative of a loophole to me. I know too that you know the idea I am about to propose is inevitable, given the way they are acting. I am aware that you tendered your opinion to me only because it was the opinion of Hime, which is to say that you have no intent of invasion only because Hime has no intent of invasion. But were your more practical and personal side to speak, the opinion would be vastly different, would it not?*

*I recognise that you dislike the idea of aggression, on principle, but we understand the necessities of practice. You see as well as I do that Obsidian is intent on expansion. He lusts after our territories as well as all others within his reach. If he is already willing to attack what has long been known as one of our allied provinces, a city that is also a client-state, one can hardly doubt that he is willing to attack our provinces as well. That which differentiates the two is a scrap, a tissue of little worth. Soon enough, Obsidian shall consider even Hime itself as being within reach of his invasive efforts. That, I cannot condone. Nor can you.*

*Hence I am making an offer and a request. First, the request: try to hold out for a little longer. If the funds become low and the stipend you received from the Treasury runs out, then use your own moneys to run the enterprise for now. I will reimburse you for any withdrawals you make from your banks, although I know we can both afford to stand the financial strain for a good while. It is a matter of honour to me, since I am the one who is proposing this venture, so there need be no qualms about the cash. If you would prefer the money in advance, I can also arrange for a transfer immediately through your banker. What I would ask you to do for now, simply, is that you keep on doing what you are doing for as long as you can. I would ask you to give me time. For the Battle of Argentum can still be interpreted by the fools in Senate as a strike against a mere ally and not as a strike against Hime herself. But the latter interpretation is coming, and it is only a matter of time. So the point is to wait and be prepared for it.*

*If something comes to you that may aid in presenting such an interpretation to the Senate, I ask too that you send a missive to me immediately. You know what I shall be trying to do on my side: I*

*shall attempt to persuade the senate to annex the Mentulaeans' lands-that is to say, persuade them to grant a sanction for not just a defensive but also an aggressive war.*

*It shall take some time, some powerful backing, and some more evidence of Obsidian's intent to encroach on our very own provinces. You know how Senate is-so afraid of taking a definite stance! I am almost certain that, were one of our own territories to be attacked, all they would advocate is to push the invading Mentulae back to their side of the borders again, not even to retaliate by breaching those borders and showing the would-be-invaders how invasions are properly done. Well, we know the foolishness and inadequacy of taking such a policy against those who have threatened us time and time again. It is why I shall do my best to persuade them that we must invade and shall press them to pass a decree to that end. Trust that I can do this, for I shall. Not as a regular senator, nor as the urban praetor. I shall do it as consul.*

*Perhaps you wonder how that can be possible, since my name is not even in the present list of candidates. You see, I have instructed the tribune of the plebs Kaneda Izumi-san-he is my man, you know-to propose a law to the Assemblies. The purpose of the law is plain: it is meant to allow, in the case of a prolonged postponement of elections (as we have now), a second Nomination Period for those who wish to run for curule offices like the consulship but were prevented from making the cut-off date for the first Nomination Period due to various circumstances. Once it is passed, I shall announce my candidacy. Not to be arrogant, but I am certain I shall get in, even with late entry.*

*So wait a little longer, if you please, and I shall attain a sanction of invasion once every cog is in place. Then the wheels shall turn. I wish they were turning now, in fact, so urgent are my premonitions of Obsidian's rapacious ambitions. He has the cunning of a rat, this Mentulaean king, and he has even sent agents to woo our senators and people (for there is a very rich party of Mentulaean noblemen here now, throwing parties for anyone gullible enough to come and listen to their speeches about the Mentulae being peaceful!) at the same time that he sends armies to pillage our lands and those belonging to peoples we call friends. How can anyone with sense*

*trust such duplicity?*

*We must eliminate the threat Obsidian poses, for the sake of all we hold dear. We must invade and conquer the Mentulaeen Empire. I would not mind doing it, but something tells me that it is not I who is fated to command this war when it drops onto our laps, even if I am the one who shall pluck it from Fortuna's hands. I shall see to it, at least, that it drops on your lap. Or it may be better to say that the gods shall see to it that it drops there. Something-a presentiment from some agent of Minerva, perhaps?-has been chorusing in my mind ever since I decided upon this course. It tells me that this war was always and ever only yours.*

# Chapter 14

## **Vocabulaire :**

1. **Charon** - *The boatman ferrying the craft that takes the shades of the dead to Hades; supposed to be paid for the trip with a coin .*
2. **Corona obsidionalis** - *Also called corona graminea. The highest military decoration for a Roman soldier, it was awarded only if the soldier saved, by his personal efforts, at least an entire legion, or the whole army itself. The army had to be the one to grant it, unlike other decorations, which were often granted by the commander and to the members of the army.*
3. **Dis** - *Roman god of the underworld, Dis or Pluto.*
4. **Romulus and Remus** - *Twins said to be the founders of Rome. They were cast into the wild as infants and saved by a she-wolf who suckled them as her own cubs.*

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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The rapid knocks, followed by the visitor's announcement, brought Nao's head up with a smile. She looked at the girl at the other end of the room and tipped her head towards the door. The girl was quick: she had not even waited for the centurion's gesture to get up and head for the sounds. No sooner had the bolt been unlatched than the door swung open and revealed the senior legate with a shaky, grimacing sort of smile.

"Thanks, thanks," she said, striding quickly into the room and heading for the fireplace. "Oh, good god, I'm about ready to jump into the fire! Close the door, please, quickly."



Erstin gave a small chuckle as she bolted the door again.

"I'm surprised to see you're not wearing a thicker cloak, Chie-san," she said. "It's no wonder you're feeling chilly. Would you like me to warm some wine for you?"

"No, thanks though," said Chie. "The way I'm feeling right now, I wouldn't be surprised if the wine chilled in my throat."

She turned to Nao, rubbing her sides as she spoke.

"Ye gods, Nao," she said, chattering through her words as fine shivers rattled her teeth. "Why didn't you give me clearer directions? I must've gone through every inn on this block, thinking it was the right one. To think I believed you when you said I'd be able to find this one easily-that's why I didn't bother with going back to my room to get a thicker cloak, Erstin! Blame it on this rat-oh, stop laughing, Yuuki! It's on account of your oblique way with words that I'm frozen and just about done for!"

"It's *your* fault you couldn't find this quickly," Nao grinned, highly amused by the diatribe. "And it isn't my fault you're half blind."

The legate's eyes narrowed; her sight *was* somewhat less than perfect. Still, it was not so bad as to be deemed "half blind", which Nao knew.

"Oh, be quiet," she said.

"Well, lah-de-dah!" the other exclaimed, widening her eyes farcically. "No witty comebacks today?"

"Let me catch my breath first, then I'll take you on," the other woman replied, putting a hand against the wall to brace herself. "I'm too tired to banter."

"You do look a little winded, Chie-san," Erstin noted.

" *Winded?* " was the wry answer. "Why, I'm only staying on my feet out of sheer habit!"

All three of them laughed.

"Right," Nao said. "Come draw up a chair, Chie, and do that breath-catching before we go out again."

"Oh, don't talk about going out yet," the other groaned, coming to settle herself beside the small oak table. "Give me time to recover and get used to the idea. Why did you have to move quarters, anyway? The old place was fine."

Nao made a vague gesture: "I ran into an old friend the other day and he told me to come stay at his place. Here."

"I see."

"Anyway, you took long enough. I was almost worried," she smirked. "We've been waiting a while."

Chie threw her a dour look and muttered, "Don't complain when I'm the one who's been trudging in snow."

The centurion flicked her eyes towards the other occupant of the room. She laughed suddenly, startling both the girl and Chie.

"Oh, Sons of Dis, Erstin," she said, shaking her head at the girl hovering near the door. " *Go already* . We don't need you to look over us, anyway. We can take care of ourselves. Don't keep your friend waiting."

Erstin coloured brightly.

"What do you mean, Nao-senpai?" she asked, attempting to look as though she did not know what Nao meant and failing miserably at it.

The red-haired woman snorted.

"I mean, go already and meet that Otomeian girl," she answered. "You've been fidgeting there all this time and looking like you're about ready to run away. Been mooning about all day, I can tell. Go! It's fine."

Then, almost as an afterthought: "Just be careful, you hear?"

Chie smiled as the girl hesitated, inching her head this way and that

as though unable to make her mind. Finally, her resolve appeared to strengthen and she headed for the door while thanking the primipilus-who stopped her just as she was halfway out of the exit.

"Come back here, Idiot," said the chortling Nao, her mirth growing as the girl retreated into the room with a bewildered expression. "Put on something warm, will you, or you'll catch your death of cold before you even make it there. It'd be a hard job for us to warm you back to life if that happens. Unless your girl wants to give it a try."

This time Chie laughed as well. Erstin, for her part, turned a deeper shade of red, although she did show an embarrassed smile too. After pulling on a few more garments as ordered, she left the two women in the room.

"The silly fool," Nao said affectionately. "Can you believe she was about to go out there in just a robe?"

"Who's this other girl she's meeting?"

"Don't you remember? I told you about her. It's the Sphinx's cousin."

"Oh," Chie said. "So it's that one?"

"Yes."

"Well, well. When you told me they were getting cosy I didn't think they were getting cosy *that way*. You didn't really elaborate, you know." She screwed up her eyes to the ceiling. "So little Ers-chan has grown up."

"Funny, isn't it? Somehow, it feels like not too long ago that she was just a little tot trailing in my tracks."

"Makes you feel old, doesn't it?" Chie said, smiling.

"Please. I never feel old."

Chie responded with a droll look.

"We'd better go," she said to Nao, after a second.

"Before we do that, I wanted to show you something."

Nao got up and made her way to a closet. She retrieved a leather bundle from within and returned, whereupon she laid the item on the table. Chie eyed it with curiosity.

"What's this?" the legate asked.

"Some things I just bought," was the answer. The bundle was unwrapped, revealing the glint of metal tucked into the flaps. "Have a look."

Chie peered at the contents of the bundle, then reached for a thin metal star whose circumference was roughly the same as the width of her palm. She held it up, eyeing the five sharp points at the edges of the disc.

"I'm not really an expert on these things," she said. "Never been good with projectiles. But I do know enough to say this is a good piece of metalwork." She turned her eyes to the other, similar discs in the unwrapped bundle. "Where'd you get them?"

"Some blacksmith out at the edge of town. Great stuff. I'm damned glad I talked to the tribune-Akira Okuzaki, I mean-yesterday, or I wouldn't have known to go there."

"Akira-kun?" Chie replied, setting down the weapon. "Oh, yes, I've seen her carrying some of these too. Shuriken, you call them, right?"

Nao nodded: " *She* would have some. Her family comes from the same place I got trained, you know."

"Oh, yes, the Okuzaki were originally Sulpicians. But most of them stay in Hime now."

"Like everyone else looking to go up in politics." Nao picked up another object, slipping her fingers through the holes in the implement and showing it to Chie. "What I really like is this. Look at the detail. Good. Great grip, too. Slips in real smooth and fits beautifully, like sex."

Chie laughed, a hand thrown over her eyes.

"What a simile!" she said.

Nao laughed too. "No, really. You try it. Here."

She slipped it off and handed it to Chie, who put it on. It reminded her of those crude 'knuckles' that some of the more violent members of the Himean populace employed during their street fights. The difference was that, whereas those only had slight bumps or ridges at the 'knuckles,' this was fitted with razor-sharp, outstretched claws. She made a slight face at the weapon, grudgingly admitting that it was handsomely worked even if she could not quite countenance the brutality of its purpose.

"What an awful-looking thing!" she said, wrinkling her brow. "What do you call it again, Nao?"

"Depends. But where I come from, we just call it the claw."

"What do you plan to do with this, anyway? You can't use it for battle, since it couldn't possibly cut through a cuirass-unless you put all your strength into the blow, I suppose. It's an assassin's weapon, isn't it?"

"Yes. I left my old one at home, and figured I might as well get a new one. Especially since the stuff here is much cheaper than anywhere else, even when it's such good quality."

"Right." Chie took off the wicked-looking instrument. "Why do I have this feeling you're planning to use it on someone?"

"I probably will. That's what weapons are for."

"Oh, Jupiter!"

"Sure, call him." The centurion chuckled. "I'm just keeping my weapons up to date. You know, the way you like to pick every new bird's feather for your collection."

A laugh erupted from the other's mouth.

"Quills, they're called quills!" said the legate. "And you just made it sound as though I go around plucking the tail feathers from

whatever poor fowl comes my way."

"Speaking of birds," Nao said. "I'd love a good cooked one right about now. Actually, I'll take anything cooked at this point. Come on, I'm hungry. Let's go already."

"Anywhere in mind?"

"There's this place nearby that Kenji-san told me about. How he described the roast boar there had my belly roaring." Nao closed her eyes in anticipation of the culinary delights to come, her tongue coming out to lick at her lips. "Good wine, too, he said. And the desserts he told me about! Custardy rolls and fig pastries. Oh, let's go already, damn it."

"Goodness!" Chie cried, grinning. "The notoriously hardy Nao Yuuki, a sybarite?"

"I like good food," the centurion retorted. "Anyone would pick oysters over plain olives any day. I don't mind roughing it when there's nothing else to be had, but my goal is to kill myself from eating as much as I can when there's good stuff in front of me, to make up for the other times."

"Admirable goal," Chie replied. "Mind if I join you on this mission?"

"Shit, we can share the same boat trip down the goddamned river. I don't think Charon would mind."

"If he does, we'll set aside a leg of boar to bribe him with."

Nao grinned and threw a garment at her: "Here, you borrow one of my cloaks, Legate, or you'll be making that trip before I even get started. Glad you had sense enough to put on your thickest socks, at least."

After wrapping themselves snugly in their capes, they went out. They found empty streets to greet them, with only a few odd stragglers sitting by the warmth of an outdoor brazier or a fire. The early evening was washed with the deep midnight blue of the sky and the colour was reflected by the snow that blanketed almost all the surfaces, the whiteness taking on an azure-tinted aspect. Here

and there, the monochrome was interrupted by swathes of yellow light coming from windows or open doorways, as well as the lamps hanging from taverns and shops by the path. Chie noted to her companion that the city looked 'rather lonely'.

"More snow coming is why," Nao commented. "Look, it's covered everything already."

"I know-I spent nearly an hour walking in it earlier, remember?"

After a while, she asked: "Is it far, Nao?"

"No, we're close."

"I hope so."

"Relax, we'll get there faster than you can say Aoi Senou."

"You don't know how fast I can say that," Chie said, letting out a chuckle.

"I'll bet you'd give Mercury's feet a run for their money. Hey, isn't that the general?"

Chie turned to look, narrowing her eyes to slits as she squinted at the gazebo Nao was pointing to. It was in the middle of a snow-filled clearing, one of the market spaces usually filled with shoppers and stalls. It was empty now, however, and what few stalls had not been packed up by their owners were bleak-looking and empty. After a while, she finally made out the figures standing in the gazebo in the middle: it was their commander and her Otomeian bodyguard. She and Nao made their way to them, speculating on the reasons for the pair being out there in such weather and without anyone nearby.

"Shizuru-san!" Chie called out, waving.

The figures in the distance looked their way. The taller, blonde figure waved.

"It is them. Whatever are they doing out here?" Chie mumbled as she walked forward. "It's too frosty to be out. Why, there's hardly anyone else on the street!"

Nao grinned, lifting her eyebrows suggestively.

"Yes," she said. "Good point. Maybe *that* 's why they're out here."

"If that's what it is, the sensible thing would have been to stay inside Shizuru-san's room," Chie returned, unable to help getting in on the joke. She paused to adjust her footwear and pull a sock up, which prompted her companion to stop as well. In the few moments before they began walking again, she took in the scenery surrounding the pergola they were approaching, from the twisted branches of the few ice-spangled trees in plantboxes to the clean, white smoothness of the snow blanketing the entire space. All of it gave the scene an otherworldly quality.

"Pretty," she puffed out. "The setting is nice, I mean, even considering the awful cold. I bet it doesn't look as pretty when it's summer, what with all the merchants and people around here. But right now it's really beautiful, in a lonely sort of way."

"Ooh, *the romance of it all*," was the sarcastic reply.

Chie smiled dreamily.

"Ah, don't you feel it, Nao?" she jested. "There's something in the air."

"Whatever the fuck it is, it's freezing me to death," Nao snickered. "But the lovebirds over there don't look like they're minding it."

"Quiet! They'll hear you."

"Why, afraid they won't let you get close enough to pluck their tails?"

Chie laughed and shushed her, saying that they were fairly well within earshot by now since whispers carried in the winter silence. After a few more strides, they called out again in greeting.

"Hello there," came the response. "Chie-han, Nao-han. Out for a walk?"

"Heading to dinner," Chie answered. "What are you doing here, Shizuru-san? It's cold." Her breath turned into mist as she spoke,



and she wiggled an eyebrow at it. "See?"

"Cold in more ways than one," Nao put in, with a small smirk for the girl beside Shizuru. It was a wasted effort, however, as the dark-haired girl had her eyes fixed on a piece of wood that she was worrying with a knife. "Enjoying the fresh air, General?"

"Yes, and resting," Shizuru replied, giving them a bright smile. "We have been going about the town all day-you recall I ran into you earlier, Chie-han-talking to some of the citizens."

"Don't tell me. The issue about the governor, is it?" said Nao.

"Quite so."

"How does it look, Shizuru-san?" Chie asked. Shizuru sighed before responding.

"It appears Shikishima-han was telling the truth," she stated simply.

Nao sneered, her fine red brows trying to meet.

"Course it's true. If someone says something bad about a politician, you can expect it's an understatement," she muttered, to the other two's amusement.

"Does that sweeping statement include us?" Chie asked, pointing to herself and their general.

"It's an expression or-whatchamacallit, a common saying. And no, you know it doesn't."

"A common saying."

The other two Himeans shared a wry smile.

"The sad part is, I can't blame people for coming up with it," Chie sighed. "So. I guess we wait for Suda Yuuji-san to come home, then?"

Shizuru nodded.

"As it is, that is all we can do," she said. "I do wish he were here now, all the same."

"What is taking him so long, I wonder?" Chie mused aloud. "He should know we're here-surely the news must have reached him already. Any other governor would've come rushing back by now, or at least sent a message."

"I do not mind," Shizuru said. "If it is indeed on account of some public business that he is not present. The delay is of no matter, in that case."

"Well, seeing as he doesn't have any scruples about the citizenship itself, I don't think he'll have any scruples about making us wait for the sake of something that's a little less than public business," Chie told her.

"We could fetch him if you want, General," Nao put in.

"I do not think," Shizuru answered with a mischievous look, "we need to have *you* do any 'fetching' yet."

Nao and Chie laughed.

"Oh, now, I'd play nice, General," the primipilus protested jokingly.

"I think Shizuru-san would feel better if you said you wouldn't play at all," Chie quipped. "You said the same thing when you went to 'ask Prince Artaxi to be quiet' during the march, if I recall."

"Well, I shut him up, didn't I? From the sound of things, seems like this Yuuji can do with some trussing up, too."

"Yuuji, Yuuji," Shizuru mumbled, drawing their attention. "Ah, Chie-han, I meant to ask this earlier, but it slipped my mind. Is Suda Yuuji-han related to Aidou-han?"

Nao blinked at the commander question, then brought up her eyebrows as she hit upon it.

"Oh, right! Legate Aidou's a Yuji, isn't he?" she asked, getting a nod from the fair-haired woman. "Well that explains a lot, don't it?"

The other two women smiled, knowing the centurion disliked the legate in question.

"As far as I remember, they *are* related," Chie said later. "But distantly. The Yuji with one U and Yuuji with two U's come from one main bloodline, but the branches split off and became distinct from each other a while back. So the relation is now relatively remote, for most purposes."

Shizuru digested this. "I see. Thank you for clearing that up for me."

"They seem like enough to me," Nao muttered, drawing her lips into an expressive grimace. "A coward and a *cunnus* selling the citizenship. Pah!"

"Old sourpuss," Chie said, nodding warmly at her friend's sneer. "Why don't you show Shizuru-san those new things of yours, Nao? Has she seen them?"

The centurion's expression relaxed.

"No," she said, drawing one of the metal stars from the pouch in her cloak. "Just got them, General, and a pretty lot they are, too. What do you think?"

Shizuru took the proffered object and brought it up to her face. Her eyes took in the fine, razor-thin edge and gleam of metal hungry for flesh to bite.

"Most impressive," she said, after a moment. "A good find, Nao-han."

"I thought so."

"How was the price?"

"I'd say cheap, considering the quality."

"Ah." She hummed, eyes growing thoughtful. "I suppose I had better get my naginata's blade seen to."

"We've been sending the serviceable swords for whetting," Chie told

her. "I don't think we'll need to get any good number of replacements, though. What with the enemy armour we took from our battles, and all. Most of what we're getting done will be maintenance."

"That is good." A pause. "On another subject, has the mail bound for Hime not departed yet?"

"Just did, a few hours ago," answered the legate. "I put the letters you wrote in there, too, along with the report for the Senate."

"Thank you."

Chie acknowledged her with a brief nod: "I actually meant to entrust them to Takeda-san, but I couldn't, it turns out."

"Why?"

"Oh, you didn't know? He didn't go down to Argus to catch his ship after all. Said he'd prolong his stay here and wait for the next one."

Shizuru's eyes narrowed, which Chie interpreted to mean she wanted to know why, again.

"I don't know why," she said.

"Odd, that," Nao said. "To decide to winter here instead of Hime. I mean, it's not like he didn't have a choice."

"Well, now," said Shizuru, a teasing twinkle coming to her eye. "You make it sound as though you yourself would rather be in Hime, Centurion! Can you stand being in my army no longer?"

Nao laughed at the tease.

"I can stand it fine, General," she declared. "Just give me a good fight and good people to fight with and I'll stand the pits of Dis fine, if I have to."

"There," said Chie, smile breaking out. "I'd drink to that."

"As would I," said the general.

"Then by the gods, let's all drink to it now!" Nao exclaimed, throwing up her hands. "That's what we were going to do, anyway. We're going for a nip, General. Come on, and we'll sample the best food and wine this town can serve up. What do you say?" She turned a short smirk to the silent figure beside Shizuru. "That includes you too, Kid. Not like we can leave you out, anyway, as you're always with Fujino-san."

The girl's eyes flashed to Shizuru as if by instinct. The general smiled at them.

"Are you hungry, Natsuki?" she asked genially, actually seeming to defer the decision to her attendant. "We can go and have dinner with Nao-han and Chie-han, if you are. Or if you want to come in out of the cold now, at least."

This brought a small, vaguely apologetic gesture indicating that the younger woman did not wish to go in yet, followed by another that managed to convey a suggestion that Shizuru should go if she wished. The older woman shook her head, still smiling.

"It is all right," Shizuru said. "I myself do not feel hungry yet."

She turned to her primipilus.

"Shall you take our apologies, Nao-han, that I cannot take you up on your offer?" she asked. "Perhaps it shall be my turn to invite you next time, but I am afraid I-no, we -must decline for now."

"Sure, more for me!" the centurion replied heartily, to their amusement. "Mind if we go?"

"Not at all. Please enjoy yourselves."

"We'll be off, then," Chie said, giving a small wave as she moved away. She tipped her chin jauntily at her friend's bodyguard-cum-attendant. "Try to make her come in soon, Natsuki-san-I'd hate to see two woman-shaped blocks of ice here tomorrow."

"I suppose that means I should cancel my plan to make snowmen."

After a few more jests, the two Himeans left, stepping high and fast

through the snow. Shizuru watched them go before turning back to her bodyguard. She was about to ask the girl if she did not feel cold yet when her gaze fell on the object in Natsuki's hands.

"What is that, Natsuki?" she asked, gesturing to it.

Natsuki dropped her eyes to the object, then looked back up at Shizuru and held it out to her. The older woman took it and realised that it was the block of wood Natsuki had been chipping at the entire day as they made the rounds of the city. It was no longer a mere block of wood.

Her eyebrows went up in admiration.

"Why, this is quite well-done," Shizuru said, turning over the small figurine in her hands. "A wolf, is it not?"

She looked up to see the girl's nod.

"It is very nice." She sighed. "I myself am not much good at carving small objects like this. Oh, I daresay I can turn out a decent wooden horse or soldier. But not with the detail you have put into this. I can actually see the wave of the coat."

She said this while tracing the lines of the little wooden wolf, trying to feel the nuances of the grain and the chipped edges through her fingers, which were faintly numbed by the chilly air.

"This brings back memories," she said.

A small sound from the other brought her eyes back up. There was a curious look on the younger woman's face and she smiled at the silent question there.

"You see," she explained, "when I was younger, much younger, I used to know some friends whose parents would come back from campaign with something like this. A little Trojan horse perhaps, or a small wooden doll. I thought it ever so sweet, you know. For a parent to make such a thing on campaign and come back with it."

She paused and turned to lean against a cool pillar, her hands still playing with the carving as she went on.

"Odd whims we get when we are children. I used to hope," she said, "for my father to come home from campaign with one for me too. Even if he was not a mere ranker and could afford to purchase a carving instead, even if it was badly done. I would not have minded. I only wanted him to make one for me."

She sighed and followed it with a chuckle. After a few seconds of silence, the other finally took it upon herself to prod Shizuru into talking again.

"He did?" was the question.

Shizuru shook her head.

"No, he never did," she told the girl looking at her. "And I never did ask him to. Not that I really minded, nor that I ever thought less of his love for me due to that. It is simply that he was not that kind of man. He was a good father nonetheless. And he brought me back other things, riches and treasures found in campaign, which I liked too."

She shrugged.

"Although I still did wish he made me at least one carving." The older woman laughed at herself. "I am hard to please, it seems. Ah, well."

She was about to hand back the object to Natsuki when the girl asked another question.

"You like it?" the Otomeian asked.

Shizuru stopped in the act of holding out the wooden wolf. She flicked her eyes to it to ask if it was Natsuki was talking about, and the girl nodded.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I do. It is very well-made, as I said before, and the detail is impressive considering it is so small I can swallow it with my hand. I like it very much."

The girl made a sort of half-shrug.

"You," she said quietly. "If you like it."

Shizuru tilted her head, wondering what the girl was trying to say.

"Forgive me, Natsuki," she said. "What was that?"

The girl nodded at the tiny figurine in Shizuru's hand.

"You may have it," she said, making the older woman's eyebrows go up.

"Oh no," Shizuru replied, feeling something like shyness stir inside her. "I couldn't, Natsuki. After all, you might have made this for some-"

"No one," the girl interrupted.

Shizuru looked her in the eye.

"Are you certain?" she asked, feeling rather warmer than before. "Would you truly like to give it to me?"

Natsuki nodded.

"Yours," she told Shizuru, who smiled at the hushed statement.

"I see," the older woman said at length. "Thank you, Natsuki."

Natsuki said nothing.

"I will keep it with me at all times-indeed, wherever I go," Shizuru said, bringing a hint of colour to her companion's cheeks, as well as a small mumble of disbelief. "Do you not believe me? I shall, you know."

Unexpectedly, Natsuki lifted an eyebrow and smirked humorously at her.

"It is true," Shizuru protested, laughing a little at the girl's scepticism. "I promise. I shall take it everywhere I go. It shall go right into the chest I use to house the other things I always bring with me on campaign. Why, I might even bring it along with me everywhere! I



may put it on a chain of some kind, and carry it thus, just to spite you for your lack of faith in me."

The girl mumbled something that she failed to catch, and she leaned forward to hear better.

"What?" she asked, hoping Natsuki would repeat it, which the girl did.

"Even when you bathe?"

"Why, yes, I shall bring it even when I bathe," Shizuru answered, laughing at what was obviously a tease. "I shall call it my little Natsuki, my personal charm."

This brought on a full blush and a series of mutters. Shizuru laughed, shaking her head at her companion.

"Do not tell me you dislike the name," she said. "It is yours, after all."

More muttering, the words turning into curling tendrils of white fog as Natsuki moved her lips. The older woman moved a step closer to lean her hip against the cool marble railing, her face showing her enjoyment of the reaction she had provoked.

"Well then, give me another name for it, if you will," she said through a few more chuckles.

Natsuki scowled at her, obviously still piqued by the jab.

"Unless you do so, I shall continue to call it my little Natsuki," the older woman threatened.

The scowl remained and the girl turned away as though snubbing her.

Shizuru sighed.

"All right then," she said, disappointed that the girl did not bite. "So little Natsuki it is-"

A soft grumble interrupted her and she stopped speaking. Her head

snapped to the side.

"What was that, Natsuki?"

The girl took a moment before answering. When she did, Shizuru heard her clearly.

"Call it Duran."

The older woman echoed the cryptic pronouncement.

"Du... ran?" she said.

A tilt of the chin: "Duran."

"Do you mean that is what we should call it?" Shizuru asked.

A nod. Shizuru smiled, pleased by the sound of the foreign name.

"What does it mean?" she asked, knowing Otomeians often picked names for children or pets based on meaning.

"It means," Natsuki said, "from the cold."

"Fitting," Shizuru nodded. "And ironic, considering it comes from a summer child."

Natsuki held out a hand to her, seeming to want the figurine back.

"Oh," she said, grinning. "What did I say now? Are you taking it back already?"

The girl looked surprised at this interpretation.

"No," she said.

"What do you want with it, then?"

She handed the sculpture to Natsuki, who took it as carefully as one would take a delicate flower, plucking it cautiously from her hands. The girl had drawn out the knife she had been using for carving, and she looked at Shizuru.

"I will, um," she began. "Carve. Your name."

Shizuru's forehead wrinkled.

"My name...?" she asked, trying to probe the eyes trained on hers. After a few seconds: "Are you going to put it there?"

A nod.

*Interesting*, Shizuru thought. *Must be a custom with them.*

Natsuki nodded again: "How..."

"How?"

Natsuki gave an eloquent shrug, pointing the tip of the knife at the object in her hand. Shizuru's head came up as she apprehended what the girl wanted to know.

"Oh, yes," she said, pushing off from the railing and looking around. "Of course. Let me see now..."

She began to walk, making her way down the marble steps of the portico with Natsuki following her. Once she reached the snow, she lifted her foot and began to trace her name in the white powder, Natsuki watching the movements.

"My name is written this way," she said afterwards.

The girl hummed and began to copy the symbols into the sculpture.

"Thank you," said Shizuru when she was done, making no move to take the carving being held out.

Natsuki nodded, still holding out the object.

"May I ask you to do something else for me?" Shizuru asked, prompting the hand holding out the carving to drop. "Would you please carve your name here, too?"

Natsuki made a small sound of perplexity, her face showing confusion at the request. Shizuru took it upon herself to explain

further, aware of sounding more earnest than normal.

"To prove that it is a gift from you," she explained, the corners of her mouth turning up. "It is a gift, is it not?"

Natsuki eyed her for a moment before answering in the affirmative.

"Then," Shizuru said, feeling a little self-conscious before that unwavering gaze. "Would you be kind enough to put your name there as well?"

The girl seemed uncertain; Shizuru registered it.

"Please?" she asked.

The word was all it took to nudge Natsuki to a decision. Nodding quickly, the girl started to carve her own name on the wolf as well. Shizuru smiled brightly at that and murmured her thanks as she watched the girl fulfil her request.

"Oh, yes," she said, as the girl worked. "Why did you make a wolf, by the way? To refer to the daos, I suppose?"

Natsuki nodded, still intent on her task.

"I see."

"Also..."

"Yes?"

"I... I like them also."

"Wolves?"

Another nod.

"Ah," said the older woman. "You do have some around Otomeia, yes?"

An affirmative sound, then, later: "In the forest."

"As expected," Shizuru said. "Do you know that wolves are actually

quite an important to Hime, at least in its mythology? Because of the tale of the twins Romulus and Remus?"

This time the girl even smiled, glancing up briefly from her work.

"Ah, so you are familiar with it," Shizuru observed.

"Mm-hm." The girl seemed pleased with her own knowledge. "I read."

"In a book on Hime, I shall wager?"

"Mm-hm."

"I see." A pause. "Do you like to read?"

"Yes."

"I see."

Natsuki looked up.

"Very much," she added to her earlier answer.

Shizuru smiled brightly.

"I see," she said again.

The Otomeian lifted her chin, apparently finished with what she was doing, and handed the figurine back to Shizuru. Shizuru took it and read the characters on the side.

"That is good," she murmured absently, inspecting the way Natsuki had carved the names: the girl really had a talent for detailed work, she could see now, for the carved characters were below the length of her smallest fingernail in height. She gave the girl another smile of thanks before parting the ends of her cape and tucking the object into her pouch.

"Shizuru..."

"Yes?" she answered quickly, too quickly in fact. Natsuki spoke so rarely and she valued each rare occasion so much that each

opportunity for it tended still to excite her into trying to grasp at each pithy word from the girl's mouth. "What is it, Natsuki?"

"Duh-duh-do you, um."

The girl stopped and looked dejected for having succumbed to her stammer. Shizuru had noticed that it tended to surface when she was most anxious, which was a difficulty as the girl got even more anxious when she noted her own stutter.

Shizuru tried to encourage her with a smile.

"Go on, Natsuki," she said. "What is it?"

It did not seem to be enough, for the crease between the girl's brows only deepened.

"Do not worry," she went on. "You may ask anything of me."

Natsuki sent her a doubtful look that brought to mind a child afraid to say something for fear of a reprimand. The older woman felt herself softening even more at the sight, and wondered at it.

*I had not thought myself so affected by children, she thought to herself. Yet this particular child has the power to melt so much of me.* The girl struck her as something still young and fresh, even despite all the Otomeian's years as a warrior. The girl's past, her origins, the slaughter of her original people and now her career as leader of a cavalry regiment famed for their abilities at slaughtering the enemy—all of this had not the strength to dull the still-existing but powerfully repressed child that had been denied its day yet still lived within. Shizuru had learned to look for it, waiting eagerly for the girl to let it slip and peek an engaging eye at her between the chinks.

"Truly," she said now with great solicitude, smiling at the child in the Otomeian that was still afraid to say what it wanted to say. "You may ask me anything at all, Natsuki, and I will answer anything you ask honestly. I am hardly a brute to get angry for a question, especially a well-meaning one."

The girl finally seemed to take heart. Shizuru schooled her face into pleasant anticipation as she waited for the other to start.

"You have, um," Natsuki began. "Do you have parents?"

The rusty eyes widened at the query, for Shizuru had not expected those words. She recovered quickly, however, when she saw the effect her reaction had on Natsuki. The younger woman did not move, but something in her eyes and stance seemed to bespeak a sharp inward flinch, an expectation of reproach for daring to ask such a thing. It was a mute, tightly-coiled apprehension that reminded her of another creature that had manifested much the same apprehension once: a new colt for her birthday, a sleek and fine specimen that had yet to be broken in. It was there in the way her bodyguard stood, reminding her of the nervous flicking of the ears; there in that green gaze, somehow similar to the anxiety of the animal's large, wet eyes.

*So wary*, she thought, reaching out to touch the girl's shoulder. The shining eyes followed her hand with tense attention, reminding her yet again of the way the colt had looked. Of the way it had been ready to turn either teeth or hooves to her if she hurt it. And when she put her palm on Natsuki's shoulder, she remembered too the feeling of touching that long-gone animal, the muscles that had rippled under the taut, sleek hide.

It was the feeling of touching dread.

*You should not be afraid of me*, she thought, willing the girl to understand it even if she did not speak it aloud. Her hand curled around the shoulder, almost as though massaging it, and she accompanied the touch with a smile. At this, she felt the other begin to relax.

"Do I have parents," Shizuru said, repeating the question. "Everyone does, Dear Girl. I suppose you mean if they are still alive?"

Natsuki nodded with care.

"I see." Shizuru replied, not bothering to remove her hand where it sat. "No, they have already passed away."

There was a soft murmur of apology.

"Oh, it is all right, Natsuki," she said. "I do not mind it now. It was a long time ago, you see. Around the end of my sixteenth year. For my father, anyway."

Natsuki said nothing, her eyes dropping to her feet. Shizuru kept her eyes on the girl.

"Would you like to know what happened?" she offered, her mind more on the murky shadows of the girl's past rather than her own. "I do not mind talking about it, so do not worry."

This brought the other's gaze back up.

"There is not," she uttered, "pain?"

Shizuru smiled: "Not of the sort you are fearing. I have made my peace with it."

"Umm."

Shizuru reluctantly let go of the shoulder under her palm, knowing she had to let go of it or Natsuki would begin to wonder.

"My father died on campaign," she started. "He was a senator too, as was my mother, and he was commander of that campaign. He contracted an illness on the march and died after a battle. Exhaustion of the body, perhaps."

Natsuki surprised the older woman by taking her hand. To be precise, she took only one finger and pulled the Himean with it.

"What-oh," Shizuru said, letting herself be led back to the pergola they had been standing in earlier. Natsuki brought the two of them to the railing, whereupon she got up onto the wide balustrade and patted the space next to her as if to invite Shizuru there. The older woman chuckled at the friendly-if-childlike gesture and followed suit.

"Thank you, my feet were freezing," she said playfully, before going on with her story. She told Natsuki how her father's death had been the reason for her decision to enter the military enterprise.

"I applied to be a *contubernalis* for that same campaign," she told



the girl, who was listening avidly to her story. "Do you know what that is, the *contubernalis*?"

Natsuki shook her head.

"A *contubernalis* is actually a cadet of the Himean army," Shizuru told her. "In Hime, almost all soldiers go through at least that phase of military service, to fulfil the requirements of the state for all citizens to render service to the armed forces. However, as with most things, that position is altered somewhat in the case of, well, people of higher social status. In our case, we are not 'normal' cadets but made to be the special assistants of the highest officers- the better the family's connections, the higher the officer. The objective, of course, is to keep us out of actual fighting... or out of danger. I am sure you can see why, given that our lives do not revolve entirely around the military. We are potential senators first, we offspring of the upper classes, and soldiers and officers only after."

Natsuki nodded, her intelligent eyes lighting up in comprehension.

"But I was not really concerned about being kept out of danger at the time," Shizuru said. "I was more eager to actually contribute something to the battle, in terms of fighting. The *contubernalis* position was only a means to that goal- to get out on the same battlefield that had, in a way, killed my father."

She laughed all of a sudden, wrinkling her nose at her juvenile self.

"I suppose I felt I had to do that much, at least," she said. "And I do think was being a little cocky then, in thinking I could do *much* at all. I felt, vaguely, that my presence would make a great difference somehow, as though fate would aid us better were I only present. How silly I was back then, now that I think on it! In my defence, it was only my first time so I was still quite green and perhaps, I do not know... romantic? Perhaps I went there fancying myself something of the protagonist in the story."

She smiled at the girl, who lifted a dark eyebrow curiously.

"First time?" Natsuki asked.

"To be in a war," Shizuru nodded. "So, really, I was a touch daunted when I first saw the slaughter on the battlefield. Really not at all as the poets describe it. Do you know what I mean?"

The girl actually grinned.

"War is glorious in writing," she offered. "Gory otherwise."

"Precisely," Shizuru said, exceedingly pleased by the answer. "That said, I was-and am still-a headstrong person. I disregarded my commander's instructions to stay out of the fighting and ran off into the fray the first chance I got. An insubordinate cadet. Ye gods, I was a horror."

The two of them chuckled.

"It took merely a few minutes to show me I was nothing but a foolish girl," Shizuru went on after that. "Still wet behind the ears yet jumping into battle in some misguided notion of being the hero of an epic. Ah well. Life disabuses us of all our cherished romances of self-perception at some point or another."

Natsuki's voice slipped into her ears: "But you won, no?"

"Yes, we did," Shizuru replied. "I thank the gods for that, and not for my sake alone."

"No," said the girl, shaking her head. "Shizuru, *you* won."

Shizuru gave the girl a baffled look, wondering what she was talking about.

"The *corona obsidionalis*," explained the younger woman, bringing a smile to the Himean's face. "You won it then, no?"

"You know about that?" Shizuru said wonderingly.

"Mm-hm."

"I see." Shizuru exhaled, watching the mist of her breath float up before vanishing in the dim light of the torches in the pergola. "Well, yes, I did win it."

She turned to her companion.

"My mother, she passed away while I was on that campaign," she said tranquilly. "Oh, it was no surprise-or no great one, at least. She was already ill when I left. The disease began the day she received the news that my father died..."

She paused.

"I suppose I did not expect her to go on without him, strong woman though she was. They were very fond of each other."

Natsuki said nothing, her eyes speaking sympathy.

"Hence, when I returned to Hime after the war, I was an orphan," Shizuru went on. "A war hero, yes, having won the *corona obsidionalis*, and automatically entitled to enter the Senate, making me the youngest senator in history, at the age of nineteen. Accomplishments for which people praise me and for which I have much to thank Fortuna. But I suppose that war cost me nearly as much as I gained."

"Sorry," said the girl. "I am sorry, Shizuru."

The older woman shook her head, diverted from her reminiscences by the pleasant sound of her name on Natsuki's lips.

"It's all right," she told her. "I do not feel bad about it anymore. There is nothing to be gained by dwelling on the past, or so I think, save if the recall is done to analyse it. So I prefer to busy myself with moving forward."

"And I shall be taking Hime with me as I do, much though some may hate me for it," she added, smiling wickedly.

"They call you a-a radical."

Shizuru's stared at her companion, startled.

"Yes, they do. Yes. Now, where did you hear that, Scamp?" she asked the girl laughingly.

The other only grinned.

"Well, I can make a guess, really," Shizuru said. "You are always with me, after all. I suppose I should not be surprised you have heard that word. And you, what do you think? Do you think I am a radical?"

The girl considered it, her eyes squinting.

"Well?" Shizuru urged.

"Is that good, being radical?" Natsuki replied, making the general grin again.

"It depends on whom you ask, Natsuki," Shizuru told her frankly. "If I told you that I am indeed a radical, would you think it was good or bad?"

"Good."

"Why?" she asked, amused by the swift answer.

"You are..."

"I?"

Natsuki smiled, her eyes shining.

"You are not bad, I think," she told Shizuru, who felt her joking smile fall a little at the words and prayed the girl would not notice.

"Well. That is very nice of you to say, Natsuki. Just to be clear," she said in mischief. "Does that mean you like me or not?"

The girl's eyes had just begun to widen when she decided to add something else.

"Or, put another way," she said. "Is that good or bad?"

She watched the girl's expression, amused by the inner fumble for words that could be read clearly on the pale countenance. It tinted the ivory cheek with a roseate stain.

"I think," came the husky voice. "I think it is good."

A curt inhalation before the girl added: "You."

She dropped her eyes after getting this out and thus failed to see Shizuru's blush rising in tandem with her own, much to the latter's relief. Shizuru blushed seldom and painfully, and it hurt her like a burn. The blush she was experiencing at this moment felt as though she had her face against a furnace, and she knew it probably looked like that as well.

The older woman slid off the banister and turned away to hide her face.

"Thank you," she said, ensuring her voice remained calm. "I think the same of you."

She shot a quick glance over her shoulder, glad to see that she was not the only one who seemed in danger of dying from blood-rush to the head.

"Natsuki," she said, turning away again. "I think we had better come in now, or risk catching cold. Let us have dinner as well."

She heard the soft mumble of agreement, then the muted sound of the girl's feet hitting the floor as she came down from the balustrade. She waited for Natsuki to stand next to her before taking a step forward, her lips pulling up unconsciously into a smile.

They left the pergola and went their way in comfortable-if-shy silence.

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Meanwhile, another pair was walking out of the chilly streets of Sosia and also intent upon their evening repast. They entered a well-lit establishment and were duly welcomed by the proprietor, who ushered them to a table with great pomp after recognising the richness of their clothing. After telling the man to bring them some wine and food, they were left to their conversation.

"It's always good to see a fellow swordsman," said the male in the

pair, smiling at his companion. "Or swordswoman, of course. It's been a while, Suou-kun."

Suou settled herself in her seat. "Almost all the people in our army are swordsmen and swordswomen."

He moved a hand dismissively.

"I mean true followers of swordplay as an art," he said. "Those like us, who understand its more elevated purpose."

This brought on a faint smirk, which he noted without real insult. After all, they had always disagreed on this subject, even in the early days when they had been training under the same master. She had always faulted the elitist principle their master-and Takeda-espoused regarding their sport, for she was of the contrary opinion that there should be little difference between those who trained in the choice schools of sportsmanship and those who had been trained by the battlefield itself. To her, the only real measure of excellence in swordsmanship was that of being skilled enough to win against an opponent in combat, whereas he considered the distinction of being a true 'sportsman' against being a mere 'soldier' one of import where valuation of skill was concerned.

"Anyway," he said, deciding not to worry their old disagreement. "You look well."

"Thank you," the fair woman told him, her extremely pale eyes turning grey in the low tavern light. "I think campaigning agrees with me."

"No plans to head back to Hime yet, then, even despite the issues with your campaign's funding?"

"Of course not."

"Hmm. Though it isn't like you can exactly just jump ship and go," he conceded. "You are a legate, after all. Fujino-san might not let you leave, even if you are family friends."

"She would if I asked."

"You sound so sure, Suou-kun."

"Because I know her better than you do, Takeda-san," she told him with a slightly mocking tone on the honorific. "She would give any of us an honourable discharge if we actually asked for it. See, she dislikes the language of obligation. She has no need of it, anyway."

"Is that so?"

She nodded.

"The woman," he said. "Strikes me as a little odd."

Suou gave him an enquiring look.

"I don't know why," he said. "From what I have to go on, I just feel that way, is all. I don't think I understand her way of doing things."

"Few people do."

"She seems a little too easygoing, though."

"You've always said the same thing of me," she retorted, a grin spreading on her face. "I guess easygoers do quite well after all. Just look at us. One a legate without being a senator and the other commander of a campaign in her early twenties. Not half bad, would you agree?"

He laughed, but it was reluctant. His smiling companion did not fail to mark it.

A woman came up and set a bottle of wine and two cups onto their table. Takeda poured for both of them and they resumed their dialogue.

"I thought you were going to go home today," Suou began, sipping at her beverage. "What happened?"

"I decided to postpone it."

"Oh, I didn't notice!" she said at his statement of the obvious. "*Because ?*"

He shrugged: "Just a few loose ends here and there."

"I see." A smile. "How was my sister, by the way, last you saw her in the city?"

There was no need to ask if he had in fact seen her: Suou's sister was one of the busier senators, not to mention one of those easiest to spot.

"A vision as always," he said, eyeing the woman before him who could count as one herself. Suou and her sister were among the most stunning members of the senatorial clans and, many said, of Hime. "She seemed happy, from what I could see of her."

A corner of her lips curled up lazily, letting him know she had noticed his deliberate evasion of the topic of her sister's controversial wife, who was popularly denounced by the conservatives for her low birth. And Takeda was definitely no liberal. All the same, he was delicate enough to know he would be better off avoiding any pronouncements on the issue, as he was something of a friend-or-old acquaintance-to Suou, though not to her sister.

"I suppose she's getting rather swamped with work right now," Suou hummed. "Being left to take care of the city and all."

"Yes, somewhat. But she carries it well."

"Like everything else."

She drank more of her wine, noting that he had yet to touch his. She devoted her attention to her drink, pretending to take small sips of it every now and then as she waited for him to talk.

"Suou," he said to her later. "I've a question."

"Yes?"

He met her eyes. "Do you know that Otomeian, the dark-haired one? Her name's Natsuki, I think."

Suou blinked slowly.



"You mean the general's girl," she said.

"The general's girl?"

"Yes, that's what we call her. After all, she looks like she belongs to the general, doesn't she?"

"Oh. I see. Right." He seemed to withdraw after that, his eyes narrowing. "Do you mean to say they're...?" He shrugged for emphasis. "That way?"

Suou lifted a silvery eyebrow.

"I'm not saying anything," she said coolly. "All I'm saying is that it looks that way. But looks can be deceiving."

He nodded vaguely.

"Why do you ask?" she said. "Interested?"

"What do you mean?" he murmured, his face that of a man with a great deal on his mind. His companion eyed him unenthusiastically, not feeling like putting up with his company this way: slow brooders like Takeda irritated Suou, especially when they had a habit of coming up with all the wrong conclusions, which she thought they did.

*I had better shock him out of it, she decided.*

"Do you want Fujino-san's girl for yourself?" she asked with near-perfect innocence, her very light eyes twinkling. "Turn her into Takeda-san's girl?"

His head snapped up at this.

"Perhaps you might like to take that up with Fujino-san, you know," she went on, hiding her inward grin. "And ask her about some things to see if it's at all possible. I would hardly be the best judge of it, after all."

"What are you talking about, Suou-kun?" he asked stiffly.

"Nothing, really," she answered, before feigning slight shock, her eyes growing wide as though she had just realised something of importance. "Could *that* be the loose end you were talking about earlier? Dear me!"

She laughed as he spluttered, knowing he would be visibly colouring now were his skin lighter.

"It's not that," he said curtly. Her eyebrow lifted once more as she reflected that her random shot might actually have hit a mark.

"Then why the questions about Natsuki-san?" she asked, keeping her tone light. The proprietor chose that particular moment to come up to the table, bearing plates and plates of food for them. After laying their dinner on the table, the man bowed and left them to their meal. Suou began before Takeda, reaching for the bread. She bit into the roll she had picked up, chewing carefully as she eyed the man in front of her. He looked mildly annoyed with her now, and that amused her to no end.

"I'm just curious," he told her finally. "That's all there is to it."

"Curious?" she said.

"Yes," he replied gruffly, taking a roll for himself. "I was just curious about them."

Suou sighed, letting another lazy smile drift over her face.

"Why, Takeda-kun," she said. "Aren't we all?"

# Chapter 15

*Oui, oui, I am quite late. My apologies-the start of the new year is always hectic.*

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## **Illustrations**

*Logos minus Pity did a pretty sketch of Shizuru at metirse.  
deviantart. com (remove the spaces placed after each full stop).*

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## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Circe** - An immortal and sorceress known for her charms (both feminine and magical); she may also be found in Homer's Odyssey.
  2. **'First row of senators'** - A reference to the seating arrangement of the House. The Roman Senate sat according to rank, with the most prominent members being at the front rows.
  3. **Edepol!** - Another Latin exclamation considered suitable for formal company; often used by men as the equivalent of the women's exclamation "Ecastor!"
  4. **Patriciate** - The collective term for the Patrician aristocracy.
  5. **Prorogue** - This word may actually be found in your regular English dictionary, but the meaning employed here is rarely included in the smaller-sized lexicons as many of them consider it obsolete. I personally do not, and find it apt to use this term here in its earlier sense in both English and Latin ("prorogo"), given the setting of the tale. The word means, in its usage for the rest of this story, "to extend (specifically, a person's term of office) ."
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## **Inter Nos**

It took another four days before the governor of Sosia returned to his station, giving the excuse that his business had taken longer than expected. Upon arrival, he invited some of the visiting army's officers to a lavishly-thrown banquet in his-and their, for the time being-residence. It was a cheerful affair, and instead of tables and chairs, the governor chose to implement the more classical as well as casual Himean way of seating. Long, upholstered couches were brought out and set before tables, allowing the guests to recline during the meal if they wished. He himself now lay stretched out on his own couch, observing the attendees as the servants brought in the last course for dinner.

*A good collection of personalities*, was his verdict as he took his time to appraise each visitor. It pleased him that his banquet was well-attended-so well-attended, in fact, that he doubted any host in Hime could do better, unless they invited the entire first row of senators to their feast. He had taken care to invite only those officials who were socially prominent. It was unnecessary to invite even the centurions or lower-ranked officers. Suda Yuuji believed that one of his standing did not trouble with those who were not among the distinguished. Besides which, his guest-list was a reflection of the political logic that it was useful to know certain people early on, for the sake of one's career. He needed support to be prorogued in his province too.

His eyes went around the couches, ticking off names and credentials. Besides his quaestor, he had invited Senator Tokiha's younger brother, named Takumi; the pre-senatorial legate and hugely patrician aristocrat, Suou Himemiya; the senior legate of the visiting army and senator, Chie Harada; the tribune of the plebs and famous swordsman, Takeda Masashi; and the young commander of the visiting army, Senator Shizuru Fujino herself. Now there was a list of guests that would make any socialite or politician die of envy! Clout, fame, and fortune all in one gathering!

The only anomaly here, he thought, was the very pretty dark-haired girl sitting beside General Fujino. She would not even be seated

there were it not that the general herself insisted on having the girl by her side, something that pricked his curiosity. But that was nothing, really, after he took his quaestor aside and the man explained that the girl seemed to be the general's attendant. In any case, he attributed it the peculiarities of the patriciate. The girl's sulky and silent presence did not affect the quality of guests at his table, anyhow, and that was his main concern. Yes, he was very content with the party indeed.

He giggled to himself, feeling more expansive than usual, and listened to the conversation taking place.

"It's amazing how much snow you get," Takumi was saying. "And how fast it falls. Why, everything was white after a night!"

"That's true," the senior legate agreed. "Blanketed with it, and all in a few hours' time. I was a little surprised, to tell you the truth."

"It's a shame you could not have seen the city during the sunny months," Suda told her, joining in the discussion. "It is much more pleasurable to look at, I assure you, Harada-san. Far nicer than now."

He sighed dramatically afterwards, fingers plucking a grape from the bowl before him.

"The winter in these parts makes me long for the Himean summer," he said. "Snow, all snow, and nothing else. If I weren't so conscious of, hmmm, of my *duties* to Hime, I would not have stayed here for this season. As it is, I have become somewhat fond of this bleak old place."

This brought on a faint smirk from Chie, which Suda missed. Takumi did not.

"I think it has its own beauty," said a smooth voice.

It was Suou, the younger of the Himemiya sisters. Suda gave her his rapt attention, aware of the family's immense influence.

"Please go on, Himemiya-san," he told her.

"Suou, if you please, because the other name belongs more to my sister," she told him diffidently. "See, I actually find it alluring in a dramatic way. There is something in the blankness of it that is in itself appealing to me, in the clean beauty of a landscape devoid of nature's flamboyant colours. It renders every small spot of colour set against it doubly striking, by contrast."

"And I suppose it might help that I don't mind the cold either," she added to the company, sending a sly wink to Takumi. "Some of the others would probably disagree."

"Oh, I can't really say I *like* it," Takumi said to that, laughing. "You know why. But I do agree with you, Suou-san, that it's pretty in its own way. How you can stand it so well is beyond me, though. Why, you're skinny yourself!"

It was Chie who answered, her dark brows jumping up and down.

"The Himemiya are winter children," she declared. "Born to be cool, whether in attitude, appearance, or atmosphere."

The company laughed, for there was an ongoing joke in the Himean upper class about 'the legendary Himemiya cool', in fact. It was partly due to their appearances: no-one could deny that the members of the family were indeed wintry-looking, with their light eyes and fair hair.

"Sitting here, on the other hand," Chie continued, with a gesture to her left. "You have a summer child. Oh-wait-two of them, in fact!"

There was laughter yet again, although only among the members of the general's army. The other diners listened curiously as the governor took it upon himself to ask why there were two 'summer children'.

"I'm sure one is Fujino-san herself," he said, with a dip of his chin towards the smiling woman. "Because of her wonderful colouring, no doubt. But who is the other?"

"Natsuki-san," was the reply.

Takeda interrupted, speaking for perhaps only the tenth time since

his arrival. The tribune of the plebs seemed to be uncommonly quiet tonight, thought Suda, and when he did speak, it came out in an uncharacteristically tongue-tied fashion, as it did now.

"Natsu-what-can I ask why?" the swordsman stumbled out, his eyes flicking from the Otomeian girl to Chie several times. "What does that mean?"

"It's because of Natsuki-san's name, Takeda-kun," Suou told him as she gave a quick smile to the girl in question. "Her name, they tell us, means something along those lines. Summer child, that is."

All heads turned to the dark-haired girl, whose cheeks were now splashed with a pink. It was obvious that she did not relish the attention given her by the party, and if the crease between her brows was any indication, was even irked by it.

"I am amused that you should call us summer children, Chie-han," said Shizuru, drawing all eyes to her. "After all, Natsuki and I have both suffered accusations of being cool as well."

Chie smiled at her friend.

"True," she said. "But I guess I was thinking more in terms of pure physical looks this time-as far as *you* are concerned, anyway, Shizuru-san."

"Do I look so warm of appearance, then?" Shizuru grinned.

"The famous flaming eyes," Suda put in, sighing exaggeratedly. "I have always wanted to see them up close, Fujino-san. Really, such an unusual colour! I wonder if your parents were not surprised to see them. I remember it was said, even back when I was still in Hime, that your eyes were far redder than anyone else to have ever had the supposed red eyes in your clan. And I have yet to see eyes of the shade you have, in fact."

Shizuru inclined her head, golden lashes drooping modestly before sweeping back up.

"They have led me to some trouble in the past," she said, her lips turning up as she sent a playful smile to the Himemiya sitting across

her. "Although only in trifling things. I recall very well what Suou-han said about them, the first time we met."

"*Ecaster* !" Suou groaned, starting to laugh. "Don't tell me you still remember that, Shizuru-san. My sister teased me about it for a week. Come to think of it, she teases me about it until now."

"It was quite memorable."

"In its own way." Suou stopped to smile shamefacedly at Chie. "That was one time the 'legendary Himemiya cool' melted, Chie-san. I'm surprised you appear not to know it. I would have thought my sister would tell you, given how much she relishes my discomfiture."

This piqued everyone's interest, of course, and they pressed the two patricians to reveal the details. It was Suou who acquiesced and began the story.

"See, Shizuru-san and my sister met each other before we did," she explained, with a nod to Shizuru. "They met months before the two of us. Shizuru-san and I only met when I was seven, or barely seven. I give that as my defence, incidentally, for what happens in the story. I was very young and innocent."

Shizuru let out a laugh: "Pre-empting the tease?"

"Yes, you know you would do it too," Suou replied. "So to go on, the Fujino came over to dinner one day and this was when we encountered each other for the first time. It was strange, but I managed to stay ignorant of the rumours about her eyes until then, and since my sister never commented on them when she told me her impressions of the Fujino heiress, I had no idea what colour they were." She feigned frustration. "See, all Chikane ever told me was that Shizuru-san was very pleasant, very smart, and the like. You think she would say a word about something as distinctive as true red eyes, but no, not one peep."

She stopped to exchange a smile with Shizuru.

"My sister," she said very dryly, "is *too cool* sometimes."

The others laughed.



"Anyhow," Suou resumed. "I came down late and couldn't find my sister or Shizuru-san. The adults were in the study. So I wandered into the garden, knowing they would call for me once the dinner was set. I ran into Shizuru-san there, and she introduced herself to me. However, we were standing away from the torches at that time so I was unable to notice her eyes. Or their precise shade, that is."

She stopped here and, making a face, asked Shizuru to tell the rest. The other woman obliged.

"Shortly after we made our introductions, I suggested that we return indoors," Shizuru told them. "And Suou-han agreed. No sooner had we stepped into the light, however, than she turned to me and made as though to say something." She chuckled. "Not that she ever got to say it. She gave me one look of pure horror and ran off into the house, screaming something that forced me to run after her, if only just to calm her panic."

"What?" asked Chie. "What was she screaming?"

"She was screaming..." Shizuru answered, her shoulders shaking with suppressed mirth. "To call for a doctor because my eyes were bleeding out."

Suou winced playfully as chortles erupted around the tables.

"She gave the adults such a fright, you know, for by the time she reached them, the words had become something about my eyes falling out of the sockets," Shizuru laughed. "I suppose they thought I had an accident while playing in the garden. What a horrid image you did conjure up!"

"Again, please do not forget," Suou retorted. "I was young, oh *so* very young."

"That's a good story, though, Suou-san," Takumi told her. "I think it's adorable."

"Do you think so?" Suou said, her slow smile coming out.

"It has good, ah, anecdotal value," Chie told her, lifting a goblet to the younger woman in salute.

"I suppose I would think so, too," said younger woman replied. "But it's hard when the value comes at my expense, you know."

They laughed at the dry remark.

"I like to think of it as a normal reaction," she went on. "Even now, Shizuru-san's eyes startle people."

"So they do," put in Sosia's governor. "But, really... so beautiful!"

He said this in a fawning fashion that made others aside from Chie smirk this time. Not a single person at that table could miss the fact that he was trying to cull favour with the army general, who herself pretended ignorance.

"My thanks for the compliment, Yuuji-han," she was telling him. "Although you need not say it so often, or my head shall soon no longer be able to fit in the room."

"Oh, no, no," he replied swiftly. "I'm sure Fujino-san is too modest to be affected by my remarks!"

Chie exchanged a quick look with Suou, who was also stifling her mirth. The former quirked her lips at the younger legate, her message clear: *I'm going to break up this farce.*

"Yuuji-san," said the senior legate, lifting her voice. "That reminds me of something. Some of your staff were saying that the gardens adjoining your residence look absolutely stunning even during this season, having been designed with the winter months in mind. It's wonderful how space can actually be dedicated to huge lawns in these territories! I suppose the gubernatorial mansions were planned out early on, probably at the same time the city walls went up. But I'm getting off topic. Shizuru-san was telling me just this morning that she would love to see the gardens' beauty for herself. If she only had someone to lead her through them: they're so large, you see." She smiled at her commander. "And she's just too modest to ask someone to do it so here I am daring on her behalf."

Suda sat up at this, looking delighted. He clapped his hands together as a grin made two lines at the sides of his mouth more

articulated, the grooves eating into the flesh. His loose cheeks shook with excitement.

"Oh, of course, of course," he exclaimed. "I would be glad to do it, Fujino-san. I daresay I know my own residence better than anyone. I shall be your guide."

Shizuru sent a small and grateful smile to her legate before answering Suda.

"Thank you, Yuuji-han," she spoke. "That is most gracious of you."

"Not at all!" he cried, taking a quick peek at the window on the far side of the room. "I see it is still light. We can do it after you finish with your dessert, Fujino-san, or perhaps tomorrow, so you may see it better. What would you prefer?"

"I am actually finished," she replied. "But if you are not, then we may-"

"No, no, I don't mind," he said, rising to his feet. "Would you excuse us?" he asked the others. "There is a breathtaking part of the garden that looks best either under the moon or in twilight-you know it, Homura-and I would love to have Fujino-san see it. This is the perfect time. It's going on evening."

They signalled their assent and Shizuru stood up as well, Natsuki following suit. Just as they were moving off from the party, however, another rose to join them.

"I-I'd like to, uh, accompany-the gardens," said Takeda, striding to the three who had stopped to look at him. "If I may."

The others tried to make sense of the stammered words.

"Oh, why, Takeda-kun?" Suou asked, understanding his ploy. "Are the gardens going somewhere?"

He promptly flushed and grimaced at her.

"No! I meant, I'm going to accompany Suda-san and the others to the gardens," he retorted, slowing his speech to avoid tripping over

his words once again. "I'm going with them."

Homura spoke up.

"But Takeda-san," he said, pointing to something on the table. "You haven't even touched your dessert."

Takeda frowned lightly, running a hand through his short, dark hair.

"I *never* eat dessert," he answered curtly, seeming annoyed by the suggestion. "It's those silly sweet concoctions make a sportsman's hands weak."

Homura digested this with a patently puzzled expression.

"Spoken like a true sportsman-" Suou mumbled slyly under her breath, so that only those at her side could hear. "-of the thumb-wrestle."

Takumi and Chie giggled, hiding their faces by putting their cups to their mouths. The swordsman, however, had already turned away to join the ones leaving the room. Once the quartet had gone off, those who remained went on merrily about their conversation.

"*Edepol!*" Takumi laughed. "How strange of Takeda-san. Imagine never eating dessert for that reason."

"Silly sweet concoctions, eh?" Suou smiled, her beautiful face lighting up with amusement. "He always was ridiculous in his statements, you know."

Chie was still giggling, and she grinned at the other legate.

"I'm still laughing over the 'thumb-wrestle' bit," she said. "But, yes, what an odd thing to say!"

Suou shrugged.

"For myself, I always like dessert after a meal, and I don't think I've ever missed a chance to have it when it's there." She lifted her eyebrow questioningly at Chie. "You consider me a sportswoman, Chie-san. Do you think my hands are weak?"

"Anything but!"

The company chuckled and continued to discuss the merits of having dessert at the end of a meal, Takeda and his 'odd' pronouncements set aside.

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After a detour to obtain their cloaks, the other group of guests reached the patio of the gubernatorial palace, from where they looked out onto the path leading into the main gardens. It was covered with snow, but was still discernible due to the high, trimmed bushes marking its sides.

"We should take the path," the governor explained to his guests. "That way, we'll not step and fall into drifts. The snow makes it hard to tell where the depressions are."

"I see," Shizuru replied, painfully aware of the other man with them—who was making a conscious effort to stay uncomfortably near her, for whatever reason. "Shall we go, then?"

As they made their way along the path, Suda pointed out various statues and groves that he thought would interest his Himean companions. While they nodded and made noncommittal remarks, however, neither of them was actually paying attention to the surroundings. The only one who seemed to be looking about with an impression of one noting down details was the unspeaking Otomeian with them. The other two maintained a charade of interest that Suda failed to notice for what it was, so earnest was he in his commentary.

"And this," Suda said, moving on to point to a marble statue. "Is one of my particular favourites. It's of Alexander the Great."

"Mm, it's good," Takeda murmured, whilst the general said something about it showing fine craftsmanship. Suda grinned and resumed his remarks, still too preoccupied with it to notice the boredom of his companions. Not that he could have actually *seen* Shizuru's, of course, but it was there, nonetheless. In fact, were it not that the younger senator was a master of composing her

expression, what might have been seen there was not only boredom but irritation as well. As it was, she merely smiled and nodded at the governor of Sosia and his commentary.

*How troublesome*, she was thinking. She had to talk to him too, about the matter with the illegal citizens. Instead, she was being led through a frosted garden in winter, forced to nod at his inconsequential notes on art and topiary. She could hardly do otherwise when an unwanted hanger-on had just attached himself to them.

She sent a quick, fleeting glance to the other man in the party.

*Thick*, she determined wryly. Anyone else would have caught in Chie's request an intention that she meet with the governor alone, but Takeda Masashi had obviously not noticed-or was pretending not to notice it. Whatever the case, it made her very wary of him. She wanted him to leave already! Yet the man kept sticking close, far too close for her taste.

She did not sense anything from the swordsman that would indicate he was attracted to her, and yet it was obvious he was striving to keep as little distance between them as possible. His strange behaviour moved her to pay more attention to him than Suda, just in case she could figure out what it all meant. It was only after a good while had passed that it struck her exactly what he was doing-and on whom his eyes were fixed.

*Ecastor!*

"This is the statue I commissioned," went Suda's voice, droning in the background. "It cost me a lot, mind you, but it was worth it, I think. After all, the sculptor was of great fame..."

Shizuru nodded idly again, conscious of a terrible dislike rising within her as she noticed the man with them trying to move closer to her once more-or rather, to move closer to her Otomeian companion. It took all of her famed *cool* not to send him a withering glare at the act. Instead, she sped up her walk a little, which prompted her bodyguard to do the same. To her chagrin, Takeda did it as well.

*Upon my word, she thought. The man is like a leech!*

She clenched her teeth, resisting the very honest, instinctive urge to kick him away from the girl. So suddenly had the epiphany of Takeda's intentions burst upon her that she forgot even to take a moment to analyze the emotions it provoked, as she typically did. Rather, she leapt straight into reaction this time, a thrill of annoyance running through her veins.

*So that is why he acts so strangely around us, and why he wanted to come along now, she thought, seething. Why, the little...*

She took a deep breath to calm herself, and her bodyguard caught the sound. Natsuki turned towards her, studying her face with an expression of innocent curiosity. Shizuru would have taken the time to admire the immensely appealing quality of the girl's face just then, had she not been aware that Takeda would probably do the same.

She decided to shield her from him, failing to notice the irony of her being the one to defend her bodyguard. She beckoned the girl to come even closer, though they were already walking next to each other, and Natsuki complied, perhaps thinking that the older woman wanted to say something without being heard by their other companions. She made no motion to move away, however, when Shizuru simply went on walking afterwards without saying anything.

*He cannot come closer without being considered rude now, Shizuru was thinking triumphantly, her arm pressed against the girl's due to her ploy. That gave her a measure of assurance, although she could still feel the intrusive presence just behind them, dogging their footsteps. If only he would leave! That... that...*

She searched her mind, trying to come up with a suitably pejorative term for the cause of her ire.

*That complete idiot.*

Suda chose that moment to draw her attention and was slightly disconcerted by the brief flash of annoyance he sensed from her when she faced him again. She smiled quickly to defuse the wariness caused by her mask's slip. She still had business to attend

to, after all, which did not concern Takeda but the governor. The sooner she finished it, the better.

And the sooner she could get Natsuki away from her clumsy admirer.

"You have such attractive scenery here, Yuuji-han," she told Suda, who beamed at the compliment. "Most relaxing."

"Yes, don't you think?" he said, putting on his most amiable expression. "This is just what you need, Fujino-san, given how hard you have been working on this campaign. A lot of things must be on your mind."

"Indeed, *a lot* of things," she answered with grim humour, her eyes flicking to the swordsman near them. "It does not help that I find more things to occupy me wherever I go. Really so taxing to one's health, you know."

"Oh, yes, yes," he answered earnestly. "I hope you shall be able to rest here. It is a most peaceful place, my little province."

She gave him a small smile. "That is what I had hoped too, although now that you mention it, I did find some things to occupy me again, here. Oh, but forgive me! I should not trouble you with my small concerns..."

"No, no!" he answered, eager to ingratiate himself. "Please, do tell me how I can be of service."

"Certain things," she said, "have come to attention, Yuuji-han."

"May I ask what they are?" he ventured.

"Oh, merely some trifles," she replied. "Things to do with the usual political concerns... citizenship, money and the like. Tedious things, you know."

He turned to her, his formerly jovial expression replaced by a guarded one. She maintained her smile.

"Still and all," she went on. "One must accord some time to them,



being a servant of Hime, yes? But what am I saying? I need not say such things to one as *conscious* of one's duties as yourself. Surely you understand all this, without my saying it."

He looked almost panicked now, his big, wide face creased with worry. She smiled and inclined her head very slightly to remind him that they were in the presence of others and that he should be careful.

"Of course, oh yes," he replied, shooting their companions a glance. "Shall we move a little away for a moment, maybe? There are times when-when it would be best to be careful when speaking of politics."

"Yes, of course. Even trifles can be dangerous, on occasion."

"Takeda-san," Suda said, looking at the other man. "Would you please excuse us for a while? Just some things we have to talk about. Just the two of us, as a matter of-of-protocol."

"Hm?" Takeda responded, still too focused on Natsuki to listen properly. "Yes. Yes, please go ahead."

Shizuru grit her teeth as she knew what she had to do next. She inclined her head and turned to her bodyguard, silently cursing Suda for having said that the conversation would only be between the two of them.

"Natsuki," she said very gently. "You heard Yuuji-han. Shall you wait for me here? We shall only be a little way off, and it shall not be long."

She watched as the girl's ears seemed to perk up at this, a light frown signalling her displeasure at the notion. Takeda, however, obviously felt otherwise.

"Don't worry, Fujino-san," he said to Shizuru, his grave face looking most impressive-or so he hoped. "I'll be with her."

Shizuru looked at him with a faint lift of her eyebrows, conscious of her cresting aversion to the man. *Don't worry?* She disliked the idea of leaving him with her bodyguard just as much as the latter seemed to dislike the idea of leaving her with the governor. She eyed the

tribune of the plebs with veiled annoyance, wondering how the man could be so galling without knowing it. Or did he know it?

"Quite," she said, after a measured pause. "I confess I was not worried, Takeda-han. I would have thought you would be capable enough to fend for yourself if you were attacked."

Surprise crossed his face as she continued, still pretending to have misunderstood his words.

"However, if you would truly feel safer with my bodyguard in the vicinity, then who am I to refuse such a great swordsman that measure of protection? *Do not worry*," she drawled, watching the colour rise angrily in his face. "Natsuki is strong enough to protect both of you easily."

With this parting shot, she reached for the girl's hand and squeezed it before walking away, Suda at her side. The latter seemed to have missed the show, however, judging from the frown on his face. He was still too concerned about his own hide to pay attention to Shizuru's interaction with Takeda. Unease, on occasion, made a person likely to lose sight of his surroundings-and Suda was very, very uneasy. Little did he know it, but the person responsible for his own unease was feeling quite a bit of the same discomfort herself. She kept her frown inside, though, as she scolded herself silently.

*Now when did I become so possessive?* she pondered, wondering at her own actions. She was rarely this domineering-or, to be more precise, was never so when it came to people. Not with friends, not with relatives, not even with slaves. Apparently only with Natsuki. Was she so jealous when it came to this Otomeian girl, then? She, jealous? Now there was something you hardly saw everyday! The mere idea sent a chill of wonder down her spine. Surely it was something other than jealousy, she hoped, something more rational. All the same, she itched with every step to go back to the girl and drag her away from *the pest*.

*And if that is not jealousy speaking*, she sighed to herself resignedly, *I shall eat my armour, cloak and all*.

"Fujino-san?"

She set aside her musings and turned to the governor. They eyed each other for a few seconds, trying to get each other's measure, and it was clear that it was Shizuru who was found more difficult to put on the scales. Thus Suda spoke first, giving up on reading that pleasantly smiling facade.

"I think this is far enough," he said, gesturing towards the pair they had left a few meters away. "They can't hear us anymore, I'm sure."

"Of course," she said. "Although you never know. They might be able to read lips."

He looked confused again and she smiled. She had a particular enjoyment for confusing people she was about to quiz.

"Well then," she said, readying herself for an unpleasant conversation. "Shall we talk about the sales of the citizenship you have been brokering?"

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A little away from the Shizuru and Suda, a conversation no less unpleasant was taking place. Indeed, it was even questionable as to whether or not it could be called a conversation, as it had more of the quality of a monologue.

"So, uh, Natsuki-san. That's a pretty name, eh?"

Takeda almost sighed as the girl at his side continued to ignore him, her eyes focused on the pair standing a way off from them. He tried again, being a believer in the power of perseverance.

"It's pretty cold," he said. "Are you fine standing here? Maybe we could wait for them inside."

He winced as she snapped him a brief but terrifically glacial look. There could be no misreading the refusal in that glance.

*Jupiter*, he thought wryly. *The weather's not the only thing that's freezing here.* How was he going to get her to talk to him when she seemed so focused on something else? He pondered the question while studying her, marking that her white face was grim with

concentration even while turned away.

It was *such* a lovely face. That was the first thing that had gone through Takeda's mind when he had first seen her, and it remained, an impression etched deeper into his memory with each encounter he had with the girl. She was just so good-looking, he mused. Enough to render him speechless, in fact, and though he had seen a lot of good-looking women, he had never felt his tongue as tied, his throat as dry as when he had first seen her. Oh, yes, she was perfection! One would have to be speechless when faced with her.

The only problem, he discovered soon enough, was that the perfection herself seemed speechless as well. Oh, not due to his awesome presence, or anyone else's, for that matter. Rather, she seemed to have a natural aversion to talking, which explained the nickname General Fujino's army had given her. The only person to whom she actually spoke regularly, they told him, was the commander herself. How envious he had been to hear that! He so wanted to hear the girl talk, to see if her voice was as godlike as her appearance, to see if it was the kind of voice-like her expression-that made a man want to break it, whether in pleasure or pain...

*Damned infatuation* . She made his blood boil, and he could not explain it. He doubted it would make a difference if he could, anyway. The simple fact was that she fascinated him, had fascinated him the first time he laid eyes on her, and fascinated him even more each time after that. Each time he saw her made it worse, for the girl certainly bore watching. It had taken only a few encounters for his admiration to turn into something bordering obsession, and now here he was, suffering the cruel weather-not to mention Suda's blathering just now-just to see more of her. And, if he was very lucky, *hear* something of her.

*But the damn girl actually does live up to her nickname.*

Still, he was not someone who was easily defeated, was he? He could not let himself be daunted by the girl's silence. He had not become a great swordsman by accepting every defeat. He meditated on the problem, his mind coming to the conclusion that this task was similar to a duel: he was the one on the offensive, and the enemy was merely someone of great defensive skill.

Yes, that was it: he needed to try harder.

"Uh, Natsuki-san," he began, taking a step closer. "I see you're going to wait for Fujino-san. She takes you everywhere she goes, doesn't she?"

He rubbed his hands absent-mindedly, trying to work away some of the cold sweat that was there.

"I hope they don't take too long," he went on, starting to take another step towards the girl. "It's too cold here to leave someone waiting like this."

He stopped mid-stride as the girl reached for something from the leather sheathing her thigh, her hand coming up with a small dagger. He stepped back on instinct, realising a second too late that he was not the target.

*Stupid*, he told himself. *Now I look like a jumpy greenhorn.*

The Otomeian still had her eyes trained on the governor and her general, and her ears seemed to be trained on them as well. Takeda took in the way her body tensed with slow fluidity, as if in response to the faint sounds from the other two in the garden. He tore himself away from her image and finally looked at the source of the sounds.

The noises were coming from the governor, who was looking agitated even from a distance. The man's body movements bespoke a strong anxiety, and his loud and hissing whispers were further indication of this emotion. The woman facing him, however, still appeared deathly serene. Takeda frowned at the pair, then turned back to the girl beside him.

*A goddess*, he thought to himself, taking in the beauty of her stance, something the swordsman in him could appreciate as a high expression of athleticism and art. It was tense yet flexible, coiled-up in its power yet casual in its form; he knew without a doubt that she would let fly the dagger she was fingering in her hands and hit the Sosia governor in the eye if she so desired, if the man gave her reason to do it by attacking the woman she considered her charge. Takeda could see the fixedness of her killer's gaze, the eyes lucent

in the dying light. He stared at them and almost lost himself in the emerald depths, averted as they were. His hands felt cold again and he found he could not lift a muscle, enchanted as he was by those great, green eyes. How they stirred his blood! He was wound up, hot with desire, and yet he was also frozen to the spot, and it drove him to reconsider his earlier thought.

*Not a goddess, but a witch.* Her eyes seemed to him those of Circe, and he loved them. He could feel a faint stirring between his legs, and he knew it was her doing. *His Circe.*

"My apologies for having made you wait. I hope you have not frozen yet?"

The melodic words broke the spell and Takeda blinked, shaking his head. He was surprised to see that, during his stupor, the governor and the general had managed to finish their talk and were now standing before him. He grimaced at his own carelessness, a touch of red darkening his cheeks as he pulled the edges of his cloak together.

"No," he said, gruffly. "I-we're fine."

It was Suda who replied to this, looking somewhat disturbed.

"Ah," said the governor. "Yes. That's a relief."

The man gave Takeda a shaky smile.

"A relief," he said again, arousing the swordsman's intrigue.

"Are you feeling fine, Suda-san?" Takeda asked, eyeing him with interest. He forgot about Circe for a moment as he wondered at the sudden change in manner that the governor was exhibiting. Suda actually looked morose, which was a far cry from how he had been earlier. What exactly had they been talking about, he and Fujino? Why had Suda seemed so agitated at the end of their conversation?

Takeda brought his eyes to the female senator, only to be met by her usual, unrevealing smile.

"I fear Yuuji-han has had a touch of indigestion," she told Takeda,

her voice taking on a slight note of concern. "Perhaps Masashi-han, you would be kind enough to help him inside for us? I am not sure I could support Yuuji-han's weight easily, after all, and you seem as though you could do it much better."

His eyes snapped once again to the governor, who did look like he was about to vomit. Then they went to Shizuru, who looked, despite her claim to the contrary, strong enough to support the man's weight herself. She was uncommonly tall for a Himean, for one thing- Takeda himself was a good height for a man but fell several inches short of her-and though she was very slender, Takeda knew enough of her repute as well as of athletic musculature to recognise powerful arms and legs when he saw them.

After a few seconds of appraisal, Takeda wrinkled his brow and nodded. He took the man's arm, guessing correctly that it was on account of their secret conversation that Shizuru was asking him to escort the older senator instead of doing it herself.

"I'll get him inside," he said, taking care to show no exertion on his face in case the dark-haired girl was watching. "You two should go in too, Fujino-san. It's getting dark."

The general thanked him and he went off with Suda, unable to see the smile slip away from her face as she watched them leave.

*And there go two species of parasite*, Shizuru was thinking, only just able to keep from sneering with annoyance. She would have to be more careful around Takeda Masashi, or try to avoid him altogether, so as to keep him away from Natsuki. If he had he only been like the all the others, who generally gave up trying after a single glare from her bodyguard! But the man was apparently persistent to a fault. He had been trailing them for a while now, even before this day. She had simply failed to see it earlier, and now had to suffer for her oversight.

But she was not a person patient at suffering nuisances, much though she pretended to be.

She went over the possibilities. There was always the option of pushing him into going back to Hime early. She would have to check

when the next transport left Argus for Hime, and make sure he left Sosia and booked passage on it. There were surely ways to convince him to do that. She could persuade him to return to his duties in the city, appeal to his more honourable nature and love for the Republic. She could point out the problems with a Hime that was run with what he himself had said to be a very meagre lot of officials, hint at the opportunities to be discovered there if he distinguished himself at such a time of need for the city. Or she could just flat-out ask him to leave, please, because he was being annoying. And if he refused after all of those things, perhaps, ask a certain primipilus to tie him up and shove him into the ship's hold by force and-and-

*And ye gods, what am I thinking?* She berated herself in her mind, almost shocked by her own schemes. Not because she was unaware of her capacity for them: she was a Himean politician, not to mention a very ambitious person, and that meant one had to be capable of certain modes of duress or forcible action. What surprised her was that she could think of doing them for such a thing as this, and to a man who had done nothing *to her*, strictly speaking. What could she gain from such machinations that was so great it justified their doing? A release from a petty annoyance? The ability to walk around Sosia without Natsuki's admirer dogging their footsteps?

*Or... Natsuki herself?*

"Shizuru?"

She remembered, only then, that the girl responsible for all this dark calculation was at her side. Oh, no, that was rather an immature thing to say, was it not? Why should she blame the child for her own faults? No, she decided, Natsuki was innocent here. The Otomeian most likely had no idea, in fact, of the emotions she was able to stir up in her charge.

Not that said charge had much of a better understanding of them, either.

Setting aside the thoughts disturbing her for the moment, she turned to the girl. She paused at the familiar flash of metal. There was a dart in Natsuki's hand, one of her small throwing daggers. Her eyes



went to the Otomeian's face, and she read the explanation for the weapon there. Immensely pleased by this show of protectiveness-especially in light of her own recent burst of possessive feeling-she felt her earlier irritation slipping away under the girl's gaze, dropping from her like melted snow.

"Oh, my dear, dear Natsuki," she said quietly, a smile coming to her lips. "Is that for my sake, or is it because Takeda-han was annoying you again?"

The girl smirked, showing that she shared the joke. So *she* had noticed! Shizuru cursed herself again for having failed to mark his infatuation before the girl herself. Then she might have been able to take care of him earlier and spared herself the irritation.

"Were you so worried about me that you had to take it out?" she asked as the girl slid the dart into its sheath again. "Were you worried that Suda-han would try something?"

Natsuki nodded.

"You silly girl," Shizuru said, giving the younger woman a dashing smile. "I would have broken his arm first."

The other grinned at that, her green eyes lighting up.

"But thank you," Shizuru went on, before taking Natsuki's hand and pressing it, feeling the warmth even through the bandages swathing the skin. "I was actually worried about you, too, you know."

A dark eyebrow came up questioningly as Natsuki eyed her with mild surprise, perhaps wondering what the older woman meant by being worried about her. Shizuru took the opportunity to sigh and released the girl's hand.

"I was worried because I feared Takeda-han would try something as well, though in another fashion," she explained rather grimly. "After all, the two of you were alone here. In a rather dark, secluded place. The sort of place where two people, well, try something. Though it seems that you would not countenance anything of the sort, one still worries for your sake. Many of my fellows can be quite crude in their

interests. Not to mention arrogant in the presumption that their status as Himean senators permits them to satisfy every interest that may take them."

The girl seemed to choke, her eyebrows slanting darkly together as she gaped at this black suggestion. Shizuru watched her carefully, noting that she seemed truly dismayed by the idea. Good!

"So I need not worry about you, then?" the older woman asked, keeping a faintly concerned expression on her face. "You draw a lot of interest, Child, little though you may enjoy it, I know. I only worry because it might catch you off-guard, and you too might be prey to the silly belief many have that Himeans-senatorial ones and ones with offices, that is-must be permitted everything."

The girl shot her another glaring look, telling her with it that such was a silly belief indeed.

"Wonderful," Shizuru said, hiding most of her relief because she did not want to be caught out just yet. "Then allow me to assure Natsuki that she need not worry either, for I would not let anyone, Suda-han least of all, *try something* on me."

She paused to swallow a chuckle, knowing the girl would be getting confused soon.

"I am flattered, Natsuki-" here her smile grew wider "-that you would be so affected by such a thing. I did not think you to be the jealous type, and here you take out a dagger at one small instance."

A puzzled look told her the girl was wondering what she was talking about now.

"Rest assured that only you can take me aside in the snow," she promised, trying to suppress a giggle at the comprehension slowly dawning on her companion's face. "Only you may try something on me, I promise you . "

As soon as she had finished, a series of strangled noises made their way from the other's throat, which the Himean took to be the girl's attempts at refuting what had just been stated. Shizuru bit her

tongue to stay the laughter, then paused to watch her companion turn purple before turning away and walking ahead towards the mansion.

"Shall we go in now?" she asked, her voice stifled by the amusement still threatening to erupt from her. "Come along, Natsuki."

It took all of her strength not to show her hilarity as she sauntered, straight-backed and dignified, towards the mansion. She suddenly felt better and a little more like herself, even smiling broadly as she strode through the deep snow. Her feet made small, trudging sounds with each step she took. *Soft sounds*. At the same moment she thought that, she also realised that she could not hear similar sounds from behind her. She stopped walking and looked back, wondering if Natsuki had been so incensed with her jest as to refuse to follow. Had her tease gone too far this time? Surely not! The girl was not the kind to be-

"Ahh!"

Shizuru shook her head dazedly after this small cry. She found herself sitting in the snow. Blinking several times, she vaguely recalled a very large blob of something cold and white hitting her squarely in the face and so suddenly that it had robbed her temporarily of balance.

A shadow loomed over her and she looked up: Natsuki was standing over her with a triumphant smirk. Shizuru opened her mouth in surprise as she realised what had happened. The other smiled evilly and shrugged.

"Shizuru," said the girl. "I tried something."

She held a hand out to the fallen woman, obviously intending to help her up. Shizuru took the offered hand and let her do just that-right before making a sudden tug and pulling the younger woman to the snow as well. The Himean scrambled up as a surprised Natsuki tumbled into a deep drift, rolling into it like a small, dark missile. Shizuru grinned foolishly at this, inwardly cursing the folds of her heavy cloak as they made it more difficult for her to move about and

regain balance.

"Not fair earlier!" she cried, still laughing. "You gave no warning, you little brat!"

She gathered up a handful of snow-probably two or three handfuls' worth, really, given that she had hands commensurate with her height-and packed it quickly. She then launched it at the girl, who was just getting up. The ball of powder hit Natsuki on the head and made her reel until she fell back into the drift. Afterwards, the dark-haired girl half-sat and half-lay there, not even attempting to rise.

"Natsuki," Shizuru called, worried upon receiving no answer. "Are you all right, Natsuki?"

A little concerned that the younger woman had been hurt during the first tumble, Shizuru approached her, only to be pelted by another snowball. She brushed away the chilly remains of the projectile and opened her eyes. At the same moment, Natsuki jumped up and dashed towards her, another clump of snow in hand.

"Oh, no you don't!" Shizuru laughed, meeting the charge. She launched herself at the girl, her hands reaching out to grab the latter's clothes and pulling her once more to the ground. After a flurry of snow and muffled laughter, both of them fell into a drift, their hands still clutching at each other's garments.

"What a mess we are."

Taking a few moments to catch her breath after pronouncing this, Shizuru lay there for a moment, her eyes closed. She realised she was disoriented by their scuffle when looked up and registered only an expanse of greyish white.

*Am I looking up, or down,* she wondered, right before a flash of green caught her attention.

"Ah, there you are, Natsuki."

The girl was leaning over her and had her pinned against the powder-like bank of snow. The Otomeian's mouth was slightly parted, her breathing still heavy from the exertion of their game. The

misting breaths issuing from between her lips bridged the gap between them, and Shizuru revelled in them, amazed that she could both see and feel their warmth.

*Beautiful.*

The thought was unbidden but sincere. She took in every detail of the girl's face, which was a mere foot away from hers. The younger woman was so close that Shizuru could see the white flames banked in the depths of her eyes, could see every hairline depression in the girl's sensuously curved lower lip. The black hair was curtained to one side, and taken with her clothes and complexion, the younger woman had the aspect of a statue carved out of marble and ebony.

She had never seen such beauty, Shizuru decided, nor had she ever wanted to touch another so much. She was about to do so when she realised that the object of her admiration was smiling, mischief glittering in her eyes.

"Natsu-mmph!"

Shizuru laughed and began spluttering as the girl continued to rub snow onto her face, chortling all the while. She did not struggle, however, and let the girl do as she wished. The attack ceased after a few moments and she felt as well as heard the other's delighted giggle-one of victory, she noted-before the small weight on top of her shifted off.

"Was that really necessary?" she chuckled, finally able to open her eyes without having snow dropped onto her face. She was no longer being pinned and she pushed herself up until she was sitting with her back straight and her legs stretched out. "You mean girl..."

She looked at said girl, who was lying beside her and smirking happily. Shizuru smiled at this, very much enjoying the combination of youth and happiness on Natsuki.

"I should get you for that," she threatened, putting on a very clearly false anger when Natsuki merely lifted an eyebrow and made a face that dared her to take revenge. "That was cold."

"Mmm," was the only answer.

"But it was amusing." She stopped, shaking her head. "No, rather, it was fun."

She brushed a few trace amounts of snow from her hair with her hands, then grinned as something came to her. She looked at her supine companion.

"Oh," she said. "Would you believe I have never played in the snow before, Natsuki? I just thought of it now."

Natsuki lifted her eyebrows and smiled, making another humming sound. Shizuru nodded at the silent query.

"I suppose you must do it all the time, though," she surmised as she turned her face to the rapidly darkening sky. "In your beautiful, snowy Otomeia."

The answer came a few seconds later.

"No."

Shizuru shifted her position so that she was sitting straight again.

"Really?" she asked.

Natsuki nodded.

"I see. That is too bad." She grinned after a moment. "But we are playing now."

She reached out swiftly and Natsuki shut her eyes, the tightly-pressed lips showing she expected Shizuru to do the same thing she had done to the older woman. The girl's eyes shot open, however, when she felt Shizuru's hand cupping her cheek instead. She looked lost then, and bewildered by the gesture. She looked, thought Shizuru, innocent and adorable and very young.

"Are you cold?" she asked the girl, stroking the warming skin with a thumb. "Do you feel cold?"

Natsuki shook her head slowly, her colour rising magnificently against the snow.

"I see. That is good."

The girl said nothing to this and merely turned her eyes away. She refused to meet Shizuru's gaze, but the latter did not mind. In fact, she felt quite content just then.

She could feel the burning cheek leaning subtly into her touch, after all.

## Chapter 16

*Dear me, another long-delayed update. I fear they shall be coming at this pace for a while, you see, given everything that is taxing me these days. This also means I shall return to my old (well, actually... usual) practice of uploading first drafts, such as this chapter. My apologies for this and thanks to the reviewers.*

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### **Notes:**

**1. Augury** - The modern definition holds this to be the practice/art of divining from omens or signs (such as bird sightings) what the future holds. That is the definition used in this chapter.

**2. Dura lex sed lex** - A well-known phrase. It means "the law is hard (but/and) that is the law".

**3. Talent** - Used to measure gold and silver in Latin times; one talent is the load of gold/silver that a man can carry.

**4. NOTE on Slavery** - The Latins, as most people in those times, usually had slaves for their servants. These slaves were often foreigners from defeated nations, people bought from slave-traders, and the like. This does not imply that the slaves were treated badly. Many were treated fairly well and some even valued.

Being slaves, some could and would suffer occasional abuse (as we, with our contemporary notions of human rights, would understand it). Floggings could happen, for instance, usually for punishment if the slave did something that displeased his/her owner, although it would only be considered abusive in Ancient Roman times if it went beyond the permissible degree of punishment (which could be interpreted quite arbitrarily). Rarer would be the odd crucifixion of an unfortunate slave by an intemperate master. Forced sexual favours were likely, too, although most upper class owners refrained from the practice-or at least, from making it public knowledge-since it was frowned upon (but not condemned) in the



*highest echelons of society.*

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## ***Inter Nos***

*par ethnewinter*

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When Shizuru first made up her mind to loathe Takeda Masashi, she did so with a faint reluctance courtesy of her conscience. The fact that the man had not actually insulted her person galled Shizuru into guilt and led her to vacillate between two stances towards him: hate and simple wariness. What strengthened her original resolution towards the former attitude was the insult- *still an indirect one*, she noted- of the swordsman trying to follow her and Natsuki around Sosa. Still, she had to admit that he was unfailingly genial if absurdly clumsy during those times. Sometimes, she found herself wishing that he had no geniality at all, for then she would have an excuse to send him off with a flea in his ear.

*Although I wonder if you can put a flea in another flea's ear*, she would think dryly, eyeing the man she had come to think of as a two-legged parasite- or rather, a three-legged one, as her wit would later put into her head. The man could stick like burr if given a chance. Though she would have liked to close off all chances of that with finality, she knew she had yet to find a pretext, or an acceptable one to her more principled side at least, that would let her do so. So the burr-cum-flea stuck, much to her chagrin.

Truth be told, her wavering over the matter prevented her from actually showing him hostility- outright, that is. She was aware that some of her dislike was so powerful that it slipped even her control sometimes, but she was also aware that it did so in a subtle way, which meant that most people failed to notice. Takeda himself was among these people.

Shizuru was grateful for this at first, because she had yet to truly strengthen her resolve to hate him. Had she known that he would give her cause to do so a scant four days after the incident that first

led to her ire, she might have been less indecisive in her treatment. But she had no way of knowing, of course, and there were no premonitions to warn her. Not that she thought of omens, like most people did, as foretelling the future. Though she did have a good knowledge of augury, she did not really believe in it. It was, she thought, a pitiful thing to rely on such arbitrary interpretations of fortune rather than determining one's fortune oneself.

In any case, she began that particular day with little thought for Takeda Masashi. She busied herself with seeing to a certain matter in the morning and simply stayed in her room with Natsuki for the afternoon, having to come of late to prefer the Otomeian's company to all others. They passed the time with her reading a copy of *Iphigenia* aloud. The girl listened keenly to the story even though she pretended not to be so interested at first. Her eyes betrayed her, however: they sparkled like cut emeralds spun at end of a cord.

Shizuru stopped at one point in her reading, deciding to tease her enthralled listener.

"Perhaps we should stop here," she said. "I have bored you for long enough, Natsuki."

The girl started and frowned.

"It is fine," she said, pointing her chin to Shizuru as if to say that the latter should go on. The Himean pretended not to believe her, however, and went on to say that Natsuki need not lie for her sake.

"I know it is such a dull story," she said, trying not to giggle and give it away. "And I am no lively reader. You need not be so kind, Natsuki."

Having said this, she made as if to put the tome away. A small sound of negation stopped her in the act.

"No," Natsuki said, looking embarrassed and discomfited. "No. Please, Shizuru."

She said this with the faintest trace of a pout on her lips, her brow wrinkled. Although Shizuru had been planning to tease her for a bit

longer, the older woman relented at the sight. Nodding at the girl, she returned to reading the story, consciously putting a little more effort into her narrative. She was later rewarded by a glance at her companion's face, which had the appearance of someone absolutely caught up in the tale.

They were nearly finished when there was a knock on the door and in burst the senior legate, an exasperated look on her face.

"All right, I give, I can't take it anymore!"

Shizuru gave her friend an amused look at the outburst. She turned to Natsuki.

"Well, Natsuki, it appears I am a terrible story-teller after all-see how it managed to displease even Chie-han at a distance," she quipped.

Chie ignored her friend's comedy.

"It's been four days," the senior legate went on, starting to pace. "Four days of inquiry and thinking. And no, I still haven't found out what you told Yuuji-san. So, tell me already, for Jupiter's sake. You win. There! You win."

The other chuckled at this explanation, shaking her blonde head: "So I do."

"Don't you ever get tired of winning?" Chie asked, laughing as well. She pulled out the other chair at the table where Shizuru herself was seated. "I knew it was a bad idea to take you up on that little dare of yours. The only thing I had going for me was that there was no money involved. But, *oh* !" She clutched the fabric over her chest, rolling her eyes theatrically. "My pride!"

They laughed again as the legate sank into the seat.

"To be fair, I did think you had a fine chance," Shizuru said. "I honestly thought you might be able to find out what I said to him without resorting to asking me. I have often been amazed by your ability to sniff out the most obscure rumours or news, Chie-han. I thought you would amaze me again this time."

Chie sighed.

"Well, it appears you're wrong," she replied. "Though I guess that's little consolation-even when you're wrong, you still win."

Again her friend chuckled.

"Now, the dare's over. So I'm actually asking you," Chie said, putting her elbows on the table as she peered from behind steeped hands. "Shizuru-san. What *did* you tell him?"

The other woman smiled at the blunt question.

"Merely what I was duty-bound to tell him," she replied. "That he had to stop whatever he was doing wrong, before it came back to bite his, well, rear."

"Really."

"Yes."

"That's it."

"Yes."

"As intimidating as you are, I doubt that would have been enough to put him in that state," Chie said. "He was pale as death when he returned, you know."

"Oh dear. I do hope he is feeling better now."

"Stop teasing me already!"

Shizuru laughed: "Forgive me."

"So what did you tell him? I know you probably did warn him off in that roundabout way you have, but what else did you say to get him so frightened? He's been acting like a little mouse these days-almost a model governor, you know, *and* a little mouse." Chie tilted her head pensively, thinking of the governor's fairly exemplary behaviour in the recent days. "You threatened him, didn't you? You did, tell me you did."

Shizuru shrugged, her smile showing the answer. Chie clapped.

"What did you say?" she asked again. "Let me guess. That you'd take it to the Courts?"

Shizuru nodded. "Oh, yes, and I told him to be more careful."

The other smiled, waiting.

"Although if I found out he was being 'more careful' in the wrong way, I said I would personally express to him our-I speak as a servant of Hime, of course-extreme displeasure."

She stopped to let the legate chuckle, and went on, smiling too.

"Of course, if he desisted from all manner of illegal activity now and gave me a full list of all those who had gained the citizenship through his little business, I said that I would perhaps conveniently forget about lodging a case against him in the Bribery Court once we return to Hime. Then he would have a fair chance at continuing his political career. As long as he refrains from doing anything like that in the future, of course."

Chie narrowed her eyes and blew a lock of sooty hair away from them. It fell back in the same place as before, but she made no move to brush it away. Shizuru held back her smile, conscious of the other's sense of anti-climax.

"Well..." the legate hummed, leaning back in her chair. "So that's it? I didn't think you'd let him off the hook that easy, though. But, you're right, I guess it's reasonable. Otherwise, he could just milk the province until his time is about up, then make a run for it. After all, you can't arrest a governor until his term is finished, and if he already knows that someone's waiting for that time to arrest him, he'll be making preparations to scuttle away as soon as possible."

She shrugged and ended by saying for punctuation: "Oh, well."

There was a slight twitch in Shizuru's lips as she replied to this.

"But all I promised was that I would forget about lodging a complaint against him when we return," she said suggestively. "Is it not so?"

Chie's brows quirked, a spark of interest coming to the brown eyes beneath them.

"So?" she echoed.

" So I have already submitted a detailed report to Tokiha-han about the matter. It was in the last batch of letters we sent to Hime."

"Jupiter!"

"Where?"

Chie shot forward in her chair, trying not to laugh with the woman in front of her.

"Shizuru-san!" she cried, trying to feign anger and failing miserably due to several ill-timed chortles. "Anyway, no, really, did you really do that?"

The younger woman nodded, sending several blonde tresses waving softly.

"You're just amazing, you know," Chie whistled.

"Actually, I do," said the younger woman, her eyes dancing. "Although I am gratified you share my opinion."

The legate snorted. She looked at the other occupant of the room, who was sitting cross-legged on the bed.

"How you manage to put up with her teasing is beyond me, Natsuki-san," she told her. "Sometimes, she's just hopeless."

She turned back to her friend and they shared a smile.

"My apologies, Chie-han. You know I am only jesting. Now to return to the topic, I thought it was the best course of action. You see," Shizuru explained, "all I said was that I would not bring the case formally to the court myself. I said nothing about sending it to one who would be able-and very willing-to do that in my stead. And I had to send it. Would you not have done so?"

"Mm, yes," Chie answered, with a faint smile. "It's rather too shameless, what he did. Our citizenship isn't a pasty to be sold at every corner!"

"Tokiha-han will know when the time is right to arraign Yuuji-han," Shizuru said contentedly. "She has a good knowledge of the delicacy of such matters."

"She *is* a veteran of the Bribery Court, after all." Chie lifted her eyebrows with the look of a conspirator. "So, naturally, Suda Yuuji has no idea you've done this."

"Naturally," was the reply. "You did not think I would really let him be, Chie-han? He cannot be allowed to gain a position in government again. There are better men and women out there who deserve office more, so I think, especially for such a province as this. It is germane to my interests as commander of the Northern Provinces' defence that the provincial governors with whom I work are efficient as well as reliable enough to stay away from crimes of this type. We have no idea of how long we shall stay here. As such, it serves me well to set up a web of people I prefer to ones I do not."

Chie tapped a finger on the table and angled her head at the younger woman.

"I had forgotten," she finally said, "how ruthless you can be, Shizuru-san."

"Am I?"

"Now, I agree with what you did," Chie said. "Definitely! I'm relieved you did that. Sosia would be the better for it, I agree."

Shizuru smiled and waited.

"But," Chie continued, "don't you think-and I'm *not* gainsaying your actions here, mind you!-don't you think it was enough to hold that threat over his head instead of actually acting on it, if your goal *was* to secure a more preferable state of affairs in the area as far as the officials of the provinces are concerned? After all, he might become useful in the future, and I hardly think he'd dare to do anything of the

sort afterwards, knowing you of all people are watching him."

"Keep him beholden to me, you mean?" Shizuru asked.

"Well, yes."

The younger senator took some time to mull over the idea, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

"As I see it, I do not think I would care to have such a person among my allies," she said at length but with firm decision. "Gratitude, particularly that kind of gratitude, is a feeble thing. It often leads to antipathy. People often detest those to whom they are beholden."

She exhaled softly.

"I do agree that any rational person put in like circumstances would accede to the conditions I gave Yuuji-han," she continued. "Yet I fear there is a problem with that scenario. My conditions for letting him 'off the hook' were an appeal to his logic. People are rarely logical."

"Dear, dear, becoming pessimistic about the nature of man, Shizuru-san?" Chie put in, chuckling at this assessment. "Didn't know you had it in you, humanistic philosopher that you are."

Shizuru bowed her head with a chuckle.

"It is necessary to be wary in dealing with people," she answered. "That is to say, I wish to be as thorough as possible. Even if I did let him go now, with a warning not to do like things in the future, what is to prevent Yuuji-han from simply devising more convoluted schemes later where it would be more difficult to trace his involvement? And after meeting him, well, I feel that he would do exactly that."

"Is that what your gut tells you?" Chie asked, knowing full well that the other woman was usually correct in her evaluation of people's characters. "That he's one dog that won't stay trained for long?"

The general lifted an eyebrow at this.

"What an interesting way of putting it," she said, before lifting a hand



contemplatively to her cheek. "I cannot say it is *just* a gut feeling, Chie-han, or not precisely. I am afraid I distrust that term."

"Why?"

"Let me see," Shizuru began. "I think it is due to the fact that gut feelings are said to be purely random instincts, thrown to one by Fortuna. Whereas I believe that these things are actually the product of unconscious rational processes in our minds, where things we notice subconsciously are stored without our being truly aware of it. Things we notice but do not remember noticing."

"Hmm. You mean perhaps things we think too trivial to really pay attention to? Like what colour tunic Nao was wearing the other day and what the innkeeper was wearing in that last tavern I visited and so on?"

"Yes. We decide not to pay attention to them, but in doing so, we already have. So they are taken into the unconscious, or perhaps that intermediary part of the mind between waking and sleeping. That strange part of the mind that we do not control. We must all have one. Else why would fevers bring on such odd visions? Why do we sometimes dream the things we do?"

"You don't believe in dreams sent to us by the gods, Shizuru-san?" Chie asked.

"I believe some dreams may be portentous. I doubt most are. I once dreamt I had an ape's tail. I find my rear lacking that accoutrement even now, and believe me when I say I inspected more than once."

The other Himean was laughing, as was the girl listening to them. The latter only did it more quietly.

"Portents aren't always literal," Chie pointed out.

"And portents are not always portents, but things only made out to seem like them by random interpretations. Witness the regularity of differing interpretations from seers and mystics for the same event or supposed sign. Is it not the case for Senate as well, sometimes? The official interpretation is merely the one that gets in first. Who is

to say then that any interpretation reading the event as a pure coincidence is of less validity?"

"Fair enough. So not all visions are sent to us by the gods."

"And not all our visions are under our control."

"Right. Go on."

Shizuru continued what she was saying earlier.

"Returning to the matter of things we notice but not consciously," she said, "sometimes they are processed, in my opinion, without us really knowing it. Used as factors in a formula-again, by that part of the mind I described-and then we have the product thrown up into our consciousness, without knowing that we ourselves arrived at it through a kind of non-volitional logic. So, I think that it is more proper for me to say that, post-calculation, that is what I think of Yuuji-han. Hence I am afraid this is one time I cannot risk being lenient."

The other nodded, seeming to agree.

"Yes, of course," she told Shizuru. "You're right. About that gut thing and about him. I don't know why I even brought it up. Why, I'd love to send the fool to exile right now, for what he's done! They sully Hime, all these curs who worm their way into government. Then we get the rebellious provinces or maybe the complaints that become revolts later on... Oh, yes, good riddance to the man, I say."

Later, she asked: "So who else knows you've already sent the information to Mai-san?"

"For now, just you."

"I see. That's wise." A curious look. "You didn't tell The Princeps? Or Himemiya?"

"I forbore telling Reito-han because I do not think he needs to know about it yet," Shizuru replied. "And he must have his hands full of rather unruly senators at the moment, with no consul to oversee the sessions of the House. He shall learn of it in his own way, at any

rate. I have no doubt of that."

"Right."

"As for the other, I did tell Tokiha-han to tell Chikane if she thought she would need advice or help with the matter. It is not so grave that I need to trouble so many of our good colleagues, and Chikane is busy these days, being urban praetor."

The other agreed, sighing at the neatness of Shizuru's resolution to the matter.

"All right," she said, lifting her arms and stretching. She groaned with satisfaction as she felt a few joints pop, her eyes falling shut.

"You've wrapped everything up so well, Shizuru-san. Typical! Ahh..."

It was the cold, she thought, that made her feel rigid all over. She felt a little stiff at the hinges, like armour left in the snow to rust. She shook her head at the idea and moved her shoulder gingerly, clapping a hand over it.

"You know, I've the feeling I've been getting paler," she said nonchalantly, earning herself a curious look from her friend. "It's the climate. Lack of good, clear sun. Don't you feel the same?"

Shizuru lifted her own hands in response, studying them.

"I suppose my hands do seem a little whiter these days," she told Chie, making out the traceries of veins that showed a faint blue beneath her skin. "Although I cannot really tell, Chie-han. One does not see oneself as objectively as other people."

Chie nodded. "Well, since I'm 'other people'-oh, what bad grammar!- I suppose I can tell you you're paler too."

"Am I?"

"Yes." The legate grinned and pointed to herself. "Me?"

Shizuru took a moment to look her over.

"Yes," the younger woman said, afterwards. "I daresay you are right, Chie-han. Your countenance has lightened a shade."

"Not as much as Suda-san's did that night, I hope," Chie giggled, grinning wickedly. "He looked like he'd been powdered with flour, you know. And it didn't help at all that it was Takeda-san with him, because that one's so dark."

For an infinitely small space of time, she thought she saw irritation flash across her friend's features. Before she could comment on it, however, Shizuru spoke.

"Masashi-han has been postponing his departure for a while now, has he not?" said the younger woman, sounding very casual. "I think another group heading for Argus and intending to go from there to Hime left the other day too."

Chie voiced affirmation.

"I wonder why when Homura-san tells me all he does is grumble about this place," she sighed, noting Shizuru's look of interest at the statement. "He says that Takeda-san thinks this an awful country. All the snow, cold, foreigners, and so on. The usual complaints. Added to which is his gripe that the climate is stiffening his sword arm."

Shizuru's eyes narrowed ever so slightly, a hint of something sharp flashing-like the glint of steel hiding deep behind the trees, an assassin lurking in the background and in the dark.

"Then one wonders if Masashi-han would not be happier back in Hime," she told Chie. "He need not stay here if he feels that way."

A pause, then she added words: "There is *nothing* keeping him here."

Chie found herself surprised by the hostile undertone. From anyone else, she would have queried it; from Shizuru, she decided it would be best not to remark. Sometimes, she had the feeling that underneath that pleasant façade her friend kept, there lurked something dangerous just waiting to be prodded into waking. She

had no explanation for this feeling, of course, unless Shizuru's own theory about nonvolitional thought processes was considered. But whatever the case, she did consider it only rational to follow the adage about letting sleeping beasts lie.

*Better to try and figure it out myself*, she thought, going through the possibilities that could explain the apparent annoyance Shizuru had just let slip. She could think of no reason for the younger woman to be unfriendly to the man whose name had just been mentioned, however. What piqued her interest further was her realisation that the younger woman had been acting slightly cool towards Takeda lately. Oh, most people would not notice it, but Chie knew better. Shizuru was unfailingly warm to most persons, especially to fellow senators. So when she lost a bit of that warmth, she still appeared most courteous-yet it was the slight loss of warmth that gave her away.

*Well, in this case, anyhow*, Chie added, thinking that this was perhaps the most noteworthy incident she had yet seen to fit that theory about her friend. What had caused this? Had Takeda Masashi said anything to incur Shizuru's wrath? That was unlikely. Few people had the courage-or stupidity-to either offend or insult her friend to her face. Shizuru tended to inspire a great deal of awe, which meant a great deal of care.

She studied her friend carefully, trying to read what was going on behind that wonderfully aristocratic and serenely impassive face, trying to tease some meaning from the smouldering red eyes that met her gaze equably.

*And really, who am I kidding*, she thought with dry humour. *Reading Shizuru-san is just about as easy as reading Egyptian: squiggly line, big eye, jug, something-that-looks-like-an-owl, another squiggly line...*

To change the subject, she asked if her friend did not want to eat.

"The clock says it's close to supper, and I haven't eaten yet-save for a little snack that hardly counts as lunch," she said, after gesturing to the water chronometer on the nightstand. "No breakfast either. Just kept forgetting about meals today, would you believe?"

"Heavens! You must be starving."

"I do think I could eat a horse at this point."

"Then please stay away from our cavalry camp."

Shizuru looked over her shoulder and addressed Natsuki, who was still perched on the bed they shared-a little detail of their accommodations that Chie was aware of and which intrigued her to no end.

"Natsuki," said Shizuru. "Would you like to continue the book later? We should eat now, perhaps."

The girl nodded just as a giggle came from the direction of the senior legate. Shizuru turned to look at her friend.

"It's the way you talk," Chie explained. "Like you're always asking for Natsuki-san's permission to do things instead of it being the other way around."

Shizuru stood up, amused, and said, "Is that how it seems?"

"Yes."

The legate got to her feet as well and watched the bodyguard come up to take her position beside her friend-who gave the girl a wink.

"I suppose it is only natural," Shizuru said, keeping her eyes on the Otomeian. "In a way, you might say that Natsuki is my keeper."

Chie grinned at the dark-haired girl's weak scowl.

"And vice-versa," she chuckled. She pushed away her chair and threw her cloak around her shoulders before walking to the door. The two followed.

"Where do you want to eat?" she asked, stepping out of the room. "If you want, I can take you to that place Nao and I go to. It's a little distance from here but the food's well worth the walk. Delightful!"

"Who am I to refuse delight? Lead on, Chie-han."

They went their way, grateful that the size of the gubernatorial residence prevented them from running into too many people in the corridors. Most of those they did meet during their walk were servants who bowed to them as they went along. After a while, they found themselves outside, walking the path that led out of the premises. Only then did Chie ask what Shizuru had been doing the past few days, for the younger woman had seemed to be busy.

"I have been finding all of the illegal citizens I could," Shizuru replied. "I am glad to say I have covered a good deal of those on the list Yuuji-han gave me-though more than a third are still unaccounted for."

"Is that what you've been doing?" Chie asked, surprised. "I haven't gotten wind of any floggings."

"That is because there were none," came the reply, prompting her to send a shrewd look to her companion.

"Himean law states that such an act is punishable by flogging," Chie said, thoughtfully. "Among other things."

The other let out a breath that curled in the air.

"Yes, but I preferred to use more discreet measures," she answered, her long, steady strides never faltering. "Even the law can and should bend under certain circumstances. I am not a believer, I am afraid, in the saying we have in our courts: *dura lex sed lex*."

They walked on for a little more before Chie finally realised that no explanation would come unless she asked for it. She deigned to ask, but received a question instead of an answer.

"Why do you think people wish to be Himean citizens?" Shizuru asked her, prompting a quick response.

"To avail of the privileges that come with being one."

"True. We are indeed a strong and fortunate nation, and our citizenship is among-if not the-most advantageous in the world," Shizuru answered, brows furrowed. "So we understand why many dream of attaining it. It is for this reason that some foreigners throw

in their lot with us during battles and fight at the front lines, hoping to win the award of citizenship by putting their lives at stake."

"Or," Chie replied, half-jokingly, "they simply pay an unscrupulous politician enough money to get him to put them on the census rolls."

"Indeed," Shizuru said. "And, obviously, that would be the easier way to do it. But sometimes one must inquire a bit deeper into matters, to see where one stands. It is true that almost everyone wants our citizenship, yet not everyone has been willing to risk acquiring it through illicit methods-the harshness of the law is one deterrent, naturally. So one wonders why, when there are people who do try despite said deterrent."

A stiff gust of wind blew past them. Shizuru paused to look at the other member of their trio, asking her if she did not need a cloak to protect herself from the cold. Natsuki shook her head with an amused expression, and Shizuru went on talking.

"I am not such a fool, Chie-han, that I would pretend to be indignant with people who simply saw a practical way to their goal and took it," she resumed. "Yes, I am aware it is a crime, so I must still treat it with disapproval, generally. But I am also ethically bound to find out why they wanted it badly enough to flout the law and take-or rather, *buy* the citizenship."

"Take the case of one of the men on the list, for instance," she went on. "He needed the citizenship for his four children, two of whom were ill. What they call the mental diseases, I believe. The man, a widower, could hardly support all of them with his wages forever. Hence, he saved and borrowed money to pay Yuuji-han for the citizenship. It would be a great help to have it, after all."

She looked feelingly at her friend and was gratified to see that the other woman had a look of comprehension on her face.

"The grain dole," Chie murmured, referring to the cheap grain issued by Hime to all its citizens. "And the reduced prices for most basic goods in these parts for Himean citizens."

Shizuru nodded at this.



"That would have made a big difference with so many mouths to feed," she said. "There were other cases, but I think that you understand now, Chie-han. I could not possibly flog the man for such a thing."

The legate let out a small breath, smiling crookedly.

"No," she said. "No, you couldn't, could you? What did you do to him?"

Shizuru looked relaxed.

"Ah," she sighed. "I think you know."

"Yes, I think I do-and just so you know, I approve," Chie said, smiling, before a sobering thought came to her. "But what about the others, Shizuru-san? You can't tell me all of them were like that man."

"Of course not." The younger woman blew through her nose, expressing displeasure. "I am afraid I had to apply the law more strictly there, although there was still no flogging. I would prefer for this matter to be dealt with quietly, after all, and without breeding too much enmity among the foreigners who clamour for our citizenship. To confiscate property, or levy a fine... those are two things. To do both of these things while also wounding a person's dignity by flaying his back is another, and is likely to make him hate you and yours forever. In most cases, that is. Can we really afford to breed such enmity, especially at a time when war threatens us here?"

Chie nodded to show that she understood, and looked around. They were on the street now and she instructed her friend to turn right at the next corner.

"Spoken like Solomon," she mumbled, causing Shizuru to laugh. "You do know him, of course."

"The fabled 'Wise King' of the Jewish peoples, yes, although I am astonished you do."

"Two of my favourite scribes back home are Jewish. They talk a lot while they're copying books. Mostly about their people's heroes,

which is how I heard of that character."

The general flashed her teeth as they reached the corner and said: "Well, I have heard of him myself. Although I wonder if he would have put away the money gained from the offenders' fines and added it to his war chest."

"Is that what you did?" Chie asked, grinning too. "Smart of you! You're the one who instituted the punishment, so you should be the one to collect. Besides, you were acting as a senator of Hime. You have more right to it than Yuuji-san does at this point, even if this is his province."

Shizuru inclined her head to this.

"How is our war chest?" Chie asked later. "It seems quite rich to me, but I'm no abacus-toter and I can't be too sure."

"It is, as you say, *quite rich*," Shizuru told her. "In fact, a little more than 'quite'. Over the past few days, you see, Shikishima-han and the other plutocrats of Sosia have been paying me visits-as well as gifts. All of which I have added to our reserve funds."

Chie sighed happily: "Wonderful!"

"Indeed. So you need not worry."

"Rumours are starting to get around, though."

Shizuru lifted her eyebrows in enquiry.

"About the Senate cramping your funds." The legate held up a hand and made as if batting an annoying invisible insect away. "Of course, we expected that to get around. It's not like we're the only ones receiving mail about news from home. It was inevitable that the soldiers would learn where those asses in the House are blowing their wind these days."

"What do the soldiers say?" the general asked curiously. "Are they afraid they shall not be paid?"

Chie looked delighted.

"In the words of our favourite primipilus," she said. " *They don't give a rat's fart which way the Senate's farting* ."

The two of them burst out laughing and she went on.

"They'll soldier for you, General," she said, snapping her young friend a jaunty salute followed by a gentle pat on the back. " I'll soldier for you. I know you have something going on in that head of yours, and that whatever it is, you shan't be leaving the legionaries hanging. Don't worry about the rumours getting to them-they came here for you, didn't they?"

She watched the fiery red eyes soften as Shizuru gave her a genuine, grateful smile.

"My thanks," the young woman said with sincerity. "To all of you."

"Ahh, now." Chie waved it away, pleased by the younger woman's reaction. "We know. As I said, don't worry about it."

She looked up and saw the tavern just a few houses away.

"There it is, Shizuru-san" she said, pointing to the brown walls of the building. "And look who's there-Ers-chan!"

Her call carried easily through the early evening air, reaching the blonde girl standing outside their destination. Said girl showed a dazzling smile in response and waved to them, seeming to gesture to her companion-another girl, this time in white Otomeian garb-to wait.

"Good evening," she said, once the new arrivals reached her. She bowed deeply to both women. "I didn't think I'd run into you here, Fujino-san, Chie-san."

"Neither did we," Chie answered. "Yuuki?"

"Oh, she went out with some of the other soldiers. To drink somewhere, I think."

Chie would have said something about Nao's outstanding capacity to imbibe liquor had it not been for Erstin's companion, who

suddenly stepped forward and bowed her head with great dignity to Shizuru's bodyguard.

"Natsuki," she said, in a tone that yet seemed to hint at familiarity. Natsuki, for her part, simply lifted her eyebrows in acknowledgement.

It was Erstin who explained it for the other Himeans standing with them.

"Oh, yes, you haven't met Nina yet, have you?" she began, speaking in a slightly embarrassed manner. "Nina, this is Fujino-san and Chie-san."

She addressed the two elder women once more and added: "Nina is Natsuki-san's cousin."

Two pairs of eyebrows flew up readily, and the younger of the two Otomeians suddenly found herself under the scrutiny of two hugely interested gazes: one crimson, one earthen. She flinched, moving a step backwards.

"Ah, where are my manners?" Shizuru said apologetically, realising she had unintentionally made the girl uncomfortable. "Forgive me, but it is simply that I could not help but take note of your similarities to Natsuki. I did not mean to stare at you so, Nina-han."

Soft amber eyes met hers before flicking downwards respectfully.

"No," said the girl with a bow, her Himean just as perfect as her cousin's. "I do not mind, General." She bowed to Chie afterwards. "Legate."

"This one *talks*," Chie whispered under her breath, causing Shizuru to stifle a chuckle.

"Don't mind us, Nina-san," Chie told the Otomeian. "We're just eccentric people. I have to say I'm pleased to meet you, at long last. Nao's told me about you, and Erstin here has too."

Nina exchanged a look with Erstin, who was somewhat pink at the moment.

"I admit though," Chie went on, inspecting as politely as possible the two Otomeians standing beside each other. "I'm a little angry she didn't tell me you anything about your appearance. Good looks run in your lineage, apparently," she noted, addressing Natsuki as well. "How striking!"

To general amusement, the pair under scrutiny responded by promptly turning scarlet-at the same time.

"O-oh," Shizuru giggled, covering her mouth with a hand as she tried not to laugh too loudly. "The blush seems to be a family trait too."

Chie managed a nod, pulling her lips inward. It was the youngest Himean present who proved most charitable of all and saved the two Otomeians, suggesting that they all go into the tavern now and have dinner as they seemed to all be outside the tavern for it. Thus it was that a short time later, all five of them were seated comfortably at a table and waiting for their victuals, the cousins' embarrassment forgotten.

"I was wondering," Chie said, sipping some wine. "How much longer we're going to stay here in Sosia."

"Eager to move, Chie-han?"

Chie waved that away.

"I'm simply curious," she replied to Shizuru. "We have one more province to go to, and knowing you, you're probably more eager to see it than I am. We weren't able to sightsee when we disembarked at the ports there, after all."

"True," Shizuru replied. "I suppose we can be off in a week or so, although I shall have to check how the routes to Argus are. If they are passable, that is, to an army in winter. One can never be too sure, and it would be a foolish thing to force our way through when it might simply be better to wait for a while."

Erstin joined the conversation gently, asking them to excuse her for her interruption.

"Nao-senpai told me that the present governor of Argus is a friend of

yours, Chie-san," she said. "As well as yours, Fujino-san."

The two elder women nodded, suddenly looking pleased.

"Yes, she is an old friend, though she might not like that particular phrase being used to describe her, given the modifier," Chie revealed. "I can't wait to see her too. She's great fun if you recall, Shizuru-san."

"Oh, do I ever!" said Shizuru, laughing. "I confess I am curious as to how she is now. How long it has been! A pity she was away when we made our brief pass through Argus."

"I'm sure she's waiting impatiently for us right now," Chie said, lowering her voice slightly with her next words. "Well, it will be a relief to see a proper governor in a properly administered province. Argus looked good to me when we passed. Though, of course, it's hard to tell when you spend barely a day there. Still, it looked well."

Shizuru assented to this just as the tavern's owner came to their table with a servant, bearing their repast. As all of them were hungry and the food looked and smelled so appetising, the conversation was abandoned momentarily for dinner. Even afterwards, however, the discussion could not be resumed. It turned out that Erstin and Nina had to go off quickly. Chie herself admitted that she had somewhere to be, and could not stay.

"Promised a friend I'd come and see him," she explained to Shizuru as they parted ways. "You don't mind, do you? Anyway, you have Natsuki-san here to keep you company."

"Of course, and Natsuki is definitely not poor company, at that," Shizuru replied. "Go on, Chie-han."

Shizuru watched her walk away, then turned to the girl left with her.

"It appears we are by ourselves again, Natsuki," she said, smiling as they began to walk. "Although, if I were to tell you a secret, I do believe I prefer it this way."

Natsuki looked at her curiously.

"Your cousin is an interesting girl," she said. "How old is she?"

There was a short gap of time between the question and the reply.

"Seventeen."

"Another young warrior," Shizuru noted. "Has she been in the army long?"

"Mmh."

"Quite impressive. She *is* an interesting girl." She smiled and added: "But, of course, not as interesting as my Natsuki."

She glanced at her companion to see a blush at her use of the possessive form once more. They walked on for a little more before Natsuki spoke.

"She likes you, I think."

"Does she now?"

"Not-not *like*, that way. But... she likes you," Natsuki struggled to get out, her brow creasing again as she tried to organise her words. Shizuru waited patiently, although she already understood what the girl was trying to say. She still preferred to hear her speak, instead of finishing her sentences for her.

As she waited, she thought of Natsuki's cousin. She had been observing the other Otomeian during the meal and noted that, although Nina was also inclined to brevity in speech, she was still more willing to engage in conversations. Indeed, this was only the start of a long list of differences between the two relatives, despite her statements about their similarities earlier. Nina was not as intimidating, for one thing, and not as striking in her looks as her older cousin, despite the fact that she had her own charms and appeal. She radiated far less coiled-up intensity, displayed much fewer wild glints in her eyes. And she was definitely less subtle. Shizuru had discovered her own Otomeian to be capable of surprising subtlety in observation of others, and she recognised in Nina a lack of that same subtlety: the younger Otomeian could be furtive, yes, as indeed she had been in sending occasional

inspecting glances at Shizuru herself during their meal. Even so, it was furtiveness easily apprehended by someone with a properly sensitised mind.

"Respect," Natsuki finally said. "She respects you, I think. Or admires."

Shizuru hummed with a pleased air.

"That is nice to hear," she told the girl. "I am quite flattered now."

Natsuki nodded, looking relieved that she did not have to explain any further. Again Shizuru marvelled at her companion's discomfort with speech. Even now that they had reached such comfort with each other's presence, when she spoke, her remarks seemed calculated to making the older woman monopolise the dominant end of the conversation. Shizuru was infinitely thankful that they even *had conversations*, but she did find herself noticing sometimes that for every word or nod from Natsuki, she herself let out at least two full-fledged sentences.

Not that she found this particularly uncomfortable, of course. Her only qualm was that she hardly heard as much of the girl as she would have liked to. Thus it was that whenever Natsuki spoke, she tried to savour each note of that husky, attractive voice as though it were a rare delicacy.

*Which it is, really,* she told herself. *I should do well to remember that.*

"Are the two of you close, you and your cousin?" she asked her companion, only to be surprised when the latter looked put out by the query.

"Forgive me," she quickly followed. "Perhaps that was a rude question."

Natsuki shook her head, sending her silky curtain of straight and gleaming hair waving. It was so black, thought Shizuru, who preferred black hair.

"No," the girl said meaningfully, looking at Shizuru with a little colour



still dashing about her wonderful cheekbones. "Not rude. And we-we are fine."

"I see," Shizuru answered, caressing the few syllables to make them more soothing to the girl's ears. "Of course. I understand."

*That is the best word, perhaps*, she thought. *Fine*. Natsuki and Nina had appeared to be fine, throughout dinner. She doubted they would make the cut for 'very close', however. From what she had seen tonight, she felt she had a fairly good guess about Nina's character, which she took to be reticent too-though not in Natsuki's league, certainly.

The younger cousin also spoke, she felt, with a hint of what the senior legate might have called a serious streak. It had been there in her formal replies to their questions, and the slight, official bows of her head to all of the statements addressed to her. It made Shizuru recall how Natsuki had been during their early days together.

She guessed this was perhaps one of the things that prevented the cousins from becoming truly 'close'. Given two people of similarly earnest temperaments, it was unlikely they could hold enough dialogue of the kind that would lead to real intimacy. One had to be a person used to provoking people into speech for either of them to open up, just as she had done with her bodyguard.

She turned to Natsuki.

"I suppose you would like me to finish the story when we get back?" she said with a friendly tone. "Although only a little is left, Natsuki. But I shall try to find other plays afterwards, from the library."

The girl's eyes shone: she was pleased.

"Shizuru," she said softly.

"Yes, Natsuki?"

"How-" She stopped, thought over what to say. "How is it yuh-you read so?"

"Hmm. How exactly do I read?"

"Swiftly."

Shizuru grinned.

"I myself do not know exactly how it happened," she confessed, knowing what the girl meant: it was a common query directed to her, even by her peers. It was not a simple thing to read Himean, given that one had to guess for oneself where one sentence ended and a new one began; even words ran together. "It was simply always so. As soon as I was taught to read, I discovered myself able to read at a glance."

The Otomeian's eyes shone again, this time with a bright and wondering amazement.

"A handy ability, hm?" Shizuru prodded.

"Yes," the girl said with great feeling. "It is."

"Well, I am pleased to offer it in service to you, My Dear," the older woman offered. "I do not mind reading out more tomes for you if you wish it. Why, had I known that you liked literature so very much, I would have read to you before instead of simply prattling on about so many things."

"Buh-but..."

She looked at the girl, who had uttered the word so softly she barely heard it.

"Yes?" she asked.

Natsuki seemed to quicken her steps unconsciously, but the elder woman kept pace.

"I liked... that," the girl finally said, rather lamely.

"Liked what, Natsuki?"

The girl sighed a cloud and Shizuru wished she could catch it on her tongue. Such a thought might have shocked her before, but she only registered it with mild resignation now.

*What odd fancies you do get when you desire someone*, she thought, sighing too. Natsuki's tardy answer came out just then, as her own breath fogged in the air.

"You," she told Shizuru. "Talking."

Later, like an afterthought: "About so many things."

Shizuru felt herself grin.

"Truly, Natsuki?" she asked.

Natsuki nodded seriously before saying, with a quick flash of humour: "*Ookini*."

The older woman laughed, saying the word as well. She felt wonderful, she felt all of a sudden, and thought that the day had been a good one. It was with a light step that she reached the gubernatorial residence, Natsuki at her side. They had already entered the main hall, about to go to their quarters, when a slave came forward and accosted them.

"Oh, I'm sorry, General Fujino," he said, addressing Shizuru with so many bows that he made her dizzy. "Masashi-san was looking for you. He said to ask you if you would speak with him once you arrived."

"Masashi-han?" Shizuru said, irritated by the reminder of her flea's existence at such a juncture: and here it had been shaping up to be a good day! She smiled at the servant, however, and lifted her eyebrows questioningly his way. "Has he been waiting long? Is he waiting even now?"

"Yes, General Fujino," said the man. "He is waiting in the second dining room, the one just around that corner. He's been waiting for a while now. Two or so hours, I think."

The general looked surprised at this piece of intelligence.

"How strange," she said. "And did he give you any indication what it was that he wanted to speak to me about?"

The servant shook his head with conscientious regret.

"He did look a little serious," was all he could tell her. "Like he was thinking of something, thinking hard."

Shizuru was tempted to say that Takeda would indeed find thinking hard. She thanked the man and began walking slowly towards the dining room, trying not to look too unenthusiastic.

"Natsuki. What do you think of Takeda-han?"

She looked at the girl to see her reaction, which was a shrug.

"What does that mean?" she prodded, wanting-perhaps even needing-to get something more definitely negative. "Humour me, Natsuki. What do you think of him?"

She watched as Natsuki made a motion as if to shrug again but stopped. After a short pause, the girl finally spoke.

"I do not," Natsuki said.

Shizuru was confused.

"Do not what?" she asked.

"Think of him."

That made her laugh. They reached the room soon after and she found the swordsman sitting at a polished wooden table. He got to his feet when he saw them come in and did it so quickly that he looked as though he had been pricked with a needle. He looked a little anxious, Shizuru thought. Or was it eagerness she saw on him instead? She studied his face as she and Natsuki seated themselves opposite the man, the fact that he spent more time gazing at her Otomeian companion than anything else not lost on her.

"Good evening to you both. Have you eaten?" he said, sounding a little more collected than usual. Shizuru nodded, wondering why exactly she thought that. Something there, she felt, was familiar. Something she could categorise. What tone was that again?

*Oh, yes, I know*, she realised. It was the sound of someone who had just come to a decision.

"I was talking to Homura-san today," he said, clearly trying to put on a casual manner. "He said he expected you to be going on soon? To Argus?"

Shizuru prayed he would not ask to join them.

"Perhaps and perhaps not," she answered obliquely. "I am not certain yet, Masashi-han. And you? Some tell me too that they expect you to be going soon?"

She affected her warmest smile, wryly wishing he would catch fire from it.

"Yes, well, maybe," he said, looking a touch uncomfortable then. He shifted in his seat and licked his lips, which were very chapped. "I think I'll have to be going in around, uh, a week's time. Or two."

She barely managed to hold in her grin: "I see."

"I wanted to ask when *you* would be going," he said after a deep breath. "To Argus. A rough guess, maybe?"

She pretended to think it over, then smiled helplessly at him.

"I confess I really have no idea," she answered. "Perhaps in a month, perhaps three weeks. Perhaps we might even be leaving by tomorrow. I fear I am a capricious commander. Fortunately, my troops are trustworthy ones. Which means I need not fear that they shall fail to meet my capricious demands."

He frowned at this. She sent him another apologetic smile as she rose.

"Well," she said. "If that is all, we should be going."

Natsuki had already gone to stand beside her when the swordsman started, holding up his hand in supplication.

"Ah, please," he begged. "Fujino-san, may I have a word? Before

you go."

Shizuru looked at him, slowly returning to her seat. The man watched her at first. But then he continued to watch her for a good while afterwards, still saying nothing. It was obvious that he was deliberating on how to begin whatever he wanted to say, and had it been anyone else, Shizuru would have been more inclined to let their thoughts take time to form. But given that it was he...

"Yes?" she said crisply, breaking him out of his mental exercises. "What is it?"

Takeda twisted his lips. His brow had furrowed at this interruption, and he lifted a hand to caress the back of his neck warily, shooting her another anxious look that travelled to her companion towards the end.

"Could we maybe discuss this alone?" He smiled in apology to Natsuki, who was already eyeing him askance. "It would be easier. To talk, I mean. I'm sorry."

Shizuru was now wondering what on earth the man had to say. She turned it over in her mind but came to no conclusion as to what he wanted from her. The thought that she could not predict what he was about to say was irritating, but not entirely surprising. Strictly speaking, after all, the two of them had no commerce with each other.

*Which is how I would prefer to keep it,* she thought with great annoyance.

Fixing him with her expressionless stare for perhaps a little longer than necessary, she took her time in enjoying the slight fidgets of his facial muscles. Perhaps due to this silence, he decided to speak again before she could say anything.

"You don't have to send, uh, Natsuki-san away completely," he explained. "Just a little off. As you did with Suda Yuuji-san."

She digested this for a few seconds.

"Indeed," she replied.

She turned her head to the side and looked up to find Natsuki hovering there, a small frown on her pretty face. She smiled to assuage the girl and-for reasons she later reflected to have stemmed from possessiveness once again-put up her hand to draw the younger woman's face closer to her own, keeping her eyes on the green ones.

She was pleased to see that there was only the faintest hint of surprise in those eyes at her action.

"You heard Masashi-han, Natsuki," she said, speaking with a softness that was meant for the girl and the girl alone. "Shall you stand a small distance away and wait for me there, perhaps?"

Their gazes locked for a moment and it seemed to her that everything else fell away-that all she could see was the younger woman's face and the cascade of dark hair framing that face. She could almost hear the girl telling her she did not trust the man, although no words were spoken, and could almost see the many reasons in the Otomeian's unspoken argument.

She smiled to assuage the worries she could read so plainly now in the girl's eyes.

"It's all right," she promised. "I shall not take long either, this time."

She nodded encouragingly.

"Then we can return to reading *Iphigenia*."

Natsuki exhaled through her nose, showing that though she did not like the idea she would give in to her charge's wishes. Shizuru shot her eyes to the side, catching Takeda's face as it shifted between surprise and envy at their interactions.

"Masashi-han?" she prompted, not too keen on having him watch the girl walk away. "Your concerns?"

He snapped his eyes to her, his swarthy face showing that whatever he had to say was serious. Shizuru looked at him inquiringly and wished he would get to his point as soon as possible. As far as outward appearances were concerned, of course, she looked calm

as she waited. Her body and face were too disciplined to show her inner thoughts, which were taken up by wondering how to make this short conversation much shorter and very unpleasant for the other senator. Had she known that displaying her impatience would have made the man before her more unnerved, she might have let down her façade. But then, the ill-fated interview might also have taken even longer.

Takeda was taking his time. He was wondering how to begin the discussion-and although the woman before him showed no sign of rushing, he could still feel a faint impatience coming from her. His main distraction had already gone off, fortunately, and although he knew she was standing just beneath the arch of the room's entrance, she was not in his direct line of sight any longer, which rather left his tongue and throat freer.

*So let's get this over with*, the voice in him urged.

"It... well, it's actually a little embarrassing," he finally began, glad to find that his speech flowed more easily without his dark-haired temptress nearby. "But I prefer to discuss things like this without the person present, you see. It seems more appropriate."

Shizuru gave him a puzzled expression.

"The person?" she asked, actually mystified.

"Yes," he replied, turning his head to steal a quick glance at the girl at the other end of the room. After satisfying himself that she could not possibly hear their conversation, he went on.

"It actually concerns that girl," he confessed. "So I had to ask you to-"

"Natsuki?" Shizuru interrupted, looking more and more curious by the second. "It concerns *Natsuki*?"

"Yes, Natsuki-san," he said, licking his lips. "Yes, ah. An excellent attendant you have there, Shizuru-san. I have to say."

Shizuru had to restrain herself from lifting an eyebrow at his casual use of her first name so suddenly. She nodded with dangerous



sloth, wondering what the man was getting at and whether or not he knew that he was coming perilously close to the fire.

"That is true," she said, in reply to his words. "I must admit I find myself hardly able to get by without her."

Takeda's brow furrowed as he put on an even more serious air.

"Yes, I see," he said, pinching his nose between his thumb and forefinger before sniffing. "Hm. Can I ask where you picked her up, Shizuru-san?"

This time, Shizuru's eyebrow did lift, starting a slow crawl upwards even as she replied.

"Otomeia," she told him, her answer a little more curt than she had intended. She fixed him with a searching look and got straight to the point, hoping he would emulate her example.

"May I ask, Masashi-han, what the reason is for all this interest in Natsuki?" she asked. "Why the queries? And why request that she be sent away? I fear I have a great many things to do myself, so I must request that you come now to the matter at hand, whatever it may be."

The swordsman's dark eyes widened for a few seconds before he regained himself and nodded, looking deeply apologetic.

"Oh, of course," he said. "I'm sorry, I should've thought of that! Please pardon me. Of course, I was getting to that."

He brought his hands together and clasped them, his elbows resting on the table. He endeavoured to meet her eyes without flinching, ignoring the odd twinges of alarm their eerie colour provoked all the time.

"You see, Shizuru-san, I've been looking for-for an attendant for a while now," he said, dropping his voice to its lowest and what he fancied to be its most businesslike audible register. "I've gone through dozens, maybe even hundreds, of possibilities, and I've yet to see one I like. It's so hard to find a good one, you know."

He paused and sighed to give more gravity to his presentation.

"So I had almost given up looking," he went on. "Until Na- *your Otomeian* impressed me. She impressed me very favourably. This is the reason for all my questions, Shizuru-san. I wanted to make you an offer. I would like to purchase her from you." He tipped his head carelessly. "Please don't worry about price, as I would be glad to pay any amount for such an attendant."

He stopped here, as the woman in front of him now looked even more confused than before. She seemed to be doubting what he had just told her, her eyes wide open as she stared at him with more amazement than he had ever seen her show.

"Fujino-san?" he said, snapping her out of the strange expression on her face.

She opened her mouth, although no sound came out the first time. After a small, bizarrely pained blink, she tried again.

"Pardon me, Masashi-han," she murmured, her voice down to the very floor. "I am not sure I heard you correctly. Did you just...?"

She seemed to wince disbelievingly at something, shaking her head.

He nodded and took this to be the old haggler's trick. He almost sighed, wondering why she would feel the need to do that when he already told her that he would be willing to pay any price.

*Unless, of course, she plans to ask for an insanely large amount,* he thought wryly. Well, no matter. He could cover it, of that he was certain. What was money to him? And come to think of it, what was money to the woman he was speaking with, anyway? She was supposed to be one of the richest people in Hime, after all—richer than Croesus, if the rumours were true. If so, she should not even be haggling. So what was this game, in that case, and why was she speaking this way?

"Come now, Shizuru-san," he coaxed. "As you heard, I'm already prepared to pay whatever price you ask. Even you must concede it's a generous offer."

He turned to look at the girl in question, who was still standing at the other end of the room. His eyes were on her as he went on, a small smile coming to his lips as he thought of finishing this business and finally owning her.

*In every way possible.*

"In fact, I should even tell you," he said offhandedly, feeling excitement tremble in his flesh, "I'm willing to pay more than a few talents for her-slaves like that are worth their weight in gold, after all-"

" *Ecastor!*"

The furiously whispered word silenced him. He looked at the woman across the table, discovering that she had risen to her feet and was now standing with hands clenched and shaking at her sides. Her eyes were shut, her finely furred brows slashing downwards with obvious displeasure.

"Shizuru-san?" he said uncertainly, just as red eyes unveiled themselves once more.

The look she gave him set a dozen maggots crawling at the back of his skull.

# Chapter 17

*Thanks to all the reviewers. Regarding Chapter 16, I understand that there may be misgivings among some of you regarding Takeda's act , but if you would be so kind as to allow an explanation, then I refer you to **King of Esca** ' s review, in which she explains very concisely why Takeda was led into his "proposition". Thank you to Mlle. Esca, by the way, for pointing all those things out-it saves one some trouble, which element (unfortunately) seems to be the constituting factor in so many things of late. Thanks as well to Sylverlyf, from whose review one appropriated a detail for use in this chapter.*

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## **Notes:**

1. **Maleficum** - Simply put, evil; that which is maleficent.
2. **Aspects of the gods (e.g. Apollo the Healer and Apollo of the Torments)** - The Romans believed gods to have various aspects or manifestations. The example given, that of Apollo as Healer against Apollo as Tormentor, is an illustration of how some of these aspects could show the varied, contrasting sides of a god's personality.
3. **"Tace!"** - Latin for "Shut up!"
4. **Dignitas** - This is one of the most important terms to understand when speaking of Roman culture. Do not be misled into translating it into the English word "dignity", for it is far more complicated than that. There are no serious Latin scholars/commentators who attempt to translate it, for it cannot be reduced to a single contemporary term (as far as the modern languages are concerned).  
  
*Shizuru gives a little insight into dignitas later in this chapter, but to explain: it is a person's personal worth, his public standing, his prerogative to respect and treatment as a human being. It comes not only from his personal qualities but also from his achievements, which enhance his dignitas if they are worthy ones.*

*Why is it important to know dignitas? Because it was often the most sensitive asset possessed by a Roman (here, a Himean). An insult against dignitas could be enough reason-as justified by societal culture-to destroy someone. In fact, almost anything was risked to defend dignitas, whether it be one's property, one's name, one's life, or even one's family.*

5. **Bacchante** - Worshippers of Bacchus or Dionysus, who was the god of wine and revelry. Some stories depict them as intoxicated women tearing savagely through the country and hills, dancing and feasting in a blind passion.

6. **Condemno** - The "guilty" sentence in Roman courts.

7. **Imperium** - Imperium is the degree of authority owned by a magistrate, governor, or army commander .

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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*What in the world...?*

Takeda stared in amazement at the woman he had only ever known to be pleasant and even-tempered, stunned by the alien snarl on her face. Her usual smile had become a savage-looking parody of itself, and he would be damned if those teeth did not look ready to tear into his neck. The most alarming change was perhaps with her eyes. The brightly coloured irises, disturbing enough in their normal stillness, now danced and swam with living blood. *Maleficum!*

His hand struck out at his side, falling to the sword that hung there-a sword, he recalled, that was not actually the one he often carried. That other weapon had been left with a sword polisher in town, and he had taken to carrying this spare in the meantime. It was of inferior make, this blade whose hilt he had in hand, and that discrepancy bothered him now. Yet it should not. It was not as though he planned to use the thing. And most certainly not against the woman

in front of him!

A low voice focused his attention upon her again. He looked up as she spoke, for which he cursed himself later as her gaze set off a brush of lightning.

"You-I cannot," she murmured, her voice still bearing traces of disbelief. "You presume-?"

A deep intake of breath, cut short when she spat it out indignantly: "You *dare*?"

He pushed himself a little further into his seat, instinctively moving away. A short burst of air hissed from her teeth again, and she leaned very slightly forward as if to follow him. The tense movement bespoke volumes of powerfully coiled self-restraint-as did her voice, which came out in a throaty rumble.

"I trust I do not mistake your meaning, Masashi-han," she said, pronouncing his name in a fashion that implied it sullied her tongue. "When you just offered to *buy* Natsuki from me just now. Is it not so?"

It took a few seconds of being subject to that intense stare before he finally understood that she was waiting for an answer. He nodded mutely, still wondering what was the matter. He would find out soon, however, for she suddenly threw him a look that was even angrier than the last, her features throwing off what restraint had been dressing them until now and suddenly contorting into a portrait of nude rage.

*Monstrous*, Takeda gasped, shivering at the image his fellow senator now revealed to him. It was a possessed Phidias statue he regarded, one vested with every classical proportion but unfrozen from its marble shell and showing the dynamic and demonic being inhabiting it. So beautiful! Yet also so ugly! There was something about beautiful people, he decided then, that made them look even more horrific than the average person when driven to anger. The same quality that made their beauty unearthly seemed to make them grotesque to him. Like divinities turned on their heads. Like having Apollo the Healer transmute into Apollo of the Torments in a

thunderclap. Such a fantastic change! He felt himself shrink a little before the spectacle and felt shamed by the reaction.

*Why am I so damned anxious before her?*

The question roused him as well as his considerable pride. Takeda did not like feeling cowed, and despised the cowardly. Which meant that he despised himself for flinching, even if before a patrician Fujino obviously angered. Why should he flinch before her, after all, when he had not flinched before dozens of opponents before-opponents who had brandished swords, whereas the woman before him did not? Yes, she was a formidable woman, even a woman who could brandish her very reputation as a weapon. Yet, his ego argued, was that not the case with him as well? What mattered it to him that she was said to be the star on the rise of Hime's horizon? Why, there were some who said the same thing of him!

Yes, he simply needed to keep calm. The reaction was unprecedented, but he had no reason to *fear* it. He needed only to look away from those eerie eyes and regain composure.

And he needed to find out what exactly was happening.

"Please sit, Shizuru-san," he finally said, still a little too weakly for his liking. "I just asked if I could buy-"

"Hold your tongue."

His head snapped back at the harsh command.

"Hold your tongue," she whispered again, still glaring at him with that awesome anger streaked across her face. "How dare you insult her-and me-by bartering for her as though she were a mere slave and I some slipshod slave trader? Does either of us look so mean in your estimation to be treated thusly? How dare you?"

He swallowed, not knowing what to say in the face of this mounting fury. This was not turning out in the least as he had expected. He was still a little unsure of what had spurred her to this passion, but her words had at least given him a general idea of his error, and he groaned inwardly. Evidently he had gone wrong somewhere, made

a wrong assumption, and he attempted to say it. One had to save face, at the very least!

Although he highly resented having to do that at all.

"I didn't mean-I'm sorry, I misunderstood," he managed, a small sense of alarm clogging his throat even as he ranted inwardly. "You see."

*Humiliating!*

"I thought she was one," he muttered. "I don't really get it, but... Well, it's just a misunderstanding."

Still she said nothing, her expression not softening in the least. He saw this and felt annoyance welling within him. Why were the rules of the game so unclear now, when he had thought this such a simple undertaking before? This was such a hateful situation: patrician *and* Fujino though she might be, it did not come easily to him to have to beg pardon of her, and he was not enjoying this little exercise in chagrin in the least.

"Sorry," he said quickly again, grimacing at his own inarticulacy. "I mean, you can't blame me, really! I just, well, I thought that-"

"On the contrary, it appears you have not thought much at all," she interjected, growling out the words so softly he had to turn his ear towards her. "Enough, if you please. Enough of the excuses. To impute slavish status upon her-and she from one of the oldest dynastic lines of history, by rights!-then to actually ask me to-"

She broke off here, and shut her eyes.

"The imprudence of it astounds me," she muttered, one fist pressed to her brow. "This. This is the Takeda Masashi? The swordsman said to have one of the sharpest swords in Hime? Is this all we can expect of such a man?"

She lowered her fist and raked coal-hot eyes over him, lips turning up in disgust.

"Frankly, your sword must indeed be sharp, to compensate for your



significant shortcomings," she drawled heavily. "And let it be understood I speak of the sword hanging at your side rather than the other that hangs elsewhere, if indeed you have the latter at all, judging by this unmanly display."

Takeda rushed to his feet, stung to the quick by that scathing insult. He was barely able to hold back the curse threatening to leap from his tongue, held there only by the last cords of confusion.

"I say, I don't think this calls for that, Fujino!" he said brusquely, tacking on the cavalier address at the last moment. "It's just a simple mistake, whatever you think it is."

She pretended surprise, the expression particularly sarcastic as she made it.

"Simple mistake?" The mirthless echo slipped softly from her lips. "Just a simple mistake?"

She laughed humourlessly.

"Yes, a simple mistake," she said, speaking in tones he found absurdly gentle for the situation-almost amorous, in fact. "A curious one. Consider, for instance, that you could have asked any of the officers, any of my staff, before meeting me, to confirm your idiotic assumption as to her standing. Anyone with a grain of sense would have done such a thing, and yet you did not."

She shrugged. There was nothing casual about it.

"Or if indeed you did," she proceeded, "then either my people have misled you deliberately or your own ignorance has accomplished that. My soldiers are not in the habit of misleading others on intention. So perhaps you had best return to your inquiries-if you made any-and ponder the veracity of any conclusions you may have drawn from them. I am certain you shall find that you failed to see the *very simple* facts: she is a high-ranking officer of the army, she is not a slave, she is my bodyguard and my personal attendant. But I did not pay for her, nor did I coerce her into assuming this responsibility. She agreed to it as a request from her king."

She scoffed here, giving a small shake of her head.

"You say I cannot blame you for this mistake, it being due to ignorance, but people can still be held culpable for ignorance insofar as it proceeds due to negligence. And you neglected to inquire properly into the matter before making this rash judgement! Oh, what a strategy! One wonders what kind of general you would be, Masashi-han. As far as I know, it is still customary for soldiers to have a basic grasp of the terrain before they jump into battle... and here you have pretended to scale a mountain when in fact you have been plunging into the sea."

She smirked briefly at his obvious discomfiture, and continued in that soft but punishing voice.

"All that aside, you did not even have the sense to realise that the girl has not an ounce of slave in either bearing or appearance. So, yes indeed, it was certainly a simple mistake. Only a true simpleton could have made it," she sneered, with a quiet, venomous laugh. "You give me cause to wonder, Masashi-han. When you cannot even see a thing as obvious as this, how could you hope to see a swing coming at you from the front?"

He squared his stance, a low rumble coming up in his throat. He had had enough of this. Fujino though she might be, she had absolutely no right to talk to him that way! What galled him more was that he had let her abuse him for so long, struck dumb by the spectacle of her rare fury and her scathing speech. Her barbs had lodged poisonously in what he knew was the greatest chink in his armour, his ego, and it smarted more than any sword wound ever had in his flesh.

*She'll pay for this*, he vowed, returning her glare. *What does she think I am, some lily-livered fool she can bully with words so easily?*

"You'd better watch what you say," he scowled, his nose wrinkling. "Just because I made a mistake there doesn't mean I'll make a mistake with my sword!"

The golden brows shot up haughtily: "Is that a threat?"

"Maybe it is!" he hissed, his hand now resting fully on the hilt of his weapon. "Don't think that just because you're who you are, Fujino, I'm afraid of you. You don't scare me! And why does it matter to you so much if I want to buy her, anyway? It may be an insult to her, but this doesn't concern you!"

"Then why did you come to me about it!" she shot back.

He blew out his breath as though trying to release steam. His lips pulled in for a moment like those of a man close to losing his temper or already losing it.

"I guess I really did come to the wrong person!" he finally said, giving her an angry caricature of a grin. "I'd better see the Otomeian king, then, and see if he won't consider a request from me! You know these foreign kings as well as I do, and a subject is just a subject to them-he just might transfer her to being *my* attendant if I asked nicely enough!"

Shizuru looked surprised that he had even had the strength to answer her, but the anger in her face did not go away.

"Oh, yes, you are a paragon of asking nicely, are you not? I am sure you shall manage to offend the king as much as you have just offended me. Please do not let me dissuade you from it! Yes, I do know these foreign kings," she said dryly. "And they would only be too glad to deal you a good lashing for your folly. Oh, go and get yourself into trouble that way, Masashi-han, do!"

"Now you see here-!" he began wrathfully, only to be cut off by her again.

"No, you see here!" she snapped, eyes flashing. "This is not merely a question of the offence you have made to her standing, unforgivable though it may be! Do you think I have not been watching you? First you had the audacity to follow us-to hound Natsuki-around the province like-like a dog in heat. You made overtures towards her and somehow managed to ignore all the glaring signs that she is not in the least interested. Well, that is fine. That is irritating but still pardonable. But now you do this!"

She leaned forward again as she went on, her voice somehow caressing the accents of fury that managed to work themselves into her lilt. Her stare blazed and seared into Takeda's eyes like red steel, and something in him quailed against his own volition at the heat.

"You did yourself a disservice when you became impatient," she told him. "You were fool enough to follow us around, but I did not think you would actually be fool enough to try this. Did you think that, since she refused your advances, you would *force* them on her after bartering with me? Did you think I could not see your intentions from a mile away? Indeed, if that is so, you were wrong."

Takeda shook his head as though slapped, startled by the savagery of her words and the bone-hard way in which she exposed him. He knew she understood the blow she had just dealt when she smirked viciously at his expression. He knew something else, then: that he hated her deeply.

"Yes, you were planning to do that to her, were you not?" she drawled on. "Such base intent, really. I suppose you would have tried to hide it, too, else your reputation as a perfectly disciplined, abstemious sportsman and senatorial son of the most traditional fashion would crumble. To say nothing of your reputation for refraining from *dessert*. My word, how you revolt me!"

She finally paused, seeming to draw breath as well as composure. There was a short silence, then, where she seemed to wait for him to say something. But he said nothing, too choked by rage to reply just yet. When it was clear he was speechless, she finally waved her hand as one would to shoo away an insect, letting out another long-suffering sigh of great restraint.

"To think you even dared to threaten me," she said disdainfully. "Go now, Masashi-han, and forget all your ideas about Natsuki. You cannot have her-you cannot even touch her! Do you hear me? *You will not, will never touch her!* I swear it!"

Her breathing having grown more agitated from this outburst, she shook her head with wrath.

"It would be best," she said, "if you went home as soon as possible. In fact, I am telling you to go home as soon as possible for your own sake."

This brought him out of his silence.

"Don't think you can tell me what to do, Fujino," he growled.

"Ah, but," she said with a contemptuous smile, "I believe I just did."

Out came his sword with a soft screech of metal, his temper gone and scattered by her words.

"Nobody tells me what to do!" he cried, only to be cut off by a crisp and very loud crack from the entrance to the room. He and Shizuru snapped their heads to that direction with similar expressions of alarm. They both gasped in surprise, however, at the unexpected sight of the girl they had been quarrelling over as she *fell* their way, tumbling in the air.

The two rivals thought the same thing, just then: *Ye gods!*

There was a short moment where all they could see was Natsuki's form suspended in space, all they could hear the whistling sound made by her body as it somersaulted towards them. Then came another whizzing sound, which ended with the intrusive noise of metal hitting metal along with the splintering crash of the table being rent.

"*Shit!*" Takeda exclaimed, half-standing, half-backed into his pulled-out chair. "What on earth-?"

He broke off as his eyes dropped upon countless slivers of wood. Then onto the table, which had a horrific cut torn through a hand's length of the polished wooden surface.

His eyes travelled to the girl rising from her crouch near him. She was standing at the head of the table, almost between him and the other senator, and her eyes were dropped demurely, he noted, conscious of a sense of irony in that detail. For all the modesty in her expression, there was still no mistaking the warning in her stance or the menace of the scythe she had in hand. He would have

likened her to an Amazon at that moment, were it not that he felt her too graceful to be one. He thought, rather, of Diana the goddess.

*Yes, the Queen of the Hunt...*

He was conscious of a burning sensation on his cheek.

*... the crescent moon a sickle in her hand.*

He remembered the sword in his own hand just then. Flexing his wrist, he realised that the weapon felt oddly light at the moment, so he looked at it. And started in astonishment.

The thin blade of his sword was broken, a good length of steel missing. His head snapped back to the girl who had broken it, surprise etched into his features.

A disturbed silence overtook the room.

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Shizuru, for her part, was also more than a little surprised by what had just transpired. Even her own rage had dissipated somewhat from the shock, and she stood there for some seconds, simply looking-or better, staring-at her Otomeian bodyguard, who stood before her with nothing but the usual grim expression.

*What happened?*

The crimson eyes drifted, taking in the details.

She saw the scarred table, and the thick chain lying on the floor directly beneath the cracked wood.

She saw the spiked, rectangular weight now embedded in the floor and attached to the chain, which led in a trail to Natsuki's hand.

She looked at the other end of the room, her mind taking in the splintering holes and cracks in the ceiling and forming a series of rapid calculations.

And she understood.

Natsuki, it appeared, had been watching the two Himeans argue. Unsure as to whether or not she needed to return to her charge's side, she had finally decided to intervene when Takeda drew his sword. Taking this as undisguised provocation, the girl had then thrown the weight of her daos towards the ceiling and broken through, whipping the chain about to swing its head back downwards until it wrapped around one of the exposed joists.

She had swung herself up with the dangling chain, running to add to the momentum and half-climbing as she did so. Its whipping length had extended her leap to her destination. At the very peak of the swing, she had somersaulted and used the power of that sudden tug to free her chain again. Shizuru guessed that the girl had hooked the chain with her elbow in the somersault for this, as she had seen the Otomeian do many times when playing against targets during practice sessions. Her elbow now the fulcrum and the spike now the swung object, this had resulted in the sudden whip of that end of the chain and the ferocious lash it and the weight had dealt to an edge of the table. This blow was then followed by the outstretched hack of her sickle upon Takeda's sword, which ended with the latter's blade being broken and the table's head being cloven in two.

*That weapon's paw is better named a claw*, Shizuru found herself thinking, still silent as she stared at the damage it had wrought. What a slash that claw had just made! She eyed the girl with unreserved awe and would have forgotten-for the most part-her anger with the other occupant of the room had she not then glanced at him.

The first thing she noticed was the blood pouring from his cheek. There were two crossed cuts responsible for this, and the more lucid part of her mind noted that one slash was deeper and larger than the other. She deduced it to have come from the tip of Natsuki's scythe catching his skin, whereas the other slash must have come from a shard of either the wooden table or the broken sword flying into the air. She knew enough about injuries to tell that there was a possibility the wounds would scar. She felt no pity. Indeed, the sight of the man bleeding gave her a strong sense of satisfaction. A further assessment of him took away that momentary pleasure as she registered the expression in his face.

Takeda was staring at Natsuki with an unabashed mixture of admiration and awe-similar to what she herself had been feeling for the girl just a moment earlier. His moss-coloured eyes were fixed on the Otomeian too with a gleam of desire, and that made Shizuru's blood boil again.

"General Fujino! Masashi-san!"

"Oh, by the gods, what happened?"

They all turned to the sudden cries, which had come from the doorway. Two servants stood there, looking frantic and worried by the scene before them. They stared at the three people in the room, and Shizuru thought, vaguely, that the confusion seemed bright and dumb on their faces.

In any case, she decided that it was time to go, seeing that the crash had been heard by several people. More would be coming soon, and that would make the situation even more unpleasant. She looked at the man opposite her, her look making it clear that she wanted to cut this short.

"Masashi-han."

He met her gaze and she sent him another withering look. He answered with a retaliatory sneer, though with slightly less effect.

"I trust I have made everything clear," she said with prodigious calm, considering her turmoil. "I would advise you to leave Sosia now and return to Hime. Immediately."

She said this in her most dismissive tones, drenching them with as much quiet antipathy as possible. She then turned to her bodyguard and nodded to the girl.

"Let us go, Natsuki."

Natsuki gave her a searching look, as if to ask if she was sure.

"Yes," she nodded shortly. " *Let us leave him.* "

The girl drew up the loops of her weapon efficiently and took her



place by the older woman's side, neither of them sparing Takeda a second glance as they walked away. He followed them with his eyes, saying nothing as they turned their backs on him.

It was when they were just about to reach the exit to the room, the servants standing there still and gawking incredulously at the scene, that he called out.

"Fujino-san!"

Shizuru stopped and saw her companion do the same. She looked over her shoulder then, feeling a small vein in her temple pulsing harder than usual.

She saw Takeda scowling darkly at her, his swarthy face distorted with resentment.

"I'll remember this," he said ominously.

*E-cas-tor*, she thought, stifling the urge to roll her eyes. *Of all the trite things to say!*

She gave him another majestic sneer before replying.

"So shall I, and in case you have any concerns about the object of the matter, do not worry," she said, a mocking lilt to her words-which he had spoken to her, some days prior. " / shall be with her."

With that parting shot, she resumed her exit with Natsuki in train. When the two servants in the doorway came forward, Shizuru waved them away with less than her customary grace, not even looking at them as she stalked off. She doubted she could even speak coherently at the moment, for the anger had returned in full force and had filled her throat. A final, called-out statement from behind her nearly broke that fragile composure.

"She doesn't belong to you!"

She kept walking and pretended to ignore him, emotion setting off tiny explosions of rage in her mind. The blood pounding in her ears seemed thunderous, and she could barely hear the quiet clinking of the chains of Natsuki's daos behind her-and above that, the sound

of the servants exclaiming concern for the injured man she had left in the room, *that wretch!*

She was aware that she was moving without her usual calm. In fact, she walked so aggressively that her strides ate up the ground, her feet thudding audibly with each step. She was even tempted to take the steps they encountered two at a time, but settled for simply passing each one more quickly than she normally would.

She understood what was happening. She was trying to channel her fury outwards, trying to let it seep out of her by directing the energy into the quick snap of muscles and limbs as she often did when she was irked by something. On those occasions, she saved the emotion for use in battle. Yet it failed this time, for each movement only doubled her irritation. If only she could strike something! Or even kill someone!

*This is why I loathe getting angry*, she thought, tugging loose a fold of the suddenly cumbersome cloak still wrapped around her. She clenched her hand afterwards, because it took all of her strength not to tear the cloth, which would have been a foolish thing to do indeed. In a sense, even her behaviour earlier, her allowing herself to get roused to this, had been a foolish thing to do as well.

*But that is it-I do foolish things when I am angry*, she cried out in her mind, very aware of her failings of temper. *Oh, why did I even have to get so angry? Curse it all!*

A small part of her wondered when it had been, the last time she had been this livid. Not that her mind could supply an answer, for it was not working as lucidly as usual. This was the bane of her personality, which most people hardly ever saw beneath that easy-going mask. Her mother had been the first to notice it, and she had often cautioned Shizuru about allowing her anger to get the better of her.

*When you snap, Shizuru, you do it perfectly, as with everything else*, that elder lady once said. *So beware yourself, and hide that half for as long as you can*. The younger Fujino had not understood the words entirely back then, but had still taken the warning. And now she saw clearer than ever before what her mother had meant. The

indignation-the white-hot anger-she was feeling was so perfect, so complete in its own way, that it had almost consumed her more rational side or half, as her mother put it.

*And all because of that cretin downstairs!*

Takeda Masashi. Decidedly a proud man. She had not missed that, even before he had drawn his sword, the look in his eyes admitted his already measuring the distance between them with his mind's blade. She did not think he would have had the audacity to actually strike an unarmed person as well as one with her status and name... but the mere intimation of it through that naked sword had been enough indication of his willingness to engage her in a duel over the matter. Did he want Natsuki so badly, or was it due to his pride that he had done such a thing?

Well, whatever it had been before, she knew he would always feel this strongly about the matter now. Emotions had a way of getting stronger after crises.

*Let him run after the impossible, then,* she thought viciously. She knew he would not engage her in an old-fashioned duel at this time-or could not, given that she was still on a campaign and endowed with the untouchable authority of her *imperium* -but the possibility just might arise in the future. True, duels were outdated concepts, particularly duels to the death for such things, but there were always ways around the written and unwritten laws preventing it. Takeda would certainly know, and she herself had no issues with exercising an archaism when she found it beneficial. She had no fear of his sword technique, although it was admittedly formidable from what she had seen in one athletic contest. He had a good, quick swing, with a clean slash that carried a considerable amount of power. A good execution of the most popular and highly-revered technique.

*But it is hardly good enough,* she thought, glaring with that dead-certain intent that often had enemy soldiers flinching in battle even before her attack. *It is not enough to stop me.*

It took a few moments before she apprehended she had even begun to visualise killing the man.

Shaking her head disgustedly, she turned into the corridor. She was painfully aware that her companion still had yet to say a word to her, and she wished she herself could say one to the girl. But her throat tightened each time she attempted to say something. With each failed attempt, her blood thundered louder, sounding remarkably like the army's drums playing the call to a charge. She was nearly deaf to everything else by the time she reached the passage leading to their room.

It did not help, she thought, that she was angry with herself as well for actually becoming so furious over such a thing. And yet, how could she help it? The things the man said-the look in his eyes when he eyed her Natsuki!

But, yes, there it was again: *her Natsuki*. All of this was due to her thinking of the girl as *her Natsuki*. But Natsuki was not truly hers, was she? Was that not the crux of the argument, after all? That Natsuki was not hers to give-or sell, for that matter-because Natsuki was her own person and belonged to no one else? That Natsuki was Natsuki's, and belonged only to herself? She certainly belonged not to Takeda Masashi.

The furnace in her breast threw out a little tongue of flame: *Not even to Shizuru Fujino*.

"Ah, *tace* !"

She could feel the girl's eyes on her again at this outburst, but she ignored it for now. There was the door of their room, finally, up ahead. She quickened her steps towards it, still debating with herself.

*No*, she thought. *It cannot simply be a matter of that* .

It was not just the idea of ownership, she decided. It was the unmitigated gall of that insult-the lowest known to a Himean-of calling a freeborn person a slave, which took away one's *dignitas* . Only a free person had *dignitas* . And to have no *dignitas*, strictly speaking, was to have no life at all. To have no *dignitas* was to be a mere animal.

Was that what had irked her so much, then? The unpardonable insult Takeda had done to Natsuki's very personhood, her worth as a human being? Surely it was the worst offence one could do to another through mere words-or such was her own opinion and had always been. But then again, if that was the case, would she not be guilty of using her own standards to measure the insult against Natsuki-who was not even Himean and who, for all she knew, might not even interpret the insult to be as large a one as Shizuru had? Did the Otomeians even have a concept comparable to *dignitas*? Besides all of which, it was not really a grave insult against Shizuru, was it? It was one against Natsuki, and as the swordsman told Shizuru, she had no concern in it, very strictly speaking.

*No!*

She shook away that thought. She had every concern in it. Her anger was justified, for she had every right to be indignant on behalf of the girl. After all, Natsuki was her... *what?*

"Furies take that man!" she hissed vehemently.

She burst into their room, striding across the floor as Natsuki followed and shut the door for both of them. Shizuru made her way to the window and stood there, leaning against the wall as she fumed. She was facing the night sky, the curtains drawn back and stirring gently in the breeze-which she did not feel on her burning face. Her body felt so warm that she was surprised there was no steam rising from her skin yet.

*As though that would be possible*, she told herself, her mind a tangled mass of confusion. *Steaming skin? What am I thinking!*

Taking a few deep breaths, she addressed a brief query to her companion.

"Did you hear?"

She turned to the girl in time to see the negative shake of the head, which somehow made her feel a little relieved. Still, it could not quell the fury that was thrumming in her nerves, and she nearly bit her tongue when she tried to formulate a proper response. That made

her blood rise again.

Supposing that it would be safer to be short, she settled instead for saying a single word.

"Well."

*Brilliant reply!* She chastised herself soundly, seeing how the girl's wariness of her rose under that curt word. Oh, what was she to say? What could she say? She could not possibly tell Natsuki what had transpired. Yet she could not leave the girl in the dark, after everything that had occurred.

But what could she tell her?

"Natsuki."

She beckoned her nearer with a tip of the head, and Natsuki obeyed. They stood by the window, both leaning on the frame and facing each other, though Natsuki kept her eyes down before Shizuru's intense gaze.

The older woman was trying to come up with something to tell the girl.

"What happened just now," she began. "You see..."

Natsuki lifted her chin, and Shizuru faltered before that innocently prying look.

*How I hate that man for this!*

"No." She waved her hand abruptly, pressing her eyes shut with the other. "Never mind."

She turned away with a frown and strode to the bed, where she flung on top of the covers in a way she had not done since she was a child. She lay there quietly for a while, one arm over her eyes as she tried to achieve calm by parodying it. So engrossed was she in this enterprise that she hardly perceived Natsuki's gradual approach until the girl was finally sitting on the edge, beside her.

*I am surprised she is even willing to sit beside me with the way I have been acting*, she thought wryly, not making any motion to acknowledge the girl's presence. Perhaps Natsuki was wondering who this stranger was and where her true charge had gone. Perhaps she was wondering what had transpired during that conversation for this sudden change of personality to result.

*But this is who I am as well*, Shizuru thought moodily. *Even this anger is mine, and now she, of all people, has to see it.*

She felt the weight at the edge of the bed shift, moving closer, and heard her companion's voice.

"Shizuru."

She did not realise it, but the tightness of her mouth relaxed a little at this. She did not remove her arm from over her eyes but hummed in response, soothed slightly by the sound of her name on Natsuki's lips. No one else ever said her name that way, really. It was only Natsuki that made it seem so beautiful that she wondered if she was worthy of it.

*But Natsuki makes every word sound beautiful.*

She would have smiled at the thought, had not another intruded itself upon her: if that was true, could Natsuki make every name sound beautiful?

That bothered her. She rarely heard Natsuki say people's proper names, as the girl preferred to speak of and to them using their titles. She even preferred to speak of her own cousin by referring to her as "my cousin" instead of simply calling the other girl "Nina". Now Shizuru wondered what it would be like to hear Natsuki do otherwise regularly. Could Natsuki caress someone else's name the same way she did hers? Could the girl's tongue lift someone else's appellation to the same heights?

Could she say even Takeda Masashi's name in that same sensuous lilt, with the same fatalistic drop at the end?

*I would die first rather than hearing that*, the older woman decided,

her ire returning in full force. The thought was unbearable! She even groaned at the idea, but felt the groan soften into a sighing breath at an unexpected touch: something in her hair, stroking close to her scalp with a light caress.

"Shizuru."

She finally removed her arm from her eyes, turning a little to look at the girl who sat next to her. Natsuki went on caressing her hair, although the actions of her hand became more tentative in the face of Shizuru's still-burning eyes. The girl did not stop, however, and Shizuru was grateful for it.

*Such kindness*, Shizuru mused, studying the girl's face as the latter looked away from her with a blush. *And such charm . Irresistible.* The Otomeian could not possibly have any idea how much strength Shizuru was expending just to resist pulling her down and finally doing what she had been fantasising about for a while now, to turn that furious emotion still raging in her chest into something else-to end all the worries that had led to this and perhaps make it so that no-one could ever pose a threat again-to make Natsuki finally, decisively, her own-

*Good god, what am I thinking of again?*

She winced at the apprehension that she had fallen into something similar to Takeda's way of thinking once more, hot shame tightening her jaw as she mentally slapped herself for being so-what was the word for it? Mad, perhaps?

*It would not be far from accuracy*, she told herself dryly. Oh, why was she like this? Why did her emotions have to be so unstable, so volatile, when everything else about her seemed so firmly entrenched in reason? Or was that merely her façade? She was aware, even now, that her anger was mixing with a heady desire for the girl beside her, a maddening possessiveness... and all of it was becoming intertwined in a sickening knot of feeling in her stomach that was so strong and abrupt that it frightened even her.

Yet that nagging sense: that this knot had been present even before now. If so, had Takeda's insult only been the thing to unwrap it from



whatever had been hiding it?

*Am I no better than he, then,* she wondered, trembling with suppressed fury. *Would I do the same thing as that wretch was planning to do to her?* Indeed, it would be even simpler for her than for him to do so, she being a present and powerful general who would not be condemned for carrying on with a beautiful young woman, personal attendant though the girl might be. It was even routine for most generals to have, during campaign, a foreign lover or several upon which to slake their desires while away from home—and in some cases, while away from a spouse. One could even say it was expected.

But Shizuru had never done that, had she? She had been much too concerned with the enterprise of campaigning itself as well as the welfare of her soldiers to have time for anything else. These concerns, joined with her concerns of proving her worthiness of commanding entire armies despite her youth, had until now managed to prevent her from giving any thought to that particular pleasure during her early forays in the military. It was not that she had absolutely no desire for it, but that she considered herself as having no time to give it. Thus, that certain channel of passion was given the fate of all the others for which she thought she had no time: it was dammed up and forgotten, and soon almost completely ignored into nonexistence. It took not long before the expedient became the routine. That channel stayed dammed, stayed forgotten and nonexistent.

But passions were compared to rivers for a reason, were they not? Dammed, they turned inwards and flowed into themselves like lakes gathering water for a sudden flood... at which time the dam would be swept away by the sheer force of the current. And here was the flood, one of conflicting emotions and desire. Here too was the current, and it was torrential.

The tide was drowning her.

*Stop that,* she told herself, groaning lightly. Her head was aching, and that awful, pricking sensation in her breast was getting worse, as though some beast had suddenly decided to settle there and was beginning to scrape its way out.

*Indeed, perhaps that beast has been there all along.*

She groaned yet another time, shutting her eyes in exasperation. Images of the swordsman's face came to her, his fawning gaze at Natsuki driving her mad all over again. And Natsuki's face too was in her mind, that lovely face that she could not bear to think of being touched by someone else.

*This is too much, she brooded. This is something I never expected, and I am not prepared for it.*

She could hear that awful thudding of her heart, a protest against its own unusual agitation.

*I am always in control. I am not supposed to be like this.*

She probed into herself pitilessly, admitting that some part of her had become somewhat arrogant in that regard, had begun to truly admit of her supposed elevation from other people this way. She had begun to think herself immune to such dilemmas as this, she realised, and now that conceit had thrown reality into her face with a slap.

*This was never supposed to happen to me, but it has.*

The fingers threading into her locks continued their motions, and for each stroke, that monster in her chest raged a little more, all the heretofore hidden uncertainties swarming out of her depths and baring their fangs.

*I know not what to do about it!*

That thought rocked her. She opened her eyes and stared at Natsuki with patent distress, wondering how this girl who had only ever been a comfort to her had suddenly turned into her undoing.

*Is this all because of you, she wondered. Is it all on your account that I am thrust into this now?*

The beast roared.

"Shizuru?"

The girl was looking at her now, the caresses stilled. They stared at each other and fought a silent battle as to who would dare to speak first, and ironically, it was Natsuki who sighed and began to talk.

"Down there," she murmured. "Downstairs."

*Oh, do not ask me!* Shizuru thought, panicked. *I will not know what to say. Please, Natsuki.*

"Wuh-wuh-"

*Do not ask me!*

"Why did..."

Natsuki paused here, and Shizuru prayed to Jupiter, to all the gods of her faith, that the girl would not continue, for the beast was just about to break out. Still Natsuki went on, heedless of her companion's unspoken prayers-and the first word that issued from her mouth after the pause sent the beast into a howl.

"Takeda-"

The last shreds of self-control left in Shizuru snapped and she shot up, the beast moving her clawed hands. She seized the girl's arms and gripped them so tightly that she felt the muscles beneath the thick fabric of the shirt tighten in protest, felt the agonised spasm of flesh being held far too tight.

" *Do not say it!*" she said angrily, her eyes so wild that she could hardly see the girl's face before her. "Never do that! Never say his name!"

She said this while shaking the girl, looming over her on the bed. Natsuki simply stared back in silence, apparently dumbfounded. The older woman was practically crushing her arms, fingers digging deep into the flesh, and yet the girl made no move to counter the assault. She simply looked into the angry crimson eyes, watching the slow trickle of excitement draining from the older woman.

"Do not," Shizuru muttered, now more quietly. "Natsuki."

Natsuki continued to watch with those eyes of hers, still not struggling.

"Natsuki."

Shizuru shut her eyes in an effort to clear her head. Everything had become tangled up there, threads of reason drawn into a tightly-spinning bundle that made her feel off-kilter: not herself, yet more truly herself than usual. *So vaguely remembered, this sensation* . It was a feeling of baring oneself, of becoming suddenly and all-too-mortally vulnerable. A feeling she hardly ever experienced anymore.

*It almost hurts.*

"Ahh."

She opened her eyes at the little sound.

*Natsuki.*

They were so close. She realised it when Natsuki's open-mouthed breaths made her lips tingle, and drew her eyes downward to the girl's mouth. It seemed to taunt her. But it was *such* a beautiful mouth. It was no surprise, seeing it this way, that it could make every word slipping from it seem beautiful as well. Every name.

Perhaps even Takeda Masashi's.

Something inside her cried out at the thought, and the man's words came rushing back.

*She doesn't belong to you!*

Everything she was feeling convulsed tightly in reaction, her growl hardly audible as her arms tightened, flexing so quickly the girl had no time to pull away.

*My Natsuki.*

Her body tingled, soaking in the moment with a wild and desperate thirst. It was as if allowing the beast to come out had heightened her perceptions so far that each sense became drunk on feeling,

revelling in the offering of sensations like Bacchante tearing through the land that was her body. Her eyes had shut to accommodate the delicious intoxication and her entire consciousness focused on wrapping around the girl's lips, over which were her own.

*She is my Natsuki after all.*

She tightened her grip further at the thought and felt the sleek heat beneath those dark clothes, the warmth of the flesh underneath them so much more real than any other's. She could even feel the body of the younger woman stiffening, suddenly frozen in shock and yet not pushing her away. Yes, the body was stiff, but the lips were soft-so gloriously soft-and they moved against hers, teasing her mouth. She pushed against them, forcing her tongue into that soft opening... and it seemed almost as though those lips trembled against hers.

But, no, they were not trembling, were they? They could not be. Natsuki was not the kind to tremble. That body never trembled, and that mouth could not be otherwise.

*No*, Shizuru thought, drunk on the feel of those lips on her own. *They do not tremble, for Natsuki does not tremble. Natsuki is steadfast, and Natsuki is mine.* Yet Natsuki's lips seemed to be moving in an attempt to say something, and she did not know what that was. Could it be protest? Could Natsuki be trying to protest against what she was doing to her? But what was she doing to her? Ye gods, what was she doing to her?

Her reason, that formerly ever-present thing, returned in that pitiless flash and she released the girl in an abrupt movement. She even pushed Natsuki away with her hands and drew back, shaken by her own actions.

*Oh god, what have I done?*

"Na-Natsuki."

She cringed after having said the name, afraid to look at the girl. That legendary boldness of hers seemed to have vanished into thin air, abandoning her just as reason seemed to have abandoned her a

few moments ago when she had taken the Otomeian's lips by force. Would it-her *daring* -return as cruelly in the future as it had vanished just now, then? Would it choose to let her do another awful thing just before it came back, making the act even worse by its late but oh-so-close return?

"I am so... Oh, Natsuki!"

She finally summoned the strength to look at the girl and found Natsuki rigid with shock, one hand over her mouth-that mouth that had just been violated-and her eyes wide, brighter than ever before.

*Oh, no, no, Natsuki.*

Shizuru winced when she met those eyes, noting the odd shimmer that flickered in their alarmingly green depths. What was it in them that shone so brilliantly? What was that emotion? She started to lift her hand towards the girl, but stopped herself.

*Fear?*

The girl stifled a sound that was caught between being a choke and a whimper, and Shizuru felt it hit her like a flagellated whip. Was this what it felt to be on the receiving end of the lash, then? Was this what the defendants in the courts felt when they received the verdict *condemno* ?

"Forgive me. "

The whisper fled from her lips so quickly she was hardly conscious of having uttered it.

"Please forgive me," Shizuru whispered again. "Natsuki."

And again the stillness in the accursed room, the only sound from the girl being those ragged, *frightened* breaths.

"I... Please, Natsuki."

She mumbled out the anguished pleas, repeating them with frantic desperation as she recoiled from the memory of what she had done. But she could not shut it out, try as she might, for it remained tingling

in her lips, against her fingers, on her tongue-but most of all, in Natsuki's large, wet eyes.

"Forgive me, Natsuki. I did not intend to hurt you. Truly."

Her own pleas seemed so shoddy, so shamefully feeble to her ears. She finally rose from the bed, almost reeling in her haste, and took a stumbling step away. She drew her regret about her like a pitifully transparent and tattered cloak, and she found she could not hide in it.

"I am so sorry."

Hatred for herself welled up in her chest.

"Please forgive me," she whispered, finally, before turning around and rushing towards the door.

She fled from the room and from those accusing, emerald-green eyes.

## Chapter 18

*Thank you to the readers and reviewers. A quick note, since someone recently reminded that many classical expressions of language are now not so well-known: whenever a word in boldface in the "Vocabulaire" section of a chapter is followed by the bracketed initials "s.v.", it means "sub verbo". Those familiar with classical tomes and the older encyclopaedias know this: it signifies that there is an entry for the preceding word (the one in boldface) in the same text of definitions or explanations-in this case, in the given "Vocabulaire" for the chapter.*

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### **Vocabulaire:**

1. **In suo anno** - In literal translation: "in his year". This was a Roman expression referring to a man's achieving curule (i.e. praetorian or consular) office at the exact age and time prescribed by the law. A great distinction, since it not only implied adherence to the **mos maiorum** (s.v.) but also the possession of clout, given that it meant the person had to have won the praetorian or consular election on his very first attempt to run for office.
2. " **Before the Republic** " - A reference to the earlier parts of Rome's (Hime's) history, when there were still kings/titled aristocrats instead of elected officials.
3. **Comitia** - Also called Assembly, a gathering of the People to deal with political matters, it took place in the place called the Well of the Comitia, near the Senate's Hall. Assemblies were often called to discuss legislation to be passed.

*In this chapter, the specific type of comitia convoked is the Plebeian Assembly, which is distinctive in that it could only be called by a tribune of the plebs and allowed only plebeians to participate. Patricians could not join the assembly and often had to wait for it to finish before finding out from their plebeian acquaintances what had taken place. For other patricians with privileged vantage points*



*(such as the patrician senators, who could watch the proceedings from the Curia/senate steps, which overlooked the Well of the Comitia), they could listen to and watch what was happening, but never address or interrupt the assembly.*

4. **Mos maiorum** - The established custom, tradition; the way things had always been done and "should" always be done, according to the conservatives or the "Traditionalists".

5. **Mnemosyne** - Personification of memory; also mother of the Muses.

6. **Corona obsidionalis** - Also **corona graminea** ; highest Roman decoration for valour in battle, extremely rare and thus extremely prized. Won only by 8 Ancient Romans (7 Himeans in this story) in history; Augustus Caesar's is exempted because it was not actually won but given to him instead by Senate for imperial pandering (the true corona obsidionalis has to be won in battle and granted by the army for it to mean something).

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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"That arrogant bitch, Fujino, is behind this. You can be sure of it!"

The contemptuous exclamation made Yukino Kikukawa pause in what she had been about to say and her steps slowed as she and her two companions turned the corner. A light frown crossed her brow and she gave the man who had spoken a slightly reproachful look.

"That could be, Akagi-san, but please don't say it like that," she murmured, voice gentle even in rebuke. "Please refrain from saying such things so loudly. We're not in a place where we can keep from being overheard."

Jin Akagi huffed heavily, lowering his voice nonetheless. "But I'm

sure if it."

"All the same," said the other man with them. "It's still a little dangerous to say it like that in public, Akagi-san. Yukino-san has a point."

Yukino smiled at the speaker.

"Thank you, Kazuya-san," she said, with a slight tilt of her head towards that worthy. "To tell you the truth, I do agree with Akagi-san. I'm sure Fujino-san knows something about this that we don't. Doesn't she always? But it's a little too reckless to be passing judgment on it this early, especially when we're still in the Curia and could be overheard."

Akagi made a face, obviously not relishing having his mates put a damper on the rant he had been working up.

"This reeks of her, though," he mumbled with his usual persistence, casting furtive glances around them. There was no one else nearby save the three of them, however, so he went on with a vaguely vindicated expression. "It's a little too timely. Just when we finally manage to pull out her fangs in the House, that tribune of the plebs Izumi reaches into his toga and pulls out a motion legislating a second nomination period for the elections! Oh, too well-timed!"

"But Akagi-san," Kazuya interjected, "aren't you being a little too paranoid, maybe? I never thought-and still don't think, honestly-that Kaneda Izumi-san is Fujino-san's man. If anything, he's Himemiya-san's."

He paused to adjust a fold in his toga, and went on: "True, Himemiya-san and Fujino-san are friends, but I don't think Fujino-san actually had anything to do with this."

The other man grunted, rolling his eyes heavenward.

"I know that," he snapped. "But it's you who's being too innocent, Kazuya! Haven't you thought of the possibility that Fujino might come all the way back here just to announce her own candidacy for praetor, eh? That'd be a fine step for the woman!"

Yukino chose this point in the conversation to sigh, patting her unruly mane down with one hand. One brow lifted as she realised that it was getting too long again. How troublesome it was to have springy hair! Already she could feel it starting to frizzle this way and that, and she gave another sigh at the thought that she would have to see her hairdresser later. Too troublesome, really, but still necessary. She was a candidate, after all, and she had to keep up her best form for the public.

*Besides which would be Haruka-chan*, she tacked on to that thought, an image of the senior consul's irritated face coming to mind. *She'd give me a good lecture if she knew I was being sloppy with my appearance.*

"I think that particular action is very unlikely, Akagi-san," she ventured. "Let's give her credit where it's due. Shizuru-san would hardly abandon a venture such as the one she was given in the north. I think that it's Chikane-san who wants to take advantage of the law by running for consul. It is her man passing that bill."

She stopped to give the two men a helpless shrug before folding both arms across her waist. The three of them had ceased walking, standing in an alcove at the end of the hall and facing each other.

"That wouldn't be so surprising," she continued. "It's *in suo anno*, after all. So it's a logical step for her, since she's the outgoing urban praetor, although I did have my doubts about it since I thought she might consider getting a province first before running for consul. But then, well, I suppose she doesn't need to."

This last remark was received with a chuckle from Kazuya and a grunt of dry amusement from Akagi. Both of them understood what Yukino meant: most politicians strove to acquire governorship of a province after reaching praetorian office before actually running for consul, for the simple reason that governing a province offered a fantastic opportunity to make money that could be put away for the future or used as seed money for campaigning for the consulship. Since the Himemiya were ludicrously rich, however, there was no need for their most prominent member to seek a governorship.

"I concur with Yukino-san," Kazuya spoke up. "Actually, I'm pretty

surprised. I thought she'd wait for Fujino-san to be eligible for candidacy as a consular nominee before being one herself. I mean, the two of them running in tandem is a sure win, and we all know how thick they are. But I guess she has her own plans that can't wait."

Yukino eyed him discreetly after his comment, smiling inwardly at his-in her opinion-rather naïve words. She did not let on about her estimation of his remark, however, and merely made a noncommittal sound. He smiled easily back at her in response, even as she continued to assess him privately.

*He's nice-looking man*, she thought, after scrutiny. *But a little plain, to be honest*. Perhaps that was even the reason for his being nice-looking: his unremarkable plainness. He was a man of regular height, with a pleasant, smooth face and a slight build. All too average, if agreeable, for him to stand out in either the crowd or on the senate floor. Even the personality was rather lacklustre: affable but uninspiring, and on the whole, much like the rest of him.

Indeed, the only thing that stood out in him was his name.

The Kurauchi were one of the oldest families in Hime, on par with the Himemiya and Fujino for sheer ancestry if not for supposed divine heritage: still, they also dated back to the days before the Republic. As such, they were among the most imposing of the Famous Families, among the noblest ones, in fact. Their name carried with it immense clout, and their family was considered one of the pillars of the Traditionalists, to which faction the members of the clan had always belonged. Kazuya being the latest scion of the broodhad, he adhered to convention by joining the conservative bloc as well, lending it as did his predecessors the grandeur of his family's prestige.

*And that's all he really lends to us*, Yukino thought ruefully. *Oh, and money too, yes, but that's not really what we need from him*. It would have been so much more helpful to their cause if he had been outspoken, productive, a true and seasoned politician as his uncle and father before him. Now there had been two stalwart pillars of the Traditionalists! Always speaking for and defending the *mos maiorum* ! How many times had she heard Haruka use them as exemplars for

present-day statesmen? And, of course, for Kazuya too, although that bore little fruit given the man's patent difference of temperament from his antecedents.

*But I guess we can't all be politicians*, she thought guiltily, almost ashamed of her criticisms. He was really ever so nice, after all, and tried his best. It was not his fault he was not of the same mettle as his elders. Blood did not always determine talent, even if it did standing.

Although, her mind reminded here unpleasantly, there was Shizuru Fujino, was there not? And, yes, Chikane Himemiya, or even Sergay Wang, or Haruka herself, and of course the Princeps Senatus. What of them? But she really should not make such comparisons! More sensible to simply accept whom one had in one's ranks, and work with that. Yes, that was the proper way. Particularly for her.

*Haruka-chan is the one who handles the complaints*, she thought with good humour. *She does that well enough for both of us*. There was no need for Yukino to express regret or carp on about the weaknesses in their group when her friend did it so well for both of them-with Olympic prowess, as a matter of fact.

Yukino's task was to make do with what they had, to be the more practically-oriented one. Which suited her well, given that it meant she could be silent and be forced to offer opinions less frequently, so long as she did her part and let her friend handle the verbal matters. It did mean she was listened to less often when she spoke, but she supposed she could change that with a little work. It would have to change soon, since she was running for consul. Haruka told her as much, and she could not let Haruka down. That was something she never wanted to happen, she was sure.

Although she was still not sure yet that she really wanted to be a consul.

A question addressed to her cut off her ruminations, and she turned an apologetic smile to the inquirer, Kazuya.

"I said it looks like the bill will go through, though," he said to her softly, forgivingly. "If Himemiya-san does run, how do you feel about

that, Yukino-san?"

She gave him a small grin, amused by his suddenly cautious way of asking how she felt about *the indisputable fact* that Chikane Himemiya would be winning the place of senior consul if that bill did indeed go through—which was, as they all knew, very likely going to be the case. This meant that their hopes for Yukino to come in as senior consul would be dashed. Furthermore, it also meant that Haruka's nemesis, Shizuru Fujino, would have an even more powerful ally in the House than any of them had been prepared for. What a situation! How would Haruka feel about it? That was easy: Haruka would definitely not be pleased.

*And I?* she wondered. *How do I really feel about it?*

"It does make me a little apprehensive about some issues," she said tentatively, choosing to be as politic as possible. "But I guess it can't be helped. And Himemiya-san is a very capable person, so it could turn out quite well, I think."

"Yes, I have to admit that," Kazuya returned. "Oh, hello there!"

Yukino turned to the newcomer already being approached by Akagi, whose arms were outstretched to welcome the man. She recognised immediately the Mentulæan prince—the one leading the deputation that had been staying in Hime ever since the departure of the Fujino Campaign. Unlike some other members of his entourage, this prince opted for Himean dress, but this did not make him any less strange a sight. In fact, his appearance often made people pause and take a second look, for he was one of those they called an albino.

She came forward and greeted the man, feeling, as she always did, a little wary in his presence. Something shifty in the pinkish eyes with their sly upturn at the corners, something untrustworthy in his smile, which had a hint of what she fancied to be malice. Oh, not that he actually had the look of a villain: his features were actually fairly handsome in their own foreign way, suitably prince-like, even—but Yukino still could not escape the nagging feeling every time they met that she was speaking to some white, overgrown weasel.

*Or perhaps I'm being too insular,* she thought, offering him a bright

smile as if to make amends for her thoughts. *He is sympathetic to our faction, anyway. But do I really trust sympathies from foreign princes whose brothers battle with our armies?*

Yes, there was the matter of his brother having attacked Argentum, after all. Even if he insisted that he and his father the king had nothing to do with the "rash" actions of the defeated Prince Artaxi, it did not change the fact that Chie Harada's accounts also told of King Obsidian's having nearly opened war on Shizuru Fujino, which would have meant opening war with Hime. Oh, yes, Prince Nagi explained it away as a possible misunderstanding, laughing it off as one of his father's odd shifts of temper. But war was still the prerogative of kings in those lands and hence as subject to a king's temper as to more convoluted turns of politics.

*Whatever the case,* Yukino thought, looking at the man. *I don't trust him.*

"Prince Nagi," she said, timidly letting go of the hand he had offered to her. "How goes it with you? What brings you here, to the senate?"

He grinned and two very thin lines carved into the pale skin beside his mouth.

"I thought I would watch the *comitia*," he explained in his faintly nasal voice. He spoke Himean, of course: all the Mentulaeans did, even if they had perceptible differences in cant and accent. "Interesting, that new proposal-the one for a supplementary nomination period for candidates. It seems well-received."

Yukino's eyebrows lifted: so the prince was watching their politics?

"Yes," she said, barely able to suppress her suspicion. "It does."

"Unfortunately for us," Akagi commented dryly, seeming to be restraining himself from saying something more damning. He settled for adding, with a mutter: "But not for Fujino."

Kazuya and Yukino let out simultaneous sighs.

"Oh?" Nagi said, his ears almost perking up under his shaggy white hair. "You think that the General Shizuru Fujino has something to do

with this?"

Yukino's warning glance to Akagi was for naught as the man nodded, launching into diatribe.

"I'd say so," Akagi muttered, half-growling with excitement as he perceived a sympathetic ear. "Himemiya'll be the one running, but it's Fujino who'll be calling the shots, I tell you. You ought to be concerned too, Prince! If those two get any say in it, you won't be getting that peace treaty you're suing for. It'll be war and campaigns up North, all the way!"

Nagi fluttered his fair lashes, putting on a look of faint and obviously theatrical dismay.

"Ah, no," he said. "That would be very disappointing."

"Don't worry, Nagi-san," Yukino said, quickly interrupting before Akagi could say anything more. "I don't think Akagi-san's fears are likely to be realised. I for one think that Fujino-san has little-if anything!-to do with this. Himemiya-san, even if she does become consul, is fair in her own right. Your desired treaty is in no danger as far as her impartiality and judgment is concerned."

Nagi looked at her appraisingly. Yukino's skin crawled in reaction, even as she nodded to reassure him. She could see his hand playing with the golden band on his wrist-a thick, intricately-worked bracelet that drew many a fortune-hungry politician's eye and which would probably see him killed in a mugging were he to set foot on the streets without the bodyguards currently standing behind him. To Yukino, the ornament was garish. She hardly spared it a second glance.

"If Yukino Kikukawa says it, then it must be so," Nagi finally said, smiling brightly at the three senators. "Now may I invite the three of you to my place for dinner? It would make me so happy to have such illustrious people-and defenders of the *mos maiorum*, too!-at my table."

Yukino shifted, aware that she would have to accept his offer for the sake of diplomacy though she little cared to dine with the man. "At



*my table" might just translate to "on my table" here*, she thought, watching her companions' reactions to the invitation. She could already see that Akagi was accepting, as well as Kazuya. But what could one expect from them? One too reckless, the other too naïve. And what about her? Was she, perhaps, too wary?

"Kikukawa-san?"

They were waiting, and she knew what she had to say.

*The things you have to suffer for politics!*

"Of course, Prince Nagi."

The Mentulæan prince beamed, ushering his guests along the corridor with overdone happiness. They talked all the while of banal things: the weather, the present state of the economy, even of the vagaries of Himean culture. They were already out in the street and talking about culinary matters when Nagi suddenly returned to the subject of Izumi's law and Shizuru Fujino.

"I just thought of it," he said, opening his oddly-coloured eyes wide-eyes that seemed like washed-out parodies of Shizuru Fujino's, to Yukino. "If the General Fujino is actually aware of this, then is it not possible she will return to Hime to try and run in the elections?"

Akagi grinned at him.

"I thought that too, Nagi-san!" he uttered. "You see what I mean, eh?"

Yukino interjected.

"No," she said firmly, bringing the men's eyes to her. "No, I really don't think that's going to happen. For one thing, her campaign is not yet officially over, and she'd come under sanctions for abandoning it just for the elections. She wouldn't do that, I can assure you."

Kazuya nodded, looking at her.

"For what it's worth, I agree with Yukino-san," he said. "Fujino-san is definitely not the type to do such a thing. She'd never up and leave

her legions for that."

Akagi scowled and looked away while Nagi seemed to ponder the matter.

"I see," he said, at length. "You would know, of course."

He tilted his head in tacit acquiescence, before going on to say: "She is considered one of your best generals, is she not? I have heard so much about her and her doings! From what I hear, she is most capable."

"That's so," Yukino said, noting Akagi's grumble to the side. "No one can deny that, Prince. So she's also one of our most trustworthy."

"I see, I see. Maybe the great General Fujino is unaware of this, as you say. I would think she has her hands full in the north, and not just in dealing with whatever troubles my fool of a renegade brother has drummed up for both our nations. She has, I suppose, much to do there still? She must be having a bit of trouble, from what I've heard from the other senators."

Yukino and Kazuya nodded, the irony not lost on them that it was a Mentulaeen speaking about the travails of the Fujino campaign. Akagi, however, simply sneered and turned a sarcastic smile to the company.

"Oh, sure!" he spat, shaking his head disgustedly. "That woman has damned good luck! I'll bet she's having the time of her life right now!"

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Shizuru Fujino was almost delirious. Only moments ago, she had run from her own room. The flight had taken her all the way to the grounds, and it was even with some surprise that she now noted her surroundings, eyebrows lifting as she finally identified where she was.

*The gardens.*

The gubernatorial residence's estate was very large, and the gardens could almost be considered a maze. Had the governor not

led her through them before, she might well have spent time in simply cataloguing the twists and turns of the walls of trimmed bushes and plant-boxes. Yet she had somehow reached the very centre of the gardens in her dash away from the manor. She did not even recall her progress to this point, and that made her wonder at her own state of distraction.

"How did I get here?" she murmured, gazing about confusedly. Turning her eyes forward, she saw a monstrous shadow before her and would have taken a step back in reflex had she not apprehended what the silhouette was: an enormous blackwood tree, its leafless boughs branching and reaching up towards the sky. The flaky bark sparkled with frost, catching the radiance that was coming from the blazing torches of the mansion.

*Remarkable how the glow reaches all the way here*, she observed, noting that the same distant illumination seemed reflected by the snow-covered surroundings. No doubt this was the reason she had been able to make it this far this late at night, even with no torches in the immediate area. She took a moment to study the scene around her, staring at the desolate and frozen place with burning eyes.

Everything was so white: so perfectly, innocently white.

Perhaps even too white, she decided. Too pure and untainted, a world complacent in its spotlessness. And this such a sharp contrast to what was suddenly rising up, churning again in her heart that it almost offended her.

*Ah, no, not this again.*

But it was returning: a perfectly outlined, flawlessly vivid reminiscence of what had happened in her bedroom. It lay like a mural against the cold canvas of snow, and little though she wished it, her memory invoked every detail with its usual precision: her quarrel with Takeda, the retirement to the bedroom, the persistence of her irritation, even the kiss itself.

"Not that..."

She exhaled and it steamed the air, the slow hiss like the sound of a

brand on skin. She was remembering the kiss now- *if such a desecration of person could be called a kiss*, she added-and beat one closed fist against her thigh in sudden impulse. She noted the action dully, wondering at how even her own body had turned against her.

It was an odd thing for someone always in control of herself. Odd and traitorous.

*It only feels what I feel*, she explained. *It feels the shame*. Her body felt and knew it, and simply reacted by trying to beat the accursed thing out. Just as she knew it and felt her will double over in spastic regret.

That, too, was an odd thing: the regret .

It was not that she was completely unaccustomed to feeling it. Rather, it was because she was unaccustomed to feeling it with such-what was the word? Depth? The regret hammering at her heart now was unfamiliar to her, so strong that it seemed she had never been this grieved by anything else, had never felt such disgrace on account of her own actions. And this might well be the case, for she had never truly given herself cause to do so in the past, nor allowed herself opportunity to dwell over anything approaching a cause. But this time was different. This seemed to sear the shame into her, and she felt the dreadfulness of repentance like never before.

But she was being arrogant again, was she not, in thinking about such things? What was that they said about Shizuru Fujino never making mistakes? Whatever it was, it was certainly proven false now. Here was *an utter mistake*, and the shame that should come with it. For if one made mistakes-particularly ones of such a magnitude as this-then one could undoubtedly feel shame.

*How awful it is*, she noted dismally. *Almost overpowering*.

She supposed that what made it worse-what branded the mortification deeper-was the knowledge that part of her did not share in that same regret that should have overwhelmed all of her being. It should have, by rights, yet it did not. Even as that terrible regret licked at her heart, she could feel a contrary sensation in the

same place, a feeling of having taken pleasure in what she had wrought. That part seemed to spite her repentance, gloating and bringing back the sweetness of the prize she had taken with her reckless act earlier. It returned to her the heady pleasure of that velvety, liquid sensation of kissing the Otomeian's lips, even as it rang hot and scandalous in her mind.

*The human being is a treacherous one, she mused. For every part of us that steps forth, another moves back or goes the other way.*

There was the shameful thing: the consciousness of the act's reprehensibility did not in the least dull the delight she had taken in it.

"Damn!"

She groaned and struck out with a hand, her palm meeting the scarred bark of the tree with a dull smack. She leaned on that hand and pressed her eyelids insistently together as she attempted to do away with the recollection of her actions, to do away with the spectre of memory. She nearly laughed at that thought, even in her anguish. A mere woman trying to drive away Mnemosyne?

A low mumble, half-amused and perfectly sarcastic: "Of all the idiotic things to do..."

Who would even think of driving away Mnemosyne, who was even stronger than Death? Oh, she was just full of sensibility tonight! She had to shake her head at the futility of that idea. Even Death was far stronger than her, after all, for all that she was one of that divinity's agents when on the battlefield. If even the mistress could not defeat the enemy, then surely there was no point in the servant attempting to do the same.

A weary sigh escaped her lips, condensing into sad and sluggish drops in the air.

Yes, she thought with resignation. *Driving Mnemosyne away is impossible.* She should have learned that by now. Besides which, what could she even gain if she succeeded in the endeavour? What would she achieve if she forgot what had happened, anyway? What

happened was a fixed thing: it was done, and that was all. *That was all.*

"Yes, all."

She doubted she would ever be able to forget what she had done, no matter how hard she tried. Not when she felt this powerfully about it. She supposed, even, that she would never forget.

*Nor, perhaps, would Natsuki.*

The latter thought brought her forehead crashing to the tree as she let out another stifled groan. Not for the pain of the coarse wood digging into her brow! That thing digging into her chest was far more palpable, and it defeated the other sensation. She could not even feel the chill of the evening wearing on, for her body-as well as her mind-seemed to be burning too much to allow that balm to the flushed heat of her skin.

"Ye gods, forgive me."

Her bodyguard's face came to mind as she uttered these words, and another burst of heat snapped inside her breast.

*How could I have done that to her?*

She hung her head, still leaning against the tree as remorse rode her with a whip. Each lash spurred on the remembrance, each recollection like a heavy-handed blow as she spared herself no discomfort in her sorrow. She took the reminiscence and beat her breast with it, as though trying to degrade herself further in the face of her self-censure.

*To think I had the temerity to be so high-handed before,* she thought, returning to Takeda and their quarrel-that accursed thing, which began all of this. Even now it continued to feed the flame as she thought of their words to each other, words where she had argued for something that her actions contradicted later on. What a perfect hypocrite she was turning out to be! It drove her mad to think it, but there was an odd sort of satisfaction in hurting herself this way too.

*To think I was so superior on that point, when it turns out I am no better than he!*

She lifted her palm from the trunk and returned it as a fist. It made contact with a smack, sending a faint flush of warmth spreading out from her knuckles. She ignored it, still caught up in the memories as well as the self-condemnation.

*A verdict: I am even worse than that man.*

She repeated the action, throwing even more weight behind the blow. Bark broke off from the wood as she struck and snow powdered onto her shoulders, but all of it was lost on her. She merely redoubled her efforts at punishing the wood, imagining a face in the knots and whorls in the grain.

But she did not know whether the face she was imagining was that of the swordsman or her own.

*I told him he was not worthy of her* . She had been so adamant on that point, had she not? And now she was even less worthy of the girl than he. Oh, indeed, how perfect it all was! Perhaps she should appreciate the irony.

*Just perhaps.*

Now she could feel the faint sting where her knuckles had skinned up, but it was nothing to the sting in her chest. Again and again she punched, wounding both the wood and herself with steady, unflinching determination.

And still she could not stop repining.

*I am not worthy of her after what I have done* .

A sheen of red broke out on the bark, where she had been striking it. But whose blood, that of the tree or hers?

*I am not worthy even to be protected by her.*

Again another blow, so strong that some of the branches above her head quivered and sent a bitter rain of icicles and frost onto her

head.

*I am not worthy-yet I still want her!*

She threw her hand at the tree with a snarl. This time her fist met a jagged scar in the trunk-no doubt the remnant of a low branch that some gardener had cut off ages ago-and blood spattered out as the abused knuckles split on the knotted bark. She hissed and uttered a short oath to the great god, eyeing the back of her hand. Two sluggish rivulets of crimson bled from it.

Looking at the blood, she felt her lips pulling into a smirk.

*Serves you right, Fujino.*

She shook her head, still wearing that farcical half-smile, and flung the same fist at the trunk once again. The resultant pain made her grit her teeth a little, but not enough to make the corners of her mouth drop.

*Yes indeed,* she told herself viciously. *Serves you right.*

But it was not enough, still could not divert enough of the pain hacking away at her breast. She readied herself to throw another punch, thinking that she would break the bones of her hand if she had to, just to take away even a little of the ache in her heart.

Because that latter ache was far too unbearable.

She was about to strike again when something hit the back of her head, scattering over her shoulders. She jerked in surprise, slowly realising what had hit her as a heavy clump of something cool and wet fell onto her unhurt hand, even while she whirled to face her attacker.

*Snow?*

Her mind made the identification just as she turned fully around and saw the *last* person she had expected to see. Or perhaps the first-did it really matter?

*Natsuki?*



She opened her mouth, suddenly stumbling over syllables that should have been easy at any other time.

"Natsu-what?"

Her mind was only a little more articulate than her tongue.

*Since when did she-?*

She was staring dumbly at the new arrival now, having difficulty seeing the latter's expression in the dim light. She *could* see, however, the puffs steaming from the younger woman's mouth, coming in harsh regularity as if the girl had just been running. Perhaps she had been running? But why would she do that; was something the matter with her? Was she all right? Oh, of course she was not all right!

*Remember what you did to her!*

Shizuru winced at that, groaning to herself. Here was a confrontation she did not know how to handle, for all her famed skill with defusing situations of high tension. Though words of apology were still on the tip of her tongue, the humiliation of it all was suddenly choking her throat. What to do? What to say? Better not to say anything!

*Yet I have so much to tell her.*

She sent the girl a beseeching look, hoping that could substitute for the words she wished so much to speak. As she could not see the girl's face, however, she had no idea how it was received. All she could hope for was a sound, so she waited-and in vain.

Natsuki was not talking to her.

*And that, she told herself, trying to ignore the insistent twinge in her heart, serves you right too.*

She had a sudden desire to fidget, something she hardly ever did. But that was merely because she had never felt this uncomfortable before. The silence, she felt, was too intrusive, too rudely imposing. Someone had to talk, and given that one of the two was Natsuki, it was fairly certain it would not be that one.

Besides which, Natsuki did not deserve this silence from her.

*So, you talk, the older woman commanded herself. Break the silence, or suffer it.*

"Ah..." Shizuru began, about to say the girl's name but faltering before she could begin to get it out. She was afraid to say it. How could she even say that name, after all, given what she had done, given the trust she had broken? But she could not simply stand there and not address the girl, not say anything. She had to talk, because that was better than the silence right now.

A dangerous thing, but one had to try it. So she tried again.

"Na-" she started, only to find that her tongue was thick and sluggish. "I am..."

*Again, try again.*

"Oh god, Natsu-"

She broke off as the girl suddenly started walking towards her, still panting bursts of steam into the air. The unexpected movement caught her off guard, and it was all she could do to watch and hope for a glimpse of her expression. It took only a few steps before the girl was close enough for Shizuru to finally get a view of her face.

The sight took all of the seasoned general's nerve not to step back in surprise.

*She looks so threatening.*

That was remarkable, since Shizuru was usually immune to postures of intimidation. Something about Natsuki now, however, seemed to break through her usual steel. What was it about the young woman? Shizuru studied her carefully, noticing that it was not precisely the thunder of Natsuki's expression that made her feel so menaced. Even that thunder was all too luminous to be considered truly frightening, she saw, for Natsuki's beauty shone through the distortions of her countenance: the dramatic green eyes, darkening with emotion; the slightly flared nostrils; the succulent mouth parted and issuing mist, white teeth visible within; the way the eyebrows

slanted together into a still-girlish scowl.

All of it was too lovely to be truly frightening.

Natsuki continued to come forward, her silky strides closing the distance. And the closer she came, the better Shizuru could see and study her expression.

Another step: green eyes flashing catlike in the dim light.

*There, that's it!*

Shizuru watched her with fascination, coming to recognise just what it was in the girl that had given the sense of a threat. It was the poise, the predatory way in which she moved forward that menaced and intimidated, even as her face drew you in.

Now she was coming even closer, dark hair whipping behind her in a sudden gust of wind.

"Ahh."

There was something both calming and agitating about the girl's movements. *Each step carries a dreadful finality to it*, Shizuru thought, exhaling anxiously and still waiting for this human panther to reach her and perhaps take out its fury on her body. Yes, Natsuki seemed furious with her-as she should be-and yet, there was something in that fury that seemed a little strange. There was some other emotion in that agitated face, something Shizuru could not name. She wracked her brain for it, even as the girl came steadily closer.

*What is it? Is it hurt?*

Natsuki kept walking, a small twitch in her left eyebrow becoming visible at this distance.

*It should be hurt.*

She was only a few feet away now, and would stop her advance soon.

*Yes, hurt. But what else?*

Abruptly, Shizuru realised that Natsuki had continued her approach until she was standing a mere foot away, instead of the few feet the older woman had expected. The surprising proximity stole the breath from her chest as she made a meaningless sound.

"Oh."

Her body was tensing, she recognised, reacting instinctively to the provocative presence before it. The memory of her self-censure dictated that she should be repelled by this, and should back away, yet it also said that she should stay and receive her punishment, whatever it would be. She wondered, somewhat distractedly, if the girl would slap her.

She steeled herself and tried to bring her eyes to meet those brilliant green ones she had come to know so well and which were surely glaring at her. The very moment she looked up, however, Natsuki eluded her by dropping to kneel.

"Natsuki!"

The name left her mouth before she could stop it. She was about to fall to her knees as well, to see what was the matter, but then she felt a hand taking her own. The touch reminded her of the injuries she had brought upon herself earlier, but even that momentary pain was relegated to the background when the girl suddenly spoke.

The sound of her voice made Shizuru release a breath she had not been aware of holding.

"You-oh," Natsuki began, stopping to click her tongue as she studied the older woman's wounds with what seemed to be barely restrained irritation. She blew through her nose before going on to say a single word, her inflection making it clear she was thoroughly displeased:

" *Silly.* "

Shizuru's eyebrows shot up at this statement, which had been far from what she was expecting. Her brows climbed even higher at the sensation of something cold being pressed into her wounds: Natsuki

was rubbing snow into them, doing it so gently it seemed almost like a pleasant caress.

Almost.

She had a sense of anticlimax. But she could hardly do more than watch as her wounds were cleaned by her bodyguard, who seemed hell-bent on ignoring her amazed expression. Something in Shizuru was steeped in relief at what was happening, and yet there was something in her too that cried out in shame. Hence she let this go on for a while and remained mute before the girl's attentions. But when she felt cloth wrap around her knuckles-the cloth being the bandage Natsuki had unwrapped from her own hand-she finally collected enough strength to speak, albeit rather shakily.

"Natsuki," she whispered, giving the girl a confused-and, she was aware, faintly panicked-look. Still, there was no helping it, particularly when Natsuki was not only holding her hand so gently but suddenly staring up at her with those unsettling eyes.

Shizuru took a deep breath: "What are you-"

Natsuki shook her head, cutting her off.

*What are you doing?*

The girl rose to her feet, took Shizuru's arm, and tugged at it gently to indicate that they should go. This was a sensible proposition, of course, since it was getting colder by the moment and Shizuru had only a tunic on, besides now having wounds that required tending. But the older woman was so staggered by everything right then that she could only give Natsuki another searching glance. It took a few more tugs before the girl finally deigned to speak and persuade her to leave.

"Cold," Natsuki said gruffly, furrowing her brow. "We will go back."

She tugged on Shizuru's arm again.

"Shizuru."

Whether either of them knew it or not, that name on her lips had

been all the older woman was hoping for. Shizuru nodded at the girl, still feeling helplessly lost.

She let the Otomeian lead them away from that place. Natsuki did this quietly, saying nothing, and Shizuru followed suit. But for all that their progress was silent as that of a thief creeping into a house, the Himean's head was occupied by a cacophony of thoughts. Each step she took had her heart beating like a drum.

*What is she doing*, she wondered, glancing every now and then at Natsuki, who seemed to ignore her questioning looks with remarkable determination. Oh, why was Natsuki being like this? It would have been more eminently understandable if she had cursed Shizuru or something else to that effect. But this was so unexpected that it mystified the older woman completely. The girl was so difficult to read! Always had been, perhaps always would be. But that was part of what made her so interesting, after all, especially where Shizuru was concerned-that she could not read her with perfect ease. Hers was the allure of mysteries . All the same, Shizuru would have given anything to have that facility, at the moment: to know what Natsuki was thinking, to know what was going on in that lovely head of hers.

Even if what she found there might frighten her.

*Do you hate me now*, she thought, addressing the query silently to the girl holding her arm and walking a little ahead. *Do you hate me so much that you will not even walk beside me anymore?* But that did not make sense. Why would the girl even touch her, as she was doing now, if she hated her? Why would she even tend to her wounds that way?

She remembered Natsuki's face earlier: the anger in the eyes, and that other thing that she was still unsure of having identified, besides the worry, that thing so much like disappointment.

Disappointment? Ye gods, what an awful thought! Surely the anger was preferable, Shizuru decided with a grimace. To have truly disappointed someone in such a way-and to have the someone be a person for whom she felt so much-it was unbearable! Yes, anything but disappointment!

So caught up was she in her mental agony that she did not notice they had reached their room, alerted to it only by the sound of the door's bolt clicking into place. She almost started in surprise, staring at the familiar surroundings.

And remembering what had taken place there.

"Shizuru."

She turned to see Natsuki coming up to her, holding two bottles and a bundle of what seemed to be fresh white cloth in her hands. She motioned Shizuru to the bed.

*Oh Jupiter, that bed.*

Then Natsuki's cool voice reaching out to her again: "Sit. Please."

She obeyed meekly, trying to seat herself on the edge of the bed with as much dignity as she could muster. It was not very much at the moment, she well knew, given her sudden unease in this room, on this bed, before this girl-who was unwrapping the bandages from her hurt hand now, kneeling before her yet again.

*When I should be the one kneeling before her*, Shizuru thought, flushing red with chagrin.

"Natsuki."

The emerald eyes turned her way and she faltered. Natsuki chose to speak at that moment.

"It will hurt," she said, with a trace of-and this was so ironic as to be taunting-apology in the words. She lifted the wine bottle in her hand, obviously asking for permission to apply the liquor to the wounds. It was standard procedure for deep cuts so that they would not fester later on. But Shizuru had been so engrossed in her remorse that she nearly forgot about it. And now she was being reminded by none other than the one she had hurt a while ago, a criminal being looked after by her own victim. Oh, this was a day of ironies, indeed!

A small mumble interrupted this self-laceration.

"Uhhh."

She looked down to find Natsuki, cheeks suddenly a little pink, still giving her that inquiring look. She was scowling and holding a now wine-soaked piece of linen. Shizuru could do nothing but nod, all too conscious of the hand holding her own so gently.

*Too kind. Why is she being too kind?*

When Natsuki began working at the wound, she felt her eyes water a little from the sting of the alcohol biting into her flesh. It was not enough to make her utter a sound, but it still hurt. Even through the pain, however, she could see that the girl was trying to be as tender as possible without sacrificing thoroughness.

Somehow, that hurt even more.

Once she had finished with the wine, Natsuki proceeded to soak another piece of cloth with liquid from the other bottle-which turned out to be water, as Shizuru expected. The girl then went over the wounds with the cloth once again, eyes intent on her task even as her patient's eyes were intent on her.

It was not until she began patting the water dry that Shizuru finally gathered enough courage to speak.

"Thank you, Natsuki," the older woman started, her voice quiet. "I am..."

She paused, aware that the girl's eyes were still focused on her hand. There was something in that which deterred her, made her a little afraid.

*But I have to get it out.*

"I am so sorry," she finally managed, whispering the words because her throat was in danger of closing yet again. "Truly, Natsu-"

"Do not."

She stopped, mouth falling shut at this interruption. Natsuki went on, still working at her wounds with that still-too-tender touch.



"Do not..."

The words slipped from Natsuki's lips, gentle yet unyielding. The girl had to huff before she could go on, and what she said next fell more heavily on Shizuru's breast than her ears.

"Do not... do that," she said quietly. "Again."

Shizuru had to repress a wince, for all that she had been expecting this. She shut her eyes, bowing her head in apology. She was about to say something when Natsuki went on.

"Do not do that, please," Natsuki whispered. "Leave."

Shizuru's eyes snapped open, staring at her with perplexity. Natsuki paused, still not looking back, and let out a small sigh as she reached for the strips of new linen beside her.

*What does she mean*, Shizuru wondered, unconsciously tensing all over. *Does she want me to leave now?*

When Natsuki began to wrap her hand in the fresh cloth, Shizuru finally asked the question aloud, privately cringing even as she spoke.

"What do you mean?" she asked, hearing the faint shiver in her voice. "Natsuki, what do you mean?"

She did not know what she expected. Perhaps an angry glare, perhaps indignation. Perhaps nothing at all. But whatever it was, she did not expect the worried, pleading look that Natsuki suddenly turned to her.

This, beneath a suddenly insignificant veneer of the wrath that had been there before.

"You-like that," the girl admonished, meeting her eyes with reproachful, forest-green ones. "Without me."

Shizuru stared at her as the girl struggled to get the words out more clearly.

"You do not leave without me."

Having said this, scarlet immediately swept the girl's cheeks as she dropped her eyes to the injured hand once again, valiantly attempting to look stern as she did. The frown gathering at her brow trembled, however, and did not fool the other woman in the least. Shizuru finally understood why something had seemed odd about the young woman's anger earlier-and having come to understand this, grew even more bewildered by it.

*That-is that why she was angry?*

"Natsuki?"

Natsuki said nothing, trying to finish wrapping the bindings on her charge's injuries. Her face was so close to Shizuru's hand that the older woman could feel the caress of the girl's breath on her exposed fingers. At any other time, it would have tantalised. In her present confusion, it provoked.

*Is that all*, she wondered uncomprehendingly, trying not to let on her agitation by clenching her hands. Was Natsuki not angry with her for what she did earlier? Was she not offended? How could that be?

*How can she not be angry with me!*

"Ahh."

The exhalation had come from Natsuki, who had apparently finished wrapping the wound. Shizuru watched the girl with rising puzzlement, saying nothing as the fury tightened like a coil in her throat. Something inside her was screaming, telling her this was all wrong and she had no right to be treated so kindly by Natsuki. Not after everything.

*She should not be so kind even now*, she told herself, feeling the pressure build up yet again. How could the girl be so gentle? How, when Shizuru had just abused her person that way? How could anyone ignore an insult such as that Shizuru had given?

Something in Shizuru could not accept it.

*She should be angry with me!*

When Natsuki looked up at her, she finally snapped.

"Why are you not angry with me!" she burst out, glaring at the girl.  
"Why, Natsuki?"

*Think of that offence!*

"Think of what I have done!" she cried out, only vaguely aware that she was pleading now for the girl to hate her where she had been asking for forgiveness before. And yet the contradiction seemed irrelevant at the moment. "You have to-you should be angry with me, Natsuki! You must be!"

Natsuki continued to look up at her, watching with a wrinkled brow that Shizuru could not decipher.

"You are no mere slave!" the older woman whispered, her words sounding more like a plea than anything else. "Natsuki, you cannot and you should never-"

She was cut off by fingers on her lips.

"Mm."

Shizuru fell silent at the touch, unable to believe the girl still trusted her enough to touch her in such an intimate way. *Calming, oddly so, yet perplexing too. As ever.* She watched as Natsuki shook her head slightly, still looking up at her with that unreadable frown.

Always such an enigma.

Now Natsuki was kneeling up, lifting her behind from its seat on the backs of her legs so that her face moved higher and came nearer to Shizuru's. Another blush swept over her face like sunrise, and Shizuru watched it, fascinated by the way the stain of that colour seemed to make the lustre of her skin stand out all the more. She was so close, so close once again, and so terrifically stimulating that the older woman had to remind herself not to lean forward as her body ached to do.

"Ah..."

A small sound, like a half-formed word, escaped Natsuki's lips. Shizuru could clearly see-even almost hear-the sound of the girl's throat as it flexed, swallowing convulsively all the while.

Shizuru wondered what was going on.

She would have asked had it not been for Natsuki's fingers still on her lips, which tingled at the contact. But then the fingers left and moved to her cheek, rounding the bone.

*What is she doing?*

She was still wondering what was going on, and perhaps she might have wondered even more had it not been for the sight of Natsuki's lips, which trembled as if the girl wished to say something but could not. And though her first thought then was of curiosity as to what Natsuki meant to say, the succeeding one was of desire for those lips she was looking at, her body starting to lean towards those lips she had already tasted once and wanted to taste again.

*My god!*

She jolted ever so slightly but all too visibly backwards, a little shaken by herself. Quite unthinkable for her to try that again and yet she had almost done it. Oh, how hopeless was her self-control these days? Or more precisely, how hopeless was her self-control when it came to this young woman? Who merely looked at her now with that same unreadable expression, the same painfully beautiful face.

*Shizuru Fujino, you really are the damnedest creature!* She growled inwardly, wanting to give herself a good slap for what had almost happened. Why was her body suddenly acting so impulsively this way? And why that awful feeling in her chest, which felt as though it were about to break open?

Then that sudden fear: what if the girl decided she could not trust her ever again?

She was about to apologise-yet again!-to Natsuki, but was halted by the sight of the girl's countenance. It seemed that her face had

changed just a little. It seemed that there was a faint and evanescent sadness in her eyes that made their colour all the brighter and more yielding.

Her lip quivered again too, perpetually on the verge of speech yet never reaching it.

"Natsuki," Shizuru whispered, not knowing what to say before this. She wanted to tell her she would not do it again, that she had never meant to hurt or abuse her in such a way. She wanted to tell the girl that she need never speak to her again, if that was what it took for her to be able to stay as Shizuru's bodyguard and attendant. She would have told the girl this, perhaps even more, had it not been for Natsuki's suddenly leaning in towards her and shocking her so badly that she failed to close her eyes when their lips met.

*Ecastor!* Shizuru cried inwardly, absolutely dumbfounded. *Natsuki is - she is -*

Something quivering on her lips, steady in pressure yet tremulous as well.

*It cannot be.*

Natsuki was kissing her. She was kissing her mouth. Just a lovely little feeling, the soft pressure of lips on her own. Chaste, and so exquisite in both sensation and surprise that it rooted Shizuru to her seat.

*Dear god*, she thought, still too shocked to shut her eyes. *Dear god.*

Who was more surprised by it was hard to tell, for the giver's lips shook far more than those of the recipient-who, for her part, was so still she would have seemed a statue, had it not been for the giddy rush of blood thundering all the way to her face. Even the clarity of thought seemed so lost to her that all she could think were three words, over and over again, like echoes:

*She kissed me.*

Natsuki's nerve seemed to wither suddenly before the heat of Shizuru's blush, and she was the one to pull back, gasping as if she

had been in some harrowing trial. The older woman was breathing hard as well, eyes wide as she regarded the girl with brazen amazement.

They stared at each other with frightened expressions.

*Natsuki.*

The Otomeian flinched, suddenly looking terrified by her own actions. Shizuru watched the play of emotion on the girl's face, unaware of the same display on her own.

*Do you also-?*

She saw the twitch in Natsuki's muscles even before the girl began to get up, obviously intent on moving away. She was surprised to see, even, the embarrassment on the girl's face so clearly, when she had been agonising over reading Natsuki's face before. But now she could see this much, and she knew too what Natsuki's instincts were screaming at her: to run.

*But Furies take me if I let her do the same thing I did,* Shizuru thought, lunging into action. Again those three words rang at her, but in a tone more triumphant than before: *She kissed me!*

She reached and jerked the girl back before the latter could turn away, pulling at the younger woman so strongly that the Otomeian practically fell into her arms. Natsuki let out a short sound of alarm, but it was cut off by Shizuru's mouth on her own, catching her lips just as the older woman's hands caught the rest of her body. Their mouths came together for the third time in the day, but this time both of them were moving forward and pressing their lips together, which seemed to make all the difference.

Shizuru had to exercise considerable self-restraint not to let out a moan.

*Do you want me too,* she was asking the girl in her mind. *Could you possibly feel the same?*

She let herself fall backwards onto the bed, taking the girl with her. Having done this, however, she loosened her grip on Natsuki's

arms, giving her opportunity to stop what was happening if she wished. But Natsuki made no attempt to free herself, nor to separate her mouth from Shizuru's.

*Could it be you were simply surprised the first time?*

Their lips broke apart and again they stared at each other with anxious expressions, mouths open. Their breath tickled their faces, which were both bright with heat as the excitement danced beneath the skin. There was a slight dip in the mattress when Natsuki put an arm beside Shizuru's torso and moved up a little in an attempt to support her position above the older woman.

"Ahh."

Natsuki stirred again, putting her other arm on the mattress as well. The movement made Shizuru conscious of the girl's breasts pressing against her own. It seemed suddenly to her that she was losing her mind. It seemed there had never been a more luscious, more yielding feminine body. Yet the same body seemed so firm and strong as well, and she almost kissed those lips again. But she had to make something clear first. She had to be sure.

For even if Natsuki forgave her this time, she could not forgive herself if she wronged her again.

"Natsuki," she said slowly, swallowing hard. "Natsuki, forgive me, but I..."

She was finding it increasingly difficult to talk. The awareness of Natsuki being in her arms, the sensation of the girl's weight flush against her was dizzying.

*I want you .*

"Stop me," she went on, trying to work around the tightness in her throat. "If you do not want to do this. Simply stop me."

Natsuki said nothing, looking at her with an expression bordering on helplessness.

"Please," Shizuru told her, voice dropping to a hoarse, throaty

whisper. "You need only stop me, Natsuki, if-if it so. Only, please..."

*Please want me too.*

She shut her eyes, hoping that taking away the distracting sight of temptation hovering so close to her would somehow force the words out. But then she felt the shift in weight above her yet again, followed by the silky drop of Natsuki's hair rippling over the girl's shoulders and brushing her cheeks.

She opened her eyes just as Natsuki's lips brushed her mouth.

Yes.

A murmur passed between them, and she lifted her head to catch the girl's mouth again. They pressed together firmly, and she felt a bright flash explode behind now-lowered eyelids. Heat was suffusing her face, but it felt light compared to the scorching embers that were Natsuki's lips, rubbing a gentle friction against hers.

*Not even when I won the corona obsidionalis*, she found herself thinking. *Not even then did I feel this elated*. She was so ecstatic that she could not help but still be a little incredulous at what was taking place. But the timid press of Natsuki's lips on hers was all too true to be a mere fantasy-oh, it was such a tactile feeling!

She opened her mouth slightly to nip at Natsuki's lower lip, which quivered at the gesture. Her arms folded over the younger woman and this was reciprocated by another shy press of Natsuki's lips, her small nose brushing Shizuru's own.

"My Natsuki," she whispered, feeling the small tremble the verbal possession caused. She realised then how much it must have taken out of the younger woman to do this, how difficult it must have been. Even now Natsuki looked fearful, her eyes looking back at Shizuru with mute fright as they paused to stare at each other.

*Poor child*, she thought. *And it is all my clumsy fault that I made it no easier for her. Or for myself, for that matter*. But Natsuki was hers now, and that was all that was truly significant at the moment and in the world. Everything else, to Shizuru, was dust.



She leaned up to return Natsuki's kisses as tenderly as they had been given, trying to hold back her own ardour for now. This did not trouble her too much, for even this gentle contact touched her in a way she failed to grasp. Exquisite feeling, those lips against hers, that satiny quality to the girl's cheeks as they touched her face. She was so exultant over all of this, so caught up in the extraordinary sweetness of kissing Natsuki this way and this lightly, that she nearly failed to notice something important. When she did, however, she actually had to halt momentarily and give Natsuki a surprised and penetrating look.

*She has never kissed anyone before*, she thought, amazed by that. *She does not even know how.*

It would certainly explain why she had been so shocked by the first kiss Shizuru had stolen from her, when the older woman had actually gone so far as to invade her mouth. It would explain, too, why she was kissing Shizuru in such a way, giving small tentative presses of her lips that were similar to those of a cub nuzzling another. Sweet, yes, irrepressibly so, and yet they made Shizuru ache to show her another kind of sweetness.

"Natsuki," she whispered, watching the other's eyes go wide as she tumbled them over. They ended with reversed positions, Natsuki lying stretched out and stunned beneath her. Their legs rubbed against each other and Shizuru had to stop herself from pressing her thigh between the girl's.

*First things first*, her mind told her. If Natsuki had not even truly kissed anyone yet, there would be even less probability of her having experienced anything that blatantly sexual. Shizuru did not want to shock her into fear again so soon, for all that she was burning to simply take the girl there and then.

*Not too fast, not now*, she told herself, taking deep breaths that matched those coming from the body underneath her. *She is yours. You have time.*

She thanked the gods some of her usual sensibility was returning, at least, even if she was still being assaulted by her senses. The light puffs of warmth against her lips were sending fine shivers of need

through her body again.

She said the girl's name.

"May I kiss you?" she asked huskily, almost amused by her own question. Still, after what had happened the first time, it was better to be certain. "May I do that, Natsuki?"

It made her heart falter to see the nervous reply, which was a red-faced, shy little nod.

She lowered her lips again. But this time, she opened her mouth to nudge Natsuki's lips open with her tongue. The girl granted entry unsteadily, an odd whimper rising from her throat when Shizuru's tongue passed into her mouth and began to feel hers.

"Hnn."

Shizuru was in ecstasy. She could feel Natsuki's tongue starting to move, maddeningly uncertain in its dance as she caressed its wet flesh with hers. It was unbelievably soft and Shizuru wished she could wrap her lips around it, suck at it the same way Natsuki was now sucking on hers. Hands were lacing into her hair, massaging her scalp in a way that sent thrills of pleasure rippling from her head to her stomach-and deeper still, to her very centre. Her belly felt suspended, dangling in air. Everything about her seemed fixed to the other's lips, tied to the movements of their tongues as they became bolder with each other.

The sound of Natsuki's first unrepressed moans had her clutching the girl's hips, hands massaging her through the cloth.

There was blood in her kiss. It thundered beneath it.

Natsuki's tongue slid over hers, suddenly peeking out to lick at her lips. It slipped between them and she gave a low, rumbling groan when it touched the inside of her mouth. She could still feel a little fear in its explorations, but there was fascination there too, seducing her thoroughly with its slow strokes against her tongue. She met it encouragingly, marvelling at how the seduced had become the seductress. Again she had to struggle not to bring her knee up, not

to bring them closer to the conflagration that the body exploding under her hands was trying to come to.

A wisp of hot air blew against her face, coming from Natsuki's nose.

They exchanged one more lingering kiss before easing apart, panting heavily. Shizuru felt light-headed, the heat under her compelling her body to press harder into it. Her eyes were still closed and she could feel the flutter of Natsuki's lashes against her cheek.

She wondered how the younger woman felt about all this.

Her head lifted ever so slowly and she peeked out from heavy-lidded eyes to see Natsuki's face. She saw those blood-infused lips glistening beneath her, the hot colour of the girl's skin. She saw that haughty, delicate little nose rising up like a challenge. And she saw the cheeks with the wonderful hollows that could break her heart.

*Perfect*, she found herself thinking. *This is what they mean when they say it, this is perfect.* But then she saw Natsuki's eyes and even those words seemed inadequate, for the girl was looking at her with an expression of sheer adoration, the emotion suddenly lucent through the layers of enigma.

*And I am still not worthy of her.*

Shizuru felt her heart leap into her throat, thanking all the gods for this girl who made her feel more humbled than she had ever felt before.

# Chapter 19

*There is an interesting parodic image at [img297 . imageshack . us/ img297/1002/trip2oa1. Jpg](http://img297.imageshack.us/img297/1002/trip2oa1.jpg) from Miyaki.*

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## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **P ublicani** - Tax-farmers who make contracts with the state (through the officials called " censors" ) to collect taxes from a province. For a more comprehensive explanation, see the 4th paragraph in the 4th part of **Chapter 13** . Note that "parts" of a chapter are separated from each other by the breaks. For example, this chapter has 2 parts.

2. **Contubernalis** - A position in the army already discussed in **Chapter 14** . To recollect: it is a cadet of the army, and here, specifically a position given to children of high-ranking families when it comes time to serve their military duties. They were often given desk-work, or any duty in the general's tent that would keep them safe and away from the actual fighting.

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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"Is it or is it not true? There's the question of the day for you."

Chie chuckled approvingly at the rhyme, giving a few claps for applause.

"Playing with words already," she mumbled thoughtfully. "Does that mean you're interested in the gossip too, Suou-san?"

The younger legate inclined her head.

"I can't deny I am," she admitted with her usual charming smile.  
"Takeda-kun and Shizuru-san fighting." She quirked her pale brows.  
"It intrigues me."

"As a warrior or as a socialite?"

Suou laughed at that, turning to the one who had spoken: "You're quick, Centurion. What about you? Does it interest you as a warrior or as a socialite?"

Nao snorted.

"Who said I was interested in it?" she said indifferently. "It doesn't concern me."

"That's a little more reserve than I'd have expected of you, I have to say," the flaxen-haired legate baited. "Even so, it's impossible not to have an opinion. You haven't said what you think about this yet."

The primipilus grinned, opening piercing green eyes widely.

"What I think doesn't count," she said, obviously directing her words more to the man sitting next to Suou than to the woman herself.  
"After all, I'm just a primipilus supposed to follow legates' orders-oh, sorry, I meant *opinion* -right, Taro-san?"

Taro glared. She turned from him and went on to tell the company that she did not really care for idle tittle-tattle, although she did admit that the hearsay this time was somewhat out of the ordinary.

"Still, I'm not as much of a rumourmonger as Harada here," she said, prompting the senior legate to throw a small grape her way. She caught it and winked at her attacker, popping the fruit into her mouth. "I don't think much of Masashi, so I'm not even excited about a real fight happening between them."

"You think the general would win easily, don't you, Nao-san?" someone asked.

"Don't you, Kenji-san?"

"I do think she would win," he said, leaning both elbows on the table

as was his wont. "But I'm not sure it's going to be an easy win. Takeda-san is a famous swordsman for a reason, you know."

"My money's still on the general."

Kenji laughed, his lean face relaxing as he opened his eyes comically at the primipilus: "I don't recall saying mine wasn't."

"She'd murder him. Suou-san?"

"I'm betting on Shizuru-san too, of course," Suou answered to the obvious question. "And it's quite certain Chie-san would do the same."

"Quite certain!" Chie grinned, saying the words so emphatically the rest had to laugh.

"Poor Takeda-kun," Suou said dolefully, a twinkle in her eye. "Given up for dead."

"Not really," Kenji followed. "Someone hasn't put a bet yet. Taro-san? Your money will be on...?"

Taro sighed, his expression indicating that he would choose the same contender as the rest of them.

"But why are we even talking about this?" he asked afterwards. "It's not like they're actually going to fight! More importantly, what would you-all of you!-bet on the rumour about the reason for the quarrel?"

"Which is?" Kenji prompted. "I don't know yet."

"They say it's about a *woman*," came the delighted whisper.

"Our general?" the other practically spat out, incredulity laced through every syllable. "Codswallop!"

"Just what I said!" Taro told him, still whispering for some reason. "But it's being bandied about by the slaves from the gubernatorial household, so I hear. They say some overheard them arguing-though which 'some' those would be I've yet to discover."

"Well, until then, it's just a rumour isn't it?"

"Yes. But you have to admit, it's slaves that are usually in the know about everything."

"That's true enough."

"So do you think it's true after all?"

"Those two fighting over a woman?" Suou interjected in the pair's exchange, humming to herself. "Interesting idea, really."

Kenji regarded her with amusement.

"That's an understatement, Suou-san," he said.

She looked at him good-humouredly.

"Conceded," she said with a light laugh, slanting her head. "See, I was so taken aback I suppose I lost eloquence. When I said it was interesting, I meant that it was vastly, unbearably interesting."

"Yet you seem to bear it remarkably well," Chie chuckled at her.

The fair-haired woman merely smiled.

"A woman." It was Kenji again, his lips pursed as he ruminated over it. "Do you know, Chie-san, who that would be? I didn't even know Takeda-san-much less the general, good gods!-was after anyone. Last I heard, they were still in the list of most eligible bachelors in Hime."

Chie exploded into cackles at this.

"Oh, Kenji-san!" she cried, eyes very moist. "That last bit made you sound like a gossipy young girl!"

The rest of them laughed as Kenji rubbed the back of his brightly orange hair.

"I blame Miyabi," he said gruffly, referring to his fiancée who awaited him in Hime. "The things those letters of hers have!"

Chie nodded understandingly.

"Sometimes I get the same thing with Aoi," she confided. "And much though I love to know the social news, I can't help but get a little scared when she starts rattling on about the most eligible bachelors and bachelorettes in the city. I trust her and all, that goes without saying-but Jupiter! It still doesn't help when you're an entire sea away and surrounded by mountains, knowing that your woman is surrounded by all those accursed eligibles!"

The company fell to hooting at this impassioned complaint, Nao going so far as to pat her friend's back even while laughing at her troubles. Chie shook her head with mock sadness, huffing for good effect.

"Anyway," she said, waving her hand to draw their attention. "Going back to your question, Kenji-san and the eligibles we do have in our company, I'm afraid I'm a little dry for news there. I don't know a thing. Besides, I'm not sure you should believe it, that thing about a woman being the cause."

"What do you mean?" Taro asked.

"It's just the sort of thing that folk would say," she told him. "It makes the issue sound romantic if it's about a woman, and you know how the people love romanticising things. The usual snowball, where one piece of gossip starts rolling and gets bigger and more remarkable-not to mention untrue. Hardly worth crediting."

The rest digested this.

"Now that you mention it, that sounds reasonable," Taro allowed. He reached for a roll of bread from the platter on the table. "Romance indeed. But there's still the question of whether they got into a fight or not, and the rumours about the fight are stronger than the ones about its cause, you know. Besides which, the table in that room is missing now, isn't it? They said it was wrecked. I heard, too, that the general has been going around with a bandaged hand."

"Now that *is* romantic," Chie could not resist remarking. "A bandaged hand."



Nao scoffed.

"I don't believe that would come from a fight," she declared authoritatively. "Especially if it's the general against only one person, even if it is Masashi. She probably injured herself in an accident or something."

"Always loyal to the general," Kenji teased, wiggling his eyebrows at her. "And said with such conviction!"

The centurion laughed a carefree, infectious sound, flicking her strawberry-coloured hair away from her face.

"You forget," she told him, tilting her chin upwards. "I'm the only one of us here who's actually sparred with her. So take my word for it: that snot-nosed bastard couldn't have touched her, all that I've seen of him. And I've seen him do his bit, all right."

Several of the legates were now leaning forward, eyes intent on the primipilus.

"Wait, Yuuki-san," Taro himself said eagerly, seeming to forget his usual reserve with the woman. "You've sparred with the general? How was it?"

Nao looked at him, a faint smirk playing on her lips.

"I would like to know too," Suou added. "Even if I have seen my sister and Shizuru-san sparring, I would still like to hear how yours went."

"You've all seen her fight," Nao said in reply. "She disarmed me and I lost. Plain and simple. I don't think I can give you a move-by-move since it's been ages ago."

She narrowed her eyes, remembering what she could of that short exercise and defeat.

"But I can say Masashi wouldn't so much as hurt her," she said decidedly. "The difference in range of weapon for one thing. Then there's the fact that she's strong, very strong. I know she doesn't look it, but the general's got the strength of an ox."

"A bit inelegant as a description, isn't it?" Taro said, grinning.

"It's strength I'm describing: no call for elegance in it," Nao snapped. "And you'd best believe I mean it. She doesn't look it only because she's so bloody *long*, but she's got the muscle to break the bones in your thigh, Old Boy."

"I believe you," Suou cut in. "One need only touch the naginata she uses for training. It's weighted. Heavily."

Chie nodded to confirm this, having had a near-disaster with her foot after she had picked up the polearm casually from its stand before.

"And even without that, there's her speed," Nao continued with what she was saying. "And it's insane! I was using projectiles when we fought, and even I couldn't hit her then."

"Not once?" someone asked.

"Never," she said, before amending: "Unless you count ripping her clothes and cutting off some hair. But that's piddle in a fight, doesn't count for shit. Anyway, that bandage you're talking about might not even be over a wound. The general could be wearing it for practice- the naginata gets damn tough on the palm in winter, even more than a sword."

"You met her earlier, Chie-san," Kenji said, turning to the senior legate. "How was she? Did she say anything about it?"

The senior legate leaned back into her chair, crossing her arms over her cream-coloured tunic. All of them were in tunics and robes, garments of thick and woven fabrics that kept them warm without being abrasive to their skin. Chie felt it with her fingers now, holding her sides in self-embrace.

"No, Shizuru-san didn't say anything," she told them. "She just gave out the order for us to check the troops of the provincial capital as well as ours, prepare to leave in the next few days, and so on and so forth. And she asked to speak to Toshi-san, like I told you. She didn't mention the quarrel, *if* there was one. Or the bandage, although I should probably tell you it's true. I did see it on her hand."

"Then I expect you asked her about it, didn't you?" Kenji persisted.  
"How did she react?"

"As you should expect too, she just laughed it off," Chie answered.  
"All of you should know by now how Shizuru-san can be when confronted with gossip."

"I was just wondering, Chie-san, when you saw her, were both hands bandaged?" Suou asked.

Chie turned to look at the younger woman, staring straight into the very light, very cool gaze. After a few seconds of knocking at their ice and finding no cracks, she smiled.

"No," she answered simply.

There was a knock on the door just then and they turned towards it as it opened, revealing a bowing slave carrying a folded piece of parchment.

"Please excuse my interruption," she said. "I have here a note for Suou Himemiya-san."

The legate made a sound of assent, rising from her seat to take the note. The slave bent in deference once more and left as Suou took some time to read the communication. She mumbled something after she was finished and turned to face the company.

"Well, well," she drawled, both near-invisible eyebrows lifted. "It appears there just might be more to this than we think. We have here a very interesting development, My Friends."

They looked inquiringly at her, Chie asking what the "development" was. Suou smiled and began to fold the note in her hand with theatrical care, pressing the creases into the paper lovingly.

"This is quite good parchment, don't you think?" she asked Nao, who was closest to her. "I wonder where they get it."

The primipilus started sniggering.

"Oh, put them out of their misery, Legate!" she cried. "Just say what

it is."

Suou grinned unrepentantly.

"This note says that Takeda-kun is leaving," she said.

Sounds of surprise escaped the others as their voices tumbled over each other in an attempt to question her.

"You're joking!" Taro exclaimed.

"He's leaving?" Chie asked, looking just as surprised.

"Now?" Kenji gasped.

Suou winked at them.

"So it says here," she said. "Letters from the Senate have arrived and he says they're calling him back."

She paused and added slyly: "That's what *he* says."

"We-elll," Kenji drew out, his rusty brows beetling. "It could be true. It's understandable and likely too, since they're probably missing him as a tribune of the plebs in office. But it's going to give new strength to the rumours, you know, if he leaves now. This adds more room to speculate."

There were words of agreement from the others. Except from Suou, who shrugged and looked nonchalant as ever.

"That's true," she said. "But one cannot say he has a choice this time if such summons have indeed arrived. The Senate calls, the Senate gets. Unless, of course, you're Shizuru Fujino."

She went to fetch the cloak she had left draped on a stand.

"Anyway, I should go see him off," she told them. "If the beaten rival departs on the heels of the confrontation, someone has to see him go, even if it's only an old friend."

She gave them her lazy grin and waved goodbye, calling out

something that made the senior legate laugh.

"Having no one to say goodbye to ruins the romance."

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Shizuru studied the man before her, putting her hands together into a steeple as she explained her reasons for seeing him.

"In effect, Toshi-han, I am asking you to stay on with the garrison in Sosia," she said. "What say you to this?"

There was a short pause in the room as Toshi looked at the general thoughtfully, his mind racing as he tried to make sense of what she was proposing. She merely returned his look with an easy one, waiting quietly for him to enunciate the reserve in his gaze.

"Naturally I'll follow your orders, Fujino-san," he said at length, meeting the ruby-shaded look with equanimity. "If you want me to stay here, I will. But may I ask a question?"

"Strictly speaking, you already have," she smiled. "What is it?"

"Why me?"

That brought a grin.

"Why *not* you?" she asked, making an amused sound. "You sound as though you deem yourself unqualified, Toshi-han. Or perhaps you do not care to stay here after all?"

"Oh, I wouldn't mind!" he said, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he smiled back. "But you're right. I do feel a little 'unqualified' for the position you are offering, Fujino-san."

Shizuru clucked, shaking her head.

"Dear me," she sighed, bringing her hands up onto the table in order to pour him more wine. "I do wish you would not undermine yourself. You not only do a disservice to yourself, but to me as well, since it implies my judgment ill in asking you to do this thing."

He took the cup she returned to him, his expression a blend of amusement and apology.

"I didn't mean it that way, of course," he told her, lifting the cup to his lips and taking a sip of the beverage. A rumbling sound came from his throat as he swallowed. "Good wine."

"Yes."

"Anyway, that was *not* what I meant, Fujino-san. Forgive me."

She shook her head again.

"No, I should be the one asking for forgiveness. I was teasing you." She began to pour wine for herself, her eyes on the rosy stream flowing from the flagon to her goblet. "In any case, may I know why you feel unqualified, Toshi-han?"

Toshi set down his cup, eyes drifting from the crimson pool of his drink to those like pools that were her eyes. As if knowing someone was probing their depths, they met his stare, surfaces shimmering in concealment of what was within.

He smiled.

"It's because I'm not very experienced as a legate, General," he told her. "And Sosia is still a tactical military garrison in these territories. As you know, I haven't served anything other than regular martial duty before this, and as a *contubernalis* and tribune only, to boot. I just think that any of the other legates would do the job better than me since they're more... soldierly, I think, is the word."

She inclined her head, not really conceding anything.

Toshi cupped his chin and continued, a contrite expression on his face: "I can't help but think I'm just an old dog better suited to talking politics than waging war-so to speak."

A soft shuffle of cloth indicated his general had just crossed her legs under the table.

"Perhaps you are right," she admitted, bowing her head shortly. "In

some ways, not all. But even were we only to consider the last thing you said, it is exactly why I need you for this task, Toshi-han. You see, I am not so worried about Sosia's military leadership." She paused meaningfully. "Would you happen to know who the gubernatorial force's captain of the guard is?"

Toshi responded in the negative, having the grace to look embarrassed.

"No, it is not surprising that you would not know," she said, putting him at ease. "He was away on furlough, you see, and it is the quaestor, Homura-han, who has been serving as the temporary captain. In any case, it is Shigeru Oni-han."

He started, straightening in his chair.

"Shigeru Oni?" he said.

She nodded complacently at his reaction.

"He just returned, apparently," she informed him. "As you well know, he is fairly soldierly."

"That he is," Toshi said, laughing at her manner of saying it. "Well then! There's less worry for us if such a military man is head of Sosia's garrison."

"Exactly," she told him. "So I daresay I already have one less concern as far as Sosia's military defence is concerned. However, there is still the matter of its overall well-being, which is to say that I have other matters I would like seen to in my stead."

Shizuru paused and leaned forward as he blinked, waiting for her to explain.

"This is why I chose you, Toshi-han," she went on. "You are more experienced than most of the other legates when it comes to strictly political matters, and those are exactly what I am concerned about. There have been significant, ah, changes, shall we say, that I have set into motion in this province and I would like to see them serve their purpose without being snuffed out beforehand."

She smiled a little mischievously, in his opinion.

"In politics, an old dog is what I need," she said. "I need someone who deals in the bark before actually dealing in the bite."

Toshi acknowledged her joke with a low chortle.

"I see it now," he told her. "And, naturally, I accept."

"Wonderful."

"But what are the changes you were speaking of, Fujino-san? I'd best know them if I'm to see to them."

She bestowed a grateful smile upon him, then went on to explain her arrest of the scheme for illegal sale of the citizenship. Having covered this and given him an injunction not to reveal any of the details of that issue to anyone else, she proceeded to tell him that she had asked the governor, Suda Yuuji, to regulate the taxes of the province to a fairer figure, as well as to forbid the extortionate interest rates presently being used by the *publicani* not only collecting those taxes but also lending money to those required to pay them.

"He has agreed, fortunately," she said. "Well, given how I have my hand on his throat for the citizenship scheme, he could not do otherwise. And he is going to act immediately. As you know, I have been going around for the past few days, trying to gather information in order to be able to draw up reasonable estimates for taxation. These estimates are those to be used in Sosia from now on."

"But how can that be?" gasped Toshi. "The *publicani* would squeal! And the same goes for the Senate, Fujino-san, once they find out. The Treasury's revenues will be affected too, after all."

He gave her a penetrating look.

"How did you manage to convince Yuuji-san, anyway? Even if you do threaten him with exposure of his citizenship scheme in Hime, I have to say that being openly counter the tax farmers' interests would not serve him better at all! The man would just be headed for more headaches that way, and probably even more powerful



opposition, given how strong the *publicani* are."

She smiled, opening her long-lashed eyes wide.

"I can be very persuasive, Toshi-han," she said to him.

He laughed, shaking his head as it dawned on him what sort of persuasion had taken place.

"It's ironic that you're putting a stop to extortion by using it," he told her, thoroughly enjoying the conversation. "I suppose you're very persuasive indeed, Fujino-san."

"Well."

"But the *publicani* will still be fuming. And it's likely he'll let them know you're the one responsible, Fujino-san, if worse comes to worst." He frowned lightly, the lines on his face deepening. "I know that the taxes are terrible and plainly impossible, but they still have the legal contracts for them. They also have the right to demand whatever interest rates they want for their usury. They'll go to their allies in the House, and given how you've just put him in a bind, I very much doubt Yuuji-san will have any scruples about throwing all the blame your way. If you do go on to bring him to court after all for his citizenship sales, it's guaranteed he'll get the *publicani* to bring you to court for this too, in turn. Mutually-assured destruction, perhaps?"

She tilted her head in concurrence.

"I knew I picked the right person-you really do understand politics better than many of the others," she said languidly, evidently unconcerned by the threat that might be hanging over her head soon. "I know what you mean. But Sosia needs this relief right now, especially since a state of war is imminent. I had hoped to take care of it by enacting legislation upon return to Hime, but after perusal of the provincial income accounts, I am afraid we cannot wait any longer. Legislation takes years, sometimes even decades."

She shrugged and added: "Besides, the proper rates are the proper rates, contract-bound or not. Even if the *publicani* did try to take it

into a court of law, they would lose."

He asked her how that could be possible.

"For one, because the figures they have promised the censors are patently impossible," Shizuru explained. "Anyone with rudimentary knowledge of accounting could see it from the province's books. The only way the province manages to pay the taxes now is by borrowing money from the same *publicani* supposed to collect those taxes for the State. If this continues, Sosia will end in a bottomless pit of debt, given how high the *publicani* have set the interest rate on credit. Oh, their current contract is legal, no doubt about it. But if a good advocate demonstrated in court that they have been milking a province of the Republic for their sole benefit for years-which they have, you just need to check the records-I doubt these idiots would get another contract from the censors in the future. They would not be willing to risk it. Besides, their extortionate rates of interest are in fact illegal. There is a very old statute that actually prohibits such rates. Can you imagine their horror were I to dredge it up?"

She smirked, seeming amused by something else. She explained it to him: "To say nothing of the support the Traditionalists would be forced to give me since the statute I would quote from is from Hime's ancient legal tradition. Research pays, you know, as does reading."

He looked patently impressed.

"I'd almost forgotten how good you were in the law courts," he admitted. "You didn't speak often enough for my taste, you know! You've always done as well with words as you do with war, Fujinosan."

"Please," she said, affecting polite embarrassment. "Thank you for the compliment, Toshi-han, but I might be a little rusty now. I have not played advocate for years."

"I doubt you'd lose your touch."

A faint smile played at her lips.

"If Chie-han were here, she would add 'or your tongue' to that

statement," she said, causing him to laugh. At any rate, regarding the *publicani's* senatorial allies, it little matters to me how many of them call out for my blood."

She quirked a tawny eyebrow at him and explained: "Most of them already hate me, anyway, and have been doing their best to worsen my life for some time already-with little effect. A few more would not make a difference."

He gave her a sympathetic look, well-aware of the recent happenings in the House concerning their campaign.

"Maybe you're right," he allowed. "Anyway, Chie-san told me you were thinking of leaving for Argus soon. When, may I ask?"

"In the next week or so," she replied. "So please see me about any concerns you may have as soon as possible. I shall see you before departure, of course, to ensure that all is well. Do you have any concerns now, Toshi-han?"

"Everything's clear," he said, sensing the interview was over and rising from his seat. He bowed to her as she stood up too. "I'm honoured to be entrusted with this office by you, Fujino-san."

"I am the one honoured to have you working with me."

They parted and she shut the door to her rooms after him, bolting it with a satisfying click. Shizuru then turned to face her remaining companion, who was sitting on the bed and looking at her curiously.

"Natsuki."

They stared at each other for a long moment, which ended with green eyes being shuttered, a fall of black lashes brushing against reddening cheeks.

"Now that that is over," Shizuru said with a chuckle, moving from the door. "Shall you drink with me a little?"

She motioned to the flagon on the table.

"It is very good wine and having someone to drink it with makes it all

the better."

The girl made a sound of assent. Shizuru smiled and motioned for her to stay where she was.

"I will come over," she explained, pouring more wine into the goblet she had been using. "Please wait for me there, Natsuki."

Natsuki obeyed, watching the older woman with a puzzled expression as the latter held the cup in one hand and dragged a chair over to the foot of the bed. Placing the chair so that it was directly opposite the girl, Shizuru then lowered herself onto it and pulled it to the bed until her legs were between Natsuki's, her knees touching the insides of the younger's thighs where they hung from the edge of the bed.

She was gratified to see a blush bloom on Natsuki's cheeks again.

*That colour drives me to distraction*, she thought, lips tingling with desire for those of the girl in front of her. She occupied her mouth instead with taking a sip from the goblet in her hand-which was a poor substitute for Natsuki's lips, she was sure. The wine splashed onto her tongue with a burst of warmth, the rich and loamy taste washing over her tongue. She smiled with the simple pleasure of one who appreciated vintage, holding out the cup to the girl.

"Here you are."

She watched the perpetually-bandaged hands take it from her fingers, and afterwards, watched the girl drink from that cup with so much unconscious intensity that the younger woman had visible difficulty swallowing, her smooth throat flexing a little more than it should.

*Such a slender neck*, Shizuru noted, fascinated as ever with the long, fragile looks of the girl she yet knew to be a consummate warrior. *I know she is a power to be reckoned with-in more ways than one, perhaps, considering the manner in which her people are constantly treating her. There is esteem there, a considerable respect and awe. Yet she is still only a girl, her youth still so painfully visible. And her very looks have a delicacy not in keeping with her*

*martial ability and state, have a thin and brittle look about them. Look at her neck. I could hold it in one hand. I could snap it if I am not careful.*

There was the thing keeping her from reaching out and latching onto that neck right now, after all: the need to be careful. The reminder made her release a small sigh for perhaps the hundredth time in the past three days.

To be sure, the past days had been wonderful. They had been shrouded in a hazy bliss that kept her smiling, perhaps a little more openly than usual, as she went about her usual duties. Some of her time had been spent checking the province's accounts as well as its fortifications and troops, but most of it had been spent in the bedroom with her Otomeian bodyguard-or *lover*, as she liked to think of the girl now. Often they had merely lain upon the bed, holding each other. Sometimes they talked, and sometimes there was no talking at all.

It was a little amazing to Shizuru, the things she could do and enjoy with this young woman. Sometimes, cradling the Otomeian's head to her chest after kisses, she would marvel at how she had ever managed to live without indulging this area of her senses. It had been starving! It was such a vital part of her, she realised: this passion that had nothing to do with politics or war or even the exercise of intelligence. And yet she had almost forgotten about it. How strange that she had been able to neglect it so far! How could she have ever managed without it and how could she manage to be without it now?

All of this was as much a revelation to Natsuki as it was to her, she guessed, even if only judging from the girl's reactions to each new caress. She was pleased to note, at least, that the Otomeian was gradually becoming more comfortable with affections. The girl's kisses were becoming less shy each day, becoming bolder and more demanding each time. Unfortunately-or fortunately, as far as Shizuru was concerned-her face did not seem to lose its tendency for blushing every time the two of them did something of a similar nature, which provoked the older woman to explore their physical pleasures even more. Who knew a blush could be so damnably tempting? It signalled to Shizuru, invited her to try out further, more

blush-worthy things. It was a herald from Eros itself, urging her to sample and satisfy even newer desires.

However, while the novelty of the experience was partly what made their relationship so alluring, it was also what kept Shizuru from taking the next step-and the cause of her recent sighs. While she truly enjoyed their kisses, the many touches they had already exchanged, she had to admit to herself that she was eager for more, wanted to make the girl her lover in the proper *Himean* sense. That is to say, she wanted to bed the younger woman. But she had not done so yet.

*I wonder why*, she thought to herself. Certainly not for lack of trying! She had taken them several times now to the brink of the act, somehow managing to figure out the mechanics of Natsuki's complicated attire on the first try, albeit with a few furious fumbles. Each time she began to put this practical knowledge to good use, however, someone or something would interrupt them. It did not even take a knock on the door to do this, for the mere sound of footsteps or voices hovering a-little-too-long and a-little-too-loudly nearby could make Natsuki bolt from underneath her, twitching as warily as an untamed cat. And Shizuru knew better than to try to push the girl then.

*I did make a resolution never to force myself on her once more*, she sighed yet again, taking the cup from the girl and drinking. *But this waiting is driving me mad!*

It took so much more willpower than she had ever thought to need-or, sometimes, ever thought to have. This was especially the case in the early morning, when she would silently watch as Natsuki went to bathe, her mouth going dry as she tried to resist the urge to slip out of bed and join the girl in the bathing area. Perhaps she would start by running the pumice stone over her skin for her, and eventually go on to run her hands over that bare skin as well. Perhaps she could move on to the act after that, the act every Himean was made to learn from near-birth by an environment of dirty ditties and goggle-worthy graffiti on the walls, to say nothing of the constant scandals of this affair and that being bandied about in every house. Oh yes, every Himean knew about sex and its supposed delights! And very few were able to escape it, especially for as long as Shizuru had.

Now was the price, apparently, for spurning it for so long: now that she actually wanted to pursue it, it was the one doing an escape.

Complicating the matter was that Shizuru was worried too about her conduct in her relationship with the Otomeian thus far. She had never been involved with anyone before this, and so had only vicariously-gleaned information as a basis. Was she perhaps going too fast? Should she slow the pace even more? That would be *exceedingly* difficult at this point, given how her body seemed to have recently decided that the girl was something it could not go without. Perhaps it made her seem too needy, in fact, the way she seemed to have a constant urge to be touching the girl. Did she seem too eager? Was she being too impatient?

*And good god!* she cried out in her mind, wincing as she caught herself. *I sound like some adolescent agonising over her first dalliance! Am I really so pitiful as that?*

"Shizuru?"

She broke off her internal ramblings, eyes snapping to the green ones before her.

"Yes?" she asked gently, putting forth her most innocent smile.  
"Natsuki?"

Natsuki gave her a suspicious look.

"You are all right?" the Otomeian asked huskily.

Shizuru lifted her eyebrows, realising that she had forgotten just how perceptive her companion could be. She berated herself again, flashing a cheery expression at the younger woman.

"Of course I am, do not worry about me," she answered, taking one of the girl's hands. "I was simply thinking. I did not mean to be impolite, my dear."

Natsuki nodded, eyes dropping once again to her feet. A silky lock worked free from her tresses and fell over one eye, prompting the older woman to use her other hand and tuck it behind the girl's ear.

"Natsuki, forgive me," Shizuru told her, leaning close to place a quick kiss on the other's brow. "Is it that you are bored? Do you wish to exit the room? We can go somewhere else if you desire to take a walk or do something."

The girl looked up, shaking her head vigorously.

"No," she answered, repeating it for emphasis. "No."

She added, after a moment's pause: "I am fine."

Shizuru smiled at this. She leaned to one side and set the goblet onto the floor, then put the now-free hand on the girl's knee. Her other hand raised Natsuki's to her lips and she began kissing the fingers unprotected by the bandages, smiling when a nibble elicited a soft rasp of breath.

"Then I am glad," she murmured, in between nips. "I would hate for my presence to bore Natsuki."

Natsuki said nothing, watching with a mysterious expression in her gaze.

"We are going to Argus soon," Shizuru continued. "Have you ever been to Argus?"

Giving in to impulse, she licked one of the exposed knuckles against her lips. Natsuki gasped lightly, her face beginning to turn pink.

"Mm," she mumbled, in reply to Shizuru's query. "Yes."

Shizuru kept her eyes on the downcast ones, pressing a soft kiss to the tip of a finger.

"Shall you tell me what you thought of it?" she asked.

The glaze to Natsuki's eyes cleared at this question, to Shizuru's disappointment, as the girl considered the query seriously. Shizuru pressed another kiss onto another finger, all the same, while waiting for the girl's to speak.

"Argus, it is..." Natsuki paused to seek the word. "Busy."



Shizuru chuckled, ceasing her ministrations on Natsuki's hand.

"Busy?" she echoed.

Natsuki nodded.

"Many persons," she said, by way of explanation.

Shizuru sounded comprehension.

"Yes, there would be," she agreed, absent-mindedly running the fingers of her other hand up and down the other's thigh. It brought a delightful shiver from the girl and she did it again, unable to help smirking as she catalogued the action and response for future delights. "It is famous for its port, after all, and is the primary trading harbour in these parts, especially between our northern territories and the southern ones."

She paused in her activities and squinted, her thoughts turning to another matter that suddenly inserted itself into her mind.

"I shall leave two legions of my infantry here, for garrison," she revealed. "That will leave me with one overstrength legion to take to Argus. What do you think?"

Natsuki mumbled something that sounded like approval, before asking: "All the cavalry goes? To Argus?"

"Yes. I am quite fond of the cavalry, you know." Shizuru said this with a droll smile. "Particularly a certain dark-haired captain in it."

Natsuki actually forgot herself enough to laugh, the cool sound bringing a fond smile to Shizuru's lips. She was about to say something more when she became aware of the girl's fingers picking at the bandage on her hand, working it loose. She let this go on until the end of the linen strip fell free and Natsuki began to unwind the rest of it.

"What is it?" she asked curiously, keeping her hand lifted so that the girl could continue what she was doing. "I suppose it is time to change them?"

The younger woman nodded, making a satisfied sound as she finally bared Shizuru's knuckles. She brought them closer to her face, inspecting the now-healed wounds closely.

Shizuru waited.

"Better?" she asked.

Natsuki looked up, the corners of her mouth gradually curving into a smile.

"Better," she pronounced, strong approval in her voice. "Good healing."

The Himean laughed, feeling as though she had just been given a rare compliment. She slipped her hand from Natsuki's grasp and brought it up to hold the younger woman's face.

*Such a beauty*, she thought with distinct pleasure, rubbing the Otomeian's cheek. She was so arrestingly lovely, with those large green eyes and the exotic artifice of black paint rimming the lashes. And there was that sulky little mouth, with its mysterious little tilt at the corners. Shizuru marked all of this with great pleasure, something swelling in her chest as she thought of how only she was allowed to touch the girl the way she did. All of this was hers, hers for the taking! Oh, life was *very* good.

What made her life just a little better today, perhaps, was the news that Homura the quaestor gave her earlier: Takeda Masashi, apparently, was off to Hime. That sore little canker on her happiness was about to leave, most probably licking his wounds in defeat. How she relished the thought of his departure! She had been waiting for it a while now, half-prepared to pack him up in a litter and send him his way if he put his exit off any longer. And now he was finally leaving, absent her help.

Well, the quarrel they had had was probably help enough, she admitted. They had not seen each other save at a distance since that argument. Both of them managed to avoid another confrontation despite living in the same quarters, slipping quickly away when one saw the other nearby. They were aware of the rumours, of course,

so they were careful never to chance a meeting-for the risk of letting show their animosity towards each other was more dangerous than putting down the gossip by staging a falsely amiable encounter. Or so both parties felt in the days immediately following their near-brawl. High passions did not run their course and dry out after a mere few days, particularly when pride was concerned. And with the two of them, it was concerned.

Shizuru being the victor in the conflict, one might have expected her to try to flaunt her trophy, in order to quell any remaining spirit in her opponent. Or, at the very least, to be sufficiently assured of her triumph to render her foe all but eradicated. But she had remained secretly irritated by his presence in the province. It gnawed at her, much like a rat worrying old leather. Perhaps it was partly the offence to her pride, which protested a little at how the man had once cracked her composure. Perhaps it was because he reminded her of that unsavoury moment when she acted more imprudently than she could ever have allowed, were she in her proper mindset. But a greater part of it, she admitted only to herself, had more to do with her growing, almost manic possessiveness of the girl sitting before her.

She had owned many things in her life, and even now owned a great more than most ever would. Yet this particular possession, the latest thing to have fallen into her grasp, occupied her more than all the others. She wondered if it was because it was not an "it" but a "she", another, a living thing vested with a powerful enough intellect and dignity as well as independence to actually break free of her grasp did it so desire. Did that make it worth more than all the other things that could not fight her possession, she wondered. Was it the possibility of its escape that made her so jealous over it?

She sighed yet again at her thoughts, wondering that she should turn out to be so possessive a lover. Who would have thought it?

"Do you know?" she told the Otomeian still watching her mutely, dropping her own voice to a confidential whisper. "You bring out the most unreasonable part of me."

The girl merely looked on with puzzlement, a tiny crease on her forehead. Shizuru grinned, dropping her hands from the other's face

and sliding them slowly underneath the slender thighs, wedging fingers and palms between the bed and the suddenly tightening muscles of the girl's legs.

Dark brows lifted a question, only to be ignored.

"It cannot be helped," Shizuru went on, a hint of mischief glittering in her eyes. "So, I shall give in today and be unreasonable by postponing my other duties for much, *much* later. And in the meantime..."

A yelp escaped Natsuki's lips as she found herself lifted by the older woman, pulled straight onto Shizuru's lap. She frowned half-heartedly afterwards, trying to glower at the smirk on the other's face even as her hands settled on Shizuru's shoulders.

"Now, this," Shizuru said smugly, bringing her arms around the Otomeian's back, "is so much better. It is so nice to be unreasonable sometimes, no?"

Natsuki finally gave in to the smile tugging at her mouth, blushing as she met the lips coming towards hers.

# Chapter 20

*Hello and thank you all again.*

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## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Dignitas** - This term, not translatable to the English word "dignity", was explained in **Chapter 17**. To reiterate: it is a person's personal worth, his public standing, his prerogative to respect and treatment as a human being. It is the most sensitive asset a Roman/Himean can have, and should be defended with one's life.
  2. **Inter nos** - Literally "between ourselves" or "between (the two of us)".
  3. **Princeps Senatus** - The Leader of the House (of Senate).
  4. **Proletarii** - The "Head Count" or masses. They occupied the lowest layer of social stratification and were so poor as to not even belong to the 'actual' social classes.
  5. **Scrip / scrips** – Mode of payment wherein a certificate is issued by an authority (e.g. the government) to an individual for services rendered. The certificate then entitles him to land or money.
  6. **"Under the cat's foot"** - An idiom used to indicate that someone (the one under the cat's foot) is uxorious or henpecked.
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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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Most campaigns were expected to be profitable ventures, save if they were civil wars, for then there would be no booty to be had from

the enemy. A campaign abroad, however, was a prime chance for both Hime and the soldiers to gain wealth from the sale and acquisition of either spoils or slaves from the opposing camp. A truly successful campaign had to enrich both soldiers and state with its proceeds. The obvious key was to make it so that the costs of the campaign were outstripped by its revenues, which was chiefly achieved by a combination of two things: good pickings and good accounting.

Thus a general often travelled with a miniature army of accountants on his staff, all of whom were expected to keep on hand constantly updated ledgers of the campaign's profits and costs. Most generals left the technical aspects of finance to these "abacus-toters", any special attention they might have being directed largely towards their share of the proceeds. This left most of the resolutions on distribution of gains to the accounting body, which sometimes led to tension with other interests-such as that of the soldiers-or even plans emanating from the command tent, which sometimes produced decisions that were not in keeping with the army's state of finances. Hence many campaigns were in reality less profitable than costly, due to this common disjoin between the accountants and the officers.

Shizuru understood this difficulty plainly enough. Happily, she just so happened to understand accounting as well. As such, she deviated from the standard practice of simply leaving the accountants to handle the finances and actually worked with them, putting her own considerable fiscal skills to good use. She did this intermittently, going through the ledgers the accountants prepared for her whenever she found spare time during the campaign and planning her actions based on the resultant data.

The days preceding the march to Argus offered her an opportunity for this task, and being the conscientious worker that she was, she quickly seized it. Thus it was that four days before their planned date of departure, the Himean army's commander sat at her desk, busily running up figures on an abacus she had borrowed from the accountants.

She had worked since noon, asking for meals to be sent to her room to save her the trouble of going out. There had only been one or two

interruptions to her occupation thus far: one when the senior legate had passed by to inquire about a matter regarding the fortification of the city, and the other being when the quaestor came to give her a message that the governor would be having a dinner party later and she was invited. She had entertained the first and agreed to the second, immediately returning to her task afterwards.

She had her reasons for wanting to finish the job as soon as possible.

It was already evening by the time she finally set down her quill and looked up from her notes. The first thing she sought was her bodyguard, whom she found sitting on the floor against the far wall, a small rug spread under her bottom. The younger woman was smiling, and Shizuru mirrored the expression.

"Natsuki seems to find something amusing," she noted while relaxing her posture in the chair. She lifted a hand to massage a shoulder. "What is it?"

"You," Natsuki answered. "You... work very hard."

The older woman lifted an eyebrow at this statement: "You seem surprised."

The other shrugged.

"It is funny," she told Shizuru. "That."

"Funny?" The chestnut-haired woman looked about her desk, as if searching for an answer there. "Do you mean my working hard?"

A sound of affirmation.

"May I ask why?"

Natsuki smiled.

"Because you do not need to," she explained.

That made her grin. She leaned forward and placed her elbows on the table, wagging a finger warningly at Natsuki.

"You have been listening too much to Chie-han and the others," she accused. "Well, do not always believe what other say, My Dear. That is a matter for debate. I work only insofar as I see that it would be beneficial for me to work. Which means I generally do not work more than I need to."

She paused and pretended to consider something.

"Although," she went on contemplatively, "if none other than Natsuki of the Otomeians says that I do not need to, then I am not about to contradict her. Hence, I shall cease now, in hopes of pleasing this esteemed personage."

This was received with a snort.

"That is not a pleased sound," Shizuru said with a quizzical frown. "I am stopping because of your opinion, you know."

Natsuki rolled her eyes, which gesture brought a small smile to the Shizuru's lips.

"No," Natsuki said. "You stopped because... because you are finished."

The smile on the Himean's face transmuted into a grin.

"You are too observant for your own good," she said with a giggle. "You have been watching me all this time, I see. I am flattered by such fervent attention. Gods know what I could have done to deserve it."

Laughter bubbled up from her throat when the girl turned red, looking away with an almost injured air.

"Do you deny it?" Shizuru baited. "You are right, you know. I am finished. I do not see how you could say it with such certainty unless you have been watching me. How nice to know that you do that."

*Particularly since I do that to you too,* she did not add. She did it now, finding endearing the sight of the other struggling awkwardly to say something. She was about to tease her a little more when Natsuki opened her mouth to speak.



"Because, it," the girl said. "It is muh-muh-my work."

There was a cluck from the older woman.

"Ah," she said. "Then you work harder than you need to."

There was an instant of silence where the girl looked up at her blankly, but it soon gave way to their simultaneous chuckles. Shizuru beckoned her closer afterwards, telling the younger woman to sit by her. When the Otomeian had lowered herself into the chair Shizuru had drawn up, they resumed talking. Or rather, Shizuru resumed talking, with Natsuki nodding and making sounds of comprehension, agreement, or reserved enquiry.

"These are actually the figures for the shares of booty thus far," the general of the northern expedition explained to her companion, whose hand she held on her lap. Her other hand was on the table, pointing out the notes on the papers she had been using. "We divide them according to set rates-the higher the rank, the larger the share of booty. Awards and notable valour in battle also merit higher shares, although cowardice-should there be an allegation of it-does not lower one's share of the spoils, for all that it does prevent it from becoming any larger. But the point is that this ensures all the legionaries have a fine reward for their work, separate from their actual pay."

She looked at the girl, who had her eyes on the parchment.

"I am uncertain as to whether or not you are familiar with this concept, Natsuki, of dividing the war spoils thus," she went on. "It escapes me, since you come from a different system of administration. Do you do the same?"

Natsuki nodded.

"I see."

"But."

"But?"

"We do this... um, a little different."

"Different?" Shizuru echoed. "How so?"

The other made another humming noise in the back of her throat, looking up to meet the crimson gaze of her commander.

"They can loot if permitted," she explained. "And their loot is theirs. They are permitted often."

"But?" Shizuru said again, smiling.

"Only officers get a share from the collected booty of-of the army. And the ones who fought well."

Shizuru considered this for a moment. One brow went up as a question came to her mind.

"And how do you determine who fought well?" she asked her companion. "Or, rather, who determines it?"

A slight tilt came to the girl's lips.

"We do," was her answer.

"By that, you mean the officers, I suppose? Or the nobility in the army?"

A positive sound.

"How interesting. I suppose, then, that everything else goes to the royal coffers?" the older woman inquired, to which Natsuki answered affirmatively again. She sighed. "Somewhat standard for monarchies, perhaps. Still, I hope that the set pay for your rankers is sufficient to make up for it."

She tapped a finger on the table.

"In any case, I am doing this now for several reasons. First, to make sure that the numbers are correct. Second, and more importantly, to be prepared to give the soldiers their scrips immediately if the situation should ever necessitate it. The numbers on the scrips have to be accurate, and so I revise the ledgers each time we come into more booty."

She paused to look at the girl, who nodded to show that she understood. Shizuru continued.

"You see, Natsuki, I do not know if this is the case for you as well, but a fair number of Himean soldiers rely primarily on their shares in war to get them through the rest of their lives," she said. "Their career is not a constant, after all, as war is largely an unpredictable variable. Thus they spend most of their years on the battlefield, hoping for a rich campaign to join. Most of them enter the army as members of the lower classes, if not the *proletarii*. If they make it through, all they have to fall back on when they are too old to fight will be their wages and proceeds from the battles they have fought, which they can use as seed money for small businesses. And if it is a long campaign they have fought, well, they can count on some kind of land grant later if they are lucky and their commander is conscientious."

The general took a deep breath, her expression suddenly turning dark.

"I want to be ready to give each one a scrip for his earnings at any time," she went on. "The standard practice for most campaigns is to wait for the army to return to Hime before distributing the scrips and dividing the wealth accordingly. The trouble with such a procedure is that the Treasury and the bureaucrats in government often step in and take over the accounting-with the result that the soldiers get *much* smaller shares due to the 'tax cuts'. Atrocious, really. The taxes do not go to the actual Treasury so much as to the officials concerned. Formalised gluttony at its best."

Having sneered at the faraway bureaucrats of her homeland's government, Shizuru suddenly brightened up. She turned a satisfied eye towards the ledger on the table, putting a hand on it.

"So what I shall do this time is what I did in my last campaign: distribute the scrips before the Treasury officials get here, to guarantee the soldiers' shares," she said. "Oh, yes, I daresay those money-hungry *ineptes* in the Senate shall cry foul again, but it shall matter little once I have done it. As for the Treasury, they shall not be able to complain. I have always given Hime her due, and am not about to cheat her now. I am going to be accused for 'cheating' due

to it, can you believe that? Yet this is the only way I can be sure no *cheating* takes place. It is appalling for the government to swindle its people out of just compensation when they have bled for it," she said with a touch of anger, which vanished as quickly as it had appeared. She seemed to ponder for a moment, her eyes focusing on some distant point. There was a squeeze on her hand and she looked sideways, tumbling into depths of endless green.

"I seem to have gone on about it a little more than I intended," she said. "Forgive me, Natsuki."

She received a sombre look in response.

"You," Natsuki began, her tone soft but earnest. "You are a good person."

Shizuru actually stiffened at the compliment, a slight but all-too-warm flush rushing into her cheeks. She cleared her throat before letting out a half-mocking laugh.

"I am honoured that you think so," she told the other woman, who was wearing her usual serious countenance-or so Shizuru thought, until she saw a glint of amusement in the forest-cool eyes. "But I might be simply be doing this to protect my share of the booty as well, you know. It would be the largest, after all. Wealth is an excellent motivational force, often more so than good intentions. You should not rule out the possibility of my own selfish interests coming into play."

The girl shook her head with a shut-eyed, sage-like expression that amused Shizuru. The Himean asked the younger woman what made her so sure, and received an answer that amused her even more.

"You are rich."

Trying her hardest not to smile, Shizuru cast a grimace towards her companion.

"Am I?" she asked. "Who said so?"

Natsuki made a vague gesture, still as serious as before.

"Everyone," she answered.

"Ah." Shizuru made a droll look. "Everyone can be wrong, you know. What did I say about not always listening to everyone?"

Exhaling contentedly, she turned her companion's hand over in her lap. She tickled the bandaged palm and smiled when she felt the girl's fingers twitch before catching her hand.

"Rich..." she mumbled, leaning back into her chair and turning her head towards the ceiling. "Yes. Yes, I am, actually. It is no secret."

She peeked at her bodyguard from the corner of one eye.

"Do you find that interesting?" she asked.

Natsuki shrugged, a noncommittal response. Shizuru asked her to elaborate.

"I think," the girl replied, "you do not have to be rich to be interesting."

"And vice versa, I suppose," the older woman said with a tiny smile. "Somehow, I expected that answer from you."

Suddenly remembering something, she released the girl's hand and stood up, stalking over to the closet.

"It nearly slipped my mind," she said, opening the closet and reaching inside. "Do you recall when we went to pick up my naginata the other day? There was a dagger Usui-han showed us that you agreed with me was quite handsome-a very fine example of craftsmanship, in fact."

She returned to her seat, laying the object she had retrieved upon the table. It was a bundle wrapped in cloth and it made a dull but solid sound as she laid it on the wood. Natsuki spared the object a curious glance before looking at her charge once again.

"I liked it as well," Shizuru went on, while reaching out to unfold the package before her. "However, I did think its beauty would be supplemented by a few alterations, so I hesitated to take it then and

there. You were occupied by one of the members of your division when I was giving Usui-han the instructions, so I suppose you did not hear them."

Her hands finally bared the object nestled within the white cloth, revealing the very dagger she had been speaking of. It was very slim, about a hand in length, and sheathed in a beautifully-worked scabbard of lustrous silver. The hilt, in contrast to the white metal of the sheath, was of ebony. Shizuru picked it up with a pleased sigh.

"This arrived yesterday, remember? I forgot to open it because we were going out just then," she said to the girl while inspecting the weapon in her hands. "Oh, he did it well! Lovely!"

She turned in her seat to face Natsuki, who was looking at her with a smile that seemed to say that she enjoyed Shizuru's pleasure. Shizuru tilted her head inquiringly at the younger woman.

"What do you think?" she asked. "Is it not a beautiful piece of weaponry?"

Natsuki nodded, then put on a bemused expression.

"But..." she said curiously, "what changed?"

It was Shizuru's turn to smile.

"Ah, yes. What changed?" she said mysteriously. "You cannot see it from that side, the way I am holding it. Here, take a look."

She handed the blade to her bodyguard, watching the younger woman carefully as the latter proceeded to study the weapon. Thus she saw the startled expression that came over Natsuki's face when she finally discovered the "alterations" Shizuru had ordered. To be precise, she saw their names together, carved into the black wood of the handle.

"I fancy it a definite improvement," Shizuru said casually, enjoying her companion's stunned face. "I shall have to remember to commend Usui-han for such fine work. Don't think so?"

She choked back a laugh when the girl looked up, a flabbergasted

expression on her face. Shizuru enjoyed this bewilderment for a little longer before Natsuki finally spoke.

"This-our-" she started, obviously confused. She paused then and appeared to gather her wits, her brow furrowed with bewilderment. The older woman waited.

"Um, Shizuru," Natsuki finally said. "Why?"

Shizuru smiled easily.

"It is for you," she said, by way of explanation. "I got that for you, Natsuki."

She nearly drew blood from biting her tongue when she witnessed the other's reaction: a wide-eyed, open-mouthed expression like that of a shocked child. Adorable!

"I already purchased it so please do not refuse to take it," the older woman went on. "And I do not intend for it to pass into anyone else's hand."

She peered at the Otomeian woman, whose face was suffused with colour.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

This question seemed to rouse the other from her stupor. She turned another floored look towards the dagger before shooting up from her seat as Shizuru watched, surprised by the sight of Natsuki bowing deeply to her.

"Natsuki?"

"Thuh-thank you," Natsuki said, still keeping her head lowered. Her locks hid her face from view, but Shizuru had a feeling she had the countenance of someone lost for words. This feeling was validated when the Otomeian looked up, opening her mouth soundlessly. She settled for simply bowing from her waist again.

"It is-I-" she mumbled awkwardly. "Thank you."

*What is she doing?* Shizuru wondered, amused and amazed. It was so abrupt, the way Natsuki had just reverted to formality in order to express-albeit nervously-her gratitude. What did that mean? And that look on her face! It was almost as though she had never received a present before.

The notion made her start. Could that be possible? Had Natsuki never received a gift before? That was difficult to believe, particularly with her charms. But then again, it was entirely possible too that her demeanour would prevent anyone from getting near enough to give her a present. Still and all, this was unorthodox.

"Natsuki," she said quietly, reaching out to pull the girl back into the chair beside her. "It's all right. You do not need to... bow to me."

Having guided her bodyguard back to the seat, she took the dagger from the girl's grasp and laid it on the table. She then turned back and framed the younger woman's face with her hands, fascinated by the almost tangible feeling of emotion coursing underneath the skin.

"I am *very* happy you like it," she said. "And though that was a very fine show of gratitude, I must admit I would prefer it if you were not so formal. You do not need to be formal with me, remember?"

Natsuki nodded, still a little lost. Shizuru chafed the girl's cheeks with her thumbs. She was about to say more when she chanced to look into the green eyes, which were turned towards her with a moist expression that seemed to go all the way to the core of her Self.

She held her breath. How strange, she thought. She felt as though she was the one who should be grateful.

"Oh, yes," she said, her smile a little shaky in development. "I did promise to attend the dinner party so we should be getting ready."

She placed a gentle kiss on the girl's lips before releasing her face.

"You do not need to thank me any more, Natsuki. That will suffice."

She stood up and made as if to move away, but paused and turned back to look at the girl instead. She reached out and lifted Natsuki's chin with her fingers.



"When your king does something for you," she said, meeting the other woman's eyes. "Is that how you are expected to react, by any chance? The bow you made earlier?"

Natsuki blinked, her cheeks still somewhat pink.

"Mm," she answered, before saying: "His Majesty taught-taught me to-to do that."

"It is proper with one's, um, superiors. It is-is courtesy," she added a little later.

Shizuru nodded.

"I see," she said. "That is nice. It is good to be observant of the courtesies."

The younger woman smiled back, looking up at her with another nakedly adoring expression. Shizuru caught her breath again, stunned by how strangely this girl could make her feel and how honest the face she had once thought mysterious could become.

*And I, with all my reservations and courtesies, she thought, am humbled by it.*

She bent to bring her face closer to Natsuki's, suddenly wanting to feel the girl's breath on her skin. She needed, suddenly and for no apparent reason, to see the fine cracks in the roseate marble of Natsuki's lips, and to feel the familiar heat from Natsuki's blush.

"To tell you the truth, however," she whispered, once she was close enough to do all these things, "I do not really think there is a need to stand on either courtesy or ceremony. Let us dispense with them, shall we? We might have that between us, something that belongs only to us and which the world cannot moderate, out of propriety or modesty or whatever all these damnable authorities see fit to interject between our relation. We can have that to ourselves-it shall be for us alone. What do you say?"

"You want... no courtesy or ceremony?" the girl echoed, seeming intrigued by the idea.

"None."

"Buh-between us?"

"Exactly," Shizuru grinned. "It will be *inter nos*."

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The *Princeps Senatus* of Hime was a very busy man. In the absence of both consuls and with no consuls-elect due to the postponement of elections, he was the one left to hold the dangling reins of the Senate: a considerable task given the tumultuous trend of political discourse recently. The absence of consuls was always a trying time for Hime, as the members of the upper class-most of them senators and politicians in office-were given to petty feuds within their ranks. Besides which, there was also an inclination for the more brash officials to attempt and arrogate more power to themselves given half a chance. Added to this was the standard fare for any official in government: a usually complaining public, senatorial fellows up to their elbows in all sorts of iniquities and illegalities, sticky legislation, and so on.

With such concerns hanging over his head, one might have thought that Reito Kanzaki would have little time for social engagements. But tonight he *was* at a social engagement and an informal one at that. It was a simple invitation to dinner that he had accepted from a friend. Or, at least, that was how he phrased it to anyone who happened to ask him earlier in the day. Had these people known who the invitation was from, they might have disagreed with his terming it "a simple dinner with a friend" and perceived shades of complication in it. For this friend-and his hostess for the night-just so happened to be Hime's urban praetor and the city's most senior magistrate at the moment.

"It's all so bothersome," he complained to her. "I was actually tempted to make my way over here by slinking along the shadows of the streets and just climbing over your wall in order to avoid being seen. Why is it that public grievances seem to coincide? I can hardly go anywhere without being followed by either clients seeking to air more of their petty concerns, or by some senator who wants my support for some asinine thing or other, dearest Chikane. And here

you drag me out of my comfy hole!"

Chikane Himemiya let out a soft laugh.

"One would think the Princes of Hime would know the law of politics," she observed, "that one small stone dislodging itself from the rest soon sends more rolling downhill."

"That's true-and he does. He just wants to curse at it in his free time." He lifted an eyebrow at her, a teasing look on his handsome face. "And in your case? I hear the courts are a veritable hive of people these days, so I would think you suffering from a landslide yourself. Why, in fact, you've precipitated one!"

A look came to her face that seemed to indicate she was proud of that particular achievement. She said nothing, however, and merely tipped her head at him.

They were sitting in her study, having finished dinner a while earlier. The two of them reclined on cushioned chairs across each other, before a table set with wine. The wine was in a cut-glass decanter within which the ruddy-hued beverage shimmered, and Reito took a moment to admire the carafe, quite pleased by its clear and crystalline appearance. Glass absent blemishes was most valuable, and the carafe had none that he could detect. It made him want to turn it over in his hands to see what hidden distortions he could find.

"The bill for a second nomination period has set the House abuzz," he murmured, his voice having a complimentary tone. "As has your baffling silence on the subject of whether or not you shall avail of it once it passes, to run for consul. I'm actually excited to see what you'll be doing next, Chikane-chan. I'm sure you'll have me buzzing in no time too."

She regarded him with her usual languid, secretly humorous gaze.

"I wonder," she said. "Is that a good thing or not?"

"I meant it to be a good thing."

"Then I shall take your meaning, Reito-kun."

He smiled cheerfully, studying the woman before him. Having just admired her cut-glass carafe, he now went on to admiring her looks.

Reito had a particular appreciation for the urban praetor's style, which he secretly referred to as "a classic reinvented". Being a Himemiya, she had the naturally lofty air of that clan, as well as the long-limbed grace that manifested in her relatives' frames. But for all that the Himemiya were a beautiful people, she contrived to stand out even in their midst. Some thought it was the dark hair and eyes that she had taken from her mother, which set her apart from the classical blondes of her clan's crowd. The Princeps disagreed.

Rather, he thought, it was something else that she had most likely inherited from her mother too: an unconscious tragedy in her eyes, even in her usually-smiling mouth. There was something dramatic and dark beneath that calmness, something the numerous artists attempting to capture her visage in either sculpture or paint despaired of. Was it to be called "passion", perhaps? Was there even a precise word for it?

*Whatever it is, it certainly makes her look terrifically decorative*, he decided. Even the way she was sitting on the chair across him now seemed artistic, the drape of her long and very white hands over the arms of the seat almost too graceful. Yet it was wholly casual too, and he understood the thing that made her most appealing: that her drama was not manufactured, but real.

*A deep woman.*

His appraisal was interrupted by a knock on the door, which opened after a soft prompt from her.

"Chikane-chan."

Two blonde heads poked through.

"Himeko. What is it?" Chikane asked, getting up to meet her wife. She cast a teasing glance at the other fair-haired woman who had come in with her spouse. "Has Urumi been mean to you?"

The paler of the two blondes feigned a wounded air.

"I resent that, Cousin," she said. "I happen to have been behaving admirably ever since I returned, as you said so yourself earlier."

"All the more reason for us to be wary, Urumi-chan," Reito called from his seat. "It's rather like waiting for a rumbling volcano to erupt."

"Oh, not your volcano metaphor again!"

The company fell to laughter, which ebbed when Urumi opened her eyes innocently at Chikane. Among her most distinctive features-for one eye was a brown whereas the other was blue-they succeeded in fixing the older woman's gaze.

"I happen to like Himeko-chan," she stated openly. "So I you may rest easy there, Chikane. I wouldn't dream of playing any games with her."

Chikane smiled, whereas the Princeps snorted.

"That," he noted with a grin, "would have had so much more credibility were it not *you* speaking."

Urumi sniffed, looking at him from the corner of her blue eye.

"I am most honoured by your faith in me," she drawled solemnly, looking *so very Himemiya* that the rest smiled again.

"You remind me so much of Suou-chan when you do that," spoke up Chikane's wife, who was of warmer colouring than Urumi. She now looked up at her consort. "Doesn't she, Chikane-chan?"

"Yes, actually," the raven-haired woman replied. "So much so that they might as well have been sisters instead of cousins. They look more alike on occasion than Suou and I do."

She stopped and gazed affectionately at her wife.

"What was it you wanted, Darling?" she asked.

"Oh," Himeko said, smiling sweetly. "We were just wondering if we could go ahead to the festival, Chikane-chan. Urumi-chan says she wants to see this play and it could be starting soon." She stopped

and cast a glance at her wife's guest, suddenly flushing. "I mean, if you don't mind, of course. If you want us to-"

"It's fine, Himeko," Chikane said, catching the smaller woman's fluttering hands. "Although we could go with you now if you wish. I am sure Reito-kun would not mind."

Reito nodded: "Of course, dear ladies."

"Oh, no!" Himeko protested, her pretty face suddenly set into determined lines. "You said you had something important to talk about with him, Chikane-chan."

She snapped her mouth shut after seeing the amused expressions surrounding her. She flushed hotly again.

"And I shouldn't have said that, should I?" she said timidly, looking mortified. Chuckles broke out from both Urumi and Reito at this, while Chikane smiled indulgently at her wife.

"No fear," she said, patting Himeko's cheek. "I was just about to bring it up, so you saved me the trouble, Dear. I should be thanking you for doing it for me."

Having reassured her wife, she turned to her cousin-who was also Reito's cousin, on the young woman's paternal side.

"If you are going now, I think you should take a carriage there," Chikane instructed. "Please avoid the crowds, if you can, Cousin. Try to get seats in front as well, for the play. You would enjoy it much better."

And though it was unspoken, there was also the other, perhaps most important message: *Please look after my wife.*

Urumi nodded, her heterochromic eyes showing that she understood.

"We shall follow you after a bit, all right?" Chikane said gently, addressing her wife once again. "I promise we shall not be long."

Her wife nodded, giving her a bright smile that seemed to almost

tangibly warm up the room. The two blondes left shortly, with Chikane's injunction to "take four men along".

"Four men..." Reito was saying thoughtfully. "Rather extravagant for the occasion, Chikane-chan. Or are you expecting something?"

She shook her head.

"Not at all," she replied. "But I find nothing extravagant where my wife's safety is concerned. It actually reassures me somewhat that Urumi is with her, truth be told. They are fond of each other, and Urumi is particularly protective of those of whom she is fond. I can take comfort in the knowledge that any possible threats would be immediately perceived by our mutual cousin."

"Urumi *is* rather astute, after all," he said, drawing a chuckle from her. To say that their cousin was "rather astute" actually seemed an understatement, in light of the young woman's status as an intellectual prodigy. Urumi was said to be one of Hime's most promising citizens, and very well known among the intelligentsia. Then again, she was even more well-known among the social elite: being born of a union between a Kanzaki and a Himemiya, she held two of the most illustrious ancestries in her veins. That alone was enough to get you invited to every party worth visiting, in the young woman's own words to Chikane.

"She's mellowed out considerably, don't you think?" he went on. "Urumi, I mean. I suppose the trip to Egypt has done her good."

Chikane hummed noncommittally.

"Perhaps," she answered. "All the same, I would adjure you not to let your guard down."

"And let that little prankster trick me into something? Never again!"

"You say that each time you meet her," she cautioned. "And she tricks you each time, too."

He winced, wrinkling his brow.

"Unfortunately enough, that's true. Oh, the little wench," he said,

giving in to a smile. "She's a terror, but I find it hard to stay mad at her, you know. I wonder why."

"Perhaps because it is difficult to consistently hate that which is similar to oneself?"

He chuckled.

"I'm hardly as much of a troublemaker as she is," he protested.

"I beg to differ: you may well be, in your own way."

"And you are not?"

Her lips twitched.

"Compared to the two of you," she told him. "I am nothing but a dull dog."

"I always thought," Reito rejoined with a speaking look, "that eagles suit you better."

"That is very kind of you."

"In any case, dull dogs do not really have such lovely wives as yours."

A soft gleam of pleasure showed in her eyes for his praise of her wife, as she had always been able to read him very well and could read now that he had said the compliment with perfect sincerity. She inclined her head.

"That is kind of you as well, for all that it is the truth," she replied, a touch of gravity suddenly coming to her voice. "Particularly as most of our fellow aristocrats seem to think my wife no better than a dog, dull or otherwise."

He scoffed quietly.

"Such people as those, on the other hand," he said with feeling, "are more suited to maggots. What a sorry way of thinking, if it's thinking at all!"



"As you say." The azure eyes sharpened and narrowed, suddenly flashing with a light less akin to sapphires than to the blue steel of a blade. "Sometimes, I admit I am sorely tempted to *make* them sorry."

His brow furrowed: "Then what prevents you from doing it, Chikane?"

Chikane grinned suddenly, looking sheepish. It was a rare expression for the eternally-assured woman.

"She does," she confessed, eliciting a laugh from the Princeps. "She says it little matters anymore, as we are already married anyway. I would object, were it not that she is more properly the injured party in this case, and hence has the prerogative to stay my hand on the matter of reprisal."

She shut her eyes contemplatively, exhaling a rueful breath.

"Himeko," she told him, "is altogether too sweet a creature when it comes to such things. It is just as well that the fact that she now bears my name prevents those curs from casting aspersions on her as directly as before, or as publicly as before. Were it up to me, they would no longer be able to do so in private either."

"So in effect," Reito said. "The choice lies with Himeko-chan?"

She nodded. He took a moment to look at her, seeming thoroughly entertained.

"You, My Dear Eagle," he said after a while, "are firmly under the cat's foot."

Chikane smiled her slow and languid smile.

"So I am," she allowed, tucking her hair daintily behind an ear. "Cats' feet are comfortable to be lying under, Reito-kun. You would do well to get a feline companion, yourself."

He started laughing again: "I'm allergic to cats, remember?"

"But not to red-haired ones," came the reply. He stopped laughing

and looked at her. "How goes it with Mai-san?"

A telling flick of the eyes upwards and to one side.

"It goes," he said. "And then again, it might be gone."

Her eyes twinkled: "I see."

He made an attempt at a pitiful look, eliciting a giggle.

"I suppose you are feeling sorry for me?" he asked with a touch of humour. "I *am* being overtaken by my own-for lack of a better word-apprentice."

She made a sound in the back of her throat before picking up her goblet. She swirled the liquid inside when she held it, but did not take a sip.

"It is indeed unfortunate that it would be Tate-kun vying against you," she replied with a sympathetic smile. "But though I do feel for you, Reito-kun, I confess I see no reason to offer you pity. Not when you have so many of Hime's maidens battering on your doors to announce their availability."

He chortled at the slanted compliment.

"However," he said, "that makes me sound so capricious. As though I could leap so easily from one 'maiden' to the next."

Her winged eyebrows lifted now: "My apologies. But I admit to having seen no indication that you were so much in earnest with Mai-san."

"And now you wound me," he said jokingly, putting on a hurt expression. "I do have rather deep feelings for Mai Tokiha, you know."

"Then, shall I be indelicate?"

He smiled affably and held out his hands.

"What is indelicate among others is not so with friends," he said.

"Nor with family."

"Indeed," she said, nodding her head to acknowledge his acquiescence. "Would you perhaps submit that your affections are earnest enough to be love?"

"Perhaps."

"I see."

He nodded, folding both well-muscled arms across his equally well-muscled chest.

"Hence my, hmm, consternation at the likelihood of her favouring Tate more," he said with a wry smile. "Ah, for a mentor to be rejected in favour of the mentored... My *dignitas* is smarting terribly."

"So I imagine," Chikane replied. "But if I may point it out: your *dignitas* should be a trifling thing in this situation, were you really in earnest."

Reito chuckled good-naturedly.

"This coming from one who, at the age of eight, claimed *dignitas* to be paramount to everything else," he taunted.

"You mentioned it yourself: I was only *eight*," she answered. "What does an eight-year-old know of the world?"

"You were terrifically knowledgeable even then," he told her. "But, yes, I suppose I shouldn't oppose your words on solemnity in love at this point. I have little leverage, whereas you have the benefit of a certain starry-eyed young lady who gazes upon you as the moon."

"My dear Reito-kun-poetry!" She flashed impeccably white teeth. "I'm beginning to think you *are* earnest, after all."

"Why, thank you-though it doesn't alleviate my difficulty, does it?" he sighed with conscious drama. "You would think having what people deem a silver tongue would be of help in these situations, but no. All my 'sweet nothings' are nothing indeed. They don't get me anywhere."

She nodded, sipping noiselessly from her drink.

"If it is true that it does not get you anywhere with matters of the heart, at the very least it has served you well in matters of state," she said afterwards. "But then again, the latter category has always been less complicated than the former."

He smiled at her, perceiving her words for what they were: a prompt to begin their true discussion.

"Then we would do better to abandon this topic momentarily-delightful as it is," he returned. "It's high time we moved on to the matters of state, as you suggest." He paused for an instant to give her allowance to protest, though it was given that she would not. "May I ask how your bid for the consul's chair is going?"

She made a vague motion with her head: "It goes well, I am happy to say."

"So well, in fact, that your election may be taken as inevitable," he said complacently. "I suppose you already have plans for what to do once you actually get to the consular chair?"

She smiled: an affirmation.

"May I hear some of them?" he asked, knowing this to be her intention in inviting him.

She lifted her cup to her lips, saying before she drank: "I have so many things in mind. Like, for instance, a land bill."

"A land bill?"

"Yes." She set the chalice back onto the table, playing with its stem while throwing Reito the swift, subtle grin of a conspirator. "I wish to requisition land sometime, for eventual distribution to retiring soldiers, as compensation for their services to the State."

He returned the smile: "I understand."

"How fortunate."

"May I also understand that this is for a certain red-eyed friend?"

"You may do so."

He made a thoughtful sound.

"Did she ask you for this?" he queried.

"No," came the answer. "Or to be exact, not yet."

"But she will, eventually." He thought it over for a few moments, nodding all the while. "Yes, you're right in telling me this, Chikane. Best to begin canvassing for support now. These land bills are thorny things. The senators usually become tetchy come time to discuss them."

"That is what I thought."

He looked up at her: "You have my support, of course."

She bowed her head slightly and said, "Then you have my gratitude."

The Princeps grinned, a lock of hair falling over his brow making him seem boyish as he lifted an eyebrow at her.

"Was that all?" he asked. "It wasn't, was it?"

She shook her head, giving him that dreamily enigmatic smile that had been the cause of many a politician's frustration and many a racing heart. Even he, who had practically grown up with her and her sister, could not help but feel ensnared by the expression. It only added to her sheen, he thought, that beneath the silky exterior was layer after layer of tempered steel. She really was a formidable woman. Why did it seem like he was always surrounded by formidable women?

*Or could it simply be that all women are formidable?*

He sighed inwardly at the notion.

"Please go on," he told her.

"I would like to push a resolution."

"A resolution?"

"To annex the lands of the Mentulaeans."

That actually shocked him, and before he knew it, he was leaning forward in his chair.

" *Edepol!* " he exclaimed. "That's *daring!* "

Chikane said nothing, merely inclining her head as though to thank him for a compliment. Her eyes were fixed on his stunned face, a twinkle in them indicating her enjoyment of having surprised him.

"War?" he said in a low tone. "A full-scale invasive war with the Mentulaean Empire?"

She nodded. There was a short silence, then, as he took some time to come to grips with what she had just affirmed. She watched in silence all the while, occupying herself with sipping from her cup every now and then.

At length, he ceased his private deliberations and met her gaze with a serious one.

"It shall be extremely difficult," he said slowly. "Very, very hard, if not impossible, to convince the House."

She smiled genially at him, not at all troubled.

"Then I am indeed fortunate that I have its Princeps before me now," she said. "Would you not say so?"

He could not suppress a smile.

"All right then," he said, settling back into his chair in surrender.

"Let's have it! But first of all, from whom does the idea originate?"

"As a pious Himean," she replied, "I should say it arises from the gods."

Reito had the grace to laugh.

"And," he said with a smirk, "as a very shrewd politician with an unfortunate tendency to prevaricate?"

She lifted her eyebrows.

"You misunderstand me," she said. "When I said it originated from the gods, I meant that it was they who put it into my mind. As I can speak for my own consciousness alone and that of no one else, you may well infer my answer."

"Then allow me to put the question directly: Shizuru-san wouldn't happen to agree with this course?"

"I am fairly certain she would." She paused meaningfully. "Or rather, she shall."

"I see," he replied, nodding several times. "So *you* put the proposition to her but her answer is yet forthcoming?"

Her smile widened.

"I submit it shall be a yes," she stated with certainty.

He was the one lifting eyebrows this time.

"I thought you could not speak of anyone else's consciousness but your own?" he teased.

"We speak now of probabilities," she rejoined. "Not of certainties of consciousness, which is the far more abstract subject of the two, for all that probability is something of a floating concept as well."

"And now I'm being defeated at my own game," he said, giving her a comically overwhelmed expression. "Perhaps you should have been the Princeps, my dear Chikane. You confuse even me with your verbal play, on occasion."

"I thank you for the compliment, dubious as it is."

They laughed easily before going back to the topic at hand.

"This is a great undertaking," he told her, narrowing his eyes at the table as though the issue were to be seen there. "And a very controversial one."

"All great undertakings are controversial," she replied equably. "And most controversies, Reito-kun, are also inevitable."

She fixed him abruptly with an intense gaze, which would have startled him had he not witnessed it several times before.

"You are the Princeps and have to deal with foreign relations more often than the rest of the House," she stated. "You know this as well as I do, having been witness to the trouble the Mentulaeans have been giving us thus far."

"Yes, yes," he said, with a conceding tone. He twisted his lips, looking conflicted about the matter. "But still, even when I was thinking of ways to settle them, I had not thought to go as far as annexing all their lands, Chikane."

"Then perhaps you are losing your balance and teetering into the conservative, Reito-kun."

He made as if to draw back, hands raised in surrender.

"Now, now," he told her jokingly. "I'm not about to join the Traditionalists yet! I am merely thinking it over. I grant that the Mentulae are becoming tiresome, but do you really think such a grand measure necessary? We shall be taking on *an empire*, Chikane."

She inhaled, sliding suddenly back into her usual lazy demeanour as she gave him an assured smile.

"There, in fact, is the argument," she told him. "I adjure you to think on your own words then: the foe is an empire. Have not the greatest threats to Hime in the past come from united peoples and nations abutting our territories? From what were, for most purposes, empires?"

"Yes. But why provoke a threat any more than we need to?"



She shook her head slowly.

"Certainly a full-scale and invasive war seems an overdone measure," she allowed. "But only if you think in terms of the immediate. Think, old friend, of *the future* . Can you honestly tell me that you cannot imagine the Mentulaeans trying to spill over our borders in the north within a decade? Remember your own words, Princeps: the fires of Vesuvius may reach even our shores then. And Shizuru-ah, she may beat them back for now and purchase valuable time for us by crippling them for the moment. But the instant they heal, they shall focus their energies upon doing the same or worse to us. Does that sound like something we should chance?"

She halted to allow her words to sink in.

"We cannot afford to give the Mentulaeen hound time to lick its wounds in retreat," she continued, eyes flashing once more. "The more time we give them, the more time they have to grow and gather strength for their assault. The only recourse is to defeat them decisively, completely, so that they never pose a threat again. We know they are an enemy: we knew it the moment they tripped over the border and invested Argentum. So the enemy has been identified, and it has even struck. We have wounded it in turn. But one does not wound an enemy one cannot kill. Hence we *must kill* ." She glanced feelingly at him. "Would you gainsay this?"

He took his time answering, still caught up in debating with himself.

"And suppose," he said finally, "that I did gainsay it? What would you do then, Chikane? What if I refused to give you any aid in this?"

She smiled.

"I submit I would seek other allies," she told him.

"Supposing you have difficulty there as well? Would you still pursue this course?"

"I submit I would."

"Even if, say, I and the rest oppose you?"

"I submit not you nor the rest of the House would stop me."

He began laughing heartily, her soft chuckles joining him.

"Jupiter, but you submit with such confidence!" he told her, tears in his eyes. "Yes, of course I agree with you, Chikane. There's great justice in what you say, and there's sense in it. I'll lend what support I can give."

"I am most grateful," she told him. "It is always good to have you on our side."

"Likewise," he said, dabbing at the corners of his eyes. "Shizuru-san is to be given command in the 'Great Northern War' or whatever you plan to call this, I take it?"

"Of course."

"Are you sure you do not want it yourself? You *are* going to be the consul, after all, and have even more right to it."

"No, Shizuru may have it," she said positively.

"I see. Your aim is to take command of the war in the Senate?"

"Would you prefer to do so yourself?" she asked, eyes twinkling.

He pretended to be daunted by the prospect.

"Certainly not," he answered humorously. "I know enough by now to let formidable women have their will when it comes to such sensitive enterprise-the fairer sex has the better touch, as the poet says, and this is doubly true come the two of you, whether in the subtleties of politics or the brutalities of war."

He reached for his cup, lifting it in salute.

"No, you and Shizuru-san are most welcome to be the ringleaders, My Dear. Anyway, it would be ungentlemanly of me to even try to usurp the seats of command from the two of you."

She laughed when he added: "It would be ungentlemanly of me too

if I did not at least pull out the chairs."

# Chapter 21

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Adoption** (rules of) **and families** - Romans belonged to both the families of their mothers and fathers, but their names often meant that they were officially listed as members of one gens (family). For example, Gaius Julius Caesar was related to the Aurelii through his mother, but his name meant that he was primarily a member of the gens Julii Caesares (through his father). Hence his **paterfamilias** (s.v.) was the head of the Julii Caesares, and not that of the Aurelii.

As Hime is not a patriarchal society, this custom has been altered. Here, a character may take as his or her primary family that of either the mother or the father. The main gens to which one belongs is important, since it determines one's status (Patrician/Plebeian), among other things.

If a person were adopted into another family, he would gain a new name and be listed/recognised officially as a member of the adopting family instead. So if a Gaius Julius Caesar were adopted by a Cornelius, he would become a Gaius Cornelius Caesar (or something to that effect). Do not be misled by the retention of "Caesar" in the name, by the way: it is merely a cognomen, not a family name.

2. "**Argos with Io**" - A reference to the myth of Argos or Argos Hundred-eyes, a creature said to have eyes all over his body. He was tasked by the goddess Juno to watch over a woman named **Io**. He was a near-perfect watchman because of his many eyes: he had eyes even in the back of his head, and was able to keep some eyes open even as some of them closed in rest. Near-perfect because the god Hermes/Mercury was still able to steal Io away from him by lulling all of his eyes to sleep. Hence the other name the Greeks have for Hermes/Mercury, by the way: Argeiphontes.

3. **College of Pontifices** - The official association of **pontifices** (s.v.); a state body. It had power over several very important things,

such as the task of ensuring that the calendar would coincide with the seasons, the proclamation of holidays, the approval of **lex curiata** (s.v.), and so on.

4. **Crossroads college ( s )** - Gathering places for the associations of men/women who were tasked with protecting crossroads (i.e. intersections) of Rome's roads. The crossroads were held to be a sacred place, and frequented by supernatural energies such as that of the goddess Hecate, so the Romans paid great attention to their care. The members of crossroads colleges were from the lower classes, and often formed (fairly violent) gangs or fraternities.

5. **Cunni, cunnus** - A slang term for the female genitals; profanity/insult.

6. **Demagogues and their relation to the office of the tribune-of-the-plebs** - Most effective tribunes-of-the-plebs were outright demagogues, since plebeian tribunate meetings were usually determined by the support of the people attending-who had an overwhelming number of the lower classes.

7. **Epicure** - A term that originally stood for someone adhering to the Epicurean theory of pleasure, the meaning soon became perverted into something equivalent to a sybarite. The Epicureans were not as simplistic in their treatment of pleasure as the later, perverted sense of the word suggests. In this chapter, the meaning used is the second one, more common to that which we have today: someone who simply lives for and with pleasure, without the exquisitely refined approach that the original Epicureans actually prescribed.

8. **Lex curiata** - A law or resolution carried through the curiate assembly that could make adoption legal.

9. **Paterfamilias/Materfamilias** - The actual Latin term is paterfamilias, which means "head of the family", who should be consulted for all major decisions made by other family members. Materfamilias is added here to adjust it to the setting, since Hime is not a patriarchal society.

10. **Pontifex Maximus** - Head of the College of Pontifices; high-priest of Rome.

11. **Pontifices** (pl.), **p ontifex** (s.) - An official priest of Rome. They were generally members of the senatorial families and members of Senate themselves. The priesthood was usually passed down through the family line, though there were some periods where it was acquired through election.

12. **Stoic** – Term generally understood in those times as referring to those adhering to the philosophical school that prescribed indifference to sorrows as well as discomfort, thus explaining why most of the Stoics preferred to live in a "simple" (as opposed to extravagant) fashion.

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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The Fujino army spent eight more days in Sosia, finishing preparations for the march to Argus and putting the local garrison in order. By evening of the last day, everything had been settled, every order acknowledged, and every legionary's gear and provisions accounted for. All that remained was to verify the movements of their foes, which the commander had seen to with her scouts. These scouts returned early morning of the eighth day. It was the result of their reconnaissance that Shizuru, her senior legate, and the Ninth's primipilus now discussed as they relaxed after their dinner.

"The reports all say the same thing, Shizuru-san," the senior legate said. "The Mentulaeans have retreated completely to their more western territories on their side of the border. With good reason. Some of their regions are having a whiter winter than we are. I'd say there's little to no chance of them coming out for a while."

"So I think," Shizuru said.

"They'll probably stay within their borders until the thaw."

"Our march to Argus should be straightforward then." Shizuru tapped a finger on the table. "Truth be told, I was expecting as

much."

"It's better to be safe," Chie agreed before sighing deeply. "We can go through as planned. But, you know, I'm pretty tempted to go and lead an expedition into their territories right now. What with them being all bundled and cosy for the winter, this would be a perfect time to spank these fat hounds in the rear."

"I seem to recall an aphorism," Shizuru said, "saying that one should let sleeping dogs lie."

"You wouldn't like to do it, then?"

"I did not say that," came the reply. "After all, the aphorism does not apply to rabid dogs, in my point of view. In such cases, needs must strike them dead where they sleep."

"Now I like the sound of that," their other companion cheered suddenly, her acid eyes flashing. "The general tells it like it is, eh, Chie?"

Chie and Shizuru smiled at the primipilus.

"Happy as I am to receive your approval, I fear I shall disappoint you, Nao-han," Shizuru cautioned. "Much though I would like to carry out such an expedition, I have no intent of doing so. Just yet, anyway."

She held back a chuckle at the suddenly intense attention she received.

"Wait, wait, wait," Chie chanted, holding a finger up as though to make a point. " *Just yet?* You just said that, didn't you? Tell the truth, now."

Shizuru was tickled: "I was not about to deny it."

"What you said is just tantamount to intent of invasion."

"Why, so it is."

"Well, I'll be damned!"

Having exclaimed this, Chie turned to Nao.

"You heard her, right?" she asked with droll excitement, soft brown eyes dancing. "She just sat there and said it. I wasn't imagining that."

Nao pointed her feral grin at them.

"This is the first time I've heard you say that," Chie said to Shizuru. "You're usually so cautious about it, Shizuru-san. All this time you've been saying we don't have any intention of going into their lands. I was beginning to wonder if you'd truly be content to play a defensive the game the whole time, especially when we'd just been condemned to stay in the north indefinitely by the Senate."

She spoke quickly to forestall protest when she saw her general's lips part.

"Yes, I know you're going to say that all you said just now was that you *would like* to do it-and barring the 'just yet', actual intention and desire are different. But you've never even spoken of this desire," she told the younger woman. "I've been waiting all this time for you to talk about the possibility of a foray into Mentulae territory, and here, when I finally don't expect it-bam!"

She snapped her fingers.

"That's a surprise bombardment, I daresay!" she concluded. "Just when I thought your ambitions were fading away, they hit me like a boulder from our catapultae. Consider me broken, bamboozled and blasted."

Shizuru regarded her laughingly.

"All right," she said. "I suppose I was trying to be politic, Chie-han. After all, our expedition's tasks did not include a description of going into enemy territory. Even if I have been entertaining the idea in my mind for a while now, it seemed better to keep it to myself."

She smirked and finished: "Particularly for the sake of my ambitions, as you put it. Surely you know why."



"Because it might rankle *some people*," Chie responded, with a long-suffering smile. "The Traditionalists might not have minded it before if you did try it at the start, though, I think. That was when they were still giddy about having undermanned you."

"Ah," Shizuru said. "You mean because they would have been counting on my defeat then?"

"More or less, though we both know the chances of that would have been slim. Still, after all you've achieved on this campaign, they won't be keen to cut you any more slack."

"Oh, I get it," Nao cut in. "It's even more dangerous for the general to talk about trying it now because our campaign's been going well."

"Exactly. She's shown what she can do even when grossly undermanned."

"The malicious *cunni* are afraid of being overshadowed by another 'impossible achievement' from her, right?"

"That's the gist of it. So she can't even make a reckless comment in front of someone about considering the matter, or the conservatives back home could get wind of it. They'd be on her like dogs on the chase."

"Jealous fu-

Shizuru coughed, interrupting the vulgarity on Nao's tongue as well as the pair's conversation.

"All that you have mentioned considered," she began, "nothing in our situation has changed beyond the fact that you have actually heard me make such a comment-which is not a reckless one, I hope, in view of the fact that we are in a closed room and close company. My saying it does not mean anything great. We are still not going to invade the Mentulaeans, unless the House gives us sanction to do so."

"And a lot more troops, General."

"And a lot more troops, Yuuki-han."

Chie smiled wryly and finished the thought for them all: "Which they haven't and don't seem about to do anytime soon."

"Indeed."

"It's too bad!" the legate uttered, shaking her head vigorously. "Don't get me wrong: I agree taking on an empire their size is a bit daunting. But now that I've seen the quality of their commanders and armies, I daresay I don't feel as daunted as before. And this would be such a perfect time to strike too, when the scouts tell us the Mentulae are lazy with hibernation."

"They're probably snowed in, though," Nao warned. "So it could be a hard hike for us, too, say, if we were going and invading them now. Anyway, it's a good thing it's stopped coming down where we are. I've had about all I can take of the white stuff."

"Ah, the famously hardy Centurion Yuuki," Chie crooned maliciously, attention quickly switching to her friend's complaint. "Bothered by a little white stuff. So much for being hardy, eh?"

"Oh, go pluck feathers from some bird's arse."

"Quills, for the hundredth time."

"Whatever you call it, you still pluck it from a bird's arse." Having delivered this retort, the redhead wiggled her eyebrows at the other two women. "But I'll follow your lead just this once, Harada. I think I *will* go and pluck feathers from some bird's arse, later."

The legate stared incredulously at her.

"Whatever for?" she cried. "I've never seen you write anything other than your name on a scrip!"

"What do you think I am, illiterate?" Nao said dryly.

Chie repressed a smile, knowing very well that Nao was not only literate but also literate in the language of the educated: Greek.

"I do not think," Shizuru offered, "that you truly took her meaning, Chie-han."

A few seconds passed, after which Chie burst out into an explosive guffaw.

"Oh, that's what you meant? Heavens, Yuuki," she said, between chortles. "It's the day before we leave Sosia and you think of *that* ? You're a classic, if ever there was one."

The primipilus grinned shamelessly and propped her chin up with one hand.

"Why not?" she said. "Like you said, Chie, I've got a name for being hardy. Playing around with a little bird tonight isn't going to make me so tired I can't march tomorrow."

"Oho! You do have your eye on someone in particular?"

"Just one a friend told me about. One of Makaku's." She turned to Shizuru then and explained succinctly: "Whorehouse in the city, General."

"I see," Shizuru replied, not at all fazed. "How interesting. It stands to reason that Nao-han would prefer a professional."

"Oh, yes . And this professional's said to be amazing-especially with women," Nao went on candidly. "I thought I could give it a try, since we'll be going tomorrow. Might as well have some fun on the last night."

"A reasonable proposition."

"Very reasonable, is what I think," Nao leered. "I hope she finds my demands reasonable too, later."

"I wish you well in the enterprise."

"I thank you kindly for the good wishes."

Chie sniggered at the exchange.

"I'm almost frightened for the woman, you lecher," she teased the primipilus. "It's just like you to do this at such a time, though."

Nao rolled her eyes.

"Stop playing at abstinence-it don't work that well, Harada. You can come along if you want, you know," she shot back. "But I already booked that girl for tonight so you'll have to find some other little bird to satisfy your needs. Or you can ask around with the farmers here if they have a spare duck they can lend you. I'm sure you'll have fun plucking it clean."

"Not only a lecher but a pervert," Chie answered sardonically, ignoring their general's muffled laughter. "I don't know why you even bother asking me, really. You already know that I can't. Besides which, I wouldn't."

She paused and added quickly, to their amusement: "And to be clear, I'm not only talking about being unfaithful to Aoi when I say that. That crack about a duck was just *nasty*."

"Suit yourself," Nao replied,. "It's your loss if you don't want to have a little enjoyment before the march. I'd ask the general if she wants to come along too, but..."

She trailed off here, bringing a smile to Shizuru's lips and a frown to Chie's.

"Don't infect her with your lechery," the latter pretended to scold Nao. "Shizuru-san's above that."

The general smirked at her officers.

"Am I?" she said.

"Are you going to protest, Shizuru-san?" Chie asked provocatively. "It would make my day if you did."

"It is eminently difficult to do so, given that you gave your earlier statement in what I take to be a defence of my virtue."

"Partly, though I'm also just saying what most people think, or think they see," Chie replied. She looked pointedly at the primipilus. "Nao would agree with me."

"We-ell, since you bring it up," Nao said in answer, before turning to smile at their commander. "It is pretty strange how you manage to stay out of it, General. Fact, it's godlike. I avoid relationships too, but I still need to get this sort of thing every now and then, else my bones start rattling something awful. But you don't even seem to need this much, at least."

Shizuru chuckled.

"I wonder now," she said with typical lack of commitment. "Do you think I really seem like that?"

"Why?" Chie asked once again. "Were you about to deny it?"

"Would it be of such moment if I did?"

"To someone like Chie, anything that's fodder for tittle-tattle is of 'such moment'," Nao said. "So you'd better watch it, General."

"I think I resent that," Chie said, seeing the opportunity for probing further into the mystery that was her young friend. "But Nao brings up a good point, Shizuru-san. You're definitely no Stoic-though I'll grant you aren't exactly an Epicure, either-yet you manage to resist what those philosophers call 'the urges of the flesh'. Or is 'resist' even the right word? You seem almost immune to it. I don't think I've ever heard you talk about such things, after all, let alone give any indication of being interested in them."

She opened her eyes wide and continued: "Even if Nao says it's a godlike quality, I actually think it's beyond godlike. Why, some have it that even the gods give in to the demands of their flesh, divine though it is!"

"The Greek Zeus being a particularly good case in point, I suppose," Shizuru answered drolly. "But even if we pretend that my situation is as you make it, I confess I see no reason for such an immunity to be laudable. The realm of Eros is not always opposed to virtue, and may well supplement it on many occasions."

"You speak with such authority," Chie teased. "Does it actually come from experience, then?"

"Not necessarily. It is entirely possible I have abstracted what I said from something I read before. If so, I cannot remember who said it originally. How silly of me. To quote or paraphrase an author without giving him credit is terrible, after all, even in casual conversation."

She put on an apologetic expression.

"Mayhap it is little suited to me to speak of this," she ventured. "Given that the general impression of me-as you say-is that I am isolated from the present subject, I fear that my words shall carry no authority with them if I do pass comment. As such, I might have to resort to using the authority of another yet again, and even if I do quote them correctly this time, it still seems highly improper."

Chie suppressed the exasperated smile threatening to break out on her face, conscious of Nao reining back a snigger. She and the primipilus were both after the same suspicion, of course, but it was beginning to be abundantly clear that neither of them would obtain something close to confession from their commander. How could one get anything even credibly suggestive from Shizuru Fujino that she would not offer herself? The only possible way-and one not likely to receive a proper answer, even-would be to ask her frankly about it, and that would be too crude. Not even Nao would ask such a thing of their general, and when even Nao refrained from doing something, that was sufficient to argue against the attempt of it. Oh, what to do, what to do! She would have trouble sleeping out of sheer curiosity!

*Though if not from her, then perhaps...*

She cast a furtive glance at the young woman sitting next to Shizuru. That character's beautiful but impassive face was devoid of interest in their talk, however. Her attention was directed to the open window, and though Chie looked the same way, she could not see what was so interesting about the plain view of dark sky.

Seeing the girl like this made Chie see the folly of her idea. Sphinxes put riddles to you, not the other way around!

Her shoulders relaxed as she decided to abandon her quarry for the moment. If Shizuru was set on skirting around it, then there would

be no use in trying to force the topic. Chie would only get her answer when her friend was ready to give it-as always.

She looked said friend in the eye.

"I meant to talk about this earlier," she said. "We're going to be wintering in Argus, no? What are your plans for after that, Shizuru-san?"

Shizuru turned to the other Himean with them and asked what she thought the plan would be, if nothing at all changed with their present situation where Senate was concerned.

"Set up in Argus," came the centurion's reply. "Rest during the winter. Wait for the Mentulae to attack one of our garrisoned points."

"Correct thus far. And then?"

"Then it's anybody's guess," Nao said, throwing her hands up in surrender. "I'm not sure what you want to do after that, General. If I had to say, though, I'd say you'll use the smallest tiptoe they make on our side of the borders to convince the Senate to finally give us permission to run the bastards to the ground on their own turf. And to give us more funds and soldiers, while they're at it."

Shizuru's face lit up.

"You have a better head for politics than you yourself admit, Yuukihan," she said.

"Thank you, General, though it's not the sort of thing I'd enjoy."

"The trouble with that scenario Nao's just described," Shizuru's fellow senator interjected, "is that even if the House is eventually persuaded, their deliberations before that may take so long we'll be in a tight spot before it's over. And even the mere fact that we'll have to wait for the enemy to make the first move means that we're already in a tight spot to begin with."

She eyed Shizuru suspiciously.

"Knowing you, Shizuru-san," she said, "you've already thought of

that far ahead of me. That means there's something you know that we don't."

Shizuru smiled.

"Possibly," she said. "Were the latest news from Hime here, you would no doubt get a hint of it. But as the mail has yet to arrive and may take a while longer, I suppose it is best for me to tell you already. You see, Chikane Himemiya has decided to run for consul."

After the initial bewilderment had given way, a flurry of questions was shot at her by the senior legate.

"What made her decide? Were you involved? And how is that even possible?" Chie asked. "The nominations are way past. Even if the elections are postponed, it's not acceptable to put yourself up for candidacy after the stipulated period is over."

"Not any longer, I expect," Shizuru said. "Her tribune-of-the-plebs shall make it possible by legislating a second nomination period. I am uncertain as to what justifications Chikane has instructed Kaneda Izumi to use for his argument, but knowing Chikane, it should come through."

"She told you this in the letter we received last time," Chie guessed.

"Correct."

Chie shook her head in disbelief.

"Jupiter, she'll destroy some people's plans this year," she said. "I thought she'd go take a province first before going after the consul's chair, so this is really unexpected-but what a development! If she does run, she'll carry all the votes with her! The other candidates will be gnashing their teeth!"

"She'd make a better consul than all the other candidates put together."

The centurion concurred.

"Don't know her the way you do, of course," she said, "but I know



about her. Good general, clean politician. And my friends at the crossroads colleges talked about her, since she was urban praetor when we left. They like her, and that's rare."

"Of course they would like her," Shizuru replied warmly, being very fond of this particular friend.

"Then it's good she's on our side, General," Nao answered. "Don't know her, so can't say more."

"Given that I do know her, allow me to say this much then: there can be no question of my faith in Chikane," Shizuru responded. "She told me she shall do all she can to acquire what we need for a proper campaign. Beyond or within the House, she is one of the few people of whom I can always be certain."

"You've been friends since childhood, after all," Chie noted, before saying teasingly: "Since nearly the same can be said for us, dare I hope your statement applies to me as well?"

"Naturally, you are another of those whom I trust in the same way."

"I'm glad to hear that. I suppose Reito-san is one of the others in House?"

Shizuru looked genuinely surprised.

"Why, no, not really," she replied, to Chie's astonishment. "Not to say that I distrust him. I simply do not trust him as much as I do you or Chikane, for example."

"Why's that?"

Shizuru thought it over.

"It is not due to any concrete experiences or suspicions, of course," she explained to them. "Nor do I think Reito-han an untrustworthy man, or anything of the sort. It is rather that he is a too much of a true politician. Do they not say that one should never turn one's back on a true politician?" she asked with humour.

"I don't see," Chie said. "How does Himemiya, for instance,

compare? I always thought her a true politician too, you know."

"Oh, yes," Shizuru said. "But I am afraid I was not speaking of their skill in the political sphere and its games, or at least, not exclusively that. I meant, rather, their natural dispositions, among other things. At any rate, the resultant difference lies in the fact that where I would always easily entrust my life to Chikane, I would not have such consistency with Reito-han. To expand my earlier phrase, I have no trouble having my back to her, whereas I would follow the example of Argos with Io if it comes to him. To be honest, I would actually rest easier with Kazuya Kurauchi-han behind me-even if he is from the opposite camp."

Chie took a moment to respond.

"I'm not sure I understand," she said. "But my feeling goes with your opinion, I think."

Nao snorted, drawing their attention.

"I can put it plainly for you, Harada," she said. "What she means is that this Reito Kanzaki's a slick bastard. Knowing where you stand with him is just as dependable as knowing where you stand on marble slathered with oil."

The other two laughed.

"No steady footing, eh?" Chie said between sniggers. "Oh, that was good, Yuuki!"

"The simile is amusing," Shizuru agreed. "I do feel a little sorry for Reito-han, though. Marble slathered with oil, indeed."

"I was going to say 'slippery ice' instead of that at first, General," Nao said, before suddenly flicking a meaningful look at the general's bodyguard-who happened to miss the gesture. "But then I thought someone here might be insulted, you know."

The other two Himeans stifled chuckles.

"Careful, Yuuki," Chie warned. "You're treading on thin ice."

"Oh? Based on the lack of reaction, I'd say it's pretty thick."

"So the fisherman said, right before a wrong step found at him at the bottom of the lake," the other woman returned, setting off another round of laughter. She let them chuckle first before going on.

"Anyway, going back to our topic, I'm glad to know what you just told us, Shizuru-san. About Chikane-san's running for consul, I mean, and her dedication to our cause. It's reassuring stuff."

Shizuru nodded.

"Our reservations about the Princeps aside, he is going to be part of our camp, right?"

"I believe so, but I have no word on that yet. At any rate, I am certain Chikane-han shall see to him."

"Oh, excellent," Chie nearly purred with contentment. "Well, this means I have more to look forward to after the winter. Having the head of the Himemiya pulling the strings-as consul, too!-is going to be perfect. It definitely makes life easier for us."

The primipilus suddenly grinned at this remark.

"With the people she has to deal with, though," she told them shrewdly. "I don't think you can say it makes life any easier for her."

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In Hime, the subject of Nao's dry note was regarding her cousin with a blank expression. Her hand was hovering above a scroll on her desk, having frozen halfway in picking it up. She held this pose a little while longer before finally letting her palm rest on the rolled-up parchment.

"Forgive me, but just to be sure I heard you correctly," she said at length. "You are asking me to procure permission from the College of Pontifices allowing you to be *adopted*?"

The young woman seated across from her nodded. Chikane's eyes narrowed in response.

"Adoption is a serious thing, Cousin," she went on to say. "And not something to be played with. I sincerely hope this is not another of your games, Urumi?"

The other feigned hurt.

"No, it's not," she assured the raven-haired woman.

"Then forgive me for asking this again, but I wish it to be clear: you aspire to be adopted formally by another family?"

"Mm-hm, yes, that is the general idea. Does this conclude the interrogation?"

"Hardly! What imp put this into your mind?" Chikane asked, losing a laugh. She shook her head with wonder. "Your idiosyncrasies do fascinate me, Urumi. Kanzaki is not really a family name most people would want to be rid of."

Urumi shut her eyes at this comment and smiled, more to herself than the woman before her.

"Not to mention Himemiya, hmm?" she said cannily, peering at Chikane from her blue eye while keeping the brown one shut. "But it's not like I am actually ridding myself of either name, you know. I will still be known as Urumi Himemiya Kanzaki, with only another surname added. Of course you're right-I will still be giving up my status as belonging primarily to the Kanzaki family. But that is hardly a great sacrifice for me. I need to do this if I am to get where I want to be, right now. It's nonnegotiable, unfortunately."

"That must be a remarkable place you wish to reach indeed, if even the combined weight of the Kanzaki and Himemiya names cannot get you there."

"Something like that."

"Do tell me whose name you intend to take."

"My friend Tomoko's. You remember her, don't you?"

"Nemura-san?" Chikane said, her mind recalling an extraordinarily

lovely, if rather foolish face. "An old and very respectable family, I see. Old plebeian stock, I believe?"

"Yes."

"Your peer in age."

"Yes, though not in ability. She's awfully dull, to be honest." A faint smirk. "But Tomoko has her own talents."

"Ah." Chikane eyed her thoughtfully, guessing that she was talking about the girl's considerable physical assets. "Correct me if I am wrong, but is she not...?"

"An orphan like me, yes," Urumi continued, with a complacent smile. "That simplifies things, don't you think? Since she has no *paterfamilias* or *materfamilias* to hamper her, it should be a simple process for her to adopt me. She's already agreed to do it, in case you're wondering."

"And agreed to have you, her friend and peer in years, calling her 'mama'?" the elder woman remarked, with a trace of amusement. "Curious girl, to actually consent to such a queer thing."

Urumi held out her hands over the desk and stretched lazily.

"Tomoko," she said, with confidence. "Will do whatever I want her to do. It's been that way ever since we were kids."

"It seems more like you should be adopting her, then."

"I would rather keep her as a pet-though she is already that, in a way," came the retort. "But I shan't actually be calling her 'mother' to her face, of course. Only in public, and even then, that should be a pretty lark. Oh, I can't wait!"

"A lark," Chikane echoed dryly. "You *said* this was not lark, Urumi."

"It isn't," her cousin protested. "But there's no rule against me having a little laugh over it, even if the general intent is an earnest one."

The older woman looked up and released a sigh to the ceiling. After

a moment, she turned back at Urumi with an enquiring expression.

"Well then, Urumi," she said. "Please tell me why you want to do this."

"Election as a tribune-of-the-plebs."

The languid smile vanished, was replaced by one of controlled surprise.

"I beg your pardon?" said Chikane.

"Election as a tribune-of-the-plebs."

"Why in the world would you want that?" Chikane demanded gently, once her astonishment had passed. "Is this what you meant by your words the other night?"

Urumi giggled as she recalled that evening, when she had announced to Chikane that she would be entering their-Chikane's and Reito's-arena soon. Though, she had qualified mysteriously, not strictly *the same* arena. It had left her elder cousin wondering what she meant when she went on to say that she would ascend a political office no Himemiya or Kanzaki had ever occupied.

"Yes," Urumi now said. "And just think of it: after Tomoko adopts me and I become an official member of the Nemura, I may be the first Himean citizen to run legally for the plebeian tribunate even with perfectly patrician blood in my veins."

She grinned, her expression like that of a child acquiring a new toy.

"That's an accomplishment in itself. Suou will positively flip when she hears about it-she might say I'm trying to match her feat of getting appointed a legate without being in Senate yet. Won't it be hilarious?"

"Facetious even now." Chikane smiled wryly. "This is the Kanzaki in you coming out, I think."

"But you always accuse Suou of levity, and she doesn't have a drop of Kanzaki in her."

"Actually, I was referring more to this scheme of yours."

"Oh, that. I still have a rebuttal: more of the Himemiya have broken traditions than the Kanzaki."

"I have to admit that is probably true. Certainly my own case provides base for rebuttal." The urban praetor tilted her head, her attitude that of someone having just apprehended something. "So this is why you've been frequenting the crossroads colleges. Drumming up support among the lower classes, Urumi?"

Urumi grinned an affirmation.

"Here I was, worried for you and thinking you were keeping dangerous company when in fact you were the most dangerous one there," Chikane said in a low voice. "I do not know why I was even worried. You have always had a talent for putting people of all walks under thrall."

"You have the same talent, Chikane, so I don't see why it should be remarkable."

"In varying aspects. Suffice it to say that you have even more of the makings of a demagogue than I." She smiled, suddenly intrigued. "A perfectly aristocratic demagogue. You would be a dangerous tribune-of-the-plebs, Cousin."

"No more dangerous than you as the senior consul."

Chikane looked tickled.

"And that," she said, "is exactly the point. I would be very dangerous as the senior consul."

She inhaled luxuriously.

"In any case, is this truly what you want, Urumi? To enter politics through the tribunate of the plebs instead of, say, the quaestorship?"

A determined stare: "I'm positive."

"Then I shall endorse your adoption to the pontifices," came the

answer, bringing a wide grin to Urumi's face. "They will wonder at and oppose it, methinks, but I am fairly certain I shall convince them to pass a *lex curiata*. Our present *Pontifex Maximus* owes me a few favours, so I shall exhaust one or two for you."

Urumi bowed with her head, those distinctive eyes peeking out of her curtain of silvery-blond hair.

"I'm so grateful I can hardly put it into words, so I shan't-or not so much," she said impishly. "Shall we say I will pay you back in action instead? I'm sure it hasn't escaped you that by doing this, you will have another tame tribune-of-the-plebs for next year."

"How good to know you have such confidence about winning the elections," the other replied. "Do not tell me you plan to ensure your win by bribery?"

"I don't think I have to, but it's possible to do that, too."

"Then do not let me catch you-or not in public."

"I'll be sure to remember."

"I have a feeling too that you shall not need to resort to that, anyhow," Chikane said to her. "And before I forget, Urumi: I hardly think the description 'tame' could ever be made to apply to you, whether as a tribune-of-the-plebs or not. Even so, it is true that it would benefit me to have you as a tribune-of-the-plebs. My tribune for next year is rather less inspiring-though still capable, of course."

She smiled at Urumi with humour.

"I am afraid to say that you shall have to do me a lot of favours in return for this one," she warned.

Urumi shrugged and said she would welcome the work as long as it was interesting.

"I believe I can satisfy that condition."

"And I'd love to ruffle a few Traditionalist feathers as I go," came the second qualifier.



"You shall ruffle more than a few, if the next year turns out as I expect," Chikane said. "You shall also have a lot of work for Shizuru's campaign, though I'm sure you already know that."

"Ahh." Urumi looked a little regretful. "I expected it. But, you know, it's something of a pity."

"What is?"

"Not being able to go up against her. It would be so interesting, you see."

The deep blue eyes were amused: "And in doing so, go against me as well?"

"Simply a thought," the blonde replied mischievously. "I wasn't even serious, Chikane. Rather, it's just that..."

"That what?"

The corners of Urumi's mouth turned downwards.

"It would be so much more challenging than going up against the Traditionalists," she explained. "They're all so dull! Unless it's Kikukawa-san or Wang-san, maybe. But one lacks style and the other lacks substance. Anyway, they don't interest me as much."

She cast a pouting look at Chikane, her fine, attractive features turning slightly childish.

"I would honestly prefer to set my wits against someone who actually has wits to speak of," she said. "And Shizuru-san definitely has that. Of course you do too-but you're family, and I can't go against you. The same with cousin Reito since he's my *paterfamilias* at the moment."

Chikane nodded.

"Though I must say that I disagree with your having dismissed our Traditionalist friends so easily, I still understand your point," she told the blonde. "One needs a sharp mind against which to whet one's own, to restate your argument. It may add to the appeal that you are

not so familiar with Shizuru yet, for you've had few occasions to meet. But that can be amended in the future."

She smiled, met the blue and brown gaze.

"All the same, Urumi," she concluded, "do try to avoid going against her. I would much rather you sharpened yourself against me, come to that."

"Is that an invitation?"

" *No.* "

They laughed.

"All's well," Urumi said evenly, later. "It's merely a stimulating idea-pitting myself against her-but that's all it is. For one thing, I happen to like her."

A lifted eyebrow and a smirk was the reply.

"Not that way," Urumi went on, faking a scandalised expression.

"I see."

"Mm-hm. I know we only met in passing before, and it was a long time ago, but I remembered her. And I've been hearing of her regularly for the past few years, so I feel as though I know her already, going from the genius of the things she's done. She's rather an admirable sort, is she not?"

"Yes, she is, though some people would disagree."

"Some people are just stupid," Urumi declared, while Chikane chuckled at the sight of her cousin's most disdainful expression-which was reserved for what the young woman called 'the mentally challenged'. Since Urumi had the lofty standpoint of a born genius, this meant that she doomed over three-fourths of the people she met into this category. Such was the haughtiness of great intelligence!

"Anyway, I've no problems with helping the two of you along," Urumi

went on. "We should be able to give the archconservatives a good run for their money, Chikane."

"Then I shall get started on your adoption tomorrow. Is Nemura-san ready?"

"Yes, but don't call her that. It doesn't fit well."

A smile. "What, then?"

"Tomoko. You may add *chan*, I guess."

"As you wish. I amend my earlier words. Is Tomoko-chan ready?"

"Anytime."

"Good. Have her prepare a formal statement with her signature and seal tomorrow."

"Will do. And thank you again." Urumi sat back with satisfaction, inspecting her fingernails dreamily. "Isn't that typical, though?"

"What is?"

"That on the year *you* become consul, all sorts of interesting things start to happen. I can see them coming, even now." She smiled, cat-like and derisive. "Your consulship just might turn Hime upside-down."

"Even the hourglass must be turned on its head in order to usher in a new hour."

"Or a new era. It's going to be such an entertaining year."

Chikane made a suggestion: "I believe you mean ' *controversial*.' "

"Mm, but that is what makes it entertaining. It should be so much fun!"

"Yours is a fine approach," the other replied. "But I think some people would actually see it the other way around."

"Some people are just stupid," Urumi repeated, to her cousin's

laughter.

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Urumi's words, curiously enough, were being echoed leagues away.

"Some people are just foolish."

It was Shizuru who said this, talking to her bodyguard as she undressed. She was getting ready for her bath and the present conversation was an expansion of the one that had taken place a short while before, with Nao and Chie.

"This is one of the reasons for which I distrust people," she was explaining. "Foolish persons tend to act without proper regard for consequences. Strangely enough, they often pose more of a danger to those of intelligence compared to others who are less foolish. The unpredictability of a fool has foiled many a brilliant plan."

"Given their irregularity, I find them highly suspect," she said. "It is difficult to trust someone like that-though there are always exceptions. Still, I actually prefer to deal more with intelligent, dangerous people than with fools."

She stopped unwrapping her toga from her body and peered at Natsuki.

"I suppose that is why most of the people I trust tend to be dangerous ones."

The younger woman was sitting cross-legged on the tiled floor and she now looked up at Shizuru.

"Am I," she began to ask, lips slowly curving into a playful smile. "Shizuru, am I a *dangerous one*?"

"You most certainly are," Shizuru said with indulgence.

An amused sound.

"Besides being one of those I trust the most, of course," came the addition.

Natsuki smiled again, a little shyly this time. Shizuru returned to her task. She draped the sheet-like toga over her shoulders once she had finished removing it.

"At any rate, let us return to why I trust Chikane more than Reito-han," she went on. "But first, let me ask you something. Why do you think I trust you, Natsuki? You are avowedly one of the most dangerous people I have ever met. There is no doubt in my mind that you would pose a definite threat to my life were we ever to meet as enemies in battle-and I can say that of few people, believe me. Yet I have grown to trust you to the extent that I actually sleep defencelessly with you armed and ready in the same room. Why, then?"

The girl frowned thoughtfully. After letting her ponder it for a little while, Shizuru answered the question herself.

"There are several reasons for this, of course. Particularly in the past, when you were just beginning as my bodyguard," she told her. "Back then, one of the reasons was that I felt you were not foolish, nor was the king who assigned you to ensure my care. But the most important reason I have at this juncture is this: that I may dare to say you actually hold affection for me."

She tried very hard not to smile at Natsuki's blush.

"I hope I have not been wrong in saying that?" she teased. "At least I did not say something so daring as you actually being in love with me, you know. Unless you would actually agree?"

The smile she had repressed was forced out at the vicious colour swarming over the girl's face.

"It is your regard for me that allows me to trust you," she said, returning to their theme. "The same applies to Chikane's case. Her affection for me prevents her from considering a course of action that would be detrimental to my interests, even if said course would also be beneficial to her. The same applies to me, since my affection for her is a predetermined, invariable factor in any action. Her well-being, as far as I am concerned, is not a mere variable in calculation. It is a part of my life. Just as she has almost always

been."

Natsuki nodded.

"She is a great friend?" she asked.

"Oh, yes. My very best."

"And the man?" she asked Shizuru. "This, um, Reito Kanzaki?"

The Himean began slipping her tunic from her shoulders, keeping the toga draped around her neck.

"His case is different," she said. "Among the reasons why I can rely on him is that *he is not a foolish man*. He acts with consequences in mind. He is a fairly dependable person, in that sense."

She let the tunic fall to the floor and kicked it lightly aside. She now began to remove her undergarments.

"However, I still do not trust him unreservedly in the same way I do Chikane-or the way I trust you, for that matter," she continued. "While I am on good terms with Reito-han, I still know enough to see that his regard for me is not of the kind that would make my wellbeing a preset concern for him."

She dropped her undergarments on top of the tunic pooled on the floor.

"Our relations are good enough to incline him generally towards consideration for me if I am involved, but they are not good enough for him to consistently reject a measure that would benefit him considerably while disadvantaging me," she stated. "His fondness for me is rather too light for that constancy, you see, as is mine for him."

Natsuki nodded again.

"And the other man?" she asked, at length.

Shizuru frowned at her.

"What other man?" she replied. "Aside from Reito-han?"

"Mm."

It took a while before she remembered: "Ah! Kazuya Kurauchi."

"Mm."

"Kurauchi-han. Well, it is actually different for him too," Shizuru admitted. "I said I would trust him a little more in the hypothesised situation because of his character. He is a naturally nice man, you see, and one who generally observes the dictates of popular morality as his personal creed. He is quite predictable, that way. Kurauchi-han would not stab a person in the back, insofar as he can actually help it."

Having finished her explanation, she turned to face Natsuki again. The toga covering her shoulders swayed as she moved, touching the floor.

"Well then, now that we have explained that," she said. "Would you please bathe with me tonight?"

She saw the change in her bodyguard's face, the younger woman's wide eyes conveying her surprise at the suddenness of the question. Shizuru smiled back. It had been a surprise battery since a while had passed since she last asked the young woman to share their bath.

*All the better, she told herself. I just might be able to press that advantage.*

"This must be the hundredth time I have asked you, but I actually have reasons this time-better ones than those I have already given," she told the girl. "We march just after dawn tomorrow. It is common sense to bathe before doing so, is it not? Particularly since we are in winter and fetching and heating water on the march is a greater challenge this season. Argus is a way off from here, and it may well be a while before we find a chance to indulge again in a proper bath. Hence we must bathe tonight-and if we do bathe tonight the way we usually do, one after the other, it shall take too long. That would

mean that one of us-you, as a matter of fact-shall be losing time for sleep that is badly needed."

It seemed that Natsuki's surprise wavered a little here, although it was replaced by anxiety moments later when she dropped her eyes to the floor. Shizuru offered another justification, knowing the girl could sense what she was really after but was now only waiting for her to justify the leap, to provide the excuse the younger, far-more-fearful-of-sex Otomeian needed to willingly enter the trap.

"Furthermore, do you not feel the cold?" she pursued. "Even one used to the cold as you are would have to be mad to bathe in cool water. For the water shall have cooled by the time I finish, you know that. I would hate to have you develop an illness as we march or even before we set out. Far more efficient for us to use the same hot water together, while it is yet hot."

Still no response. The older woman resorted to her best cat-coaxing voice, feeling the wavering in the girl and pushing it further.

"Oh, come and bathe with me, Natsuki," she said. "I am speaking sense, for god's sake! Bathe with me already, else I will begin to think you really are afraid of me, under it all."

The girl looked up to scoff.

*Oh, that pride!*

"No?" she teased. "Then come here. There is no need to be shy. No one is or shall be here other than the two of us. You are making me feel bad with all this reserve. Do you not trust me, Child, even now?"

She felt a little bad for using their earlier conversation as an excuse. Still, she was convinced that Natsuki was not fool enough to fail to understand that all of these were merely excuses delivered for her sake. She wanted her to understand that.

"Tell you what, I shall not do anything you do not want me to do," Shizuru promised, trying to edge closer to victory by negotiation. "I promise that if I make you uncomfortable, you only have to say so and I shall remedy that."



Natsuki looked up again, eyes cautious but not intractable. She was almost in the trap.

"So shall you come over here now or ought I give you more reasons why you should? It is unlikely for me to run out of them-I am rather good at finding reasons for things I have set my mind on," Shizuru jested. "You should know that by now."

She was pleased to see the younger woman's lips twitch slightly at this, much like those of a person trying to hold back a smile. She hoped that meant she would not have to flog the argument to death, even though she was willing to do so if it meant a victory. She tried to tamp down her excitement as she held out a hand in the girl's direction, wagering everything on the moment being the right one.

"Come here, would you?" she beckoned again, smiling easily and invitingly. "I think we trust each other enough by now to at least be able to bathe together, Natsuki."

There was an instant where she was afraid that the other would refuse once more, but it vanished when the younger woman met her gaze. There was surrender there: an acquiescing nervousness in those bright green eyes. For her part, Shizuru kept her hand outstretched, focusing herself on ensuring it would not shake. She was soon rewarded when Natsuki rose stiffly from the floor and came towards her.

"Thank you," Shizuru said, smiling brightly at the young woman who had taken her hand. It was through this contact that she felt the extent of the other's anxiety, for the hand holding hers was deathly cold. It was an odd contrast to the heat rising from the water behind her, in the tub.

She pressed the icy fingers in an effort to warm them.

*I hope my hands do not feel the same way,* she thought with a bit of humour. An idea came to her mind and she bit back a grin at it.

*I very much hope too that she is not thinking about Nao-han's frightening remarks earlier on plucking posteriors.*

She looked up at the girl, whose eyes were twitching from one direction to another. She could almost imagine little animal ears coming out of the silky hair and flicking with nervousness. The girl could look so much like a cornered beast when it came to things that frightened her. Yet they obviously intrigued as well, else she would never have approached. Shizuru was convinced of that: of course Natsuki knew where they were headed! Shizuru would never have forced it had she not sensed the curiosity and willing acquiescence in her young woman.

*Natsuki can always escape, was her determination. But only if she really wants to.*

"I shall help you take these off," she said, looking pointedly at the bandages on Natsuki's hand. "Is that all right?"

Gaining permission, Shizuru began to loosen and unwind the linen strips. She willed her own fingers to be steady and not betray the excitement over what was to come. She finished her task quickly and let the linen bandages fall to the floor, not willing to bother with rolling them up properly just yet. Not when she had so much else to do.

"I shall help you undress," she told her bodyguard, keeping her voice as even as possible. "May I do that?"

She felt the younger woman stiffen. There was something pleasantly unsettling about that. It seemed to change the mood, and the change teased out a little of the anxiety in her too.

"Well, Natsuki?"

The girl met her eyes and a tingle came to her lips, which she realised were a little dry. Had she been breathing through her mouth the whole time? That was rather unsubtle. She licked her lips and Natsuki looked away, but not before giving assent.

"All right, then. I shall take this off first."

She reached up for the interlaced leather belts encircling the younger woman's torso, undoing their clasps as carefully as one

performing a sacred ritual. Once the final belt was undone, she reached out, startling Natsuki a little when she slipped a hand around her to loosen the entire piece and slide it off her torso. The device dropped to the floor with a slapping, strap-like sound.

After that, it seemed oddly quiet in the room.

"I shall take this off now," Shizuru said to break the silence, her hands settling on the sash around her companion's hips. Natsuki swayed a little at the touch.

Shizuru's fingers ran lovingly over the sash as she searched for its ends. She found what she was looking for after a few seconds, and pulled them out from the tuck so that she could undo the knot. It was a little to the left side of Natsuki's back, so Shizuru had to reach behind her. The action drew them against each other.

"Umm."

Shizuru stopped at the sound and looked enquiringly at her companion. She forgot some of her own anxiety at the sight of scarlet cheeks, and paused what she was doing. Natsuki dropped her gaze in response and shifted her arms uncomfortably, trying to keep them from brushing the older woman's.

"Put your arms around me," Shizuru told her, understanding. "Rest them on my shoulders."

Natsuki complied, still resolutely avoiding her stare. Shizuru moved forward when she felt the clothed arms finally circle her neck, tentative even then. Their cheeks touched as she bent down a little more, and she continued what she was doing. It took a while for her to finish because the sound of the other's breathing was so close to her ear.

Letting the sash fall to their feet as all the other articles, she moved her fingers next to the trousers. Her hands skimmed the back before moving front, where she found the knotted ends of the drawstring cord. She undid the knot. When this was done, she slid her thumbs underneath the hem of the garment, feeling the arms around her neck tighten in response.

"Natsuki." She drew her head back a little, enough to see that the girl's eyes were closed. "I will take this off now."

Resting her cheek against the burning one again, she slowly began to pull on the garment. When she had widened the waist enough, she pulled it halfway down Natsuki's hips, after which the piece of clothing slid down of its own accord.

It was the furthest she had ever gone in undressing her .

She drew back from the embrace another time-though not enough to fully remove the arms around her neck-and stole a glance downwards. Her eyes greedily skimmed ivory-coloured flesh, trying to take in all they could.

*Gorgeous legs*, she marked, loving the sculptured, trimly muscled look of the slim calves and long thighs. Her view ended where a garment covered the pelvis, a sort of loincloth. She would have that white cloth off, too, sooner or later. But first she wanted to pay homage to those breathtaking limbs brushing her own. How could the girl have hidden them from her for so long? They were breathtaking!

Touching a light kiss to Natsuki's temple, she gently disengaged herself from the embrace, lifting the arms around her neck and placing the palms on her shoulders. Natsuki took the opportunity to open her eyes and looked up at Shizuru with a questioning expression.

Why did she look so frightened?

"I am just going to unlace your boots," Shizuru explained, trailing her fingers over the girl's cheek. "So that you may step out of them, all right?"

Natsuki assented. Shizuru pressed another kiss to the girl's brow, then knelt. The girl's hands stayed on her shoulders, their squeeze trembling and inconstant.

"Would you please step out of the trousers, Natsuki?" she asked, unable to resist curving her palm around one calf. It tensed beneath

her touch, right before the younger woman complied with the request.

"Thank you."

She began unlacing the Otomeian's low boots afterwards. Once she had finished, she looked up again.

"Step out of the boots, please."

She assisted her by holding the boots while the girl lifted her feet from them. After setting the footwear aside, Shizuru eyed the dark socks protecting the Otomeian's feet. They were a contrast to Natsuki's pale skin and she found that fetching. She was almost tempted to leave them on.

*Maybe next time*, she thought, consoling herself by placing a quick kiss on the girl's knee as she peeled off one sock. Natsuki responded with a slightly stronger squeeze on her shoulders, although the sudden tightness of her calves betrayed her growing agitation even more than that act. The older woman smiled, coaxing her to lift her foot so that she could take the sock off.

When Shizuru worked on the other sock, a strange impulse ran through her and she gave in to it unthinkingly. Leaning forward until her head was on the outer side of the girl's leg, she angled her face and kissed the back of Natsuki's knee on its corner. It elicited a sharp gasp as well as a wild clutch of her hair from the younger woman's hands.

*I see*, she marvelled, placing a few more kisses there while ignoring the light tugs on her tresses. *So this is a sensitive spot. How interesting*. Her fingers had already succeeded in rolling the sock to the ankle, and Natsuki only had to lift her foot so that she could slide it off. But she wanted to try something first.

Keeping one hand wrapped around Natsuki's ankle, she braced herself by placing her other hand securely on top of the girl's thigh. She felt it flex in response, and smiled to herself. Then she leaned forward again and, turning her head to the side, licked the back of the girl's knee.

"Nn-!"

She grinned at the cut-off sound, feeling Natsuki's fingers pulling on her hair. She ignored them and pressed forward again, determined to hear that sound one more time. Her tongue flicked quickly against the same spot as before. This time, Natsuki did not cry out again but made up for it by giving several sharp gasps, her legs trembling violently with each stroke. Shizuru was delighted, although she had to admit she sorely wanted to hear a cry instead of just a gasp.

*I will hear it, she decided. At least once more, before I stand up again.*

"Natsuki," she said. "Could you lift your foot just a little for me, please?"

When the younger woman complied, she slipped off the remaining sock and tossed it away. As soon as Natsuki returned her foot to the ground, Shizuru began her assault and gripped the girl's thighs with her hands. She then turned her head to the side, latching her mouth onto the place she had been teasing. Sucking on it voluptuously, she was surprised by the sudden jerk of Natsuki's hand on her hair as well as the spasm that seemed to pass through the girl's limbs. But most of all, it was the sound: a whining, stifled whimper that left Natsuki's throat before the girl could stop it.

*What a sound,* she thought, her breath catching. She deepened her suction on the white flesh and was rewarded with another strained moan. It trailed off unevenly as she alternated sucking with nips of her teeth. The younger woman's legs started to shake with restrained violence. It seemed to Shizuru that the girl was trying to stop both her moans and her shudders but could not-and for some reason, she found that she very much enjoyed that.

She lapped again at the back of the other's knee, savouring the whimpers this provoked.

"Nnh-"

*Oh god, that sound.*

"Nuh-nnh-Shizuru, wuh-wait-"

Her mouth broke away at this broken plea, and she abruptly remembered what she was supposed to be doing.

*So much for finally undressing her completely.*

She sighed mockingly at herself and pressed one last kiss to the young woman's leg before returning to her feet. Her fingers dragged up Natsuki's thighs as she rose, eventually resting on the remaining garment on the Otomeian's hips.

"Forgive me for that digression. I shall continue helping you undress now."

There was no reply. Natsuki's head was bowed as she panted quietly and tried to recover from what had just happened, her eyes shut yet again. Shizuru raised one hand to lift her chin, seeing the true difference in their heights for the first time. It had long been obvious that she was taller, but the varying thicknesses in the soles of the footwear she had been wearing, added to her uncertainty as to the height of Natsuki's boot-heels, had also kept her ignorant as to how much taller she truly was. Now she realised she had about two more inches added to her already significant advantage, and discovered that she liked it-for it meant Natsuki had to tilt her face further back to meet her lips, and it not only exposed the younger woman's wonderful neck but also made her seem more vulnerable. As she seemed to be now, for instance, with Shizuru holding her chin up while kissing her thoroughly.

Sweet, the older woman was thinking as their tongues tangled. Natsuki was always sweet on her mouth. Her other hand was loosening the cloth around the girl's hips already, working it free of its tucks until she felt she could drag it down. They broke their kiss and Natsuki opened her eyes.

*She looks like someone in a trance*, Shizuru noted affectionately, drinking in the sight of the girl's burning face and hazed eyes. The younger woman was still panting, her hands still laced into soft waves of blonde hair. Shizuru watched the green eyes suddenly regain focus when her hand began to pull down the loincloth, a shot

of panic streaking through them.

"Trust me, Natsuki."

Natsuki bit her lip and tried to turn her head away. Shizuru, in a fit of cruelty, refused to let her. The girl winced, the hand under her chin turning her face insistently towards a stare that was the colour of thickening blood.

"You are so beautiful."

Shizuru lifted one of her feet and used it to finish pulling the cloth down the girl's legs. Once this was done, she released Natsuki's chin. Natsuki did the same with the older woman's hair, dropping her hands to her sides as she struggled with a spasm of embarrassment that had her shaking and her legs drawing instinctively together. The Himean watched this for a few seconds, feeling unspeakably moved by the simple sight of the other's defencelessness.

"Natsuki," she said softly, using both hands to hold the younger woman's face. "It's all right, Natsuki. Please look at me."

Taking a step closer so that their near-naked bodies met, she moved one hand to Natsuki's back and began playing with the silky mane of hair, the other hand stroking the girl's sleek head as it buried into the crook of her neck.

*I think I understand, Shizuru ruminated. This is a little disquieting for me too. It is also my first time to be so with another, after all. But she seems to find it so much more frightening. And she seems-no, she really is so young.*

She crooned the younger woman's name, over and over. She could feel the nervous flutter of lips on her neck, hot and pleasant against her skin. And she could feel the rush of Natsuki's bare thighs on hers, which were only partially covered by the toga cloaking her shoulders. She could even feel Natsuki's breasts through the two layers of cloth separating them.

She pulled back. Natsuki was holding on to her, hands clutching at the toga just barely covering her body. She dropped a lingering kiss



on the girl's lips.

"May I take off your shirt?" she asked. "It is the only thing left on you."

There was a pause.

"Natsuki?"

She almost sighed in happiness when Natsuki finally answered with a slow nod.

Her hands went to the front of the younger woman's shirt, skimming lightly over the peaks of the breasts underneath and outlined against the cloth. The hint of what lay taut and waiting under the shirt was incredibly provocative, and she began undoing the fastenings of the garment with painful deliberation, her hands now starting to shake a little from the effort of keeping her excitement under control. Already she could feel that wicked heat and slickness below, at the apex of her legs, where the desire seemed to form a knot twinning the one in her chest.

"There."

She finally unfastened the shirt, releasing it so that it dangled freely on the younger woman's frame. The open front revealed a pale strip of white skin from the collar downwards. She inhaled loudly when she tracked the strip all the way down, past the hips and to the shadowy, mystery-laden place between the girl's legs.

Then her hands were under the shirt, sliding the cloth from Natsuki's shoulders until it fell to the floor. The younger woman's eyes were lidded, her nostrils flaring. Shizuru could see the fine quiver of her lips and even hear the staggered breaths from between them. She studied the girl's face, noting all the indications of fear.

Natsuki looked so undone by her state of defencelessness. And yet she was making no move to cover herself either. Shizuru's eyes slowly dropped, lingering on the slim neck before moving down and taking in the rest of the body she had unwrapped. She felt her breath catch yet again, so overwhelmed by what was happening that

she felt lightheaded. All she could have said, had anyone asked her how Natsuki appeared at the moment, was that the girl was smooth, hairless, and as handsomely put-together as a god. And even those words were inadequate.

*I have marvelled at her face all this time, Shizuru thought, so blasted by the girl's beauty that she actually forgot to bring her slack jaw up . But ye gods, how could I have missed the rest of her for so long? I must marvel all over again!*

After a while of staring, Shizuru finally saw she had let it go on long enough when she glanced at Natsuki's face. The poor girl seemed about ready to burst into flame, judging by the colour of her countenance down to her neck.

"Ah, Natsuki."

Cursing herself for her thoughtlessness, she drew Natsuki into embrace. The toga around her shoulders finally slid to the floor and their breasts slid against each other with a silky feeling that nearly made her reel. Something deep inside her was wrenching, and she inhaled sharply to alleviate it. Trying to ignore the feeling so that they could actually reach the bath, she murmured softly to the woman in her arms and urged her into their tub. Somehow, between her soothing words and caresses, she managed to get them both into the water.

The liquid lapped at their heated flesh without cooling it. Shizuru found herself sitting with her back against one of the short sides, making it possible for her head to rest on the edge. It was the position she favoured most when she bathed. However, for all her words earlier, bathing was far from her mind. Natsuki was straddling her hips, leaning forward with Shizuru's mouth on her neck and pulling at a pulsing vein beneath the skin.

She was making the sounds more and more loudly now.

Shizuru sat up, her hands cupping the other's rear underwater. Her fingers dug into the round flesh, pulling the girl closer until the white breasts were within reach of her mouth. She then abandoned Natsuki's neck and closed her lips over one breast, her tongue

rasping slowly over the hard, honest little peak while her hands continued to massage the girl's behind.

She parted from the girl's breast after a while, giving it one last lick as if trying to imprint its taste on her tongue. Her hands came up from the water and she used one to play with the other breast, drawing lazy arcs around its needy little centre. The other hand began to scan the younger woman's body, slipping up to hold the curve of the waist before coming back down to knead a slender thigh.

"Natsuki, dear Natsuki."

She watched the girl's face, transfixed by its expression. Natsuki's eyelids were pressed tight, the dark brows above them furrowed together as if in pain. Natsuki's mouth hung open too, and sharp pants came through it in puffing, laboured bursts. A quick glance showed that the younger woman's arms were hanging at her sides, the hands clenching and unclenching in the water like those of someone drowning. Shizuru said her name again.

"Touch me," she instructed, smiling hazily at the other's glazed-over expression. "I told you before. You may hold on to me."

She smiled wider when one of the girl's hands came up to her shoulder. The other hand, however, held the side of her face. It left a wet trail on her cheek as it moved further back, the fingers digging into her hair. Shizuru's next words died in her throat as she caught sight of Natsuki's eyes, so intensely fixed upon her that it seemed they were incapable of seeing anything or anyone else.

Natsuki was leaning towards her.

"Natsu..." she began, halting the girl's lips a few inches from her own.

They looked at each other.

"Natsuki, kiss me," she said.

Their lips met so forcefully she tasted blood, but she did not mind. She felt the younger woman's arms circle her neck and replied by

moving one of her own around Natsuki's waist. Her free hand went deeper into the water, landing on a quivering leg. It ran up slowly, and when she found the dark trench that she was looking for, she used one finger to tentatively explore it.

"Uhhnn..."

She smiled when Natsuki broke the kiss to moan, and studied the pained look on the girl's face as she continued the caresses under the water. It seemed to her that the hidden place between Natsuki's legs was even slicker and hotter than the water around them; how curious was that? She stroked that soft flesh again to test it out, and was gratified to hear another sharp sound break free from her girl's mouth.

*How wonderful are the sounds this girl pipes, she thought, staring at Natsuki with unabashed desire. I could listen to them all day. And her face-oh, I could look at her face like this forever.*

She continued her ministrations, enjoying the reactions they provoked from her lover. It was curious, she mused idly, that such tiny movements against that part of the younger woman's sex could cause her to lose all composure this way, her dark hair falling in damp tendrils over her face, and her expression beyond her control. It was curious as well that her hips seemed to be moving of their own accord, dancing lithely each time Shizuru's teasing finger reached a soft little nub within her wetness.

It was curious, too, that for every gasp the girl let out, a dull throb seemed to radiate from between Shizuru's own legs.

Paying careful attention to the young woman straddling her hips, Shizuru used her thumb to begin circling the tiny nub between Natsuki's legs, seeing that it gave the girl pleasure to be touched there. She was delighted by the reaction she got, which was a wild bout of shivers from the girl's body and a thick flurry of pleading moans. She watched with rapt fascination, unable to resist letting out a low groan as well.

*Wicked love!* she thought to herself, panting too. *Is this what it means to be with a woman? To feel as though you could eat her*

*alive or kill either she or yourself in the attempt? I want her to cry out again and I want to make her cry-I want almost to hurt her, though I want to soothe her at the same time. I am become a bundle of Want, of only Desire. I want nothing but her, and I want everything of her. And I am very much afraid that I am beginning to care less and less whether or not she will yield it.*

She gave the nub under her thumb, so alike to a tiny and pulsing heart, a deliberate pinch. A cry rushed past Natsuki's clenched teeth.

*My god, how can anyone ever get enough of this?*

Her free hand came up from Natsuki's waist and clutched at the raven-coloured tresses, yanking them so that the younger woman's head was thrown back to reveal her neck. She closed her mouth over it in a rush, licking and sucking in a frenzy as she felt the girl's shivers grow more violent, her moans even less restrained. Hands tangled in Shizuru's hair.

"Nnn," came the whine, vibrating to Shizuru's lips. "Shizuru, please..."

This was followed by several brokenly whispered words in her language, which Shizuru did not understand. Nevertheless, the Himean understood the desperation in those mumbles enough to know that Natsuki was asking for something more. She knew just what it was.

A flash of alarm entered her mind at the thought, momentarily shunting away the white-hot fog obscuring it. How could she have forgotten about this? She knew that what she was supposed to do next would truly hurt the girl in her arms. That much she had learned from her perusal of erotic texts and from the stories of her friends. What she did not know was how to go about it to minimise the pain. Was there even a way to do that? She should have asked- *whom?* Ye gods, how did one even go about asking that?

Another needy groan jolted her from her deliberations. She looked up at Natsuki, who had somehow taken to pressing short, frantic kisses on her brow.

"Shi-Shizuru," she gasped, obviously reacting to the movements of Shizuru's thumb as it played with her harder. "Ah-ah-I"

Her next moans fell into Shizuru's mouth: the older woman kissed her so slowly, so languorously, that it confused her body for a moment. She strove to match her tongue with the pace of that probing her mouth, striving hard to ignore the faster pace of the finger between her legs that was driving her mad. When she finally fell into the rhythm, Shizuru pulled back from the kiss and essayed a weak smile.

"Natsuki," she said huskily. "It may hurt a little."

A shimmer of confusion showed in the younger woman's eyes, bringing focus to them once again.

"Huh-hurt?" she asked.

Shizuru faltered.

*She does not know, she thought, before answering herself: Of course she does not know! She did not even know how to kiss, and their culture is clearly different in treatment of this matter. Even if she pleaded earlier, it does not mean she knows what shall happen next.*

The Otomeian had probably only been pleading on impulse, not even knowing what it was that she asked for. Shizuru took a deep breath, gathering her wits at this realisation.

*Yet I have gone too far to stop now.*

"If it hurts, hold onto me," she managed to get out, meeting the dusky green eyes. "Do not worry about hurting me. Or tell me if-if you wish me to stop. But I am warning you that it may hurt, so I shall attempt to be gentle."

Natsuki was panting even harder now, her hips still moving seductively against the stroking hand. She did not understand: all she understood was what her body was telling her, in a language it had never spoken before. Shizuru could see in her eyes that she had given over to this language's demands, could no more form the

words to refuse than Shizuru herself could gather strength to resist. The culmination was coming, and it would not be stopped by either of them.

"Is that all right?" the older woman asked nonetheless, moving a finger carefully along the girl's flesh in search of the entrance. When she found it, she rested her finger just outside and asked again, though it was more of a warning. "Natsuki? May I go on?"

Natsuki looked at her distractedly, then moved forward until she had both arms firmly wrapped around the Himean's neck. Her open mouth sucked at an ear, causing the latter to shudder with pleasure.

"I take it that is a Yes," Shizuru sighed, ceasing the motions of her thumb and slowly pushing her finger inside. The lips sucking on her earlobe stopped, and she heard a gasp.

*Hot*, was her first thought, as she entered the girl cautiously. *And like drenched silk*. But then she felt around and came upon the obstruction she had been expecting, and she paused against its tangibility. She would have hesitated longer had she not felt Natsuki's hips move against her, seemingly willing her to finish it. She pulled her finger out, taking a deep breath herself.

Water splashed tauntingly against her chest, and she exhaled.

She put two fingers inside the younger woman, feeling the bit of membrane tear at the same time that Natsuki jerked and let out a choked cry. That cry soon turned into a whimper when Shizuru held her close with one arm, murmuring soft endearments into one blood-flushed ear.

"Shh," she whispered soothingly, feeling the slow protests of the younger woman's muscles both inside and out. "Shh, Natsuki, I'm here. It's all right."

She held her for some time, soothing her as she waited. When she finally felt the muscles constricting on her fingers relax, she kissed Natsuki's ear and slowly began to pull out. It still hurt the girl, she discovered. Even so, Natsuki's complaints were voiced without words, and the girl never once tried to pull away despite her

shudders. It was with a relieved sigh that Shizuru greeted the time when Natsuki finally moaned in a way that indicated she had not made that sound solely out of pain. It prompted her to return her thumb to the tiny nub while thrusting in and out, mindful of the stuttered gasps coming her way. Natsuki's hands clutched at her, however, telling her the hurt had left or would soon be gone.

Before long, she felt the girl rock her hips again, now in time with her slow penetrations. The soft gasps in her ear turned fascinatingly moist. And the flesh around her fingers-the flesh around her fingers was sheer heat, she thought: velvety and tight and clamping on her invasion. She wondered for a moment if she could possibly fit another finger inside the girl. It seemed hardly possible, and yet she wanted to try it, in order to be able to feel more of that warm velvet around her.

"How soft you are inside, Natsuki," she mumbled approvingly, just as she slipped another finger inside; it went in almost of its own accord, she was surprised to see. "How delectably soft."

Natsuki reacted by moaning pathetically, rocking her hips faster against Shizuru's hand as the water lapped agitatedly against the edges of the tub. Shizuru smiled to herself, exploring with her fingers and paying attention to the younger woman's reactions in order to ascertain what gave her the greatest pleasure. After she found out the actions that seemed to do this, she finally began a steady rhythm with her thrusts, pulling and angling her hand up so that she could crush the little nub of flesh with her palm too, since it seemed to please the girl for her to do that. She pulled back a little from the arms around her neck, wanting to see the other woman's face as it contorted with ecstasy.

"Ahh!" Natsuki panted. "Hah-uhn!"

The younger woman bit her lip suddenly, in an effort to stop the sounds from issuing from her mouth. Shizuru saw it and quickly curled her fingers, delighting in the surprised gasp that provoked.

"Let me hear it," she demanded fiercely, her own breathing laboured. "I want to hear it."



Natsuki groaned in response, still attempting to cut off the sounds. Her face was suffused with colour as she bit back another groan, unconsciously shaking her head with embarrassment. Shizuru would have been amused were she not so firmly in the grip of lust by this time, a thwarted auditor and spectator determined to gain access to the full production.

"Let me hear you," she said again, actually a little angry. "Do not keep it from me."

She broke the rhythm once more, this time to add another finger and press against the narrow walls as they spasmed with shock. Natsuki's face twisted, a weak scream coming from her open mouth.

"Yes," Shizuru said with pleasure, staring adoringly at the girl's face. "Like that."

Natsuki kept a steady stream of moans and whimpers coming out now, her body flexing all over in a way that seemed almost as though she were in the death throes. Shizuru steadily heightened the pace. She felt a seeming increase in the wetness around her fingers. Everything, in fact, seemed more deliciously wet than ever before. Their skin, the warm water around them, Natsuki's sex against her hand, and even the place between her legs-all so intoxicatingly slick with heat.

Natsuki's moans were becoming more urgent. Occasionally, they were interrupted by feeble groans said in the girl's native tongue. Shizuru found the groans seductive. She laid a soft kiss on the parted lips near hers, tasting a hint of iron and recognising it as the result of the other's attempts to forestall her cries earlier. With each new sound, she thrust faster and harder, plunging so strongly into the other woman that the water around them seemed to be stirred up by an oceanic current.

"Shi-Shizu-"

She pressed the heel of her palm against the nub she had been rubbing earlier, desperate to hear her name on the girl's lips. The resultant thrash of Natsuki's head after her action whipped a few dark strands of hair onto her face. They stayed to caress her skin,

stuck with mingled water and sweat.

"Would you say my name, Natsuki?" she asked, repeating the motion. Her tongue came out to lick at lips plump from bites and blood. "Say it. Now."

Natsuki gasped before submitting.

"Shizuru," she groaned, lapsing again into incoherent moans and mumbles afterwards. Shizuru could not respond this time, could only watch with the sensation of something burning thick and hot in the centre of her breast. Her entire consciousness was captured by the girl writhing on her lap, her ears tuned only to the sound of her name being adored by a voice squeezed from an instrument she had never played before. This was *song*, she decided, feeling as though it was not her fingers being pulled deeper into the girl. It was more than that, more than the fact that she was not the one being impaled or driven into a sightless rapture. It was herself being pulled in, sinking deeper and deeper into the blind warmth her fingers were torturing and beyond it.

"Shizuru-"

This again, followed by several beseeching words, exotic and heady to the older woman's ear.

"Oh-nnh-Shizuru-!"

Her movements getting even faster, more deliberate, as she willed herself to give the younger woman what had been requested.

"Ahh-ahh-hnn!"

*How intoxicating*, she thought, feeling the insides of the girl getting tighter yet again. It was as though the flesh was eager for her, urging her to take her fingers even further. She complied with its silent request, reaching in and beckoning to Natsuki from within. She heard Natsuki cry.

Then all she knew was the sudden contraction, the tightening walls of flesh and heat- *oh god, what heat* -which was like having one's hand in a furnace without being burned. She groaned as she felt

Natsuki release, face red and hips rocking frenziedly against her hand. The girl was completely undone in that moment, weeping with pleasure, the cries jerked out of her. Shizuru watched as this happened, keeping her hand where it was driven into and against the girl's centre, the fingers still buried inside and resisting the walls trying to collapse inwards.

"My Natsuki," she whispered, entranced by what she could feel happening in the girl. "My dear, beautiful girl. You *are* mine now."

Then there were no longer cries. Only shaky gasps that trailed off into whimpers. Shizuru, for her part, continued to hold her lover close when it was finished. She drew out of the girl only when she felt the contractions on her fingers dwindle away slowly, the soft flesh still pulsing lightly from its ordeal. She saw some of the blood still streaked over her fingernails when she brought her hand out of the water and washed it off. Then she stroked Natsuki's head and waited for her to recover, murmuring praise and encouragement.

"You were wonderful," she whispered. "You were magnificent, Natsuki."

When the younger woman replied by murmuring her name again, she sighed with sheer pleasure. Her hands moved to encircle the lithe, trembling body, drawing the other so close it seemed she was trying to seal their flesh further than it had already been sealed. She kissed the gleaming black hair several times, disturbed by something ticklish in her throat.

*It is true: she is my Natsuki now.*

The girl shifted, still mumbling into the older woman's moist tresses. One of her hands came up to hold Shizuru's cheek, her mouth burning kisses through Shizuru's hair and into her scalp. She continued to whisper unintelligible words afterwards, the only lucid sound in her mumbles being the older woman's name, said again and again with reverence that could be accorded a god.

And Shizuru, receiving this, felt the lump rise again in her throat as she smiled.



## Chapter 22

*Apologies for the delay. And yes, Kanzaki Urumi is borrowed from the anime Great Teacher Onizuka (hence the property of the owners of that series).*

*As ever, a draft.*

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### **Illustrations:**

*There are a few illustrations for the story. Simply check the ethnewinter account on DeviantArt.*

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### **Vocabulaire**

1. **Circenses** - Also known as the games or circuses of Rome, these were given in celebration for particular holidays or in honour of a famous or noble person's achievements or life. They were popular diversions, and were free in that one could attend them without needing to pay entrance fees or anything of the sort, for the games' sponsor (usually some aspiring or known politician) would be the one to foot the bills. Note too that the description of gladiatorial and circus combat here is accurate for the time period: many misunderstand the Romans of the Republic to have enjoyed death in the arena or watching gladiators die, but it would in fact have horrified most of them enough to vomit. The the taste for gore and death in the games was one that arose in the Empire (which is definitely not like Republican Rome).

2. **Cohort** - A military unit equal to six centuries.

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### **Inter Nos**

The march to Argus was marked by general monotony, with the legions going at an efficient pace through level, snow-covered land. The only stops at the outset were those made to set up camp, and it seemed, for a while, that they would reach their destination without incident. On the twelfth day of their progress, however, they came upon a confrontation that necessitated delay.

They were traversing the more rugged section of the road to Argus, and had reached a part that skirted round a high, treacherously stony peak. Here the path was edged on one side by a wall of rock and on the other side by the woods. Prior to this, the road curved around a thick growth of forest that shielded the path up ahead from view, hence the surprise of the marching army at the sight that eventually greeted it.

The advance scouts, of course, were the ones to see it first. Riding back to the army behind them, they relayed their reconnaissance to the Himean commander. Since Shizuru was marching just then with the century immediately after the vanguard, the information did not take long to reach her.

"What do you mean by 'beasts'?" she asked with confusion, blinking at the scout addressing her. "Wild animals, you mean?"

"More like animals that've been captured and got loose, General," the man said, clucking to his nervy horse. It was pawing impatiently at the ground, its sides damp with sweat from the run. "A whole caravan of them. They're the sort you see at the games. Those big cats?"

"Oh! Of course. Those beasts. I see now."

"Merchant party?" the chief primipilus guessed, at her side. "Bet they were on their way to Argus. Where're they from, I wonder? I didn't think this part of the world to have those animals."

"They might have come in from adjoining regions, or perhaps even

come through Argus's ports long past only to be returned now. What were you saying about them?" Shizuru prompted the scout.

He made a grimace.

"Seems they ran into bad luck, General," he told them. "There was a landslide just as they were passing the cliff, and they were too close, much closer to the cliff-side than the wooded end. Some of the wagons turned over and it looks like the cages broke open in the accident." Seeing the change in his superiors' expressions, his frown deepened. "The brutes turned on their keepers-it's a real slaughter down there."

"How bad?" the commander asked.

"All we saw were about five, six people left," was the answer. "Might not last long, that. Badly wounded, all of them, General. Probably a dozen of those big cats free and still going around, chewing on the people down and dead. Hard to tell, though, since some of them keep jumping about and trying to kill the people that're still alive."

He shuddered and appended: "It's a nightmare!"

Shizuru frowned, a faint line appearing between her eyebrows. She paused to look at her bodyguard, mounted on a horse beside her.

"Natsuki," she said. "Do you think your division can handle rounding up those beasts? I shall be sending in some of the legionaries too, but we might need some daos-handlers with us as a precaution. Only a hundred, to be on the safe side. No need to bring all of them."

Natsuki nodded before tilting her head back to the column to ask if she should fetch her subordinates. Shizuru gave her permission.

"Get them ready now and pick those with the most nerve in front of beasts," she instructed. "No horses, though-they might quail. And ask a few of your people to switch to archery duty this time too, as further precaution. I would prefer to get this done with as few casualties as possible."

As an afterthought, she added: "Please tell Hasumi-han or any of

the other non-combatants in my staff to bring my naginata to me post-haste. A weapon with more range might serve me better in this case."

Natsuki galloped off just as Kenji Nakamura came up, his long legs eating up the ground easily as he hurried towards the general. He had been walking with the second cohort in the column, so he was the first of the other legates to reach Shizuru.

"What's going on, General?" he asked, gravelly voice a little rough from the cold. "Why the halt?"

It was Nao who answered. "We've ourselves a rebel menagerie."

"Excuse me?"

They explained the situation to him in terse sentences. He grunted and put a long hand on the hilt of his sword afterwards, lean face grim.

"I wondered why the horses and mules were being edgy," he said to the two women. "They were probably smelling the brutes up ahead."

"We're downwind," Nao noted. "So it's to be expected."

"Ah here it is," Shizuru mumbled, seeing one of the servants coming forward with her favoured weapon. She shot a quick glance to the tall, sinewy legate with her. "At any rate, Kenji-han, send word to the other legates to stay put but alert for the time being."

"I'll send word to Chie-san, first of all."

"Please do. I think she is with the Third Cohort, with Suou-han," she informed him.

"You're going ahead, General? How many legionaries shall you be taking?"

"No more than two centuries," she answered, before looking at the chief primipilus. "Nao-han, I am taking you and your century with me. Kunio-han's as well."



"Prime veterans," Kenji noted, waving over a soldier.

Shizuru met his eyes.

"They shall have to be," she said. "Even I admit this is dangerous work."

He nodded. Meanwhile, she took her polearm from the man who had brought it for her and thanked him. Nao called her attention again as Kenji gave orders to the soldier he had just called over.

"You don't want to kill them, do you?" the primipilus asked, a knowing glint in her eye. "The beasts, I mean."

"If possible," Shizuru replied, driving the end of her naginata into the ground with one blow. It broke the frozen soil, the sheer power of the arm behind it burying a hand's length of the pole. She flung the thick folds of her cape back and turned a thoughtful look to her chief centurion. "Well, you know what I am thinking. Do you think it possible?"

Nao was a trifle smug: "One of my men used to be in that business. He'd know how to do it."

"Perfect!"

"I'll get him," the other offered, before going off into the ranks and shouting out a name. As this was going on, the requested cavalry from the Lupine Division arrived on their horses and began dismounting a few meters away, leaving their chargers in the care of their fellows who were to be left behind. Shizuru saw them and called out to Natsuki. The girl came riding back upon the summons.

"Natsuki," Shizuru said, coming closer and laying a hand on neck of the Otomeian's forbiddingly black horse. "I am going to brief the members of the party as to my instructions in a moment, but please make something clear to your soldiers as of now: we do not aim to slay the rampant animals, unless *absolutely* necessary."

The younger woman's confusion was patent. It was obvious she had thought they were venturing out to kill them.

"I shall explain later," Shizuru said. "But for the time being, just tell them to remember that, all right? It would be best to have their captain give the order explicitly herself."

Natsuki nodded, a little hesitation still lingering in her eyes. Shizuru squeezed the girl's thigh affectionately, which action did not go unnoticed by Kenji and the scout with them. Neither dared to comment on it, however, and Shizuru removed her hand when she saw the chief primipilus returning with one of the soldiers in tow.

"Go on, then," she said to the Otomeian. "Bring them over here, but first, tell them what I told you. I know your troopers, and if we left even just a few of you unchecked, the poor felines will probably be dead in a minute, given how efficiently you dispatch foes. That is *not* our objective and the animals are not our enemies today."

Natsuki rode off again just as Nao arrived bringing another soldier. The man saluted Shizuru.

"So, just what is the objective, General?" Nao said with a knowing smirk. "You want to capture them, right?"

"Yes," Shizuru replied. She bestowed a smile upon the ranker standing next to Nao. "It is for this purpose that we brought you here, Tenma-han. I did not know you used to be in this business, though."

He acknowledged her with a broad grin, pleased that she remembered his name. Well, she remembered nearly everyone's name among her old soldiers. Still, it was nice to count among those.

"Did work for my father when I was young, I did, General," he said readily. "He worked for some traders in the business. Good, clean work, it was."

"I see. Are you knowledgeable enough to help us round these stray ones up without too much difficulty?"

"I believe so, General."

"Then please lend us your assistance. We shall need all the help we

can get."

"Any way I can help, General."

"In that case, please confer with us a moment." She looked up and saw the soldiers from the centuries she had requested already gathering nearby. Well then, let us begin by speaking amongst ourselves, after which we shall give orders to the legionaries. And let us make it quick, if you please. I wish to get there as soon as possible."

After all the necessary details had been worked out, they immediately set out at a march that might have qualified for a half-run, their boots pushing heedlessly through powdery snow that seemed to melt from the heat of their haste. To be sure, part of the value in acting with such speed was accorded to the element of surprise it lent them in most engagements. Once they reached sight of the location this time, however, they found themselves on the receiving end of surprise as well.

It was not that they were unprepared, but rather that they had still been a little unsure of what to expect. Whether it was that the scouts' reports had been understated, or the situation had simply gotten worse during the time they were getting ready, the scene they came upon was still startling: the wrecks of wagons and open cages amidst the landslide's debris, the savaged bodies of oxen and people both, the bright splashes of crimson on strangely pinkish snow. All of this was disturbing enough, certainly, even without those apparitions of Discord and Panic that seemed to lurk amidst the chaos: a medley of gigantic, demon-eyed cats free of leash and collar.

It was a sight that would unnerve any ordinary man. Even these ones-seasoned soldiers all-had to swallow back a good deal of bile at the prospect of what they were about to do. A fair number of them had seen cats of this kind before from the games that were regularly held in Hime, but that seemed somehow distant from this. These animals in the arena, enclosed in a space where one was certain of seeing them but not being reached by their paws, was a far-removed thing from the same beasts in the wild. Strange how their claws suddenly looked a hundred times bigger. And ye gods, *those*

*teeth!*

If these soldiers had not been among the saltiest in Shizuru's army, they might well have recoiled at this point. It was one thing to face down an army of men that outnumbered you three-to-one; it was quite another to face down creatures not at all of your ken. These things belonged to Dis and Diana! As the soldiers Shizuru had were not only veterans, though, but also some of her best, they simply steeled themselves after a moment and fixed their minds on their commander's instructions. It would be no lie to say that some of them fixed their eyes on the sight of the general's calm face as well, which helped their humming nerves. The commander's countenance, after all, seemed to hardly change even as she looked upon the scene. In fact, her smile even seemed to widen. Now there was a cheering sight! Many a legionary clung to it and endeavoured to imitate it as well, finding the thought of failing her more distasteful than potential disembowelling by a wild animal.

Shizuru knew this, of course. These were things one had to be conscious of if one was a leader. If her soldiers were disturbed, then it was up to her to be at ease-on the outside, anyway. On the inside, nothing prevented her from actually being disturbed as well. But she knew that she could not very well show it. She simply followed the dictum: grimace within and smile without. At the moment, she was doing just that while surveying the field.

*What a fine mess we have here*, she thought, eyeing the pouncing beasts with a fair bit of reluctance. *Thank goodness we have seen those before, even if only in the arena and exhibitions. Otherwise, it would be so much easier to fall prey to the fear.* All the same, there was still something about the animals that was terribly intimidating in their freedom. There was something nightmarish in their yellow eyes and coats. And good god-was that a perfectly black one over there, jumping atop that cage?

A hand brushed softly against her arm, and she caught a flash of blue-black at the corner of her eye. It was Natsuki, quirking an eyebrow at her with such perfect nonchalance it was ridiculous. Shizuru had to smirk at the younger woman's unfazed attitude, perceiving that unlike her, the girl truly was not frightened of the cats. Standing next to that, she could hardly show hesitation herself

now, could she?

She signalled for the soldiers to assume formation and they moved up. Her jaw clenched when the first cat to notice them roared, its blood-stained maw a gory promise. She saw the shields before her go up. Her own fingers tightened around the naginata on instinct and she realised she had forgotten to bandage her hands against the roughness of her pole-arm in winter.

*Not that it matters*, she thought dryly, shaking her head at herself. *Bandage my hands indeed!*

That really was such a trivial thing. Amazing how this always happened to her: she would pick up on the most trivial things when about to enter battle. Like the scent in the air, for instance. She sniffed now and found the odour she had come to know so well in combat, the one that left a metallic taste on the back of one's tongue. It seemed different today, though. Why was that?

The formation began to spread, the soldiers orienting themselves in relation to the targets. Shizuru watched silently and nodded at those who shot glances at the rear towards her. She shouldered her naginata momentarily, affecting a relaxed pose to show them that there was no need to worry. Her lips turned up into a faint smile once again.

*Really not the same*, she was telling herself, scenting the air again. *What is it? It does not smell as it usually does, like the other battles.*

She caught herself as a notion occurred to her. Yes, that was it, was it not? That was why it smelled different, she thought. What she was smelling was not the scent of battle at all.

It was the scent of predation .

It was a fearsome scent, a different one. The sort that could bring a hard-bitten veteran of the battlefield scurrying behind the lines. But she did not let it trouble her more than a moment after recognising it, if indeed she let it trouble her at all. For one thing, she had no time to be troubled. Besides which, it simply ill befitted her to let such a thing put her off-balance.

*It should not trouble me*, she told herself, with that bone-hard determination that she employed when facing an opponent, whether on the battlefield or in Senate. *It cannot trouble me. I am a predator too.*

She looked up to find that the cat nearest to them-some kind of leopard, she guessed-had begun to approach, jaw dripping blood. The soldiers before her tensed yet again, their stances becoming more definite now. Shizuru could practically taste the anticipation coming from both them and the animal.

And now she could taste her own, too.

*My apologies to you, Fellow Predator*, she said silently to the enormous feline, with an almost giddy smirk playing on her mouth. *But I intend to catch you in my coils.*

There was a bloodcurdling roar and the beast charged.

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The rounding up of the errant animals took time but was largely successful, with no significant casualties among the soldiers and only two of the escaped cats slain in the process. These were killed only because they had been too belligerent to subdue and return to their cages or put on leashes-which was done to the others, after all the necessary repairs had been carried out. While this was being done, the rest of the legionaries tended to other concerns, among them the setting aside of the dead. In their short-lived rampage, the beasts had slain perhaps two dozen of their keepers, and left none alive on the field.

"I don't think it's just these, though," the primipilus ventured to Shizuru later, as the two of them oversaw their subordinates tidying up and pushing the last beasts into the repaired cages. "The other people probably ran off into the forest as soon as those things got out. The ones who didn't get caught in the landslide themselves, I mean."

"Yes, I suppose so. There should be more persons here, I think."

"Should we send someone to look for the poor bastards?"

A soft cough interrupted them. It was from the general's bodyguard.

"Yes, Natsuki?" Shizuru said, inviting her to speak. "Is there something you would like to tell us?"

Natsuki nodded slowly, the short flick of her eyes in Nao's direction showing her reluctance to say something before the primipilus. All the same, she went on to answer her general.

"Futile," she said quietly to the two women looking at her. "To look for them."

"Why? What do you mean it's futile?" Nao asked, her eyebrows knotting lightly into a grimace. She did this not out of irritation for the girl's speaking against her idea but in order to beat back the grin that was threatening to break out on her face. It was entertaining to finally have the Sphinx talk to her, after all.

"If the lookouts have not seen them now, it is futile," Natsuki went on, her face impassive. "All you find will be blood tracks."

She tilted her head towards the trees and added, by way of explanation: "Smell. Listen."

The two Himeans exchanged glances, baffled.

"I am not entirely sure what we should be sensing, I fear," Shizuru confessed.

"The smell of blood," the girl explained. "The sound of wolves."

Again two Himeans looked at each other, this time in comprehension.

"Good point," Nao said. "Damned near forgot about that. They're probably circling round as we speak. You say you heard them, Girl? I didn't hear any howls."

"No howls," Natsuki returned. "But the barks."

She clarified, after a few seconds: "Of the hunt."

Shizuru smiled wryly.

"I see," she said. "It is strange, though, that we have not seen any come out of the trees and join in this skirmish. None were here even before we arrived. You would think that they would at least dare to approach once the cats were subdued. I have seen wolves be daring enough to approach a band of men and try to tear off scraps from men's kills."

Natsuki shook her head.

"Some of my men... they are in the woods," she told them. "They circle us."

Both Himeans looked faintly surprised.

"You mean that aside from the lookouts we posted, we actually have a circumference of the Lupine Division's members around us now?" Shizuru asked. "In the forest?"

The dark-haired woman nodded.

"I thought-" she began, before seeming to change what she was about to say. "I ordered. As a, an, umm."

Here she paused and appeared to search for a word. It took a few seconds before she was able to produce it, but both her listeners waited patiently for her to do so, understanding the difficulties of the language barrier.

"As a precaution," she finally continued. "Because there are many wolves. Interruptions, I thought."

She bowed her head slightly afterwards, as if apologising for having given such a command without informing the commander of it first. For all that though, Shizuru looked far from delivering a reprimand.

"Indeed," she said, smiling at the young woman.

The primipilus glanced at both of them and grinned. She flicked out



her cloak from where it was thrown over her shoulder and it fell like a red banner behind her, flapping against her legs. Sharp green eyes met limpid ones as she spared Natsuki another look.

"It was good thinking, Girl," she said crisply to the Otomeian. "I'm going over there to speed them up, General. Best get this over with as soon as possible."

"Of course," Shizuru replied. "I leave it to you, Nao-han."

"All right."

She left and Shizuru watched her trudge away before returning her own attention to Natsuki.

"She meant it, you know. It was very well done."

The girl turned her head a little to the side and peeked at the fair-haired woman from the corner of an eye. The sound she made was noncommittal.

"If you are worried about not having awaited my order, let it not trouble you," Shizuru went on. "Any general would only be too happy to have officers in her army that know well enough what command to give to the rankers without having to be told. It is commendable."

Another soft mumble, a shy drop of black lashes. Shizuru tried to suppress her amusement at her companion's continuing diffidence.

"Just so it is clear, Natsuki, since it seems not to be," she said with a smirk, "I am actually praising you."

This failed to produce a mumble, though it did elicit a blush-a reaction perfectly satisfactory to the older woman. She put a hand on the girl's shoulder and looked pointedly at the remains of the hapless convoy that had been carrying the beasts. There were some soldiers going through the clutter and trying to see what could be looted from it, or perhaps repaired for reuse.

"Now then, come," Shizuru invited, tilting her head to that direction. "Walk with me."

The younger woman assented. Then they set off at a slow pace, their bodies close to each other and occasionally brushing.

"Such an unfortunate accident," Shizuru told her. "So many dead. Look at this."

She frowned slightly at the mangled remains of two of the merchant party's oxen.

"And the people, too. No survivors found yet, yes?"

The girl shook her head.

"A pity. All the same, perhaps I am not in the best position to complain," Shizuru continued. "All the pity in the world does not change the fact that this is a stroke of good fortune for us."

Her boot crunched on a piece of debris as she gave a dry smile.

"I wonder if I should feel guilty about that," she told her companion.

"Good fortune?" Natsuki echoed. "For us?"

"Yes." They picked their way carefully over a tangle of ruined tents. "Because of the booty this has yielded. Do you realise it now? It is not just those little trinkets and provisions the soldiers were able to salvage, you know. There is something more valuable than that here."

"Is it," Natsuki said uncertainly, "the animals?"

"Yes, the animals. Hence our going through so much trouble simply to capture them and return them to their cages. You wondered about it earlier, did you not?"

"Yes."

"It is for their value, you see," Shizuru explained. "This trading party, from what we can make of it, seems to have been headed for Argus. Well, I would not be surprised, as I said earlier, if the beasts or their forebears had originally entered this land by way of Argus. They might have been reared here for some noble's or showman's

purposes before being sent south again to be sold. Those things are actually worth quite a lot of money, Natsuki."

She nodded at Natsuki's expression.

"They would probably have sold the animals to some contractor headed towards Hime," she continued. "Where the creatures would then be used for the games. Are you familiar with our games? Some call them the *circenses*."

The dark-haired woman shook her head.

"We hold the games for entertainment," Shizuru told her. "They are free and usually given by the State or some member of the First Class. Their purpose is to entertain the populace on holidays or festivals, or perhaps to commemorate a certain event or person. The greatest games are often held in the larger arenas, such is their popularity."

She paused to walk around one of the corpses that had yet to be set aside. Natsuki did the same.

"During the games, there are staged events such as chariot races and fights," Shizuru resumed. "The fights are often between professional warriors whom we call gladiators. Sometimes, however, there is something more spectacular: fights between warriors and beasts."

She quirked an eyebrow at her companion.

"That is where the animals we have captured come in," she went on. "They are introduced into fights or other spectacles. I have even seen one ridiculous game where they once tried to have them pull chariots. All the chariots with lions lost."

Natsuki seemed astonished: "I thought lions were fast."

Shizuru burst into laughter: "They are, but only when it suits them. Imposing-looking animals, but apparently terrifically lazy ones too. Either that or it simply did not sit well with them to do something as lacking in dignity as wearing yoke. They just plopped down on the sand and sat out the race."

The girl was intrigued.

"They do not kill them?" she asked. "The animals?"

Shizuru frowned at the thought.

"Ye gods, no!" she answered. "That would be the height of stupidity, Child. Just as the gladiators in our games do not actually kill each other in their fights, the animals are not killed and are typically not permitted to kill either. It is a show, a game, a spectacle of theatre. Not a publicly attended bloodbath. There may be exceptions, but those are not popular."

"Besides," she added after that, "you need only think about it in terms of economic investment, Natsuki. Gladiators cost money to train, and a great deal of effort. The same goes for beasts, which may cost even more when they are more exotic. Would you really waste everything you have spent into producing such a creature by killing it for a single event? Perhaps if the event were well-attended enough, significant enough, and actually *made* enough to cover the capital-but our games are not ones that charge attendance. People do not pay to watch them: they are invited to it. Besides which, I assure you that nearly all the spectators would flee and retch their bellies out if they were treated to some gory fight where both men and beasts were free to truly rip into and kill each other. Himean civilians do not enjoy that sort of grisly fare for their entertainments. Death in the circus arena would disgust them."

Natsuki's lips parted slightly in comprehension. She turned her eyes away and Shizuru followed her gaze to the body of one of the cats that had been slain. It was the one that had caught her eye earlier: a most unusual specimen of feline with a coat of pure blue-black. It was impossible not to admire, the older woman thought, the way its Stygian-hued fur shimmered in the light. A magnificent creature. Or it had been once.

Something came to mind and she recited it in a whisper.

"Death can find nothing to expose in he who is not beautiful."

She smiled shortly at the girl beside her, halting her steps and

peering at the black beast's body more closely. Surely there was something blasphemous in having slain such a noble creature? It could not be helped, of course, since it had been so violent earlier. It was still a shame. It was a little like shooting down an eagle-which one simply did not do.

*Then again, perhaps it is better for it to die here*, she reasoned out to herself. Otherwise, it would have had to suffer the disgrace of being paraded before hundreds of jeering people in an arena. Something worse in that. Something terribly insulting...

"Ah!"

She snapped out of her reverie at Natsuki's exclamation and watched the girl run over to the cat's corpse. Natsuki stopped a few feet away from it and Shizuru wondered what she had found.

"Natsuki," she called, taking a few steps closer. "What is it? Did you find something?"

The girl nodded curtly, not even bothering to spare her a glance. Her attention seemed to be focused on something on the ground, behind the fallen beast's corpse, and Shizuru followed her gaze to it.

She gasped too.

Natsuki bent her knees to squat. Her hands were held open, arms outstretched before her invitingly. Shizuru fell silent, watching as the younger woman began to make soft cooing sounds in her native tongue.

*Strange that we did notice this until now*, Shizuru was thinking, staring at the object of her bodyguard's attention. *Typical of Natsuki too, to be the one to find it.*

"It" was crouching next to the panther's body: a small cub, which the general took to be the offspring of the dead cat since it was of the same midnight colouring. It was wedged against its parent's flank-perhaps in search of warmth, she thought-and was now regarding the Otomeian woman beckoning to it with faint reserve, its furry head tilting this way and that. The smaller version of the big animal,

she decided, was absolutely delightful. She wanted to go coo to it herself.

*I wonder that she does not just go ahead and pick it up, she thought, returning her fond attention to her bodyguard. I certainly would be tempted to, were I the one there. But I suppose that would be too forward-she probably does not wish to rush it. How like her that is as well! And is there not something amusing in this, perhaps, in the fact that I am watching my personal panther coax another her arms? Yet they are still both cubs.*

Natsuki looked like a child to her, squatting that way. The younger woman's face was also loosened into a rare display of delight, which strengthened the impression; even her cheeks seemed to have the rosy blush of a child's pleasure. She must like animals, thought Shizuru. Perhaps the girl wanted a pet? Most children wanted that, did they not? If so, why not get her one? It could amuse her a little, at the very least, and perhaps keep her from getting lonely-though only when Shizuru herself was not there to fulfil that function. Yes, it seemed a good idea. Children should have pets. She could get her Natsuki a pet.

Shizuru caught herself and sighed. She was beginning to sound like the girl's mother.

*Not that that's such a horrid thing, a voice in her head told her. You can be her mother too, since she was hardly able to have one. And her sister. And her lover.*

That succession of ideas sent a light flush of warmth through her. Why did that sound as though she was thinking of starting a family? The same answer from before came to mind, and instead of letting the voice in her head speak it, she murmured it herself.

"Not that that would be such a horrid thing, either," she whispered, misting the air.

"Shizuru. Shizuru."

The calls brought her out of her thoughts and returned her attention to the present scene: the cub had gone out of hiding and was now in

her companion's arms. The younger woman's face was a study of glee, and Shizuru herself let out an involuntary laugh at the sight. To be sure, one reason for her laugh was her sympathy with Natsuki's pleasure-but another reason was her amusement at the picture the two dark-haired creatures before her presented.

*It looks like a reunion between lost kin.*

She chuckled again as Natsuki came nearer with the animal still in her arms, cradling it protectively to her chest. Shizuru looked curiously at the feline her bodyguard was holding, noting that it was actually a little larger than she had thought, though still small when compared to its parent. It was roughly the same size as a large house cat, though its paws were promisingly bigger.

"Poor little thing," she murmured with a click of her tongue. "Orphaned already at this age. And this would be partly my fault, too."

"No," Natsuki said.

"No?"

The girl nodded absentmindedly, still engrossed in the cub. She tickled one of its ears and it snorted, purring lightly while nuzzling into her chest. The young woman all but chortled.

"Quite a charming critter, it seems," Shizuru remarked, entertained by the animal as well. She reached out to pet the furry head and laughed when it mewled at her attentions. A soft black paw, claws sheathed, played with her hand.

Natsuki giggled.

"Yes, quite charming indeed," the general said after a while, her eyes on the other woman. "Would you like to keep it, Natsuki?"

Natsuki turned a startled look towards her.

"Its mother is dead," Shizuru went on, stroking the creature's head again. "It may be a little difficult to find a surrogate among the remaining animals, you know, particularly since I cannot recall

seeing another of its kind among them. If you wish to keep it, I do not see a reason for you not to. Otherwise, it would be sold with the others when we get to Argus, and it may simply end up being used for Hime's games."

She met the intelligent green eyes, seeing the revulsion at the idea already there.

"Chained and collared. Would that not be a worse end for it, after all?" she concluded.

Anticipation flashed in the girl's expression before being overtaken by a slight hesitance.

"But," she mumbled, brows slanting. "But, um."

"But what?"

"It..." The younger woman paused, looking crestfallen all of a sudden. "I do not know how."

Shizuru shrugged that away.

"If you are not sure how to take care of it, we can ask someone else how to do so." She paused, recalling the soldier from Nao's century who had instructed them as to how to round up the beasts. "Tenma-han might know. It is no matter if we have to ask for a little help. I shall do it for you if you like. He has surely taken care of dozens of these creatures in his youth. One lost little animal would be easy."

Natsuki cocked her head to the side in a manner that made her look much like a lost little animal herself. The general bit back a chuckle.

"But, Shizuru," Natsuki said again, with a hint of an unconscious plea in her voice. "A pet is work too. I have my work...?"

"If you are concerned about having to take care of it while watching over me, let it not trouble you," the older woman said to this objection, knowing the other was about to give in. "I am also going to have some of my servants help you. It would make it easier for all of us."



The girl was really far too shy, even when she had no need to be. *Reluctant even when wanting something.* It was a curious attitude, if somewhat endearing. It made one wonder how they had raised her at that cold-if-beautiful mountain citadel. What kind of childhood must she have had, to make her like this? Shizuru wished she could have been there to see it, so that she could have showered her with gifts and accustomed her to the simple happiness of receiving favours, at least. Surely her Natsuki deserved to be spoiled.

"It is no matter if we ask some of my servants to watch over it when you are busy," she told the girl. "Or we could put it in a cage when necessary."

Reluctance crossed Natsuki's face, her eyes darkening.

"A *cage*," she murmured, obviously disliking the idea. Shizuru hastened to explain, realising belatedly that it was in the younger woman's character to bridle at such a notion.

"Only for its safety and only when no one can monitor it," she said. "We do not want it to stray too far, after all, lest it befall some misfortune. It is only when you are busy with other things. Otherwise, you may keep it with you. Perhaps you might even keep it in your knapsack as we march, you know, though it shall probably not fit there any more once a month goes by. These things actually grow fast, do they not?"

"I... I think so."

"At any rate, think of it as an overgrown kitten or something."

The other smirked.

"It is actually an entertaining idea, so I daresay I would like you to say yes," Shizuru admitted, cocking an eyebrow. "To have such a creature for a pet is novel, to put it mildly. Why not do it? I shall help you, I promise."

Natsuki nodded slowly, looking down at the ball of dark fluff in her arms. It chose that moment to yawn, showing a handsome set of fangs and a curling, pink tongue. The two women laughed, giving it

a mild start.

"Keep it," Shizuru said again, adding a second later: "If you do not, I certainly shall. Would you rather not own it yourself, though?"

The girl nodded once more.

"So you shall keep it after all?"

She received a faintly timid but expectant look in reply. Hiding her smile, she waited for Natsuki to talk.

"I may," Natsuki finally said, in her low voice. "Really?"

"Have I not been saying so all this time?" Shizuru told her, amused. "Yes, of course."

"Ah."

"So once again: are you keeping it?"

A determined nod: "Mm-hm!"

The general's hand came out, but instead of reaching for the cub's head, it went towards Natsuki's and petted hers instead.

"There's a good girl," she said.

Later, they found out that the cub was female and named it accordingly. Their dialogue about the determination of its sex was immensely entertaining to Shizuru as well, as she used that opportunity to tease the girl a little. When Natsuki stated conclusively that she had known it was female before Tenma confirmed it, Shizuru asked her how she knew it was so.

"I looked," was the glib answer.

"Where?"

A pause.

"Between the legs," said the girl.

"Ah. And what did you look at?"

A longer pause.

"Um," was the answer.

"Um?"

"That."

"That?"

Here Natsuki nodded so earnestly that the Himean nearly gave herself away with a giggle. Instead, she feigned curiosity.

"So by looking at 'that', you can actually tell?" she asked with mock seriousness.

"Yes."

"How interesting! And if it were male, what would you see there?"

There followed an extremely long pause, which ended only when Natsuki took Shizuru's hand, led the older woman to her stallion, and pointed out the animal's genitals. Shizuru burst out laughing.

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"Suou-san."

Suou turned her head to see the *praefectus* coming towards her, his frail body swaddled in a cloak so large he seemed in danger of drowning in it. She waved him over to the boulder she had chosen as her perch, smiling a welcome that she hoped could warm the poor man even just a little.

"Taking a moonlight stroll, Takumi-san?" she asked, making a show of glancing surreptitiously at the shadowy foliage behind him. "I don't see Akira-san but I suppose that's regular, hm?"

He grinned, huffing dense clouds into the air as he finally reached her.

"Not really," he said, chattering. "Although some people seem to think it, she doesn't actually make a point of sneaking around in the dark."

"Ah, indeed, she doesn't seem the type to do that," Suou replied with a light smirk, guessing that the *praefectus* had missed the implication in the phrase he had employed. "But why are you here? It's rather too cold for people to be out. I myself am only out here since I wanted a breath of fresh air and my tent was getting stuffy."

"I was looking for Akira, actually," he confessed. "But now that you mention it, it's too cold. It might have been better for me to wait inside the tent, but..." He stopped here and looked up at the dark sky. "I have to admit I was getting bored in there too."

Suou smiled and shifted her seat, making space on the boulder.

"You are welcome to join me," she said. "Maybe you will see her when she passes by, or vice versa."

He smiled in return and took up the offered seat, leaving a polite but friendly arm's width between them. His hands tugged at his wrap, and he pulled it more securely about him. He was a little startled when he found a brass cup suddenly before his face, the smell of liquor rising heavily from it.

"Please have some," she said genially. "It is the best remedy for frigid nights such as these."

"Ah, thank you." He took the offered object and drank from it. His eyes widened after he swallowed, a trail of liquid fire searing all the way from his throat to his gut. " *Edepol*, that's strong!"

Suou took back the cup, and he fancied he heard her chuckle as if to herself.

"Do forgive me," she apologised. "I forgot that this was taken from the centurion's decanter and not mine. Otherwise, it would have been watered."

"No, it's fine," he said, with a laugh. "It's to be expected of Yuukisan, I guess. I was a little surprised to think it would be from you."

"Oh?"

"You didn't strike me as the hard liquor type."

"Ah." She took a drink from the cup. "I don't really mind it, though."

There was a rumble a little way off from them and they both turned to look in that direction: it was coming from one of the heavily covered cages in the wagons, which were sitting next to fires being tended by the rankers.

"It seems one of our furry friends is grumbling about the cold as well," Suou noted. "I wonder if I should go over there and offer him wine too."

Takumi chuckled. "Maybe it would be better to offer milk."

"So they say-for small cats. I wonder if it applies to big ones as well." She looked, from what he could make out of her face in the dimness, very thoughtful. "This is a nice little windfall we have here, mm?"

"Do you mean our 'furry friends', Suou-san?"

"Yes," she replied. "Granted, it's also a bit more trouble, but well worth it, I think."

"Oh, of course. I can't argue with your perception of it as being troublesome too, what with having to redistribute the oxen and horses among the added wagons and weight and all that-but I assure you it's truly worth more than the trouble it gives us," he said with certainty. A smile came to his face as the now-caged felines turned into numbers in his head, their bright yellow coats falling away in a shower of gold coins. "They'll fetch a pretty price, each one of them."

"Especially with the new year coming on," she answered, thinking of the festivals that were approaching in their homeland. More festivals meant more games, and naturally, higher going rates for the animals they were carrying. "Pity I shan't be there to see all the events. They're always good fun."

"A little homesick?" he asked pleasantly.

"Not really. It's entertaining here as well. You?"

"The same. With everything that's happened and is happening to us well, let's just say I can't help but think that Chie-san is having the time of her life setting it all down."

"Ah yes, we do have it all," she said with a hint of mischief. "The enigmatic main character, the dashing cast, the heart-stopping battles, the threat of politics from faraway lands nipping at our jaunty tails."

She added as he laughed: "And leave us not forget the not-so-illicit romance, of course."

"Romance between?" he asked, for all that he already knew the answer.

She merely gave him a slow, rather sly smile in reply. He lifted his eyebrows and looked away, perhaps a little sheepishly.

"Oh, I just recalled," she said suddenly. "You do know that Shizuru-san has decided to keep one of the felines, yes?"

"Oh, yes, I know," he said, fully aware that they had not so much changed the subject as begun to work around it. "The black cub, was it? Unusual animal."

"Yes. The pet gets a pet."

"I'm sorry?"

"You do know she gave the creature to Natsuki-san."

He nodded, then let loose a chuckle.

"I see," he said. "Oh, that's good, Suou-san."

"Thank you," she said, before drawling: "Shizuru-san is fond of taking in exotic creatures, methinks."

"Well, I suppose. You have seen it, by the way?" he asked. "The cub?"

"Yes. Pretty little critter, I thought, though it will probably turn out to be frightening when it grows," she replied, with a twinkle of her arctic eyes. "For now, though, it's adorable. As is the name."

"So it has a name already? What is it?"

"Shizuki."

"Oh- *oh* ." His eyebrows went up to his hairline, and she knew it was not wasted on him that the name she had supplied was a contraction of two others. "That's a fine name."

"I think so," she grinned. "Shizuru-san is the one who named it. Or so I gathered."

"Well, she has good naming sense, then."

She looked at him, amused by the care he took with his reactions. A different kind of care from the one that her sister or Shizuru took, of course-the kind of care that was perfectly obvious as care. It was so typical of the Tokiha, she thought, and she liked that.

When it became apparent that he was not going to say any more, she set the cup they had been drinking from onto the ground, then lifted her arms to stretch. It was with a little surprise that she halted upon hearing Takumi address a question to her that she had not really expected from him.

"Could you be worried about it too, Suou-san?"

The fair brows lifted elegantly, a perfect imitation of her older sister.

"Worried?" she echoed. "About our general, Takumi-san?"

He nodded, his usually open expression suddenly shading over with something that bordered on concern. She took a moment to consider him, and then turned her eyes forward once again.

"I'm hardly worried," she said expressionlessly. "As is obvious from

this recent engagement, it has not dulled her abilities in any way whatsoever. Or so I think, from what I've seen of her skills thus far. I am a first-timer under her command, after all."

"Me too," he said quietly, smiling. "But that wasn't exactly what I meant by being worried."

Suou returned his smile with her own; of course she knew what he meant.

"It's rather too early to think of that yet," she said to him. "We have not even started our real campaign yet, Takumi-san. All of us, I daresay, will be staying here for quite a while longer. Time enough, would you not say so?"

"Yes, that's so," he replied, looking embarrassed. "Still, I can't help but think about it."

He chuckled self-effacingly and admitted: "Akira says I'm such a worrywart, Suou-san. I guess she's right after all."

"Which is hardly a bad thing. It's in your character to be concerned for others, and often within reason." She took a long, slow breath. "So if I may judge correctly from your concerns, you actually are of the opinion that it has progressed far enough to be of moment that way, Takumi-san?"

He sounded assent: "Or am I wrong, Suou-san?"

She said nothing and shrugged. He looked away just as she spoke up again.

"Others have been talking about it too, to be sure," she told him.

"Others... oh. You mean the legionaries?"

"Yes. This is really too choice a titbit to restrict to the officers, after all."

"That's true, though I thought it would stay a rumour among the rankers for a little longer." He peered at her. "You *do* mean they're talking about it with-with certainty, don't you?"



She smirked and drawled in reply: "All the certainty they needed was to pass near the general's tent at night and strain their ears a little, my good man."

"O-oh." He coloured in a way that was visible even in the weak light. "I see."

"As does everyone else, no doubt," she said. "The rumours of the fight between her and Takeda in Sosia, the gossip about that dagger she gave to the girl, and now the cub's name-add to all that the interaction between them, and it's all rather too glaring to miss. And I'm sure you're not the only one worried about this, Takumi-san, though I myself see little to be concerned about. Do you really think it would still be a problem, when the time for us to return to Hime arrives?"

"Do you mean, perhaps: 'many things can happen along the way'?"

"No, not really. Rather, let us simply say that Shizuru-san hardly seems the type to waver once she's made up her mind about something... and she seems to have made up her mind about that girl, if I'm any judge."

He took a while to reply, and she felt her lips pull up into a smile upon his retort.

"But we're not exactly talking about the mind, are we, Suou-san?"

She let out an appreciative giggle and he went on.

"The truth of it is that I agree with you when you say Shizuru-san isn't the kind to waver once she's made up her mind," he explained. "And that's what makes me concerned. I'm sure you probably know her better than I do, Suou-san, so perhaps you'll tell me if I'm right or wrong... but my impression is that Shizuru-san has, well, *great ambitions*. Whether it's simply the consulship she wishes to achieve or more than that, I can't tell, but either way she's still the sort of woman who has many desires her mind has long been made up on. Wouldn't you agree?"

The chilly eyes were fixed upon him with interest, and she nodded to

show she agreed with him. He turned his gaze to the darkness before them and continued.

"Assuming, then, that she has made up her mind about-about Natsuki-san as well, I can't help but worry about which of these decisions will lose." He sounded a little sad now, and Suou noted the lack of effort put into masking the emotion. "I'm sure you see it, Suou-san-they're contradictory. If your sister went through so much difficulty just by being with someone of a remote social class, imagine what Shizuru-san would go through if she did decide to keep carrying on with Natsuki-san this way. Or even once this is all over."

"Still, perhaps my sister's relative success in her case might be cause for optimism?" Suou ventured, thoroughly enjoying his well-meaning candour.

He twisted his mouth into a doubtful smile in reply, and she grinned back.

"But it's a very different set of circumstances, if you'll forgive me for saying so," he rebutted. "The reason Himemiya-san was able to go on with her career was due to sheer clout and because Himeko-san is still, no matter the baseness of her social status, if you'll please excuse me for putting it that way, a Himean. But even if Shizuru-san has clout as well, she has many more enemies, I think, than your sister. Added to which is the inescapable fact that Natsuki-san is an Otomeian, a foreigner. And to most Himeans..."

She continued what he would not say.

"Even a foreign king, so they say," she said, "is less than even the lowest Himean."

He sighed deeply.

"Don't get me wrong, please," he told her. "I'm glad that Shizuru-san met her. She seems so much more animated, much happier now than ever before! I've never seen Shizuru-san like this. I think I'd prefer her to be this way from now on."

"As would I," Suou said.

"But I wonder, can having this mark on her record really serve her considering what she wants and where she has the potential to go? It can't do much good for her ambitions, even if it seems to do good for her spirit."

"What you've said is all true and reasonable," Suou said quietly. "It's true that whatever happens from now on, Shizuru-san will be going through a good deal of trouble over and as a result of this matter. Yet, Takumi-san, perhaps you'll allow me to say that you've misjudged something by a small, but still relevant margin."

"What is it, Suou-san?"

"Shizuru-san is a far more ambitious woman than you think."

He turned towards her, confused. She merely smiled at him and picked up the cup they had been using from the ground, getting to her feet and dusting off the seat of her tunic.

"It's getting too chilly," she said cheerfully. "Don't you want to go in now and cut this conversation short for the moment? I'm sure Akira-san would be displeased if she found out you spent the night out in the cold, just waiting for her. She might find it rather imprudent,."

He got up gingerly, nodding.

"Yes," he said. "That's true."

"Well then, shall we be off?"

"Yes, of course."

They had taken no more than three steps when he looked at her again, a question in his eyes.

"When you say 'ambitious', Suou-san," he prompted, looking consumed by interest. "What is it that you mean?"

She grinned and kept walking but slowed her pace so that he could keep up with her longer strides.

"Suffice it to say that I think that true ambition, Takumi-san," she told him, "doesn't feel compelled to choose between alternatives. Perhaps it might not even recognise the word 'alternative'."

"Then," he said curiously, "do you think she would-"

"I think she would do as she wishes," was Suou's answer, cutting him off. "Because she is a truly ambitious creature, after all."

Takumi squinted and looked thoughtful, but said no more. She did the same, though her expression was considerably more difficult to read than his, as her languid mask was on yet again. It was in this way that they left for their respective tents, walking silently in the snow. Even with their silence, though, the two still failed to hear the rustle from behind them, where a darkly clad figure emerged from behind the shadows they had just left.

# Chapter 23

## Vocabulaire:

1. **Address in the Senate** - In the Himean (as in the Roman) Senate, the proper form of address during a meeting is either by using a person's full name or his last (family name), regardless of personal familiarity. For a person to address another by his first (given) name during a House meeting would be a discourtesy.
2. **Auctoritas** - A concept related to, but different from "dignitas". It is another untranslatable term, but if one had to explain, one would say that it is something like the degree of clout and public importance a person carries. It would also be, to some extent, his/her ability to influence events through the strength of his/her reputation.
3. **Consular** - One who has been or has occupied the position of "consul".
4. **Domine** - "Master" in Latin. Also "dominus".
5. **Forum eavesdroppers** - These were the people who frequented the area/courtyard where nearly all the political buildings of Rome were, also known as the Forum. They were people who liked to follow, for various reasons, the political happenings of the city.
6. **Lictor** - A specific type of public servant. In the original context, lictors accompanied all public officials with "imperium" (the authority of a magistrate to chastise in the name of his/her office-there are actually officials who do not have this authority). They might be understood as an escort upon whom an official could call for assistance in certain matters, e.g. to chastise a public offender. Unlike the Roman case, this story has it that the lictors only accompany certain officials during certain times. The example given in this chapter is when the bureaucrat concerned is officiating a meeting of the Senate.
7. **Military man** - Vir militaris (L.); one whose career revolves

*around the army. He enters the political arena by relying on the reputation forged by his exploits in the military field.*

**8. Triumph** (L.) – *A special parade held in Rome/Hime to celebrate the victory of one of its generals. It was given only after the general's soldiers hailed him/her with the accolade of "imperator" on the field, and after the permission of Senate.*

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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Takeda Masashi arrived at the Himean ports a full day before Shizuru's army reached Argus, his joints aching from the rigours of passage and his lips cracked by the salt air of the sea. His crossing had been swift-largely due to the winds blowing in from the lands he had just left-but it was not swift enough for a born and bred Himean. A true Himean, so the joke went, could only be comfortable on *terra firma*. Takeda had been so uncomfortable during the voyage that even his usual remedy, meditation, brought little solace. Thus discomfited, he came ashore in the coastal port territories of Fuuka in a sour mood, knowing he had to endure another bout of being tossed and turned when he hired a carriage to take him to Hime itself.

He entered the city in the evening, haggard and too tired to do any more than go to his house, order a bath, and fall asleep straight afterwards. Aristion, his Greek steward, understood that his master was not in the mood to be bothered, so he deferred all the clients who came to greet the swordsman that day. He instructed them not to return on the following day, however, but two days after. Takeda was pleased to learn of this in the morning, and praised Aristion duly over breakfast.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," he said to the man, munching on a loaf of bread. "Having someone take care of troublesome things for me is a blessing. It's these little things I missed in those

barbarian lands."

Aristion inclined his hoary head: "I am only doing what I should, Domine."

Takeda mumbled something around a mouthful of the pastry he was eating, then drank from his glass. He held the water in his mouth for a second, letting it swish against his teeth.

"I'll have to make social calls today," he said grumpily, heavy brows drawing close together. "Just to show I'm back."

Aristion came up to refill his cup.

"The easiest way would be to go to the House, perhaps, Domine," he suggested.

"They have a meeting today?" Takeda asked him.

"Yes, Domine. Shall you go?"

"Yes, I'm going." He reached for a dish of eggs, then paused halfway through to look at his steward. "And the Plebs? Does the tribunate have a meeting?"

"No, Domine. Not today."

"Ahh." Takeda exhaled with relief, not looking forward to so many duties after having just returned from what he considered a gruelling journey. He brought the dish of eggs before him. "That's good. Anything interesting happen while I was away?"

"All is well with the household, Domine."

"Good. I mean with the city too, though."

He had broken the yolk on one of the eggs and was happily dipping bread into it when Aristion produced something he thought of note.

"The tribunate just finished deliberations on that controversial bill a few days ago, Domine. I think it is why they would be too tired to have another meeting so soon."

A few seconds of munching: "Which bill?"

"The one from the tribune Kaneda Izumi, Domine."

Takeda's brows lifted.

"The one Himemiya-san put him up to?" he said.

"Everyone says so, but yes, that's it."

"I'll be damned!" He frowned, took another swig of water before popping the last morsel of yolk-coated bread into his mouth. "A few days ago, you said? Has she declared candidacy yet?"

When Aristion responded negatively, he mopped his mouth with a cloth napkin and stood up. His chair scraped loudly against the floor.

"Get my toga and have someone call a carriage," he ordered. "Fast, Aristion. I want to get to the Curia Hostilia before the House starts its session."

"Right away," said the servant, already walking out of the room.

"And get me a better tunic than this."

"Yes, Domine."

"Hurry!"

And hurry he did. It was only a few minutes later that Takeda found himself in a hired carriage and properly dressed for his return to the Senate. Wearing his newest toga, his chosen cloak was of a deep brown that emphasised his naturally olive skin and brought out its sheen. He was of sufficient vanity to appreciate that his attire flattered him, so when he finally stepped out of the carriage at the Forum, he took good care not to walk too fast... in order that the people already waiting outside the Curia Hostilia could appreciate the flattery of his attire too.

"Welcome back, Masashi-san," someone said.

"Glad to be back, Tanaka-san."



"Hey Takeda! Growing your hair a little long, eh?"

"I'll cut it tonight, Ochiai."

"Let it grow-so it can cover that scar on your face! Got in a new fight, eh?"

"Nothing to worry over, Old Man!"

"Good morning, Takeda-san."

And so it went, with him walking to the steps of the Curia while greeting the faces actually familiar to him. After a while, he saw a particular familiar face peering at him from halfway up the steps. He smiled and waved to her.

"Takeda-san," she said, smiling back. She came down the steps to meet him. "Welcome back to Hime."

"Tomoe-chan," he said pleasantly to his old friend. "It's been a while."

"I should say so," returned the woman as she brushed away her dark hair from her eyes. "We'd been wondering when you would return, Takeda-kun. It's a real pleasure to have one of our celebrities back in the House."

"Now, I'm sure you've been doing well by yourselves."

"Fairly so, fairly... but it doesn't change the fact that we've been missing many of our esteemed senators." She sighed and shot him a rueful smile. "Why does it seem like all of our bright lights are being drawn to that cold North Star? Between you and my cousin-"

"Just a coincidence," he said abruptly, cutting her off. He had no desire to hear of her cousin at the moment: the bitterness was still too fresh on his tongue for that. "Anyway, what's the news? Are we expecting anything interesting today?"

"What do you mean?"

He lowered his next words to a mutter, conscious of the people

nearby.

"I came today because I wanted to be here if Himemiya-san announces candidacy."

Her eyes widened a little, though more from polite than real surprise.

"Some expect it could be today, in fact," she told him. "Even so, I don't see why you would want to witness it, unless you're counting on something exciting happening once she does. But I don't think people would actually contest her at this point. Himemiya-san has already won in a sense, you know-and I don't mean with just Izumi-san's bill."

He shrugged: "You can't be too sure."

She looked doubtful.

"Ye-es," she said slowly. "I suppose."

Suddenly brightening up, she held his shoulder and began to move him away from the crowd near them, which was made up of clients and the Forum eavesdroppers. He looked at her curiously but allowed himself to be steered inside the Senate's main building.

"I wanted to ask if you were free after this," she began, having removed her hand from him. "If you're not busy, would you come and dine at my place? I'm sure you're eager to catch up with all the local news and whatnot."

"Well..."

"Come, do!" she persisted. "I can tell you everything that's been happening here. In exchange, you can tell me what's going on in those parts you just came from." She paused meaningfully and added: "Besides, there is something I would like to talk to you about as well, later."

"Can't you talk now?"

"Not really," she said, giving him a cunning smile. "The walls of the Curia Hostilia have ears. Whereas those of Tomoe Marguerite's

house are mostly inanimate."

He allowed a snigger: "Fine, I'll go with you later."

"Fantastic. Shall we end this conversation for now and move to the hall proper? I think the meeting's about to start."

He agreed with this course and they went inside, the two of them taking seats near the rear, next to each other. They were both among the more recent entries into the senatorial ranks and just a little above the "backbenchers". This referred to those not accorded the right to speak yet, unless called upon.

On their way to their seats, several senators called to or greeted Takeda, welcoming him from his sojourn in the North. He nodded or returned the greetings as he went, shaking hands with some of the senators he knew well before settling into his chair. The same actions were going on all about the hall, with senators greeting each other before the proceedings began. A few minutes later, the great doors were pulled shut, shutting out the Forum observers and other Himeans at the doors. It was also the token signal for the closed meeting to begin.

Normally, the consuls would be the ones to open the discussion. As neither consul was present, it was the urban praetor who commenced. Her long raven hair hung loose as usual, falling in an immaculately tidy stream behind her as she strode to the fore of the curule magistrates' platform. She stopped there, just at the step, and swept the senatorial tiers with a cool blue gaze.

"Princeps Senatus, Pontifex Maximus, fellow magistrates, and all members of this august body," her silky voice intoned. "We are convened today for several reasons. First is the matter of the senior consul's petition for a *triumph*, with reference to the events described to this House in her last missive-which was read in our meeting three days past. Most of us were in attendance that day, so there is no need, I trust, to reread the entire account. I shall summarise its contents instead. Are there any objections?"

It appeared there were none, so she proceeded to relate the salient points of Haruka Armitage's battle accounts to the House. As this

was going on, Takeda was whispering to Tomoe.

"Armitage-san is asking for a triumph?" he asked. "Does that mean she's coming back soon, then? What happened in Africa?"

Tomoe leaned slightly towards him, refraining from pointing out that if he would only listen to the urban praetor his questions would be answered.

"The rebellion's more or less over," she explained in a hushed voice, so as to avoid being overheard. "So she sent a letter about what happened and how she helped put it down. I believe she's on her way here now."

"That was quick. Thought she'd try to make a grand campaign out of it."

"I doubt she could've. Besides, the Senate has been sending her letters all this time, asking her to come back. Hime still needs a consul, even if the urban praetor-" A flick of her eyes to the woman who was still addressing the House. "-is someone as competent as Chikane Himemiya-san."

In front, the urban praetor had finished recounting the missive from Africa, and was now inviting any would-be-speakers to rise.

"In light of what has been stated," she said. "Does anyone wish to speak on the matter before we put it to vote? I extend the invitation first of all to our Princeps Senatus, censors, and all the other consulars."

Someone stood up, which raised a few eyebrows. The expectation had been for a quick vote of approval; Haruka Armitage's allies had been counting on it.

"I would like to talk, Himemiya-san."

Chikane turned to the consular who had uttered these words, nodding when she saw who it was.

"Then I give you the floor, Hajime-san," she said, returning to her seat facing the ranks. The present orator had no intention of walking

the floor, however, and simply remained beside his seat. He began to speak in a dry voice.

"Let me begin by saying that I'm a Military Man," he stated. "I'm more military man than politician, in fact, which many of you know. As a *vir militaris*, I have respect for any good soldier's martial abilities. The share of respect rises, naturally, with the degree of difficulty in the profession... which means if I respect a good soldier, I respect a good general even more. Why am I saying this? Because the senior consul, I believe, is essentially a good general. So we can say that's how I regard her insofar as these things are concerned."

Takeda was no longer whispering to Tomoe at this point, but listening to the speaker. The man happened to have been one of his idols when he was younger, a famous expert with the sword. He also rarely attended, much less spoke in the House meetings, so this was a rare occurrence that merited attention-and not merely from Takeda. Everyone was listening.

"Anyway, I've seen a lot of Himean generals in my time, few of them good," Hajime went on with a sardonic smile. "And those good ones, usually, have been recognised in one way or another. But not all of them received the kind of recognition they deserve."

"Let's take an example," he said, lids coming down momentarily as he thought of a name. When he opened his eyes again, his gaze fell on the urban praetor. Hajime grinned like a wolf that had picked up a scent.

"We don't have to go too far," he said. "Let's take our urban praetor. I'm sure you all remember her recent exploits, so there's no need for me to prove Chikane Himemiya-san is a good general. Unfortunately, she also happens to be one of those generals who haven't received the recognition they deserve."

A scoffing voice came from the middle rows: "Himemiya-san was awarded a triumph for her last campaign, Hajime-san. Could it be you were absent as usual that day, and missed it?"

"Actually, I was there to see it," Hajime replied, with a malicious sneer. "Although I didn't see you there, Jousuke-san. I didn't even

smell you-which is strange, since I can usually tell your presence a mile away from the stink of liquor in your breath. Care to comment? Oh, no, actually, *don't bother*. I'd have to cover my nose again."

The other senator said nothing-for it was true that he had been absent that day due to a night's worth of heavy drinking-and flushed red.

"As I was saying, Himemiya-san is one of the unfortunate ones," Hajime continued. "I say she didn't get the recognition she deserved because she had to share her triumph with another worthy general, namely Urusawa-san, who was commander of the other theatre of engagement during that war."

He paused to snort.

"We like to say 'that war' but it should be 'those wars', shouldn't it? The fact is that both these generals waged practically separate, full-scale wars in their respective theatres, and won them. But when they returned to Hime, they were only given one triumph and told-in a good example of the House's joked-about cheapness-to share it."

There were mutterings now, but all of them too low to interrupt Hajime. Takeda was frowning with confusion, and he spared a glance for the urban praetor. Her face was expressionless as that of a statue. Takeda looked at Hajime again.

"What in the world is he getting at?" he murmured.

A lot of others were asking the same thing.

"Still, I know the argument that it's not our policy," Hajime was saying. "We don't award two separate triumphs to commanders in what's considered to be one blanket war, no matter how good the commanders are or how obvious it is that what's one war is actually two. It's *cheap*, but anything else would be considered flamboyant. A triumph is still a triumph. Isn't that right?"

He drew himself up to his full, imposing height and narrowed his eyes.

"Now I'm going back to the topic," he told them. "And this is what I

wanted to say: I want to know just what the senior consul is thinking, petitioning a triumph for that tiny two-month campaign she's just finished. Does she really think that going to hole up in a city and entering the fray only when the spears cross the line marking their camp is deserving of a triumph? Does she think that *cheap* little venture deserves recognition as good generaling? Because I don't!"

Fresh rumblings broke out at this, louder than before. Hajime went on unfazed.

"I don't see how the House can possibly award commanders of Chikane Himemiya and Urusawa Jinto's calibre a shared triumph," he sneered contemptuously at the senators bristling at his speech, "and then suddenly go and give an unshared one to Armitage-san for standing guard-or is it standing by?-in some well-fortified provincial city in case an *insignificant* rebellion in a neighbouring country gets a little out of hand. You can't even consider that a proper battle! A good general our senior consul may be, but that's not something that was really shown in this campaign. I'm sure she knows that too. But then, how can she ask for a triumph? Does she think just being a good general is enough to get that?"

"We don't give triumphs just for *being* a good general, unless that general actually *does* something good," he went on with another awful smirk. "In fact, sometimes we still don't give them a triumph even if they do something good. In this case, though, it's all pretty clear to me. The senior consul didn't do anything good enough for a triumph, so the senior consul should not get a triumph. It's plain folly not to mention cockiness on her part to have even petitioned for one when the only battle she fought was a skirmish. Someone needs to tell the senior consul that she shouldn't be wasting her time on unjustifiable petitions like this and come home instead. Let her return sensibly to her real duties, like a truly good general would... rather than crowing about like some young cock who's only beaten back a sparrow!"

The biting words sparked an uproar as senators jumped up and began yelling, some asking for the urban praetor's permission to speak, and some simply dispensing their retorts directly to Hajime-who stood with unconcern, leering at the commotion. Chikane was on her feet, calling for order.

"Now he's done it!" Tomoe said to Takeda, her face painted with unease as she regarded the tumult below them. "They're dying to rip into him."

"But he has a point," Takeda whispered loudly, scanning the crowd for the Princeps Senatus. He expected the older man to be doing something to calm the rioters. To his surprise, the Princeps was still on his seat and grinning broadly at the turmoil. Meanwhile, the senator who had interrupted Hajime's speech earlier was making his way through the ranks. He was headed for Hajime and his intent showed clearly on his grim face. One of the other senators, perceiving him, attempted to restrain Jousuke from getting closer to his target, but the enraged man wheeled and cuffed that intercepting man in the jaw. The other senator staggered backwards and Jousuke leapt a few chairs nearer the waiting Hajime.

"*Edepol!*" Takeda said to Tomoe, half-rising from his seat. "This is going to turn really ugly if someone doesn't do something."

Just as the words were out of his mouth, the urban praetor's voice soared out, suddenly calling for a division. While her voice was bereft of any real urgency, the astonishing call still managed to cause an abrupt lull in the outcries. The House never held a vote on an issue after the first speaker to orate gave a speech opposing it—allowance was always given for speeches of rebuttal from the other side. In this instance, though, it seemed that custom would be broken. Everyone whipped about to look at the urban praetor.

They found her just before the curule platform, surrounded by *lictors*. She had apparently summoned them during the confusion. Before anyone could fully appreciate the meaning of the lictors' presence, the urban praetor suddenly strode forward to the senatorial rows, actually getting close enough to the centre of the developing mob to fling her toga in their faces if she were to take it off. She looked the portrait of stately disgust.

"I should hardly have to say this," she said tersely, her words coming out at the crack of a whip. "But as the one officiating this meeting, I would like to remind you that you are all supposedly adult men and women. *Supposedly!*"



There were a few flinches as she snapped the last word, glaring at them with such scorn that no one had the gall to either retort to or ignore her. The woman was usually so easygoing that when the cold fire banked in her eyes leapt up, something seemed to shock the very air into freezing.

"Those who have something to say shall say it in the proper manner," she was saying. "And that is to state the words in an orderly fashion, not to scream them out at a pitch more proper to a nursery of brats. If you persist in the latter style, I shall not hesitate to either call a division on the matter right now, or put it off by adjourning this meeting at once! Anyone transgressing our rules of conduct shall be thrown out by my lictors. If need be, I shall throw all of you out, and I am sorely tempted to join the lictors in applying a hand myself! Which means, Jousuke-san, that you had better return to your seat. I advise you not to wait for my and the lictors' assistance, which you shall be certain not to appreciate!"

She stopped to rake the rows with another frigid stare, letting them know she meant the threat. A few of the would-be rioters suddenly found good reasons for looking down at the floor, to the ceiling, anywhere away from her. The senator she had named turned red and inched to his place, grumbling.

"Since both our consuls are not in attendance, I am the one tasked with preserving the order *and* honour of our august body," she declared, with less violence though not less gravity. "As such, it is my duty to safeguard both. Members of the House, take my warning: I shall see no dishonour coming to our Senate from your infantile behaviour. Having said that, I now invite the embarrassing lot of you to sit down."

Her tone made clear that it was not in fact an invitation. Although still muttering (very quietly), all dissenters returned to their seats. Hajime eased into his seat as well, still looking as though he could not care less about the people snapping at him.

Meanwhile, Chikane was scanning the seats with a glittering eye.

"Once again," she said, after a tense moment. "I address the consulars first. Does anyone have anything to say?"

She looked at the Princeps Senatus.

"Kanzaki-san," she said. "Have you anything to say?"

Reito held up his hands, still looking very tickled. "Only that I have to admit to agreeing with Hajime-san's stance on this point, and that I hope this admission will not birth another-oh-'screaming nursery'."

Chikane's mouth twitched at the paraphrase.

"Given your famous care in these matters I am certain there will be no such unwanted pregnancies, Princeps," she drawled, drawing a good deal of laughter from the rows as well as from the Princeps himself. "We thank you for your comment and the orderly fashion in which it was delivered. Anyone else?"

"I would like to express my disagreement with Hajime-san's position, Himemiya-san."

"Then I give you the floor, Wang-san."

After thanking her, Sergay Wang stood up. Unlike his usual custom, however, he did not go to walk the floor but spoke while standing next to his seat as Hajime had done. His arguments also were less inspiring than normal. In fact, each person who spoke after him in support for the senior consul's petition for a triumph delivered a pale speech, a fact noted by everyone.

Whether it was simply that this was *not* the senior consul's day or that Hajime's speech had made a heavy impression on the House, the meeting eventually concluded with a division that showed over two-thirds standing on the majority side: denial of Haruka Armitage's petition for a triumph. It was a distressing turn of affairs for the senior consul's allies, as they had expected the petition to be summarily approved. Several shot dark looks at the author of this upset, who ignored them with his usual nonchalance.

"That issue is now closed," Chikane announced. She took a moment to glare at the rows again, quelling possible protests before they arose. "The other matters on our agenda are trifling and can wait. It seems we have spent too much time on this subject and it would be

better if we stopped here for now. We may resume deliberations on the rest another day. Does everyone find this agreeable?"

Everyone found it agreeable.

"Then we are adjourned. Good day, fellow Members of the House."

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"It turns out I was wrong about one thing: something exciting did happen," Tomoe declared. "But dear me, I didn't expect that at all!"

Takeda looked up at her across the table, his mouth full of honey-glazed sausage. The two of them were at Tomoe's villa and having a light repast after the momentous meeting.

"It was a surprise," he said at length. "I didn't think Hajime-san would say such a thing. But he made good sense, even if he said it a little bluntly."

"He was marvellously dry, wasn't he?" Tomoe replied. "But Himemiya-san was something too. I'd nearly forgotten she can have a fearsome temper when she's poked."

The swordsman's eyebrows lifted: "I thought she was still pretty calm. She didn't go off into a rant."

Tomoe waved that away while reaching for a napkin.

"She's not the type to *rant* when she's angry, I think," she said. "People who rant usually don't mean to do what they say they will. But Himemiya-san meant everything she threatened to do-and more."

She daubed at her mouth.

"They say," she said, "that the more blue-blooded aristocrats really show their haughtiness when cross. After what I've seen today, I'm beginning to think it must be true. I don't think I've ever seen her so... supercilious."

"She's a Himemiya. They're *all* supercilious."

She giggled.

"Now that's a truth, even if no one has the courage to say it to their faces. Still, they're not bad. I somewhat like them, or most of them, anyway," she admitted.

He nodded agreement, then stretched his hand to reach for his own napkin. It was to his right and he turned his head as he took it, giving her a fine view of the scar on his left cheek. She eyed it curiously.

"Takeda-kun," she said, making him face her again. "I noticed it earlier but hesitated to say anything, in case you thought it impolite of me..."

"What is it?" he asked.

"The scar on your cheek."

One of his hands came up on reflex to touch the mark. His lips thinned before he could remember to stop himself.

"Oh, this? It's nothing," he said airily, trying not to think about the incident that had brought this to him. "Just an accident."

She nodded sympathetically.

"It doesn't ruin my face too much, does it?" he asked jokingly.

"No. I find it gives you a very rugged appeal," she said.

They chuckled at that and she pushed one of the dishes in the middle of the table towards him.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Do try this one. It's made with licker-fish."

He reached for the plate she had indicated. It was a delicacy of Hime, made with a fish that could only be found in one part of the river outside the city. His mouth watered as he looked at it.

"Licker-fish? Oh, how I missed it! I'll help myself, then..."

"Please do. I had them cooked for you since I thought you'd be

missing proper Himean cuisine after all that time up north." She slanted her head in an inquiring way. "What did they feed you over there, anyway? I'm curious."

"Mostly meat," he replied. "Goat, oxen, sheep. Lots of boar, too."

He sighed after taking a bite of the lick-fish.

"They'd cook that one-the boar-on a spit, usually," he said. "Awful deal of roasting."

Again, another sympathetic nod: "Just as I imagined."

"It wasn't that bad. There was more fish in Argus, at least. But I spent most of my time in Sosia, so it was meat."

"I can't imagine how you got by," she sighed, looking concerned. "Or my cousin. I can only hope she's able to find proper food wherever she is now. She's slender enough as she is."

Takeda stop chewing and grasped abruptly for his glass. He took a long drink.

"You did run into her, didn't you?" she asked, eyes eager and expectant. "I couldn't imagine you two missing each other there, since there are only so many Himean provinces in the north. Surely you saw her at least once."

He set down his glass. Tomoe, seeing it was empty, reached for and refilled it. She kept her eyes on him all the while.

"Well, yes," he said with a hint of unwillingness that his eager auditor managed to ignore. "I did."

She leaned forward, her face suddenly more alive than he had ever seen it. The change was so startling he nearly forgot about his reluctance to speak and simply answered her swift queries.

"How was she? Did she look all right? I hope she hasn't grown any thinner from all that barbarian food."

"She looked fine."

"Was she in good spirits?"

"Seemed so."

"Did you talk?"

That brought him out of his daze. He stiffened, trying to hide his apprehension by pretending to wipe his mouth again with the napkin.

"A little," he said shortly, a touch of bile leaking into his voice. "She was too busy to be social."

"Ah. Yes, that sounds like her." She leaned back into her seat, looking wistful. "She's always too busy. I hope she hasn't been overworking herself too much over there, though. Did it seem like she was?"

"No. Although she might be getting a little more attached over there than is proper," he muttered sulkily, before he could stop himself.

"Excuse me?"

He blinked and frowned at his blunder, the image of a dark-haired temptress with wicked green eyes slipping away from his mind.

"*Committed*," he corrected, meeting Tomoe's gaze. "I meant that she was getting a little too committed over there."

He paused and added: "To the campaign, I mean. Maybe she shouldn't be."

"I agree."

He blinked again, not sure he had heard aright.

"Sorry?" he said.

"I agree with you," Tomoe said smoothly, her greyish eyes so intent that it made him uneasy. "My dear cousin *is* becoming too heavily embroiled in that venture to the North, too much for her own good. I'm worried, you know."

His brows drew together as he asked why.

"Oh, many reasons," she sighed out. "She could be here instead and steadily furthering her career as is her due. But, no. Instead, she's victim to yet another scheme to keep her from her goals by banishing her to a command in a godforsaken place. Not even a campaign, but a measly expedition of fortification miles away from home. Isn't it so?"

He started at the question, giving her another long look. Something was odd about her today, he thought, but he could not place what it was. Something too eager in her eyes, perhaps. Something weird and wily.

*Best agree with her.*

"Maybe you're right," he settled for saying. "The North is ill-suited for her."

He sneered inwardly as a thought came to mind.

"She'd surely do more good here than with keeping company with those northerners," he remarked. "She'd be better off staying close to Himeans than getting cosy with them."

She nodded briskly.

"I'm glad to hear you say so!" she said. "That's what I brought you over here to talk about, Takeda-kun."

His eyes widened a fraction: "I don't see why I'd be someone you'd talk to about it, though, Tomoe-chan."

"Didn't you say you agreed with me about my cousin's plight?"

It took a second, but he nodded. She lifted an eyebrow at him afterwards.

"Then what say you help me relieve her of that godforsaken command and bring her back here, where she rightfully belongs?" she asked, in a theatrically hushed tone.

Takeda's eyes widened further.

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "Why me?"

"Because you're the only one I can trust among the outgoing tribunes of the plebs, and one of the few with a big enough following-and *auctoritas* -to make it happen."

He exhaled, wondering what he could possibly say to that. After a while, he frowned and addressed her.

"Still, Tomoe-chan, I only have limited powers," he pleaded. "I'm just a tribune of the plebs! Even if I did agree, well, what then? Wouldn't it be better to go to the urban praetor? Himemiya-san's her friend, as I remember, and has far more clout than I do. It's the whole conservative faction that's responsible for your cousin being stuck where she is, and I doubt one tribune of the plebs could change their minds. What could I possibly do?"

She smiled a wide smile that told him she was not to be deterred.

"Well, Takeda-kun," she said. "You could hear me out, for one thing."

---

As these developments were taking place in their homeland, the Himean deputation to the North reached the territories of Argus. They entered the district amidst great hubbub, people clustering about the road to gape at the army trudging in. They looked so impressive, with their red cloaks and polished cuirasses! Why, even their baggage train was worthy of attention, having as it did a pack of giant cats!

While the populace goggled, the army's commander was walking close to the head of the column, her bodyguard at her side. The chief primipilus of the Ninth Legion and some other officers were walking behind them, but stood a few paces away. Not that the army's general minded: she was preoccupied with speaking to the Otomeian.

"It is just as you said, Natsuki," Shizuru was saying to her



companion. "There are indeed 'many people'. It is interesting to find so many out and doing business in this season. Although I suppose it is always so in big port cities such as this."

She cast a glance at the woman next to her.

"That said, you really do not have to be so wary of them," she went on.

This was because the younger woman had been on a heightened alert ever since they entered the province. She seemed distrustful of having such a crowd around them, Shizuru noted, and kept her hand vigilantly on the daos tucked into her belt. Shizuru had hoped that talking to her would get her to relax, but she saw now that there were some gaps in her remedy. As the girl was standing right beside her, in such a visible position in the marching column, she was now also doubly exposed. Natsuki also happened to be a person of considerable physical charms, so now more and more people pointed and stared their way, which made her more and more uncomfortable.

"I imagine it has been a while since a Himean cohort-much less a full army-passed through here," Shizuru went on, essaying a smile. "The last time was with us as well, and we hardly spent more than a day here before going to Otomeia. You must credit that our appearance is somewhat irregular to the inhabitants. It is natural that they would treat us as a parade. So be of good cheer, do, and enjoy it! This is a fine welcome all things considered."

Natsuki nodded and went so far as to show a tiny smile to please her commander. She kept her hand on her daos, however.

"Here, enjoy the sights," the older woman advised. "Have you ever been here, in this part of Argus? The public markets, I mean?"

At this point, their entourage was passing through a wide, cobblestone road lined with stalls and booths at the sides, already inside the city walls. Only the first cohort, the general's guard, was coming in with them, the rest of the soldiers already starting to park and set up outside the provincial capital.

What Shizuru now regarded were the markets that adjoined the main square of Argus, where it was possible to find almost anything to suit one's fancy. Hawkers could be seen calling out and displaying their wares, which ranged from fanciful trinkets imported from god-knew-what-shores to unusual pastries shaped and twisted to look like animals. There were stalls selling bolts of fantastically patterned cloth, and some selling delicate statuettes of the gods. There were even some selling cages woven of reeds, each with a chirping bird inside.

"Um, I-no," Natsuki answered, finally having noticed the displays. She regarded the stalls with the sort of excited panic that told Shizuru she did not know what to look at first, and then said, after a while: "No, I have not seen these."

"I see. Then I shall accompany you here one of these days," Shizuru told her, entertained by the wonder in the girl's eyes. "We can look at all the shops. We shall go through all of them and you can even point out whatever catches your fancy so that we can acquire it. It shall be great fun."

She gave the girl an inquiring look.

"It would be a fine way to pass the time while we winter here," she added. "Would you like that, Natsuki?"

Natsuki seemed a little surprised, then embarrassed.

"Umm, if-if you like," she mumbled, and in such a low voice that the older woman had to lean closer.

"I do like. So we shall do that," Shizuru replied, pleased by the little spots of colour on the girl's cheeks. "For now, though, it should be amusing enough to just look at the goods as we walk. What do you think? See anything you want?"

Natsuki let her gaze wander to some of the booths.

"Ahh," was all she said, still trying to take in too much and thus unable to properly take in any of them.

"Are they not amazing?" Shizuru prompted. "This is the sort of

variety that you only get in port-provinces because of the continuous exit and entry of people and trade. You may find people from all sorts of places here, and it produces quite an interesting blend of cultures. I daresay we might even run into some Mentulaeans here. If we do, Natsuki..."

Natsuki looked questioningly at her as she trailed off.

"Try not to drag them behind your stallion."

The Otomeian was unable to hold back a laugh, unknowingly startling the Himean officers marching nearby. They had been watching the commander and her bodyguard ever since the two began whispering to each other, and had in fact increased the space the general's long strides had made between their parties themselves. They were sensitive to the rumours that the Otomeian was already their commander's lover.

"On another note, where is Shizuki?" Shizuru was asking. "Did you leave her with one of the servants, Natsuki?"

Natsuki nodded: "Baggage train."

"I see. That is good," Shizuru said. "It is better to leave her there for now, since she might be unsettled by all the noise and people."

Despite her words to Natsuki, though, she actually missed having the animal nearby. She had grown fond of seeing its furry head sticking out of Natsuki's knapsack-which was tied to the Otomeian's saddle-as had been the case during the past week, its black and snuffling nose often within reach of her fingers. It had been proving immensely docile, and more than a few of the other officers had already taken a liking to the animal, often trying to sneak scraps of meat to it when they got near enough.

*That may well change soon*, Shizuru thought level-headedly. She knew most of the people fascinated with her bodyguard's pet were only so because it was still small, novel and young, still much like a housecat in looks and size. Once it got bigger, these same people would probably be avoiding it out of fear. Wild animals were always so: they were easier to love when young only because the threat

they posed was young as well. Once the animal matured, it was far easier to remember that it was still an animal .

She turned again to her dark-haired escort, only to perceive the girl staring intently at one of the booths. She grinned when she saw what was displayed there.

"Natsuki," she said suddenly. "Have you ever seen those? The metal-wrapped eggs?"

Natsuki shook her head before turning to look again at the trinkets in question. Shizuru understood why the girl would be fascinated-she herself had been as well, when she had first come across them years ago. They were eggs of different kinds, colours, and sizes, all encased in a skilfully-done binding of silver or brass chains whose links were so fine they looked like thick threads of wool. Others were encased not in chains but in strips of worked metal, which was just as attractive. These were just ornaments, of course, but very handsome baubles indeed.

"Very pretty, don't you think so?"

Natsuki nodded.

"Only, it does seem a little cruel to think of the poor birds inside them. "

The girl whipped her head towards the older woman, who feigned a sad expression.

"Birds?" she echoed curiously.

"Yes." Shizuru reigned in her chuckle and kept her brow dark. "Tell me, Natsuki, have you ever seen a bird being born? When the chick hatches from the egg?"

Natsuki nodded. Her face started to show signs of apprehension.

"Did you not think it a beautiful, perhaps even *moving* sight?"

The younger woman nodded again.

"Well, so it is," Shizuru sighed heavily. "Many people think the same, and they even go to the lengths of seeing it as a little form of entertainment. So they put the eggs-like those over there-in those, ah, egg cages. People buy them only to watch the poor little chicks being born inside those chains."

She watched Natsuki's expression morph into horror at this fabrication, her own jaw aching with the effort of keeping her pretend-gravity. She shook her head and looked away momentarily, taking that opportunity to bite her lip

"Awful, is it not?" she said, facing the girl again with a solemn countenance. Natsuki nodded vigorously, her face showing that she was moved to great indignation by this act of meanness.

"Oh, the awful things that people do for a bit of amusement! Yet, as you can see, they turn a decent trade in this commercialised cruelty. See, there is one woman buying one of those vicious cages now."

Natsuki looked as though her heart had been encased in those 'egg cages' as well. Suddenly, she gave a mild start.

"Shizuru," she said quietly, her voice a troubled whisper. "But-but when they grow..."

Shizuru nodded sadly, her jaw so tense she was afraid it would cramp.

"Yes," she answered. "Do you know what happens to them?"

Natsuki answered negatively, looking even more agitated now.

The older woman dropped her voice even further, her words strained with the laughter trying to make its way out.

"When the birds get older and start growing..." she said slowly.

Natsuki waited, horror creeping into her face with every second of suspension.

"... they turn out shaped like eggs," Shizuru concluded, saying it in a tone of chilling horror.

She burst into laughter when she saw the girl's mouth fall open, her face showing comprehension of having been deceived. The soldiers and officers nearby watched curiously as their commander doubled over in mirth, her step almost staggered with the force of her hilarity. They watched even more curiously when they saw her seize the Otomeian's arm, in an apparent attempt to prevent the girl from fleeing her side.

"Say, what do you think's going on there, Nao?" one of the centurions asked the chief primipilus. "I can't hear them with this racket."

"I think... I think Natsuki-san looks like she's mad," another officer elbowed in with them, a tribune of the soldiers, answered. "Is she mad at the general? But why's the general laughing, then?"

"They're just playing around," Nao said, looking amused herself. "General's probably teasing her again."

"Ohh. Yes, I get it."

"Hey-look! Look!" another soldier hissed urgently, pushing in between them. The two turned to see what had him so excited. "The general's holding her hand!"

The general was indeed holding her bodyguard's hand. Furthermore, she seemed to be making a point to lean closer to the young woman, as though trying to speak directly to her ear. Yet the tilt of her head, the look on her face-her whole attitude, in fact, could not be mistaken for that of someone telling another a secret. Unless the secret was a romantic one.

"Ha! Told you it's just as everyone says," one man said triumphantly. "See? You can't get more obvious than that!"

Nao rolled her eyes, though she was actually surprised by the display as well.

"You can, actually, and I'm sure they'll be doing that soon enough too," she said, bringing the others' eyes back to her. "Better get used to it. If each little thing between those two makes you this excited, I'd

say you'd have a better career dishing out gossip to old women than fighting in the army."

The tribune of the soldiers grinned unashamedly.

"It's just so strange, Yuuki-san," he said, still wiggling his eyebrows giddily. "I've never seen the general like this."

"Me too, and this's my second campaign with her!" one centurion said. "But say, Nao, you're awful calm about it. You seen her like this before?"

"Just keep marching, you old gossips!" Nao said with a laugh.

As for their general, she was still too occupied with trying to coax her lover into forgiving her to notice the excitement she had stirred up in the ranks. She held onto the girl's hand tightly, cooing apologies and promising to make up for her joke.

"Do forgive me, Natsuki," she was saying to the girl. "Please? I shall not do that again if you forgive me now."

Natsuki said nothing, her face between a scowl and a pout. The older woman pulled her own lips in to hold back the smile trying to get out.

"I shall do anything," she went on cajolingly. "I shall make it up to you tomorrow, when we visit these stalls again. You may have and do anything you want; I shall not complain one jot. You may even ask me to buy you all of those silver-wrapped eggs-I would buy them for you."

Natsuki cast another dark look her way at that reminder of the joke. She parted her lips and for a moment, deluded the general into thinking she would say something. Instead, she exhaled a long cloud of grievance into the air.

"Please Natsuki?" Shizuru tried again. "I am truly sorry. Please forgive me?"

It took a few more moments of sulking before the girl finally deigned to look her way. Shizuru attempted a pleading gaze. Natsuki's face

blanked at the sight. She looked away again.

"Natsuki?"

The scowl was now fully overtaken by the pout. Shizuru pressed on, sensing victory.

"Do you forgive me, Natsuki?"

Natsuki huffed and finally nodded acceptance.

"But," she said, quickly, as Shizuru smiled. "You do not have to."

The older woman quirked an eyebrow at her.

"I don't have to...? What don't I have to?" she asked, still not letting go of Natsuki's hand.

"You do not have to get me... anything," the girl muttered, attempting to quell her own blush with a weak frown.

Shizuru grinned at that, and pressed her hand. She would have kissed her too, had it not been for all the people around them.

"My dear little Natsuki. Perhaps I don't," she said, saying the words so sweetly anyone who heard them might have thought they were being given in between kisses after all. "And perhaps I do. But regardless of that, I shall because I *want to*."

Natsuki said nothing and still refused to look at her, but squeezed her hand back.

Suddenly someone came up behind them and greeted her. Shizuru returned the greeting, while Natsuki simply nodded, fidgeting a little with the hand the commander held captive.

"Well, Shizuru-san," said the new arrival, with only a second's glance at the linked hands. "This is a fine bustle we have here, isn't it? Typical of our friend's province, I guess."

"True, Chie-han. Though the bustle suits the place in this case."



"That's a nice rhyme," Chie pointed out. "Anyway, I wonder if she'll be here to greet us today. Given how busy Argus is, though, I doubt it."

As it turned out, the ones to greet them were two other officials: the quaestor of the province, and one of the primipilus centurions of the local garrison. They explained that the governor was having a meeting with some foreign plutocrats and would be glad to meet them as soon as she was finished. She might even be finishing now, they said, so they would be pleased to provide an escort to the gubernatorial palace if the Himean commander wished to meet her right away.

Deciding to do just that, Shizuru gave orders to the officers to see to the army. Some local officials joined her officers to provide assistance and whatever might be required. This taken care of quickly, they then gave her a guide to conduct her to the governor. Only the senior legate and her Otomeian companion went with her to the governor's mansion, her marching household staff having gone to the baggage train to collect her effects and bring them to the mansion as well, given that it was where she would be staying.

"The city looks well-kept," the general remarked to their guide as they walked. "We did pass through it before, when we had just come from Hime, but I am afraid we did not really get much of a chance to sightsee."

"I remember, Fujino-san," the man answered deferentially. "I did see you when you disembarked. I was one of the authorities on the ports that day."

"I see. Yet surely we have not met before...?"

"No, I did not have the pleasure, as something interrupted," he replied. "My full name is Takeshi Ogawa, Fujino-san."

"I am pleased to meet you, Ogawa-han." She turned to indicate the other women. "By the way, this is my senior legate, Chie Harada, and my ever-present companion, Natsuki of the Otomeians."

Chie giggled at the unorthodox introduction her friend had used for

the Otomeian, who did not even bat an eyelash. She was sure the girl would have shown more emotion, though, if her fingers had still been linked with the general's: at the moment, they were no longer holding hands.

"Good to meet you too, Ogawa-san," said the legate, returning the man's pleasantries. "Have you been stationed long in Argus?"

"Oh, yes. Two years now, in fact. Always under the governor," he said, as though there were no other possible governor for the province. "I wasn't quaestor the first year, though. Truth be told, I find it exciting work."

"I'm sure it would be, with her at the helm," Chie replied, eliciting a laugh. She turned to the Otomeian and explained: "You'll understand when you meet her, Natsuki-san. Shizuru-san and I know her from a long time ago, so you don't have to be alarmed if she gets pretty familiar when greeting your general. She can be a little... hmm... effusive."

Natsuki digested that.

"Anyway, I'm excited to see her," Chie went on, this time to Shizuru and Ogawa. "It's been forever!"

"You were not able to see her either when you passed through here a few months ago, yes?" Ogawa noted. "I think she was not in residence at that time."

"She was somewhere on business," Chie said, looking around as they passed through the portals of the governor's residence. "Ah, we're here!"

They were standing in the main hall of the mansion now, and servants approached them, ready to take their cloaks. The local official made to ask where the governor was, but was interrupted by a loud cry.

"Look at what the wind brought in!"

The group turned towards the source of the exclamation and had only time to see a blur of red descend upon the senior legate and

sweep her into an embrace. Chie returned the hug, laughing gustily all the while.

The pair parted a little, allowing the other woman to get a good look at Chie.

"You're so tall!" she exclaimed.

The senior legate laughed again: "That's what you said the last time you saw me, and we're only about the same height!"

"Yes, so we are. But it's nice to be told you're tall, isn't it?"

"Childish as ever, I see," Chie joked, earning herself a knock on the temple. The two of them relinquished their holds and the other went towards Shizuru, who came forward.

"It's 'childlike', Chie, not 'childish'," she said, clasping Shizuru's offered hands. Her eyes studied Shizuru's form intently. "And you, Shizuru-chan-well, you've always been taller than everyone, so there's no need to even say it! And you look even more beautiful each time I see you! Like your parents, certainly, though even more like yourself. Quite an original you are, but still classic."

"I am gratified by that description, I think," Shizuru said, suppressing a chuckle. "You look good as well, Midori-sensei."

"*San*, not *sensei*," the governor of Argus replied with a wink. "The latter makes me feel old, and that's something no one is permitted to feel in my province."

# Chapter 24

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Cunni** (pl.), **cunnius** (s.) - Latin obscenity; refers to the female genitalia but more often used as an insult to men.
2. **Janus** - The two-faced deity of Roman myth; also spelled "Ianus".
3. **Dionysus** - God of wine and revelry, the Greek name being "Bacchus".

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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The woman supposed to be greatly occupied with the tasks of a controversial expedition was able to find quite a lot of idyllic time in it. Lounging on a couch in the room prepared for her in the Argus governor's estate one evening, she exhaled contentedly while watching her two personal entertainers-who were on the rug beside her couch-play with each other, seemingly caught up in their own world. While there was a sort of charm to watching this scene, she decided that it was high time for her to be included in the game. After a few more moments of observation, she opened her mouth to speak.

"She looks so clean, Natsuki. You bathed her?"

Her bodyguard looked up and nodded.

"I hope she did not struggle much."

The girl denied it.

"That's well." Shizuru smirked and mumbled: "I can see which feline

has already asserted its dominance in this household, then."

"Huh?" the other said, seeming confused by her statement.  
"Shizuru?"

Shizuru showed her a smile: "I was simply talking to myself, Natsuki."

Natsuki snorted sharply, drawing the attention of both the older woman and the happily snorting cub she had in her arms. Shizuru lifted an eyebrow.

"Why that reaction?" she asked. "Is talking to myself irregular for me?"

It was the younger woman's turn to smirk.

"Oh no," she said. "No."

"Then may I know why my Natsuki seems so amused?"

The younger woman coloured a little at her use of the possessive, she was pleased to note, before replying.

"Because when you do that-you talk to yourself-you talk to *me*," Natsuki explained, eliciting laughter from the other woman.

"That was a frighteningly perceptive remark," Shizuru murmured when she could speak again. "I fear it may be a token of the days when you had yet to speak to me, if I indeed do that. I am so sorry for that discourtesy, Natsuki."

Natsuki shook her head.

"No," she said. "I do not... No. It is all right."

"I shall try not to do it so much."

"No. Keep on." The girl shrugged. "Um, doing that. It is not trouble and... and I am glad to listen."

The rusty eyes softened, one of the Himean's hands coming out to

pat her head.

"You really are too kind to me," Shizuru said, while running her fingers through fine threads of midnight-shaded hair. "Why is that, I wonder. And here I seem to be talking to myself again-*tsk*, I am hopeless, am I not?"

They chuckled. She continued to stroke the girl's scalp, having observed before this that the Otomeian seemed to enjoy this sort of caress. The tranquillity of the moment was disturbed when the third occupant of the room leapt out of the Otomeian's hands and at a cushion fallen from the couch. Both women regarded the animal.

"She's quite energetic today," Shizuru observed, extending an arm to pull the cushion from the cub's grasp and dangle it before the animal. "Here, Shizuki. Come on, come here and take the pillow. Do you suppose we should take her for a walk, Natsuki?"

"Um, it is late." Green eyes turned her way. "Maybe tomorrow?"

"Very well. Tomorrow it is." She relinquished the cushion to a delightedly snuffling cub and returned to her reclined position on the couch. She peeked out of the half-shuttered window beside her and eyed the lightless sky outside. "It is quite late, as you say."

Turning back to the girl, she added: "And if we did hazard to go out tonight, I am certain Midori-han would attempt to collar us into drinking with her."

"Ahhh." Natsuki turned her luminous gaze to Shizuru. "Interesting. Her."

"What makes you say so?"

Natsuki shrugged and returned her attention to the cub promptly. She left Shizuru mulling over her description. The younger woman rarely used the word "interesting" to speak of people, and the last time she had used it, it had been to describe Shizuru herself. Was that an indication of a positive assessment, then? And how had Midori Sugiura merited it?

*Should I be jealous?*

She grinned to herself at that thought. As today was only their second day in Argus, the only basis Natsuki could have for her statement would be their first meeting with the governor, which had only been yesterday. Shizuru smiled to herself as she recalled the events of the past day. Perhaps Natsuki did have good reason to call the governor interesting, given what she had seen.

Midori had brought Shizuru and her companions to her private study upon their arrival, pushing them into seats in the affable and almost-discourteous way she had long made her own. After having dispensed with the prerequisites, the governor had then pressed her guests to take some food and drink-insisting, when they declined the former, that they take the latter at least. Shizuru chuckled reflectively to herself as she recalled the manner in which the governor had done this.

"No buts! You'll have a drink if there's anything I can do about it," were the governor's minatory words, snapping her fingers to send a slave scurrying for some goblets. She even pretended to glare at her guests and warned: "None of that abstinence stuff I've been hearing about from the Stoics! I've always trusted the two of you to have more good taste than that."

It was the senior legate who retorted before Shizuru could.

"Try telling that to Armitage, not us. I won't say no to a cup of good Falernian if it's offered me, really. Shizuru-san?"

"I shall be happy to drink with you as well," Shizuru replied.

The governor beamed.

"Good, good!" she exclaimed, looking around to give her slave an urging glance. She added conversationally: "So Haruka Armitage's still doing that abstention nonsense, is she?"

"Last we saw her, yes," Chie answered. "I don't think she'd give it up, that, er, nonsense."

"It's that fool Epixander who put her up to it-can't imagine why the Armitages ever allowed a malnourished old nut like him to prate of

his philosophy to their daughter. Even Haruka was an impressionable girl at that age, like all children are." She rattled on, watching the slave set the cups and wine onto the table. "See what comes of not choosing your tutors wisely! Corrupting a girl's mind against wine, of all things. Why, it goes against all common sense!"

"I daresay Haruka-han would deliver a fine lecture to us on the superfluous nature of wine, were she here," Shizuru ventured with a smile. "As she has done on more than one occasion to me."

"Has she, now?"

"Yes. She derives it from what she calls 'the value of living with simplicity'."

"That's *simplicity*, all right," Midori snorted, throwing an unconvinced look across the table. She started, suddenly, and leaned forward with a displeased look on her face.

"I say! There are only three cups here-go get another," she said to the slave, who was pouring the wine. She looked directly at the other dark-haired woman who had been standing beside Shizuru until the general beckoned her to sit. "You'll take a cup too, Natsuki-chan?"

Chie and Shizuru coughed at this, both thinking the same thing: that only Midori Sugiura could have had the daring to address the Otomeian warrior with such familiarity after having only been introduced moments ago. Natsuki seemed just as startled, but eventually managed to shake her head to decline. The Argus governor frowned good-naturedly at her.

"Are you sure?" she asked, just as her slave placed another cup on the table. "It's really good wine, you know-not that there's ever been anything but good wine on my table. You're not another of those Stoics, I hope?"

Shizuru stepped in to save the girl, who was embarrassed by the attention.

"No, she is not," said the general, secretly taking her bodyguard's



hand under the table. "And she does actually drink wine, Midori-han, but quite moderately. Perhaps it is only that she is feeling some of the effects of our march. I believe Natsuki is not as used to imbibing wine as we are, and it would not be best for her to drink it when she might prefer water at the moment, the toll of our journey considered."

"Oh, of course-right silly of me!" Midori cried, ordering the slave to fill the girl's cup with water instead. "You'll forgive me for that, now. I tend to forget not all people are as used to the liquor as Himeans."

She tilted her head inquiringly, though the knowing glint in her eyes showed that her next question was asked simply out of politeness and not ignorance.

"Natsuki-chan *isn't* Himean, of course?" she asked.

"She is Otomeian, Midori-han."

"I thought so! It was the hair that threw me, but now I see the Otomeians must still have a few darkheads among them. Charming people-some pass by Argus occasionally for trade, though not enough. Fine old history they have, probably as long as ours, if not longer. I hear their king keeps a wonderful library as well, stuffed to the rafters with books from all parts of the world, from chronicles written in Egypt all the way to ones from us. Gorgeous piles of books, they say!"

She took a deep breath after this flurry and peered inquisitively at the girl.

"Well, well. An Otomeian at my table. And what are you sniggering about over there, Chie, you scoundrel?"

The senior legate chuckled loudly.

"I was just thinking how it's so like you, to think immediately of things like libraries and such," she explained, drawing smiles from the other two Himeans. "It makes me a little nostalgic to hear you talk of history."

Midori chuckled while Shizuru grinned.

"It is my first love," the redheaded woman remarked. "But I'd expect you to understand, Chie-chan. We're both chroniclers, in our own way. Speaking of chronicling, I trust you've had a grand time taking down Shizuru-chan's latest exploits? Where's my copy of your accounts thus far?"

Chie took a swallow of wine.

"Sadly enough, that slipped my mind," she said. "I'm so sorry. I don't have one ready for you."

"Really now," Midori said. "Stop holding out on me. Where is it?"

"Really," Chie insisted. "I forgot to make one."

"You forgot?" came the sceptical answer. "You forgot?"

"I forget a lot of things these days. I think it's the cold-addles my mind."

"Then let me chuck you into that nice warm hearth over there, to help you remember."

"Peace, peace, I didn't forget!" Chie cried, laughing as Midori pretended to rise from her seat. Shizuru laughed at the two of them. "There's no need to get violent!"

The elder woman sat back down with a wide grin.

"Where is it, eh?" she asked.

"With my things," Chie replied. "I'll have it sent to you the moment the servants fix our rooms."

"Oh no you won't. I'll come get it with you later, to make sure you don't do any *forgetting* again," Midori retorted, mock-scowling. "They're probably moving your things in now-I already had rooms set aside for the lot of you. I expect we can house a good number of your officers here, Shizuru."

"I am grateful," the woman being addressed replied. "Though I do think some of them may choose to stay closer to the barracks, to be

sure. Well, they should be dealing with all the arrangements now."

"That's all fine, I believe," the governor returned. "But just so it's clear, I don't mind taking in as many of your officers as this place can house. It's a little empty these days, you'll find, what with most of the Himean officials who were here having gone back home for the winter and no new ones coming in."

"Except for us, of course," Shizuru smiled. "I suppose that the reason for this would be the north winds?"

Midori emptied her glass before replying, waiting for her slave to refill it.

"That's the cause," she said. "As you know, they're set to last until the end of winter, which means we'll be getting fewer ships from Hime and most other parts south of our ports since they'll be fighting against that breeze. I'm a little sad about it, actually, because it makes for a pretty unfair situation. We can send news to them regular as always but they'll take twice the time to send back to us."

Chie said, "We've been waiting for the return mail for a while now. I'm just about dying for news from home!"

"Last I heard, Hime was bereft of both consuls and elections." The older woman frowned. "Anarchy in the wind, it seems!"

"They do have a troubling set of deficiencies, I agree, but I doubt it would be as chaotic as some would have it," Shizuru put in, just as a knock sounded on the door. All the occupants of the room turned at the sound while the governor's slave admitted a person in Himean tunic and cloak. It was one of the general's non-combatants, come to request the presence of the cavalry captain on behalf of her Otomeian subordinates.

"Of course. Go ahead, Natsuki," Shizuru said to the girl, who cast an enquiring glance her way. "It would be best to get the cavalry settled into a proper camp as soon as possible."

Natsuki nodded and rose to her feet, bowing prior to her exit. Once she was gone, the governor of Argus wagged her eyebrows foolishly

at the two Himeans with her.

"I've been dying to ask a while now-but who's the pretty young thing, really?" she demanded. "I know, I know! Her name's Natsuki and she's an Otomeian captain, but have you seen the face on her and what's she doing with the two of you?"

Shizuru laughed and offered: "For lack of a better title, one might call her my guardian."

Midori was incredulous.

"You *never* take bodyguards, Shizuru-chan, assuming that's what you meant." She shook her head disbelievingly. "Why the sudden whim, then, and is it related to the question I asked that you haven't answered? Besides, you haven't been treating her as a bodyguard from what I've seen. No, none of that dissimulation. What or who is she, really?"

Chie was unable to repress a grin as she looked sideways at her friend, who could practically hear the senior legate's thought: *Now how are you going to get out of this?*

"Aside from that, one might call her my companion," Shizuru stated simply.

"Companion?"

"Yes."

This time, Midori gave her a lop-sided smile.

"Companion?" she repeated, wetting her lips with a gulp of wine. "That's a fine, ambiguous term, isn't it, Shizuru-chan? I could ask, for example, what kind of companionship you mean by that. Now I'm starting to really get curious."

She threw a sharp glance at Shizuru, her olive-green eyes suddenly twinkling and as young as she liked to claim herself.

"Is your diction in this case more a feature of your usual style of talking or is it a result of the nature of the relationship itself?" she

asked.

*Oh, the frozen Chie thought, Midori-san really does have such daring!*

"You almost make me sound duplicitous, Midori-han," Shizuru said jokingly to the governor. "Are my words always so twin-sided?"

Her former tutor chuckled. "I've always been tempted to argue you're descended from Janus instead of Venus, in that sense."

"Then might we argue that you draw your ancestry from divine Dionysus?"

All three laughed at this remark: it was no secret that the governor was a prodigious imbibor.

"Oh, I missed you two!" Midori exclaimed, permitting herself to be sidetracked. "I hardly get to see any of my old students or friends these days. Besides, this place keeps me busy enough as it is, so I can't even go visit Hime or anything, for all that I have access to the ports!"

"I was actually surprised the level of activity here," Shizuru admitted. "Even for a port province, I had the impression things would quiet down a little since it is winter. Is that not so, Chie-han?"

"Yes," the legate answered. "And besides, I also noticed something interesting while we were passing through the city: you have a lot of dark-skinned visitors here. Arabs, I'm guessing?"

The governor sighed deeply.

"You noticed, hm?" she asked. "Yes, they're Arabs. Some Jews too, and lots of Greeks. We've a lot of foreigners here."

"It's natural for a port city."

Midori acknowledged that with another sigh, though one of more irritation than the first.

"Yes, true, natural... but it gives me a headache!" she cried. "I'm the

one who has to mediate between their petty squabbles over territory, you know. Can't get by a day without having this or that deputation from one of them come by and ask me to tell the others to stay put. Sons of Dis, they're annoying!"

"Why, what is this?" Shizuru asked with standard concern. "Over sectors?"

"Yes," Midori replied, taking a gulp of wine before continuing. "Most of the trouble is over in the western parts, since that's where the Arab quarters of the city are. Just so happens that a lot of Greeks are right next to that. You know how these people can get, between them."

"I see. Boundaries being pushed between the two?"

"That's it. So I'm the one bombarded with the requests and complaints and whatever-they-call-them delegations from both sides, left to hear all the squalling." She frowned deeply, lines suddenly carving around her mouth. "I don't grudge that, mind you. I just wish they'd be less fickle about their demands. Why, every time I start to get somewhere with them, some damned fool does something stupid and kills some Arab or Greek on the streets at night-and we get another ruckus again! Can't the *ineptes* handle their own people? I have to think of the Himeans living here too, you know, and they're getting worried, even if they've been pretty much unaffected until now."

"Understandable," Shizuru responded. "I suppose you are restricting the inflow of new foreign applicants for residency, then?"

"Of course." A snort. "Though a fat lot of good that'll do-they're like weeds."

The two younger women grinned.

"Weeds?" both echoed.

"Sprout up mysteriously," Midori explained with a smirk. "Walls and guards don't stop their kind. It's like they're borne on the wind. You can't pull them out just like that, either. Got wide, thick roots,

especially since a lot of them have been here about as long as us. They've long been part of the commerce, besides that. Weeds, yes, but useful-even necessary-ones."

"Ah," Shizuru said with a small smile. "That restricts the options for gardening, then."

Chie sniggered: "I suppose we can't do any real weeding-out, either."

"Oh, believe me, 'real weeding-out' is just my problem right now!"

The two questioned her with their glances. The governor's face suddenly turned grim, prompting them to give her their full attention.

*When even Midori-han turns serious, Shizuru thought with a touch of dark humour, matters must truly be grave.*

"It's to do with the Mentulaeans," the eldest of the three Himeans explained. She shook her head at her younger companion's expressions. "No, not what you think. We don't have any of them trying to invade us or anything of that kind. Otherwise, you'd have heard about it before now. Besides which, we could handle ourselves well enough if it were just that." She lifted an eyebrow. "My garden's got a great guard dog, after all, so they wouldn't be able to tear down the fence that easily, come to that."

Both younger women squinted for a moment.

"Oh!" Shizuru said an instant later, shaking her head in self-derision. "Of course, I nearly forgot. Your garrison commander is Sakaki-han, is it not?"

Midori confirmed it. Chie leaned back in her seat and whistled.

"A damned good guard dog, all right," she said, imagining the renowned military woman in her mind. "Little bark, I'll grant, but definitely a lot of bite!"

"Right, so you see what I mean," the governor replied. "No, my problem with the Mentulaeans isn't actually due to any aggression from their side. It's the other way around-or should I say, it's due to

aggression against them."

That got them to stare at her.

"This is actually connected to you," she told them. "Or what you're doing here. You know that we aren't *actually* at war with the Mentulae yet. Not outright, Hime-versus-the-Mentulaean-Empire war. The only battle that's passed between us to date is the Battle of Argentum, where you and your army fought on behalf of an ally."

"Just so," Shizuru said. "It is as you say."

"So we don't have a state of war yet, but rather a state of wariness," Midori said. "I know, probably more than anyone else, that Obsidian is raring to have a go at a campaign of expansion-which will probably lead to war with us. But as things stand, we only have 'probably'. So all we can do is operate with caution."

"As you say," the younger woman repeated.

"Since this is a port city, a commercial province, I had to consider this," the governor continued. "The flow of people, of merchants, through this place is what keeps it running. Having foreigners coming and going regularly is a staple feature. Provinces like this always have lighter and fewer restrictions when it comes to exit and entry of non-citizens. The only time when port provinces actually close down or start truly regulating who gets in and out is during war. Not before."

She peered meaningfully at Shizuru.

"I understand," the young general said, with a thoughtful furrow of her brow. "Because if you did choose to be overly cautious in advance and put a ban on Mentulae entering Argus at this time, it might actually *bring about* the war."

Chie's lips parted slightly in comprehension. Midori nodded.

"I can't risk instigating something that's still just a probability by acting on it before it even becomes real," the older woman told them. "So as wary as I am of the Mentulaean king and his kin, I chose not to ban his people from entering Argus, even if I'm



regulating their entry heavily. The most I could do-which I did-was to have the border guards thoroughly check that the Mentulaeans coming in are actually merchants here for trade and ensure that only people who've been here in the past for the same reasons get in here again. No grand entourages allowed. Regulations for weapons are also enforced. But this is also applied to every other foreign party that comes in, so they can't find offence there. Touchy."

"Of course."

"They're allowed to stay in the province and even the city while their commerce is being done, naturally. Besides them, there are also Mentulae that have been living in Argus for a while," the governor said. "Some residing in the city itself, though most of them are outside, in the other parts of Argus Province. The ones in the city, though, are mostly respectable immigrants. Relocated here a long time ago, probably two generations or more."

She reached for her cup.

"Anyway, you can say there are a good number of Mentulae here right now," she said. "Permanent residents and travellers both. Not a *lot*, but a decent number."

The other two nodded to show they understood the background she had just provided.

"Here's the problem," she said, with a deep scowl. "Someone's been killing them. *Killing the Mentulae*. I'm not sure who, but I'm having two or so Mentulaean corpses turning up every week. We find them stabbed, beaten to death, sometimes even drowned by the docks, and no one-no bloody one-is willing to talk."

She took a long gulp of wine.

"The locals are getting jittery over the killings, but they're jittery over the possibility of Mentulae trying to invade too. So it's hard to drum up sympathy for the victims." She made a sound of discontent. "And they are victims! I'll admit there's a possibility some of those Mentulae 'merchants' coming in aren't just here for trade, but what about the Mentulae who've been living here all their lives? The worst

part is that most of the people getting murdered are in the city-and most of the Mentulaeans in the city are those who've been here for years, decades, goddamned generations already! I can't have innocent people getting killed in my province, just because of an impending war that doesn't really have anything to do with them!"

*And with that*, Shizuru thought in ending her recollections, *I have to agree*. Aside from that ethical concern, too, was the question of the political result such killings might have-in the province or beyond it. The killings had to stop. Or be stopped, more likely.

The problem would be finding the culprits. From what Midori had told them yesterday, it seemed highly likely that the murders were being carried out by several people, perhaps in a concerted effort. If Shizuru had to guess, she would say they were a highly organised group, most likely composed of a bunch of bully boys being funded and directed to do the work by some influential and paranoid members of the city's inhabitants. Most likely a faction that had always been suspicious of Mentulaeans or simply of non-Himeans in the city-there were always a number of these-and who now saw in the threatening war the justification they needed to take to such measures.

"Poor Midori-han has her hands full on this one," she said aloud.

"Shizuru?"

She turned to look at her companion.

"Ah, nothing, Natsuki. I was merely thinking aloud," she answered.

"Talking to yourself?" came the reply, delivered with a cheeky smirk.

"Come here," she pretended to growl, swinging her legs over the edge of the couch and pulling the girl up onto her lap. The latter giggled uncharacteristically as Shizuru smothered her in a playful embrace, the younger woman's normally cold façade absent in the privacy of their bedroom. Shizuru wondered what the Otomeian's fellow warriors would say if they saw her like this, so little like her usual forbidding self. They would probably fall over from an apoplexy.

*All the more reason to keep this side of her mine*, she mused, diverted from all thoughts of the Mentulaeen killings. *All the more reason to keep my Natsuki all to myself.*

She nuzzled the younger woman's neck, eventually bringing her lips up to one small, prettily-formed ear and nibbling it. Natsuki let her make love to that ear for a while, and Shizuru busied herself with licking at the shell and taking the lobe between her teeth before the girl finally turned her face properly towards her. The Himean welcomed the kiss eagerly.

It was Natsuki who broke the kiss, staring dazedly into red eyes.

"Shizuru," she whispered. She sighed the name again, sweetly and with quiet longing. "Shizuru."

Shizuru slanted her head and captured the pink lips once more, pushing her tongue furiously into the girl's mouth. Natsuki let her, clutching her hair with bandaged fingers and squirming deeper into the embrace. Enjoying the younger woman's wriggles, Shizuru began mimicking the act of intercourse with her tongue, thrusting it in and out of her companion's mouth in a rhythmic and stabbing motion. The girl gasped, trying to keep Shizuru's tongue from slipping from her lips. But it continued to slide between them, in and out, teasing and taunting.

*Why, this feels almost as good as actually doing it*, Shizuru thought light-headedly. Her rhythm faltered a little when she felt the familiar tightening between her legs wrenching at her. *I need to have her now.*

She removed her arms from around the younger woman, intending to use her hands to disrobe the girl. Before she could do that, however, she felt Natsuki's hands pulling up her tunic and sliding it up until the bottom hem folded atop her thighs.

She stopped what she was doing and drew back a little. To her surprise, the girl's hands continued underneath the folds of her tunic, reaching her undergarment and tugging at it urgently. Natsuki's eyes narrowed as she found removing that article difficult, its wearer being seated on the couch, after all. She gave Shizuru a pleading,

desperate look that had the older woman grinning.

"What is it, Natsuki?" she jested. "Do you want something?"

A tide of mingled anger and embarrassment swept over the girl's skin. It brightened the wild green of her eyes in contrast.

"Now you see how hard it is for me to control myself while trying to figure out how to undress you quickly," Shizuru whispered. She gave the girl's ear a lick before moving back. She almost regretted her tease, however, when she saw the beseeching expression on her companion's face afterwards.

"Ah, now, do not look at me so," she murmured, swiftly cupping the girl's cheeks. "I am only teasing you, Natsuki. Forgive me?"

The girl responded with a slow, still red-faced nod. Shizuru was about to resume kissing her when she felt the weight on her lap shift, sliding down and pushing her legs apart.

"Natsuki?"

The younger woman knelt between her legs. Shizuru could feel the girl's hands, which had been on her thighs, moving up again and onto her undergarment. They tugged on it insistently.

"Shizuru," the Otomeian said.

She pretended to sigh, amused by the girl's pleas, and finally relented. Natsuki wasted no time in pulling down the undergarment when the Himean lifted her hips. A moment later, the white cloth was discarded on the couch, beside her. The older woman flicked a glance at it, feeling a twinge in her belly when caught her own scent in the air. Her eyes snapped back to the girl, however, when she felt lips pressed to her knee.

*She can be so sweet*, she thought silently, while watching Natsuki continue pressing kisses around both knees. *Not to mention sensual*. For with each soft caress, the younger woman's hands seemed to push up Shizuru's tunic, exposing more and more of the strong thighs that had been shaped by years and years of marching. When the cloth had gone halfway up these tapering columns, the girl

suddenly ceased pressing kisses to the white skin and opened her mouth to suck on it. The older woman flinched from the wet touch.

" *Ecastor* !" she hissed quietly, trying to keep her hips still. Natsuki simply cast a short glance at her, however, before choosing another spot to latch onto and continue what she was doing. Her suction was slow, her teeth rasping over the skin she caught and attempted to pull between her lips. Sometimes she would catch the skin with a fleeting nip-strong enough to have a slight sting, but light enough to make Shizuru wish for more. It seemed almost as though an echo of the pleasure travelled upwards, stroking the older woman between her legs in a ghosting caress.

*Now where did she learn to do this, the elder woman found herself thinking distractedly. Not from anyone else, I hope! I swear to Sol Indiges, Tellus and Liber Pater I would kill-*

Natsuki moved up her thigh and nipped again, drawing a curt groan.

Shizuru let her head rest against the edge of the window on the wall behind her, watching the girl continue to make love to her thighs as more flesh was exposed. Natsuki put down hot, open-mouthed kisses on her legs with maddening sloth, every now and then stopping to suck a crimson spot onto the skin. Midway through, however, she suddenly stopped. Shizuru looked at her with mild enquiry instead of voicing a question. She was still too dazed to talk; her body felt hot, weakness having infected every muscle.

Natsuki's eyes hooded. She inhaled, and it was long and deep.

*Oh Natsuki*, Shizuru groaned inwardly, feeling her cheeks flame at the thought of what the younger woman was scenting. *What are you doing now?*

Natsuki seemed to be enjoying the scent she had caught, however. She closed her eyes and rubbed her cheek against the older woman's thigh like a satisfied cat. A low purr came from her mouth, setting Shizuru's thighs atremble. Then her eyes opened, and the older woman found herself consumed by those glassy green eyes, sucked in by the hunger in them.

*She will devour me*, she thought with a shiver.

No sooner had this passed through her mind than she felt Natsuki slide forward. The tunic was at Shizuru's waist now, her lower body fully exposed. She shut her eyes, feeling a shrill sensation from the puffs of breath she could feel between her legs and where Natsuki faced all her secrets. Then she felt those probing fingers finally touch her sex, pulling its lips apart with timid care. She looked up, trembling with pleasure.

Immediately the delicate tongue licked up at her. She gasped at the sensation, eyes going wide as her body jumped. She could feel the girl's nose nuzzling, burrowing deeper, and stuttered out her breaths in time to the movements. Her hands came down of their own will and cradled that dark head between her legs while she opened further. It was all too rich, too much, she thought.

Her flashing gaze fell on another dark head nearby, not the one attached to her flesh. It was the panther cub, reclined on the floor and observing them with curiosity in its golden eyes. The sight of another creature watching her body writhing indecently heightened Shizuru's excitement. It also brought a tinge of shame to her cheeks.

*Should Shizuki really be seeing this*, she wondered, a whisper of her modesty suddenly returning even if her reason knew it was wasted on the cub. *This is not exactly pa-*

A jolt of her body stopped that thought. The nub between her legs had been caught up by small but strong teeth. Natsuki nibbled, held her in a vise, then sucked her into the space between the edges with a feverishness that left her groping for vision. She felt the younger woman's tongue stabbing into her vengefully the way she had stabbed her tongue into Natsuki's mouth earlier. It was filling her now, trying to feel everything inside of her, and she abandoned herself to the pleasure of its inspection. Her head fell against the window sill as she shuddered, trying to choke her moans. Even the faint, faraway sounds from outdoors were caught in the dance, rising and falling in violent crests.

"Natsuki," she moaned from between clenched teeth. "I can take no more..."

Then that tongue flushed her and she broke, groaning aloud as the rapture seared through her in bright waves. Natsuki continued to score her harshly, rasping over the swollen flesh with such determination that the older woman's body snapped over and over again even after the first cataclysm had struck. The release rocked her so hard she broke into a sweat, droplets running down her brow.

"Hahh!"

There was the sloppy sound of Natsuki's mouth detaching from her. Shizuru breathed in deeply, too exhausted to speak right after that. She was conscious of the girl pulling back from between her legs, the soft brush of Natsuki's hair against her thighs bringing back a murmur of the pleasure. Eventually she sat up and opened her eyes. Natsuki was still on her knees.

The girl was licking her lips, a rapt expression on her face. She did this several times before Shizuru finally called to her.

"Natsuki."

The call was uncharacteristically shaky, a little breathless even, and it brought Natsuki's eyes to the older woman in an instant. Shizuru smiled weakly at her and the girl mirrored the expression. She then knelt up, one of her hands wiping the remaining wetness around her mouth. She froze, however, when the Himean seized her wrist.

She stared questioningly into the wine-coloured eyes, which were coming nearer.

"No," Shizuru said, leaning so far forward in her seat that her nose was nearly touching that of the girl. "Allow me."

Having said that, she opened her mouth and dipped out her tongue. The first lick sent a fine shudder through the younger woman's frame. She swept her wet tongue around the Otomeian's mouth to clean it thoroughly of her own juices, painting glistening strokes from the hollows of the other's cheeks to the point of her chin. Natsuki stilled like a statue, her wide eyes showing her astonishment at what her lover was doing. Little did she know it, but the latter was just as surprised as she-indeed, perhaps even more so.

*I cannot believe I am doing this*, Shizuru was thinking to herself. *For me to have her on my tongue is natural, I think, but this scent, this flavour, is my own.*

Another long lick ended at the corner of Natsuki's lips before delivering the flavour into her mouth.

It was herself she was tasting now, so why was she enjoying it?

But her misgivings were soon overwhelmed, for each new lick seemed to numb her mind to any qualms. After some time passed, she realised that she could not taste herself on the girl's skin any longer. She ceased her ministrations and looked at Natsuki.

The younger woman's eyes were half-shut, what little that showed of them being glazed over.

"My beautiful girl. That was wonderful. Thank you for it."

*Perhaps I should exact some revenge.*

She acted swiftly, practically leaping out of her seat and pushing the girl to fall onto her bottom in an awkward sprawl. Her laugh came out at Natsuki's startled yelp.

"Be still," she commanded, pinning the squirming hips against her own. She had come down from the couch, and was sitting on the floor in front of Natsuki, legs interlocking with the girl's. "Methinks it is my turn."

She spread Natsuki's legs even further by pushing them apart with hers. Their fronts were flush against each other, and the younger woman's arms had gone around her in an embrace. Her free hand swiftly began to loosen the girl's trousers. Natsuki tried to pull her down so that they could lie on the floor, but she resisted.

A look passed between them.

"I want to take you this way," she explained throatily, delighted by the look that got from the younger woman. The body against her suddenly came alive, quivering and flushing red with heat. That pleased her almost as much as the shock on Natsuki's face when



she slid the hand that had been working their way into the girl's trousers further, slipping eager fingers into a wet chasm without hesitation.

"I want to do it like this," she murmured, in time with the younger woman's gasp. At once she was driving inside of her, filling her so completely she was crushing the little bead of flesh above her opening. The dark-haired girl cried out in response, her body jerking so hard she nearly dislodged her assaulter. Still Shizuru pumped into her relentlessly, and soon the girl's body recognised its pleasure, making it easier for both of them by throwing arms around Shizuru's neck. Hips rocked against Shizuru's hand, grinding more thoroughly into the pleasure that seemed to have skewered the girl into her surrender. Their heads pushed against each other and a rivulet of sweat ran down Shizuru's face, migrating there from the other's brow.

*She looks so beautiful like this*, Shizuru thought, studying her lover's face. The young woman's eyes were narrowed and wet, and her mouth hung open, her lips a beautifully carnal red. The nostrils of her small nose too flared delicately outwards, struggling for what seemed to be suddenly rare air.

Then there came an intrusive rapping sound that broke upon their world. Shizuru's hand faltered a little before continuing the rhythm, her eyes casting a dark look at the door.

"Shizu-nngh," Natsuki groaned quietly, her face indicating she wanted to disentangle herself from the older woman while her body said otherwise. "There is-mnh!"

Shizuru shook her head and called out in the door's direction: "Yes? Who is it?"

There was a muffled sound, then a similar call from the other side.

"Shizuru-san?" It was the smooth voice of the senior legate. "I'm sorry, it's me. I didn't wake you, did I?"

Shizuru flicked a glance at the girl wincing in her arms, still being lifted and brought down by her thrusts. Natsuki was biting her lip,

giving small gasps every now and then as Shizuru continued to work her.

"Not at all, Chie-han," Shizuru called out. "Can you give me a moment to dress, though?"

"Go right ahead," came the answer. "I'll be in my room. You know where it is."

There was the sound of footsteps moving away from the door and down the corridor. Shizuru smiled at Natsuki as the latter gasped at her. There was a fine trail of moisture running down the Otomeian's face and coming from the corner of her eye; she was ready to come, and Shizuru could feel it.

"We really should not keep Chie-han waiting," she said. "Come now, Natsuki."

As if eager to obey her, the girl's sex convulsed at these words and Natsuki's face buried into her shoulder. She felt the younger woman crying, muffling the sound by screaming into her tunic. She practically felt the girl's ecstasy as well, the jarring explosions of pleasure wracking the body in her arms and vibrating around her fingers. She held the girl close in response and let her ride out the pleasure for as long as possible.

Afterwards, when Natsuki's body finally stopped quivering, she extricated herself from the younger woman and slowly disentangled their bodies. She smiled fondly at the girl and dropped a kiss onto her burning cheek, pulling her carefully to her feet.

"Let us wash," she said to her. "So that we can find out what it is that Chie-han wants this late at night."

After having cleansed and arranged themselves, they were soon walking in a corridor of the mansion doing just that. The senior legate was explaining to them that something had just transpired in the gubernatorial courtyard that merited the commotion coming from that area at the moment—a commotion Shizuru had managed to ignore completely, in fact, though she pretended to have noticed it.

"Ah, yes, I was actually wondering about it," she lied, hiding her smile. "Such noisy activity at this time of night is unusual, eh?"

She glanced to her side and saw her bodyguard's pink face. Meanwhile, Chie answered her.

"Yes, so I went off to see what was the matter," the legate was saying. "And I think you'd better see it for yourself. It's a perfect scandal, I tell you. Oh, here we are."

They made their way to the main doors of the gubernatorial residence. The hulking, iron-enforced doors were thrown open and people scurried in and out of them. Just outside, Shizuru could make out a nearby group clustered. Torches blazed at that spot, the constant flicker of shadows and light lending the scene a sense of sinister urgency. She quickened her pace, intrigued.

"Fujino-san! Fujino-san!"

They searched among the bustle to see one of the local officials they had recently met waving at them. He was at the foot of the steps outside, and they made their way down to meet him.

"Good evening, Ogawa-han," Shizuru greeted the official upon reaching the foot of the stairs. She continued walking towards the group of people near them, though a little more slowly. "Whatever is going on?"

"It's another dead Mentulaean," he explained, drawing a curious look. "This time, though, the *cunni* left it at the governor's doorstep-oh, please pardon my language, Fujino-san."

"What you just said is light compared to the things I regularly hear in the army," she said. "Ah, Midori-han!"

They made their way to the governor, who waved them over and into the centre of the cluster. She was standing by a wagon with the corpse of a man stretched atop it. His flesh had acquired the slate-like tinge of someone drained of blood and his mouth was strangely twisted. It seemed set into a rictus of agony.

"Appalling, is what it is!" Midori scowled, waving a hand at the body.

"It was bad enough that they were doing it on my watch before, but now they're spitting in my face! To bring a dead Mentulae here and leave it at my doorstep, the *cunni* ! I'll string them up by their balls for this, the cock-sucking bastards!"

Shizuru peered at the older woman surreptitiously, noting that her cheeks seemed tainted with a red that was surely not all due to indignation. She supposed the governor had been drinking before, which explained in part the unusual salt of her words.

Although it was obvious to see it was also that she was very, *very* angry.

"How did they manage to leave it here?" Shizuru asked the older woman.

"Not actually *here*," Midori replied, frowning at the corpse again. It seemed to return her scowl with the expression frozen onto its mouth. "Left it over there, just inside the gates. I had it brought here because I didn't want any people gawking over it-though I see that's happening now, anyway. Damn gossips, the lot of them."

She called to someone in the crowd.

"I thought I told you to cover this poor sod up?" she said irritably. "We've identified him already, so have the decency to put a blanket over his face!"

Several people bowed in apology and rushed off in different directions, perhaps to find a cloth for that purpose. Midori rolled her eyes in exasperation.

"Oh, for Juno's sake," she grumbled. "Never mind!"

She slung off her cloak and threw it over the corpse, shielding the dead man's body from the stares. She turned back to Shizuru and clicked her tongue with annoyance.

"I'm just hoping someone saw something," she huffed. "And that they're willing to talk. I'll have to put out an edict on Mentulaeans going about unaccompanied at night. Can't have them bibble about when these bastards are still hunting them down."

She turned her head to someone calling her.

"Excuse me," she snapped, running to that other person.

Chie and Shizuru watched the governor stalk off, her long hair streaming behind her like a banner of rage. Chie turned back to the wagon with the corpse and lifted a sooty eyebrow. She ran her hand through her own hair, which was being whipped about frantically by the wind.

"Poor Midori-san," she sighed, her eyes on the greyish white arm protruding from under the governor's cloak. "What do you think of this, Shizuru-san?"

She looked at Shizuru in time to see the smoky sigh leave the other senator's mouth.

"I think," Shizuru said, "that I should talk to Nao-han in the morning."

# Chapter 25

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Crossroads college** ( **s** ) - *Gathering places for the associations of men/women who are tasked with protecting crossroads or intersections of Rome's avenues. The crossroads were held to be a sacred place, and frequented by supernatural energies such as that of the goddess Hecate, so the Romans paid great attention to their care. The members of crossroads colleges were from the lower classes, and often formed (fairly violent) gangs or fraternities.*

2. **In absentia** (concerning **election** ) - *Literally "in one's absence". It was sometimes allowed by Roman law for a politician to be a candidate for the curule elections without being present in the city itself to file nomination personally, which was the norm.*

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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"Did you get taller overnight, or is it my imagination?"

Nao's companion smiled, saying nothing to the grudgingly-delivered compliment. The redhead pressed a temple with her fingers and winced.

"On second thought, I think it's just my hangover," she said, straightening her posture with a groan. "Cack! My head feels like it's got something banging inside it. Shouldn't have drunk so much last night."

The woman walking beside her held out a skin of water. She took it gratefully.

"Thanks, Sakaki," she said, after downing a swig of the beverage. "Do you have a handy hammer for my noggin too?"

Argus's captain of the guard smiled at her jest, taking back the water-skin.

"Do you want to sit down?" the tall woman asked, slowing her steps to look at Nao with concern. "We can stop here."

Nao waved her hand dismissively.

"No, it's fine," she insisted, peering up to look at the soft, dark eyes focused on her. She grit her teeth and continued speaking, trying to ignore the fact that her tongue felt as though it were made of lead. "Best we get there before they start cleaning it up."

Sakaki nodded, her tail of dark hair rippling. They wrapped their cloaks more firmly about them and continued.

The two were on their way to the site of the latest Mentulaeen murder, which had just been reported that morning. The actual crime seemed to have taken place the previous night. Having given instructions to be alerted instantly in such an event, Nao had been dragged out of a very comfy bed by a relentless Erstin, who had then presented the groggy primipilus to Argus's embarrassed garrison commander. After a quick recapitulation of the situation, the two officers found themselves as they were now: passing through the city's streets in general silence.

To be sure, it was not that either woman was uncomfortable with the other. They had actually known each other for a while, owing to their connections in the military. The silence was caused, rather, by two things: first, by the red-headed centurion's monumental headache, and second, by the other soldier's legendary tendency to silence—one which, in Nao's opinion, rivalled that of Shizuru Fujino's bodyguard. Who would have known that there were two Sphinxes to be found in the North? And as luck would have it, she got to meet both of them!

She smiled sarcastically. At least the Sphinx she had with her now was a little better in that respect than the general's, as far as she

was concerned. After all, Sakaki always did reply if someone asked her a question, whereas her Otomeian equivalent usually manoeuvred to give an answer without even having to open her mouth. Nao supposed that might count as a talent in itself. Still, it never ceased to astound her how the general had ever managed to put up with that overdone closemouthedness. She supposed that kind of patience was a talent as well.

*And speaking of the talented general.. .*

She slowed her steps when she saw the very woman in the distance, walking as usual beside *her* Sphinx. They were ambling along slowly and, Nao guessed, were headed to the barracks. She called Sakaki to a stop.

"Sakaki, you mind if we take a detour?" she asked. "I want to introduce you to Shizuru-san and her pup."

She looked up to find the other woman's face lit up with a curious expression. Sakaki looked oddly enthusiastic.

"The general has a puppy too?" the taller woman suddenly asked, with excitement trembling in her voice. "I heard she keeps a panther. That's nice. It's unusual, isn't it?"

She smiled eagerly, like a child looking forward to being given a treat.

"So where are they?" she asked.

Nao slapped her head inwardly as she realised what had set the quiet woman rambling. She had almost forgotten about Sakaki's curious weakness for-what was the word? Oh, yes: *small* things.

*I better tell her now before she becomes too giddy*, she sighed, flapping her cloak loose from the tangle around her legs into which the wind had blown it. *I don't think I can handle seeing that sort of let-down face in someone this grown.*

"No, it's not a dog," she explained, hitting one aching shoulder with a fisted hand. "Though you can still call it a pet, I think." She smirked at her companion. "And it's the one who owns the panther."



Sakaki looked, she was entertained to see, extremely confused.

"Let's go. I'll introduce you."

She led the way and began pushing through denizens of Argus already milling about the street. As they made their way through, she found herself recalling Shizuru's instructions to her four days ago, when they had last seen each other. That was the time Nao's commander had asked her to inquire into the source of the Mentulaean killings in the province, for the sake of preventing any more.

"I want you to look into it for me, Nao-han," the fair-haired woman had instructed, not at all uncomfortable with engaging her primipilus for work outside of the army. She had met Nao this way, after all, while using Nao in the latter's original occupation as an intelligencer. "Try to find out who it is that can be considered the mastermind, or masterminds, as I expect. This is more the work of an organised group rather than one person."

"What am I allowed to do?"

"I should say the usual," came the answer. "Do what is necessary but handle it with the customary delicacy. You understand."

"Yes, I do."

"Then I shall leave this to you," Shizuru had smiled. "We would be better able to put a stop to these murders if you get information."

"I'll see to it right away," Nao had answered, before giving her meaningful look. "But say, I didn't expect you to worry your golden head about this, General."

It did not matter that they were acting technically outside of their military offices at the moment. She almost always called Shizuru "General", it being that she viewed her as the last commander she would ever take.

"Oh, why is that?" Shizuru had asked cheerfully. "Does that mean you think me generally unconcerned about lives being taken off the field, Nao-han? I would hate for you to see me as such an apathetic

person."

The redhead had raised an eyebrow.

"Course not," had been her reply. "What I mean is that even if it does lead to what the others are afraid of, it wouldn't be the end of the world for us, would it?"

The general's smile had widened. "It might even be the genesis, you mean?"

"That, yes."

"Well, that may be so," Shizuru had replied. "If the situation does end with that particular conclusion, it might even be to our advantage. But that is only as far as the conclusion is concerned. Stripped of its ramifications, it would be quite beneficial to us. But nothing is ever so straightforward."

Nao had cocked her head at this, putting the query to her general by non-vocal means. Shizuru had then folded her hands together above the table as she answered.

"Setting aside the moral question of whether or not it is proper to let possible innocents be killed, there are other things to consider," she had told Nao. "Such as the probability of similar things happening in the other provinces or allied towns in this area. Something this high-profile is bound to be sensationalised, and given the tension in the region at the moment, there is a danger that groups or people nearby shall emulate the measures our assassins have been taking towards preventing 'foreign spies'. We might have similar killings breaking out in Sosia, for example, and other places. Which would gravely escalate the situation with the Mentulae."

The centurion had flicked a glance towards Shizuru's bodyguard-standing at the other end of the room by the window-before replying.

"That's the point, I thought. For our campaign, anyway."

Shizuru had given her a nod.

"It is, yes," had been the answer. "But this particular route towards

that point has attendant and unnecessary risks. Why hazard them when we shall soon arrive at our destination through a much better path, as our guides back in Hime shall be ensuring?"

"Please speak plain to me, General. I'm sorry, but you know I'm not good at this sort of talk."

"All right then," the younger woman had acquiesced, with a slight chuckle. "Allow me to state one of my reservations clearly: I do not want the murders to continue because Hime cannot lose the high ground in any respect when it comes to dealings with foreign nations. If an epidemic of Mentulaeen deaths takes place in Himean provinces with Himeans being the prime suspects, that suspicion casts an ill light on Hime in any war that might result from the epidemic. And more fool us if a war *does* result from this pitiful display of fearfulness by our citizens!"

"When the war does come-and it shall come, civilian killings or not," she had continued. "It will not be said that Hime brought it upon herself by condoning such atrocities by her citizens. It will not be said that Hime allowed people to be executed merely on grounds of paranoid distrust. That would make us appear such a lawless nation, with authorities seemingly willing to look away and pandering to common opinion." She had held out her hands. "It would tarnish the name of Hime."

"Hang the tarnish," Nao had replied. "That doesn't matter a fig when the war's come, I'd think."

"I beg to differ, Nao-han," Shizuru had replied. "It matters a great deal. One might even say it is everything that matters. *It*, Nao-han, is Hime."

She stopped then and had cast Nao a brief, but intense look.

"We would do well not to forget that," she had concluded.

*And that, Nao thought, means that no-one else will be forgetting it either.* Once Shizuru Fujino made up her mind about something, Nao had learned, it was usually decided. There was nothing left for her but to follow orders. Besides, while she was not sure she

understood her general's argument about Hime's honour, she did understand the other reason the younger woman had given, which was to protect the Argus governor's reputation. If the killings eventually led to race wars in the city, as was possible, then it was likely that the outcome would be blamed largely on Governor Midori, who would then be accused of having "let" the situation go unheeded.

"And she would then be another innocent victim," Shizuru had told her, before flashing a humorous grin and saying: "Besides which, that would steal my thunder. If war against the Mentulae is blamed on Midori-han, what about poor, answerable me? I would hate to be cheated of my credit where it is due."

*Typical crazy patrician*, Nao thought now, sniggering at the recollection of those words. Were she to be honest, she sometimes felt this way about more than a few of Shizuru's actions. True, they often produced excellent results, but they also managed to baffle her greatly before that. And given the general's typical manner of delivery, you never knew whether she was serious or not. One did not have a bastard clue what the woman would do next, and Nao always felt that serving her was like riding a cyclone out at sea.

She grinned when she saw the force of nature herself pause at a shop display and lift an elaborate dress from the pile to hold up to her bodyguard. The latter blushed so wildly it was perceptible even from the distance.

*I'll be damned if it isn't an interesting ride, though*, she thought, waving a hand.

"Hey there, General! Good day, good day!"

The two women looked her way, Shizuru breaking out into a wide smile. A few moments later, both pairs of women were close enough to exchange greetings.

"Good morning, Nao-han," Shizuru said, still holding the garment she had picked up. She folded it over one arm. "And to you, Sakaki-han. We have yet to be introduced properly, I believe."

"That's why we came here," Nao said. "This is General Shizuru Fujino, Sakaki. And the one I was telling you about is this other one over here. Natsuki's her name and she's a cavalry captain. Otomeian stock."

Sakaki gave the standard expression of pleasure at the introductions, whereas Shizuru smiled broadly yet again.

"I am honoured to meet you as well, Sakaki-han," she said. "I have heard of you, after all, from your old commanders." Up came the light eyebrows, wiggling curiously. "Now if I may ask, what has Nao-han been saying about Natsuki?"

Nao answered before the other woman could. She highly doubted Sakaki would have answered coherently enough, anyway.

"Just saying that she's the one who actually owns that black cat you have, General," she said. "Sakaki likes animals, especially cats."

"Oh, is that so?"

Sakaki nodded.

"Then perhaps you would like to see little Shizuki one of these days. She may do that, right, Natsuki?"

Natsuki nodded.

"There," Shizuru said warmly. "Come and see us sometime, Sakaki-han. Natsuki may even let you play with Shizuki, I am certain."

This time, both Sakaki and Natsuki nodded.

"Jupiter," Nao muttered under her breath. "Talk of the Sphinxes riddling."

Sakaki foiled the effect the next second, however, by speaking to Shizuru.

"Thank you," she said, in an absurdly soft voice. "I'd like that."

"Think nothing of it," Shizuru replied, before slanting her head

slightly at the two primipilii. "May I inquire where you are headed today? Could it have to do with the Mentulaean killed last night?"

"Right you are, General," Nao answered. "Off to see if I can pick up any clues there before they sweep it away." She sniffed the air, the smell of salt tickling her nostrils. It was not a scent she disliked. "I'm hoping our men got careless this time around."

"If that is your objective you might do well to hurry." Shizuru squinted at the sky. "Given the time the murder happened, the 'sweeping' might be underway already."

"Which is why we'll be going *now*," the red-headed centurion answered with a jaunty grin, already beginning to move off. "You'd better get a move on too, General, before the crowds come into the streets. Going to the barracks later to check their drilling again?"

"Yes," Shizuru said. "Happy hunting, Nao-han."

She looked at Sakaki, who was following Nao.

"You too, Sakaki-han," she said. "It was good to meet you."

Both primipilii saluted, then walked off into the crowd. Shizuru watched their backs until her view of them was obscured by a passing wagon. She then turned again to her bodyguard.

"Now one more time," she said with comic abruptness. "Are you sure you would not like something like it?"

She held up the dress that had been folded on her arm, amused by the backwards jerk that brought from her startled companion. Natsuki shook her head vigorously, which she had expected from the time she had first come up with the idea to tease the girl with the overly flamboyant, fabric-flower-bedecked garment in her hands. She pretended disappointment.

"I see," she said, returning the dress to its place and thanking the merchant with a nod before starting off again. The other followed her with an awkward start. "Well, I confess I did not care that much for the design. But still a pity! The colour itself was perfect. It was a perfect match for your blush."

She slid her gaze sideways, chuckling at the girl's pout.

"Now that I think on it, Natsuki, perhaps we should have some breakfast first," she said, a hand reaching to enclose the one swaying nearby. "It was silly of us to leave without having any. Shame on me if I let my dearest girl starve! No, do not worry, we can afford to stop a while-my business with the officers can wait, and they know what to do even without me overseeing them." She felt a slight pressure against her hand. "Shall we get some food here? I rather like seeing what markets have in the way of food sometimes."

Natsuki nodded.

"If you want," the girl said.

"I do, actually." Shizuru placed a hand on the cloth above her stomach. "I am very hungry, to tell you the truth. Let this be a reminder to me never to break my mother's rule."

"Rule?"

"Never to miss breakfast," she explained. "She would have scolded me, had she been here today. I fear to say she was rather a terror, *Mater* was."

Natsuki looked entertained by that. Meanwhile, the older woman looked around and searched for possible places from which to get them some nourishment. She then saw something a little along the path: a small, roadside cart like the ones in Hime, where grilled meats and warm wine could be bought. Smoke was rising invitingly from the charcoal fire beside it, and the familiar sight brought a rumble to her belly.

"Would you like to try that?" she asked, pointing to it. "I remember we used to stop by those in Hime and eat the fare in the open air afterwards. My friends and I used to do it all the time, when we were doing our apprenticeships at the law courts. Oh, unless you feel too cold-"

"No," Natsuki said, cutting her off. "Let us try. That."

They made their way over. After a purchase of two cups of warmed

and spiced wine and four sticks heavy with hot chunks of skewered meat and vegetables, the pair went to sit at a bench beside a tree, off the road. The bench was adjacent to a stone wall, and they leaned their backs against this wall as they ate.

"I missed this," Shizuru said, after taking a bite of the savoury meat. "Do you like it, Natsuki?"

She turned her head to see the girl chewing. Natsuki nodded.

"I am glad," she said, bringing the skewer of food to her mouth for another bite. She paused, however, when she saw the younger woman do the same. The sight of Natsuki's mouth as it opened, the strong white teeth coming out to snag a piece of mushroom, reminded her suddenly of the time those same teeth had nipped at her in their quarters. Her cheeks warmed.

"Shizuru?"

That call snapped her back to the present, where Natsuki was studying her face with concern. She drew a sudden breath, realising that she had also frozen while holding the skewer of meat in the air. Her hand came down slowly.

"Something is wrong?" Natsuki asked. "Shizuru?"

"Oh, nothing, Natsuki," she answered quickly, giving the young woman a settling smile. "I was just thinking of something."

The emerald eyes continued to search her.

"Really," she insisted, reaching for the cup beside her. "Nothing to be concerned about."

She took a sip from the cup and smiled down at its contents.

"I fear the vintage is not as good as the venison, though," she remarked idly, eliciting a smile from the other woman. "Ah well. To be expected."

Having been reassured that her charge was well, Natsuki returned to her own food. Meanwhile, Shizuru regarded the waking city. It



was a grey morning they faced, especially since the sun was hidden by great feathered clouds the colour of smoke. Even the cobblestones of the pavement were dark with moisture.

*The mornings here must be damp regularly*, Shizuru reflected, watching the people passing by. Most of them were garbed in thick, heavy cloaks and trousers. Some of them were even wearing cloaks similar to the Himean military's *sagum*, a waterproof, durable, and often somewhat smelly cloak worn by soldiers during rainy season. For all that this was a Himean city, she could hardly see anyone wearing the toga.

*Well, I do not really expect anyone to*, she thought. *Having that big bolt of cloth festooned around you in this sort of weather can be taxing. And with the way the winds are blowing now, you would be fortunate if you do not find yourself blown all the way to Hime, with your toga for a sail.*

Her lip twitched at that ridiculous image.

"Shizuru?"

She regarded her companion, abandoning her outrageous fantasies of people being buffeted about in undone togas.

"Yes, Natsuki?"

"Are you..."

"Am I what?"

The wide green eyes looked at her: "Are you thinking of the, um, the deaths?"

"Deaths?" she echoed quietly, before realising what the girl meant. "Oh. The murdered Mentulae?"

"Mmm."

"No, not really," she said, letting the now-bare stick in her hand fall onto the ground to join its fellow. "Is that what you thought?"

Natsuki shrugged. Shizuru picked up her cup again and cradled it in her hands, enjoying the warmth.

"What about you?" she asked. "Were you thinking about it, Natsuki?"

There was a short silence before the girl finally nodded.

"Ah. And what, precisely, were you thinking about it?"

Natsuki hesitated.

"I would like to know."

"I, umm..."

"Go on, I shall not bite," Shizuru prodded her, amused. "Unless you want me to."

The girl scowled at the taunt, her blush lending more colour to Shizuru's day.

"About that," the girl said. "Why do you want to stop it? Or them?"

The older woman's eyes widened a fraction.

"Well, for one thing," she said, "because they are killing innocent people."

Natsuki knitted her brow.

"No," was her answer. "Yes, but, um... Ah, like the primipilus said. What she said."

And a second later, she added: "Last time you talked."

Shizuru peered at her.

"Oh, *that*," she said. "So you remember what we talked about, Nao-han and I?"

A nod.

"So you should have heard my reasons for that, already."

A slower nod.

"But," the girl said quietly. "That. Is that all?"

The general could not suppress her smile.

"Is Natsuki accusing me of withholding information from my trusted subordinate?" she asked with false sternness. She immediately dropped her act, however, when her bodyguard reacted by dropping her head and stuttering out apologies.

"No, not that. I do not-I-I beg pardon, Shizuru."

"Oh, it's all right, Natsuki," the Himean said, cutting her off with a smile. "It's all right, really. I was merely jesting. I should be the one apologising to you for teasing so. And yes, you are correct. I did not explain myself fully last time, I think. Would you like me to?"

From the corner of her eye, she perceived the other woman nodding demurely.

"Only if you want," Natsuki told her. "I do not mind to listen. If you do not mind to talk?"

"I do not mind," Shizuru answered, looking out at the street again to avoid looking at the temptation next to her. Argus was now a little busier, with more market-goers and carts clacking over the cobbles. She could see the gateposts marking the beginning of the market proper ahead, just a few metres away.

"Now then, let me see," she began. "You already heard most of my arguments to Nao-han, correct? That it would reflect badly upon Hime, for instance?"

Natsuki nodded.

"But I did not explain the more practical side of the problem, did I?"

The younger woman hesitated.

"Practical?" she said. "For the governor, is it?"

"Oh, no, not that-though that is a practical matter, as you say," Shizuru answered. "I meant, rather, the concrete tactical disadvantage it might bring about in the coming war."

"Oh," Natsuki replied, perking up with curiosity. "No."

"Then let us take that up," Shizuru told her. "I would say preventing the killings and continuing to admit eligible Mentulae into the territories is a tactical move at this point. In other words, I am against undue aggression to them."

"Even if they could be spies?"

"Even then," Shizuru affirmed quietly. "It is a gamble for us, yes, as we may stand to harbour a few spies within our provinces this way, but Hime's military is hardly so pitiful an organisation that it cannot weather the effect of such infiltration. There are structures and defences within the system that provide for this possibility, as should be expected from a nation that has schools famous for producing intelligencers. Knowing best how to carry out such reconnaissance, it only follows that we also know best how to defend ourselves against it, don't you think so?"

The green eyes were focused sharply on her now, shining with acute interest.

"Now this is what I meant by it being a tactical matter," she continued, pleased with the attention. "There are many Mentulaeans already scattered around the northern territories. Some of them are mere travellers, some are immigrants. Some are even no longer legally Mentulaean, having gained the Himean rights one way or another. Whatever the case, it is a fact that we cannot simply exile them from our provinces or those of our allies in some haphazard expulsion. This goes, particularly, for those who have already settled down in these territories. In other words, it is impossible to grant what the ones ordering the killings are demanding: a total ban on those of Mentulaean origin or blood."

Natsuki made a slight movement with her head.

"But," she said, "only so far as war is not yet."

The older woman nodded.

"Yes, that is so-as far as the non-immigrant Mentulae are concerned," she said. "But if they are immigrants, or ones who have the necessary papers and settlement records already, then they shall not be subject to the prohibition in the event of war. That is only fair and reasonable, yes?"

Natsuki made a sound of agreement.

"This is where my concern enters," Shizuru continued. "You see, I fear that allowing the murders to continue would create potential spies or even outright enemies where there had been none before. I fear that the killings shall estrange the Mentulaeans living here, including those who never had any thoughts of actually supporting their nation of origin if war did happen. Why would they have such ideas, after all, when most of them have resettled here in order to escape the troubles they experienced under the aegis of their notoriously unstable king? Why would they betray the hand that has sheltered them thus far from that old horror?"

She lifted one hand then, and curled her fingers inward to make a fist.

"But if this very hand allows them to be slain like this-or, some might think, slays them itself," she went on, "it would be all too easy for them to consider actual defection. Why should they pledge loyalty to a nation that executes them simply due to suspicion? Why should they consider themselves part of our people when every 'true' Himean they pass on the street eyes them with clear distrust? It is difficult to feel loyalty for a nation that treats you so. It would not be long before they think to themselves: *If you kill us due to this false suspicion anyway, we might as well live up to it.*"

Natsuki regarded her with firm attention, head nodding lightly.

"Do you see now, Natsuki?" Shizuru asked. "If these people-the Mentulaeans who have been living among us for a long time now-were actually made to feel alienated enough to become spies, they

would be even more dangerous than any 'real spies' sent by the Mentulae at this moment."

Natsuki nodded again, but more briskly this time.

"Because..." she ventured. "Because they already know much."

"Exactly. And they already have connections, which would only be natural since they have lived in our midst for so long." She settled her cup on the bench, beside her. "It is not too difficult to imagine one of them using his or her knowledge of our cities to foment unrest among the populace, so as to give us internal problems during the war. And that would be much easier for them to do than for some Mentulaean newcomer sent recently for the purpose. Do you agree with me?"

"Mmm!"

Shizuru took up her cup again, studying the liquid within it as she spoke.

"Some might think the best way to prevent this is to simply do away with them all now, regardless of proof or actual evidence to justify it," she said. "But that is something only a reckless fool would do."

She looked Natsuki in the eyes and quirked a brow.

"I am not a fool, Natsuki," she said.

The girl grinned suddenly, surprising her a little.

"Are you *reckless*?"

Shizuru lifted an eyebrow at the question, trying not to smile.

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Chikane Himemiya was late. She was on her way now to observe the Plebeian Tribune's meeting from the Curia's steps along with the other patrician senators, but she knew that the said meeting should by now be nearly finished. The awareness of that probability did not spur her to walk any faster, however. She was not a woman

who ever gave the appearance of *rushing*, even when by herself.

*I do not expect anything much to happen today, at any rate*, she consoled herself, smoothing down the front of her gold-embroidered toga. Her hand went further up by habit, fingers reaching for the shell pendant on her necklace. Almost immediately, her thoughts strayed to her wife, who was waiting for her at their villa.

*Perhaps I should have stayed at home instead, if I was to be late anyway.*

"Chikane-chan! Wait for me!"

The raven-haired woman stopped, swivelling on one heel to turn and look around. Her expression relaxed into a smile when she saw the man approaching, striding towards her in the corridor. She stood her ground and awaited him.

"Reito-kun, good day to you," she said while offering her hand in salute. "I should have known it was no other."

"Oh?" he replied upon reaching her. They clasped hands in a quick greeting. "Why is that, may I ask?"

"I can think of no-else in the Senate who would address me so loudly with so casual an honorific."

The Princeps Senatus grinned, his beautiful amber eyes twinkling: "And here I thought it was my inimitably manly voice that tipped you off, my dear."

"That was another indication, to be sure."

"Going to observe the meeting of the Plebeian Tribune too?" he enquired. "You're quite late, Chikane."

"But still ahead of you, Princeps. By a few steps, to be precise," she rejoined. "Since it appears we have the same destination, shall we?"

He acquiesced with a gesture of his open hand and they set off again. She soon noticed that he was slowing his steps, however, and thus matched her stride with his. It was apparent that he wished

to talk as they went along, and desired to do so in the privacy of the passageway where they now were.

"This is a providential encounter," he commenced, in earnest tones. "I've wanted to ask you something these past few days now, Chikane-chan, something that I'm sure a good many others would like to ask you as well."

"Oh dear," she said, lips twitching. "I fear I am already married, Reito-kun."

That caught him unawares. He dissolved into guffaws, clutching his mid-section.

"Heartbreaking as that is, I know where I have a chance and where I do not," he said later on. "Scarcely your type, am I?"

"I have heard it said that Reito Kanzaki is every woman's type."

"But it is also said that Chikane Himemiya is not every woman." He chuckled out the last dredges of laughter before dropping his voice again. "No, I meant to ask, actually, about your intended candidature... and why you have yet to announce it."

"Ah, that." A sigh escaped her lips. "Yes, it has seemed to slip my mind. So many things going on in the city these days, you see, that keep me occupied."

There was the slightest quirk of a brow as she added: "It makes me a little forgetful."

"Ah, so that's it," he said cheerfully. "May I ask what has caused this temporary amnesia? It is temporary, I hope?"

"Of course." She gave him her slow smile. "The physicians assure me it shall be gone in two weeks' time."

His eyes narrowed slightly at this response.

"Which would put your recovery right before election week, when Haruka-san should have returned," he noted quietly, before going on to cast a sharp glance at her. "Oh. I see."



He concluded: "You *are* sly, Chikane."

The indigo eyes opened wide for a moment, feigning an innocence that vanished swiftly as the urban praetor's lashes fluttered down in a smirk.

"Is that how you perceive me?" she asked with a touch of humour.

"Now, now, I do approve," he said. "It's a fine tactic-to make everyone expect it but to also continuously put off realising their expectations until the last minute. This should wear down any opposition you might still have to your candidature by the time your nomination does become official. That is the idea, isn't it?"

Her head tilted to one side before returning to its usual high carriage.

"It saves me a bit of trouble," she said gently. "This way, I do not have to constantly fend off any attempts to reverse the decision on Izumi-san's bill, which procured the opportunity for me to enter the elections so late in the game. Of course I could deal with any such attempt, but it would be wearisome."

"Yes, I see what you mean," he replied. "And you're correct, keeping them on edge for so long will sap their strength for the future. Even Haruka-san would be forced to meet the general resignation of the House to your candidature, if she does have any qualms about it. You save yourself a great deal of effort this way."

"That is my hope."

"A question, however."

"Yes?"

"I know almost every one of our peers is expecting you to run, even with your postponement of the official nomination," he started. "But what of the lower classes, Chikane-chan? Not all of them follow the games those in our strata engage in. Some, perhaps even most of them shall not be aware of the tenterhooks you have our fellow politicians hanging on. Granted, they don't and can't contribute votes. But I would have thought someone of your ilk would prefer to

be a consul known and loved by the populace too, as such would certainly round out any truly good consulship nicely-despite and against the general disregard for the masses among our ranks. Having the people's support can be *useful*, demagogic though it sounds. Well, we see it in your best friend's case, do we not?"

"Oh, you have my agreement. Popular approbation can be a tool."

"Then is not waiting until your actual consulship to foster it a little bit of a gamble?"

"Princeps, have you ever known me to gamble?"

"No, but if you ever do I am certain you would play with something up your sleeve."

She laughed softly.

"You make me sound like an unsporting player," she said. "In any event, rest assured that there is no need to harbour anxiety over the lower classes. They are going to be very well-tended indeed."

"Now I see. Sending your agents among them already?"

"In a manner of speaking. You might say someone has been seeing to the roots of the popular grapevine for me, and quite skilfully too, I daresay. A person who promises to be a veritable master of managing the masses." Her lips turned up with feline satisfaction. "One may rest easy with such an ally."

"A fine resource to have, then," he said, intrigued. "May I be introduced to this potential demagogue, that I can have someone to turn to for similar matters should the need arise?"

She turned a highly amused face to him.

"My dear man, you have already been 'introduced to this potential demagogue'," she said. At his baffled expression, she hinted: "Who better to act as a liaison between the upper and lower classes than one with an eye the colour of the sky and another the colour of the earth?"

He stared at her.

" *Edepol!* " he exclaimed. "Urumi? You mean Urumi?"

She nodded in affirmation as they paused at the corner, the hallway leading to their destination just ahead. He shook his head in disbelief, still assimilating what she had just told him. Chikane made no secret of her amusement at his incredulity.

"I see this took you by surprise," she said equably. "Though I did not expect it to do so. One might have said it would be a natural inference given her actions of late, as well as her intentions for the future."

"Her intentions?"

"Has she not told you she plans to run for the Plebeian Tribune, hence her request for a change of family and name? I thought she would have."

"Yes, actually. So she did," he said, giving her a helpless grin. "But I thought she was joking. She *looked* like she was joking. Another of her jokes, I thought!"

"In my experience, Urumi jests when she looks at her most serious."

"Agreed. But my, my!" He took a deep breath while reconciling himself to the notion. "So our little cousin is aiming to become a tribune-of-the-plebs, eh? And when does she plan to make this announcement?"

"I know not."

"Ah."

He shook his head in a final expression of disbelief and after having done so, resumed walking. She did the same.

"Still, Urumi getting involved with the lower classes..." He shot her a quick look. "Then, the rumours-has she really been dabbling with the crossroad colleges too?"

Chikane nodded. "She has a talent for dealing with them. Methinks she already has all the major ones under her direction, the scamp."

"Quite an achievement!" His forehead creased suddenly. "But isn't it dangerous? These mobs are made up of ruffians who deem themselves petty consuls of their territories, Chikane. Our cousin may be playing with fire. Remember what happened to Terauchi, the last man who thought the gangs under his control. Not a pretty end the man had."

"Terauchi, my dear man, was a consummate *idiot*," she retorted in her usual easy manner. "And whatever you may think of our cousin, she is most assuredly not that."

"It's hard to disagree when you put it that way."

"I put it simply, Reito-kun. No more than that."

They had almost reached the Curia's steps. Already he could see some senators there, observing the Plebeian Tribune's meeting below them, and among those senators watching was a certain red-headed woman with whom he wished to speak.

"I think I had better save my reservations for another time," he ventured to his present companion. "We have reached our destination, and from what I can hear, they seem to be abuzz."

The two of them joined the others, who welcomed and made space for the new arrivals. Reito found himself standing beside the woman he had been looking at earlier-none other than the senator Mai Tokiha, who greeted him in an attitude as warm as her bright hair.

"I hoped you would come, Reito-san," she said, bestowing upon him a smile he found so dazzling that he was nearly blinded. "But you took a while, so I thought we wouldn't be seeing you today."

"Had I known you would be here, I might've come sooner," he replied, bringing an embarrassed blush to her cheeks. He enjoyed the moment, thoroughly pleased with what he had wrought. But then he remembered something-or rather, *someone*. "And Tate? Is he here?"

She shook her head, setting shoulder-length, carrot-coloured locks astir: "No. He said he wouldn't be in today."

"I see." He smiled sincerely at her as a thought occurred. "Dare I hope you chose to watch the Plebeian Tribune's meeting from here instead of down in the Well of the Comitia specifically so we could run into each other? You usually attend the meetings there, Mai-san."

"Actually, yes," she answered. Her mauve-shaded eyes met his. "I ran into your sister today."

"My sister."

*I should have known it would be that,* he thought. His half-sister, the product of his mother's latter marriage, had a great fondness for Mai-who seemed, happily, to reciprocate the girl's affection. The girl was forever at the Tokiha household, going so far as to develop a habit of staying over there instead of in her room in Reito's own house. Running into Mai, it seemed, was another habit she had just developed. He was almost jealous.

"Somehow, Mai-san, I have a feeling that it would be more accurate to say she ran into you." He pretended concern. "She didn't do anything silly, I hope? My little sister can be rambunctious, though I assure you she means well when she, er, rampages."

"I know," she replied, giggling at the word he chose. "No, she just wanted to talk to me. She asked if she could visit me tonight."

"In Mikoto's language: gorge herself at your table."

She tilted her head to one side, looking embarrassed again.

"Mikoto can be taxing to handle, Mai-san. If it's an imposition-

"Oh, no, no!" she said, shaking her head forcefully she cut him short. "I don't mind at all. To be honest, I was going to tell you that you could come along for dinner too, if you want. I was pretty sure that she wouldn't remember to invite you, after all." She gave him another of her faintly embarrassed, wonderfully likeable smiles. "You know how Mikoto can be."

His teeth flashed as he grinned broadly, pleased by this turn of events.

"I would love to come, Mai-san, if you would have me," he said.  
"That's very kind of you to ask."

"Oh, really, Reito-san. It's only polite."

"Does that mean you asked me only out of politeness, then? Ah now, I *am* saddened."

"No, ah, that's not what I meant."

As this banter between the Princeps and Senator Tokiha continued, the urban praetor carefully made her way to the fore of the group. The others let her pass while nodding their greetings and salutes. After a few moments, she finally reached the very front, her view of the meeting below them unimpeded.

*Much better .*

There was a rustle of cloth beside her.

"Himemiya?"

She turned her gaze to her side, only to meet startled dark eyes looking at her.

*Or worse.*

To Chikane's surprise-and secretly, her discomfort as well-she was standing beside a certain well-known senator, who now looked at her with a hint of the same unease she was currently concealing. She had not expected to see him here because he was a member of one of the old plebeian families, which meant he could observe the meeting from the Well of the Comitia itself instead of from their current perch. But she supposed he had come here to avoid the crowd down in the meeting itself, or perhaps to accompany some patrician friends.

The two of them were not exactly friends themselves, although they were old acquaintances. The reason for their present unease was a

past rivalry that had happened not too long ago: an unexpected but fairly strong competition over none other than Chikane's wife, who had proven her guileless self somehow able to attract two of the most sought-out, eminent senators despite her unspeakable social class. Since that matter had been settled with Chikane's marriage, there was no longer any reason for the two senators who had once competed for one woman to now avoid each other-which, had they been honest, both of them had been doing thus far.

Until now, due to Chikane's little error.

*Ah well-I suppose we had to meet sometime*, she thought, even as her lips pulled up slightly into her standard faint smile. It was inevitable, for he was another senator and went about much the same circles she did. The Himean senator's world was very small.

She greeted him politely and watched the startled look in his eyes turn into one of slight discomfiture. He returned her greeting awkwardly, though with absolutely no malice as far as she could read. And eagle-eyed as Chikane was, her readings were often accurate. If so, that was good. It recalled to her the words of her wife, who had once defended the man in an argument.

"He's a good man," the other woman had stated in what now seemed a long time ago to Chikane. "He wouldn't do that, what you said. He wouldn't bear a grudge."

Chikane had suppressed a sigh at her wife's stubbornness.

"*He* is a man who has just been scorned, Himeko. I am aware you think him a man of good moral character, and truly he seems so. But how can you be sure he would not do something out of anguish? People are reckless when they are in pain."

"I know that, Chikane-chan," her wife had responded, with a feeling look that made Chikane's head drop. After a few seconds of silence, she went on to say: "I know you're just worrying for my sake. But he's my friend too. I want him to stay and keep being my friend."

"That may be asking for too much from him at this moment," Chikane had answered. "Seeing you-seeing *us* like this would only

wound him further. Even if he does not harbour a grudge, as you say, then he would most likely keep his distance for a while."

The golden-haired woman had considered it.

"I know," she eventually said sadly. "But that doesn't mean I'm going to stop being his friend."

Then, fixing Chikane with a determined eye: "And that doesn't mean he's going to stop being mine."

They saw later that Chikane had been right when she said that he would keep his distance from them, that much was made clear in the man's actions afterwards. Now, however, Chikane could see that Himeko had been right as well. The man was actually asking about her wife in a way that was obviously well-meaning, though only after having stumbled a fair bit over the words.

"Will you send my regards to your wife, Himemiya?" he was saying to her, scratching the back of his head. "It's been some time since I saw her. Is she well?"

"She is doing admirably, thank you," Chikane replied smoothly, turning something over in her mind. "I shall convey your greetings to her, rest assured. Himeko will be overjoyed to receive them."

"That's good," he said, running a hand through his thick but short mane. "I haven't greeted her in a while. I sent a letter congratulating her on your marriage, but... Well, it was feeble of me not to have given them in person, I think, especially as I meant them. I hope she's not mad about that."

"Oh, Himeko could not be mad at you for such a thing."

"I hope so," he replied. "Anyway, thanks for telling her that and 'sorry' for me, then."

Chikane paused before giving her reply.

"Perhaps you might even come sometime and deliver your apology to her yourself?" she suggested.



He looked a little stunned by that, she thought, his handsome, almost pretty face open and unguarded for a few seconds. He recovered swiftly though and seemed to search her countenance for a hint of mockery in the instant afterwards. As he found nothing but polite expectation there, however, his expression eased once again.

"I think I could do that," he said slowly. "Maybe someday, if it won't be imposing on you."

"Not at all. Consider it done at my express invitation."

She turned her gaze to the podium before them.

"In any case, did I miss anything, Oogami-san?" she asked. "I was regrettably late coming here, so I have no idea what has transpired."

He inhaled audibly, relief coming to his face as they moved to less personal subjects.

"Something has happened, though I don't understand what it's about," he replied, falling into his proper 'politic' manner. "Maybe you can be the judge of it for me, Himemiya. It's a little odd."

She nodded to indicate that she was listening.

"One of the tribunes-of-the-plebs just proposed a strange bill," he explained. "It's to allow curule candidature *in absentia* for politicians abroad in the coming elections. So long as their official nomination is filed here by a legitimate executor of will on their behalf, that is."

Chikane lifted her eyebrow: "Odd indeed."

"Tell me about it." He shrugged disparagingly. "Even if that bill is passed, most of the officials abroad still wouldn't get the news in time to send back instructions for someone to file nomination for them. The elections are happening in just a few weeks from now. Unless our senior consul is late in coming, and I don't think she will be, this time."

"That is true," Chikane said. "The bill, it would seem, is generally useless for most of the people who might be interested."

"That's what I think."

"Ah." She took a moment to reflect on it, turning over the idea in her head. As the other senator said, it made little sense to her. "You are right. It does seem odd."

He looked at the crowd below.

"The only reason I can think of," he told her, "is that the tribune-of-the-plebs who proposed it is either in league with or being paid by an official outside Hime. Someone who's already prepared to file a formal announcement of candidature and is just waiting for the bill to pass so that his man can file the nomination immediately, even before the news of the bill's passage reaches *him* in his post abroad. Someone pretty close, as it'd have to be fast-travelling news for him to have gotten word of the opportunities presented by your man's legislation of a second nomination period."

She nearly broke into a smile at his blatantly casual-and slightly impolitic, but he had never been a perfect politician-reference to the tribune of the plebs passing said nomination period bill as 'her man'. Most people knew the man worked for her, of course; still, most people refrained from saying it in casual conversation, unless they were actually close to her or on her side as well.

"That is the only thing I can think of at this moment too," she said. "Though it seems such a desperate action. As though the person decided only recently on candidature." A faint gleam came to her eyes. "Perhaps it may even be an authority abroad who expects to have charges filed against him once his tenure is over?"

The other senator nodded. "Yes, that could be. He'd be safe from arrest so long as he still has a suitable position."

He started as though something had just occurred to him, and frowned.

"But even if he does manage to file nomination, what good would that do?" he asked. "He'd have had to go through a proper campaign to get enough voters, or no one would even recognise his name on the ballot. Especially since he's spent the past year or

longer abroad. It would be futile."

"Indeed."

"Unless he bribes or gets backing powerful enough to see him the post at the last moment, I guess. Weirder and weirder." His frown turned into one of bafflement. "I just don't understand it."

She settled for sighing in response.

Privately, she was marvelling at how many "odd" bills were being passed that would influence this year's elections. First had been the one of her making, officially proposed by 'her man'. And now there was this, whose beneficiary was most likely some desperate official abroad trembling in his shoes at the prospect of being called to account for his crimes.

"It seems this is a year of political irregularities, Oogami-kun," she said at length. "I do not understand some things of late as well."

"Hearing that coming from you, Himemiya, makes me feel a little less like an idiot."

She smiled at the implied compliment: "Who proposed the bill, by the way?"

Oogami Souma shrugged carelessly, then gave her a name.

"Takeda Masashi."

# Chapter 26

## Vocabulaire:

1. **Aeolus** - Keeper of the winds in the Odyssey. He was able to tie them into a bag, as he did for the hero Odysseus/Ulysses.
2. **Calends** - The first of the three fixed points of a Roman (Himean) month. The days of the month were not named or given numbers, save for these three points. The Calends is always the first day of each month (e.g. the Calends of January would be January 1). Along with the other two fixed points (the **Nones** and the **Ides** ), it was considered a sacred day. Note that dates were always reckoned backwards from the three fixed points. Note too that this story uses the modern months to spare readers the extra trouble of consulting the ancient calendar.
3. **Clivus** - A street on an incline. Rome had a great many of these as it was a hilly city. The word following it is the name of the street, e.g. clivus Argentarius, which is Argentarius Street .
4. **Domina** - Feminine of the Latin word "domine" or "dominus", i.e. "master ".
5. **First Citizen** - A more gender-inclusive term I have used in place of the Roman designation **First Man** . The First Man of Rome was *primus inter pares* (first among his equals), the man possessing the most clout, *auctoritas*, and *dignitas* of all men in Rome. Several famous examples of people who have been First Man of Rome at some point or other are Gaius Marius, Lucius Cornelius Sulla Felix, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (a bit contentious, since some might argue that he accorded himself the designation instead of being granted it by his peers, which was the accepted way), and Gaius Julius Caesar Dictator, all of whom were military legends.
6. **Ides** - See note above, for **Calends** . Unlike the Calends, the Ides varies. It is the 15th day of all "long months" and the 13th of the others. For example, the Ides of February would be February 13 in this story, since February is not a "long month", whereas the Ides of

*March is March 15, as March is a "long month".*

7. **Minim** - A scarlet paint worn on their faces by **triumphators** (generals holding a triumph or victory procession) on the day of their parade. Not all triumphators chose to wear it.

8. **Polyphemus** - The Cyclops blinded by Ulysses/Odysseus in Homer's "The Odyssey." He swore to devour Ulysses but was eventually outsmarted by the latter before he could deliver on that promise. Ulysses blinded him.

9. **Porticus** - A large building with a very spacious, shared central courtyard, e.g. the Porticus Margaritaria of Rome, which was a famous commercial centre.

10. **Rostra** - Comes from the Latin word **rostrum** (singular form of 'rostra'), which was originally the reinforced beak of a war galley used to ram other ships. The Roman consul Gaius Maenius started a tradition when, after going to war with the Volsci, he removed the beaks/rostra of Volscian ships he had defeated and fixed them to the wall of the speaker's platform in the **Well of the Comitia** (see par. 3 of the actual text for a definition of this term) . It was meant to mark the end of the Volsci as a rival power to Rome, and afterwards, other victorious admirals did the same, fixing so many rostra to the wall of the platform that it was literally crowded with them. The adornments prompted them to refer to the speaker's platform as the "rostra", i.e. "ships' beaks". This is from where we get the tradition of calling speaking podiums/platforms " rostra" .

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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Tomoe Marguerite sighed contentedly as she popped a date into her mouth. After swallowing the fruit, she brought a hand up to cover a weakly-stifled yawn. The light swaying motion of the palanquin was making her drowsy, and that would not do. She still had another

matter to deal with, long as her day had been.

The senator had just come from a meeting with her banker, and was presently being borne out of the *clivus Argentarius* -or the street of finances, as it was sometimes called-by her slaves. Drawing the drapes of her palanquin aside, she settled a bored gaze on the buildings of Hime's most prominent brokers and financiers. Idly noting a dishevelled man being thrown bodily from an office by two others, she continued to look over the sights with an uninterested expression until a familiar, somewhat distant sound caught her notice. Leaning to one side, she peered ahead and saw what she had expected.

The Well of the Comitia. The site of all Plebeian and Popular Assemblies, with one of the former being held there at the very moment. Tomoe settled back in the lavish cushions of her seat as she thought of what was happening in that meeting. She placed another date in her mouth.

*He should be convincing them by now, she assured herself, sucking on the fruit. I'm sure he will get approval soon. He has to, the elections are almost here.*

A small stab of anxiety came to her mind at that, and she frowned at it.

*We don't have any more time.*

"Minë," she called, snapping her fingers outside the palanquin. "Tell them to go faster."

A dark face came into view. "But you could be jostled, Domina."

She sighed and pretended to explain as one would to a child: "Then go as fast as possible without jostling me."

"Yes, Domina."

Upon feeling the subsequent change in pace from her bearers, Tomoe fell back to meditating on the issue on her mind and being discussed in the Well of the Comitia at present-namely, Takeda Masashi's draft bill. Today would make it exactly one week since the

tribune-of-the-plebs had first proposed it to the assembly, she realised. Seven days of discussion; seven days of delay. Not that the wait had been entirely unexpected.

*The Senate is usually wary of bills like this*, she reflected, the 'Traditionalists' coming to mind. Thus far, most of the hesitation over Takeda's proposal-which would permit curule candidature in absentia for all politicians outside of the city, as long as they fulfilled certain requirements-had been from the tribunes of the plebs known to be in the pay of the most conservative faction in Senate. It was argued by these that such a licence as the bill granted would give officials finishing their terms abroad an opportunity to evade the claws of the Bribery and Extortion Courts by being elected into high office, rendering them ineligible for arrest for yet another year. Given how many officials might well be facing arrest after their terms were over, such an evasion might prove significant.

*Still, they should realise it's unlikely to work that way*, Tomoe sighed to herself. If ever, few overseas officials would be able to avail of the opportunity, given how late it was in presenting itself. And even fewer of those overseas officials would manage to be elected, even if they were able to file for candidature. Takeda himself had been arguing this to those opposing his proposition. Of course, the inevitable result to that was the question: *What then is the point of this bill?*

It was a good thing Tomoe saw that one coming beforehand. Being the true originator of this bill, she had quickly foreseen that some people might question its purpose early on, given the strange circumstances surrounding its foreseeable utility. Thus, she had spread gossip about one of Takeda's long-time friends-a prefect in Sardinia, rather nearby-deciding belatedly to run for the praetorship. This friend, so the rumours now went, had someone ready to file his candidature as soon as Takeda's bill passed. That took care of the alleged motive very nicely indeed.

Now all she had to do was take care of the means. Aware that bribes would also be needed to convince the other tribunes of the plebs-and the senators from whom they took their cues-to allow the bill's passage, she had been soliciting funds for that purpose from a very generous source. Thus far, a good deal of money had changed

hands already, but she wanted to be certain of their victory. Hence she was going to meet this source today, in case more gold would be needed.

It was a strange thing, though, being able to do so much without being noticed. Thus far, no one had linked her to the bill yet-and that was exactly how it should be. The only one actually aware of her involvement was Takeda, who met her every now and then to consult over their next actions or to pick up the bribe money. Which money he thought was from Tomoe, not from some other fount of funding.

"I wonder what he would say if he knew, though," she mumbled to herself with a sneer. Perhaps the other senator would object if that were the case. Yes, he would likely object. Takeda would have scruples if he knew where the money actually came from, and Tomoe did not care to deal with an episode of belatedly manifesting conscience. It was best to simply let him think the money they had been using was from her coffers. Money was always good money, no matter from where it came.

Looking out of the palanquin again, she saw that they were now passing the yawning Well. Just next to it she could see the looming edifice known as the Curia Hostilia, with several distant figures on its high steps probably observing the assembly below. They were too far away for her to make out any faces, but she cared little about that. The only face she cared to see there was absent, an sea away and stranded in a foreign land.

She recalled the last time they had seen each other, which had been just before the other woman left for the North. Tomoe had burst into her cousin's study, only to be dismayed by the sight of the fair-haired woman packing her things. She had demanded to know if the other woman was truly leaving.

"Of course," had been the matter-of-fact answer. "I must."

"But you can't!" she had pleaded. "You know what they're doing, Shizuru. This is-"

"Something I am duty-bound to do," Shizuru had interrupted. "So I



shall."

"What if something happens to you?"

"Then I should consider myself grateful-the only people to whom something does not happen are the dead," the tall, achingly beautiful woman had smiled. "I am going. Everything is arranged and I have decided to go tomorrow."

Then, shutting one of the drawers of her desk with a firm knock:  
"That is final."

Tomoe, seeing that the other would not be swayed, had collapsed tiredly into one of the couches.

"You're really leaving," she said. " *Again* ."

"I'm afraid so."

"To fight those-those hordes in the North. With that small army."

"Most likely, yes."

She had grimaced in exasperation: "This is too big an opponent to go against with only what you have. They'll swallow you up!"

Shizuru had chuckled at that.

"So Polyphemus promised to do with Ulysses, and he ended up blind and sore," she had replied. "Have you so little faith in me, Cousin?"

"It's not that..."

"Then let this be the end of the discussion," Shizuru had smiled. "Do not worry so much-you always tell me I have the fabled luck of Ulysses, after all. I shall be fine. Now please excuse me, I need to settle some other things by tonight."

Giving her a far-too-quick farewell kiss on the cheek, the other woman had then walked out of the room, thus unable to hear Tomoe's final words.

"Shizuru, it took Ulysses two decades to come back home."

Well, she had no intention of waiting two decades as well. She rubbed the cheek on which her cousin had kissed her that day long past, trying to bring back the feeling of those soft lips brushing her skin. Until now, she could still recall the warmth she had felt. Shizuru always did such things so kindly. Though sometimes her kindness had a distance to it as well.

*Never mind that for now*, she berated herself, shaking away that niggling feeling of sadness. *You have to take care of one distance first before you can bridge the other* .

Returning her focus to her surroundings, she apprehended that they had long passed the Well of the Comitia, and were now approaching her destination: the Porticus Margaritaria. An enormous rectangular building, it housed many of Hime's most expensive shops. Most of the wares to be found there were affordable only to the upper classes, which patronised the shops of the Porticus Margaritaria almost exclusively in certain cases. Given the social status of its clientele, it was natural for people shopping there to know each other either personally or by sheer repute. This was why Tomoe had decided to meet her funding source there, where they could pretend to have simply run into each other while actually conducting their business.

*I'm glad he hasn't complained yet*, she mused, mind producing an image of her source. *No matter how much I've asked to have. He simply gives it without any qualms*. Clearly the man was very rich, which she had known even before their acquaintance, but he was generous with his money as well, which she had not known until they began their talks. That was providential. He was a godsend, as far as that matter was concerned.

But it only made sense that he would be so helpful. He had an interest in the matter too.

As her palanquin neared the Porticus, Tomoe caught a flash of very fair hair exiting a carriage ahead of her. *Perfect timing*, she thought, recognising the person she was going to meet. She stuck her head out of the palanquin and called to him, feigning surprise.

"I say, Prince Nagi, what a surprise!"

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The governor of Argus's private reception room was unusual in Hime, but perhaps not for the architectural styles favoured in the northern lands. It was a room on the first storey of her mansion, overlooking the western gardens of the estate. Shuttered doors opening to a wide, well-kept balcony kept it airy and fresh. There could be found trimmed box bushes and flowers, some vines poking out of the pots and weaving into the latticed railings to dangle above the heads of those passing beneath, on the ground floor. The doorway leading to the balcony had white drapes often left to hang loose, but such was not the case today. Due to the wild flapping caused by the winds, the governor had asked for the drapes to be drawn and tied.

"I'd ask for the winds to be drawn and tied into a bag, if I could," she remarked to Shizuru, whom she had invited to her reception room for lunch. They had just finished eating and were now reclined on lushly padded couches. "But I'm no Aeolus. Can't stop which way the wind's blowing."

"That could be a proverb in itself," the young general replied, washing her hands in a basin. She motioned to her bodyguard, who was sitting beside her, to do the same. "As Fate or the winds would have it, we are all stranded here momentarily, bereft of knowledge as to what is happening in more southern parts of Our Sea."

"It makes me anxious, I tell you," the governor returned. "Do you really have nothing else to tell me about Hime? I know you've been away from there for about four months now, but I've been away for years! I'd like to know if there's anything else I should know about that my letters from home don't tell."

"It seems to me you know just about everything pertinent," Shizuru replied, following with a courteously inquisitive look. "If I may be so bold as to ask, Midori-han, do any of your former pupils write to you? The ones residing in Hime, that is."

"Some. Chie-chan does often, but she can't now seeing as she's

right here."

"I see," Shizuru murmured. She paused to dry her hands on a piece of cloth, which she then passed to the girl beside her. When she looked back up at the older woman, there was an apologetic smile on her lips. "Please forgive me for having neglected to do-

"Oh, don't be ridiculous!" the redhead interrupted good-naturedly. "I know you've been busy ever since your first run in the legions, Shizuru-chan. Besides, you're not the type to write long letters about the latest scandal and chit-chat, so you probably wouldn't have been able to satisfy my hunger for that sort of thing."

She made a face.

"No, you can keep your meticulously politic, discreetly worded letters. Chie sends entire memoirs, anyway, and there are some things in them that would be enough to light a fire under each Himean senator's arse. Juicy and with a hefty sprinkling of spice!"

The younger woman let slip a giggle.

"There are some others too. The more regular ones would be-let me see now," She pondered it for a second. "Mai-chan writes to me and so does Akane. How is she doing, by the way?"

"The last I heard while leaving the city was that Kurauchi-han's suit had been accepted by her family."

"So you don't know any more than I do." Midori snapped her fingers. "Right! One of my old friends last wrote that she was staying in Hime for a while. Still there, I should think. Athenian, but half-Himean by parentage. Smart and snappy. Her name's Youko. You know her?"

The younger woman lifted her eyebrows: "Why, yes, I do. She was the most esteemed practitioner of medicine in the city when I left."

"That's the one-and she should be!" the governor declared, following with a quaff of her wine. "Great at what she does, Youko. A regular Hippocrates. I met her in Egypt, actually."

" *Egypt?* "

"I was there to see the inscriptions on their pyramids. She was there to learn more about their medicine." She pretended a childish moue of distaste. "It made me shiver, at first, what with the things those physician-priests she studied under had in their kits. Scorpions, spiders, all sorts of crawlies! It looked to me like they were trying to kill their patients, not keep them alive."

Shizuru laughed.

"But they're actually pretty good at what they do," Midori continued. "To be fair."

"Egypt is quite an advanced nation. Perhaps not so much in society or politics now, but they are when it comes to technology and learning."

"In some ways, more so than we are," was the reply. "But you'd like to change that, hm, Shizuru-chan?"

The rusty eyes peeking at her from above the rim of a goblet smiled.

"I hope that does not mean you think I would like to retrograde Egypt," Shizuru said after a sip.

Midori scoffed.

"Oh, you know what it means," she said, feigning a very slight glower. "And you know that fickle lot of people pulling the pharaohs' tails in Alexandria can do all the retrograding all by themselves! *This* is why it's always been hard to talk to you, Shizuru. You have an awful habit of putting words into other people's mouths. You do agree, Natsuki-chan?"

Natsuki gave the query a moment's thought and ended with a conciliatory nod. Shizuru lifted an eyebrow pointedly at the youngest woman in the room, trying to keep her lips from betraying her amusement at this answer. The girl pretended to ignore her. Shizuru saw the now-familiar sparkle of mischief in those green eyes, however.

"Now even my faithful bodyguard has mutinied," she frowned to the governor. "Shame on you for inciting this defection, Midori-han."

"Shame on *you* for teasing all of us too much," the governor retorted. "I was only asking about your plans for Hime's advancement when you brought up talk about possibly impoverishing Egypt. A grand task that would be! Well? Are you going to answer me or shall I try to wrangle it out of you?"

Shizuru leaned back into the couch, folding her hands over crossed legs.

"Well now," she began. "I cannot do much yet, to be honest. I am only a senator at present."

The olivine eyes were focused on her: "But that will change soon, yes?"

"Eventually."

"You've served as a quaestor already, as well as an aedile," Midori stated, tapping a finger on her own leg. "So the next office will be praetor. When do you intend to run?"

"When possible."

"Vague, but fine." The older woman shifted in her seat. "And after, you'll be going on to the consulship. Promise me you'll remember me when you get there and let me have access to all those dusty storerooms those stodgy Traditionalists won't let me into."

"Gladly. Though you make my success sound a foregone conclusion, Midori-han."

"Isn't it?"

Shizuru said nothing, merely smiling at her.

"You'll get to the top," the governor said. "You've always been sure of it yourself, so don't pretend to be unsure now. Isn't that your goal, after all? To become *First Citizen* of Hime, as your father would have been had the gods only granted him longer life?"

The smile changed, a touch of solemnity in it now.

"You still recall that, Midori-sensei," came the lilting words, their speaker seemingly unmindful of having slipped into that old honorific for her tutor instead of that for a peer. "But then, you remember past history best of all."

The redheaded woman nodded, sitting up to look her squarely in the eye: "To be First Citizen of Hime, clout personified. If they don't want to listen to you now, they will have to listen to you after that."

"And resent me for it."

"Every athlete resents the one who beats him to the finish line."

Shizuru let loose a short laugh: "I remember from whom that metaphor comes."

The older woman nodded, setting long red tresses waving over her back.

"I still remember the way you said it that day," she recounted, mindful of the dark-haired girl listening quietly to them but trying not to let on that she was listening. "It was a few days before you had to leave for your first campaign. Anyone else might have thought you were calm, but you weren't calm, Shizuru. You were intense."

Shizuru listened as the other woman went on with the reminiscence.

"I told you-I remember this clearly-not to go leaping into the field and to keep yourself safe," Midori went on. "And you looked at me with that face that practically said you were going to, regardless, and said..."

"That some other sprinter would beat me to First Citizen if I took no leaps along the track," Shizuru finished with a smile. "Yes, I remember."

"You should." Midori propped an elbow on her thigh, letting her chin rest on one hand as she bent forward. "You said it with such conviction."

"Something easy to do. *Every* politician aspires to become First Citizen."

"Not true. They dream about it, not aspire for it. And only a few of those who do aspire for it have what it takes to make the title," Midori replied positively. "You, on the other hand, have what it takes-the ancestors, the wealth, the talent. Don't you dare forget that. I'm waiting for the day you reach that goal. Unless you've already changed your mind?"

A sharp glint came to Shizuru's eyes.

"I should think not," was the firm response.

Midori smiled.

"Good," she replied, falling back into the cushions of her seat. "I'd hate to think they've been giving you all that trouble back home for nothing."

At Shizuru's glance, she went on: "Hah! I've heard all about it. The Traditionalists have been rounding on you like dogs at a fresh piece of meat."

Shizuru smirked and answered, mockingly, "And with so many other pieces of meat lying out there, why is it always / that they must single out, one wonders?"

Midori snorted at the complaint.

"Because you're too tall, too beautiful, and too successful for your own good," she declared, drawing the other's laughter. Casting a glance at the mirthful young woman, she added something else to her evaluation: "And you're too arrogant."

"It is to be expected, if people praise me to my face as much as you just have," Shizuru managed in between chuckles. She turned a smile to the governor. "Do you really think me arrogant, Midori-han?"

"No?" was the grinning rejoinder. "So you deny it?"

"Would it be safer to do so than otherwise?"

The older woman laughed: "I got you, didn't I?"



"I can only surrender."

"Well, you can't be too arrogant, anyway, if you can still admit defeat," the other observed. "And I'll tell you what it is that makes you arrogant. It's your deuced self-assurance and how it shows all the time."

"In that case, might I plead that assurance is not equal to arrogance?"

"Of course it isn't, but that's not what most people think." Midori smiled. "Do you remember? When I was mentoring you in your history studies, you would take your lessons at my house sometimes. I'd wait in the study, and when you'd come into the room, you looked like you should be the one to own it. I say it and I'm the one who actually owns that room. No, no..." She shook her head before Shizuru could get out a word of protest. "You did. You didn't walk in looking like you owned the room, but like you *deserved to*."

A meaningful pause.

"Sometimes you even look like you deserve to own Hime."

Quirking her brows at the younger woman, she lifted her cup from the table and pretended to toast to her, still talking.

"Too much poise, Shizuru-chan, and too effortless by half," she said cheerfully. Her pleasant, still-youthful features crinkled into a smile. "Too much assurance. People see it as arrogance because they don't think you have the right to arrogate such confidence to yourself. Well, our people have always been wary of fellows who look like they deserve to be king or queen, ever since the founding of our Republic. That self-important bearing all aristocrats have rankles them."

Shizuru conceded with a bow of her head.

"And you?" she asked.

"Oh, I love it!" Midori grinned widely. "Fact, I can't wait for you to rankle them even more when you get to where you're heading."

A laugh.

"I suppose that might be something to look forward to, wherever that would be," Shizuru said.

The governor made a sound of amusement, stopping to empty her goblet yet again. The servant waiting at her back rushed forward to refill it and Shizuru found herself noting that this was the fourth time the other woman had drained her cup. The wine was watered, but even so, the amount of liquor the woman could consume easily always amazed her.

"Speaking of things to look forward to, Shizuru-chan," the older woman said suddenly. "Your birthday is coming up. Since you're actually not going to be right smack in the middle of a war or big mission during it for once, I assume you'll take time to give us some proper festivities. What have you planned?"

There were a few moments of silence as the governor took another sip of her newly-poured wine. After time passed and she had still received no answer, Midori turned her head to Shizuru's direction-only to find a pair of crimson eyes opened widely her way. After taking a moment to ascertain the wonder in their depths, she erupted with a loud guffaw.

"*Ecator!*" she hooted, slapping a thigh. "You, Shizuru-chan? The girl who committed the Founding History to memory in record time? You forgot your own birthday?"

"I had grown so used to being too busy to celebrate it."

"So much for being said to have a prodigious memory!"

Shizuru waved a hand as if to bat away Midori's jabs. Her other hand covered her eyes in a gesture of shame.

"It simply slipped my mind," she said, laughing along with the other woman. "Good heavens, how could I have forgotten it so completely? No doubt the army is expecting me to put on something more flamboyant than the usual dinner feast I give them."

Turning to her bodyguard, who had been looking at her with shining

eyes ever since Midori asked the query, she provided an explanation.

"My birthday is thirteen days before the Calends of January, Natsuki," she said, before suddenly halting to give the Otomeian a sharp glance. "Oh! When is yours, by the way? You never told me."

Natsuki paused at that question, seeming to be working out something. Both Himeans realised she had been converting her birth date into the Himean calendar when she answered, very quietly, that hers was on the Ides of August. Midori and Shizuru made small exclamations of surprise.

"That's a good day," Midori informed the girl. "The Ides are sacred to Jupiter Optimus Maximus, the great god himself."

"That is true, Natsuki," Shizuru said. "Did you know that?"

Natsuki shook her head, intrigued.

"Well, there you have it," the governor said benevolently, with a swig of her liquor. "You were born on a good day, Dear Girl."

"Perhaps it was a good day because she was born on it," Shizuru ventured, bringing a smile to Midori's countenance and a blush to Natsuki's.

"Couldn't have put it better myself," the governor followed, after a while of joining her former pupil in silently enjoying their other companion's embarrassment. "So I'm guessing you two hadn't met yet, last birthday you had, Natsuki-chan?"

It was Shizuru who answered, and regret tainted her voice.

"Actually, we should have by that time," she admitted, casting an apologetic glance at the girl. "Forgive me, Natsuki. I had no idea-

The girl had a hand up, shaking her head as if to say that it was of little consequence.

"But I was not able to give you a present, or greet you, at the very least," Shizuru said. "I do wish you had told me."

The girl only shrugged again. The governor looked at both of them, from one to the other.

"Here's an idea," she proposed, drawing their attention to her. "Get her a gift later, Shizuru-chan. What else is my province famous for if not for what you can buy in it? You'll find things here that you're not likely to see elsewhere."

"You are right, of course," Shizuru replied thoughtfully. She turned a bright smile to the Otomeian. "Let us do that later, Natsuki. And we can celebrate today, too, to make up for it if you wish. Any way you would like. Well?"

"Capital idea! Would you like a party, Natsuki-chan? I throw smashing parties, I tell you. How about it?" Midori said to the girl, who looked a little startled by the abrupt offers thrown to her. After a few seconds of staring at them, she made as if to speak. No sound came out, however, and she snapped her mouth shut again, staring resolutely at the floor with cheeks aflame.

The older women laughed at the curious reaction.

"I wish it was my birthday coming up-I'd ask you for *her*!" Midori sniggered, winking at Shizuru. "But she's too adorable to give up, eh?"

Shizuru grinned, knowing she was only being teased.

"I admit I would not be inclined to entertaining the notion," she answered.

"That's too bad. But yes, I do see why you'd not give up Natsuki-chan to me. She's like a sweet little cub you want to keep to yourself, clawed but *cute*," she finished, drawing out the last word with particular emphasis. She paused immediately after it, however, with an odd expression crossing her face. "Oh Juno, that's... a new shade of red."

Turning to look at what seemed to be amusing Midori, Shizuru found she had to pull her lips in to stay the laugh. Natsuki's colour had gone so high that she looked like a Himean triumphator, face

painted with the scarlet-coloured *minim* parading generals wore. Sending the choked governor a similarly choked glance, she quickly brought up another subject. She was afraid Natsuki would burst a major blood vessel if she let this continue.

"On the subject of cubs," she said, clearing her throat with a feeble cough, "you mentioned earlier that you would like to see our panther cub more closely, Midori-han, did you not?"

Midori nodded, the muscles of her cheeks still quivering perilously.

"Yes," she got out. "That I did."

"We had intended to show you to her, but we ended up leaving her with one of my servants before coming here. She had to be fed, you see."

"Oh, of course." The governor's face changed, the mirth wiped away by something else. She met Shizuru's eyes, her own conveying a silent message. "Say, it's been some time since you got here, so she'd be done eating, don't you think? Would you mind asking Natsuki-chan if she could fetch the animal now? I'd really love to see it."

The tawny-haired woman did not even take a moment to think about it. She turned to her bodyguard, who was eyeing the two of them carefully. The girl was not blind and definitely no fool.

"Natsuki," Shizuru said to the girl anyway. "Would you please go and get Shizuki? I shall be here with Midori-han, so there is no need to fear for my safety. Besides, I would not like Shizuki to be too lonely without us."

The girl blinked once, the curling dark lashes meeting over her eyes. Presently, she nodded and rose to her feet.

"Don't worry, Natsuki-chan," the governor of Argus said. "Shizuru here is safe with me. What you should worry about is yourself, walking out on those streets unaccompanied. You're liable to have half the men of my city trailing after you, to say nothing of the women."

The Otomeian blushed furiously again, looking away stiffly and beginning to walk to the door. Shizuru stopped her with a call just as she reached it, however.

"If that happens, Natsuki," Shizuru said, "you have my permission to use your weapon."

Thus the girl left to the sound of a cackling Midori, who sent her own servant away as well. The redheaded woman peered at her only remaining companion, who sat smiling at the floor.

"That was excellent, Shizuru-chan," she remarked, only succeeding in eliciting a faint twinkle from the burgundy eyes. "If I didn't know better, I'd have even said you were serious when you said that."

Shizuru said nothing, trying to resist the urge to go after her bodyguard: she had been serious.

"But, yes, she's quite a find," Midori observed, obviously referring to Natsuki. "She's very devoted to you."

The younger woman confirmed it: "Natsuki is a faithful bodyguard and attendant."

"And as a *companion*?"

"One cannot ask for better."

"I believe you." Midori sent her a penetrating look before saying in a kind voice: "Tell me, how long have we known each other now?"

Shizuru tipped her head and looked at the brown-flecked, grape-green eyes. "Long enough for you to speak frankly of what it is that has compelled you to send our companions away so that we would be alone, Midori-sensei."

The governor grinned.

"It was obvious, wasn't it?" she said. "All right, I suppose I deserved the 'sensei' there."

Shizuru smiled and said nothing. Midori drew a breath.

"I'll get to the point, then," she started. "And I won't mince facts. Or would you like me to?"

"Please be as forthright as you can," the other invited.

"Don't forget you said that," Midori replied, a parody of threat in her voice. "I'll tell you what I know, then. For starters, Shizuru-chan, I know you're sleeping with that girl, despite the fact that you still don't go about advertising it the way some would. And I don't mean *just sleeping* in the same room. That's the first thing I need to get off my chest and it has to do with everything else I'm going on to say. Continue?"

The answer came quickly: "Continue."

The goblet was set down almost like a flag of truce being lowered.

"What I also know is that practically everyone in your army knows about your relationship too because-this is what some of the soldiers said-even a blind man could see that much," Midori said. "I'm not blind, nor am I senile, and I clearly remember seeing the two of you out there in the gardens two days ago. Don't think I'm some pervert spying on you. My window happens to overlook that place and it's an accident I saw the pair of you at all. Fair?"

"Quite fair," Shizuru said, smile unmoving.

"Now I wouldn't even meddle with this," Midori continued, with a flash of a grin. "I'd even congratulate you, normally, because you've been going too long without being involved with anyone and this may be just what you need at this time. Besides, the girl's lovely and I'd have snapped her up if she'd given me a second look and you hadn't snapped her up yourself, which is probably the same thing other people would say as far as her looks are concerned. She's no embarrassment there."

"I cannot argue with that."

"Then this is where I hope you will argue," Midori said, adopting a grim expression so abruptly it might have been considered droll by her companion had it not been for the circumstances. "I've been

watching the way you look at her, Shizuru-chan, and it's not *normal* . Not the sort of thing I'd have expected. Not from you, anyway."

The piercing red eyes trained on hers, gleaming but still conveying no malice.

"Dare I ask you to elaborate, Midori-han?" the younger woman said, sounding nothing other than curious. "What do you mean by that?"

Midori sighed a reluctant sound. Amusing, since she was the one who had instigated this interrogation.

"I'll be frank in answering that, just as you asked me to be," she said with a slight thinning of her eyes. "What I mean is that every time I see you with her, you don't look like you're in lust with the girl, which is what I'd have expected. It would certainly have been more normal!"

"No?"

" No . Shizuru, you look like you're in love with her."

As Midori had been admiring the younger woman's masterly self-control thus far, she was startled by the sudden crack her last words seemed to produce. It was only for a moment, but she had seen it, small as it had been. And being no novice at siege, she recognised the advantage and battered against it.

"Well, are you or are you not?" she asked, scrutinising the finely-hewn features of the younger senator. "Or let me put it another way, Shizuru. How much in earnest are you with that girl?"

The question was met with silence. For a few seconds, she thought she had gone too far, asked too personal and potentially condescending a question. What if she had offended the younger woman? Shizuru was still a Fujino and invested with the natural pride of that ancestry. Midori might be a former tutor, she might be the elder by a good few years, but no one, absolutely no one, presumed to question the personal quirks of a patrician Fujino... no matter how quirky they might be.

The lips before her finally parted, retaining the slight upward tilt at



their corners.

"You put me in a strange position, Midori-han," Shizuru finally said. "I could hardly say I take her lightly, since it would be loutish of me to do so. Nor is Natsuki the kind of person one takes lightly."

The governor frowned.

"Supposing I did give you an indication of my regard for her, then might I also ask what bearing it would have on other matters to give you enough reason to bring it up with me this way? I ask this seriously, and not in a manner intended to cut you short."

Midori released a breath she had been unconscious of holding.

"I brought this up because I'm concerned, Shizuru-chan," she said with care. "Look, I know you've had your expedition-this campaign you're on right now-be commuted to what's known as an extended military engagement, one for sprucing up fortifications. And since you're just about done with the sprucing up, that means the engagement is shortened. I hear they'll try to cut you off funds too. The outcome, unless you want to fund the rest of your time here yourself, will be that you'll be forced to return to Hime sooner than planned, probably sometime in the near future. What then? Don't tell me you plan to take your new mistress with you."

Though she had no way of knowing it, Midori's words actually gave cause for Shizuru to relax. It provided her with an explanation for the governor's actions and words, which had actually caught her off-guard.

*That is why she mentioned it*, the younger woman thought, glad to have a reason to latch onto for this abrupt interview. Midori thought the Fujino army would be forced to pack up and go home soon. But the Argus governor did not know about Chikane's and Shizuru's plans, which would 'extend' this military fortification into a full-scale war. Not that the older woman needed to know it, though: not just yet. Shizuru could allow her to keep thinking that for now.

*I know the truth*, Shizuru thought to herself, trying to ignore the small unease the older woman's words had planted in her mind. She knew

she would be staying in the North for a good while, which meant she need not worry yet about the concerns Midori had just mentioned.

"What if I do decide to take her along?" she asked in jest. "She might like to see what our city has to offer, and I would gain a wonderful companion to save me from the tedium of Hime's politics. She might even help me in my troubles with the Traditionalists. I daresay a good lot of them would shrink at the sight of her swinging a daos in the Forum, you know."

Midori shook her head with vexation.

"I'm not joking," she said. "It wouldn't do. Are you really considering it? If you did bring her to Hime, you'd carry on your liaison with her and everyone would see it for what it is, which would only be acceptable if you made her *a slave*. You wouldn't make her your slave."

"I would be ashamed to," was the uncharacteristically swift retort. The arrow had hit, and the barb lodged almost visibly in the crack from before. "Not to one such as Natsuki."

"Then you couldn't bring her with you," the governor stated. "You know why, Shizuru, and you know she'd be a liability to your cause. If you can't even hide your relationship now, how can you expect to hide it in that busy old city, festering with gossip and built with walls that sprout ears on every square foot of brick? Everyone would be on to you in a second, and your opponents would cackle like a flock of vultures."

"Vultures cackle?" Shizuru asked inconsequentially, half to herself.

"Whatever sound they make then-I don't know." Midori released a sharp breath, looking at her closely. "What I'm saying is this. You have to make up your mind about it as soon as possible. You never know when you'll get a summons to go back home, so you have to decide. Would you want to take the girl with you or not? And, if you do decide to take her along, would you be capable of treating her in the proper way, which is as a mere slave or foreign trophy you have relations with on occasion and nothing more?"

She was surprised to see a tide of anger crest, banked deep in the younger woman's eyes.

"Natsuki is a freeborn, dignified person," Shizuru declared tightly, though in a calm voice.

Midori nodded.

"She's also *an Otomeian*," she replied, having decided that quick and fast would be better than taking it slow and painful. "A foreigner. I'm thinking about your goals here, Shizuru, and what you've always said you wanted. How do you think this dalliance would affect it? How do you think the people back home would react if they knew you were consorting with someone they consider a barbarian... and not in what's still an acceptable way as a mistress or master with a slave used specifically for sexual relief? Someone looking to be considered the First Citizen doesn't do the deed with foreigners-or if he does, he's supposed to treat that foreigner as something equivalent as a slave anyway, which is most definitely not what you do when I see you with that girl. You can call it stuck-up, prudish, even xenophobic, but that's the way it goes and you know it."

"It doesn't need to be love, even. The word they'd use is infatuation to describe the way you look with that girl," she said, continuing her battery. "If you take her back with you and let everyone see your infatuation, the Traditionalists would eat it up and regurgitate it daily for everyone to hear. How Shizuru Fujino has been *tamed* by some beast from the godforsaken North. I wouldn't say it, but they would . Even if you do get over your infatuation or whatever it is, the damage would have been done by then... and your goal of becoming First Citizen would practically be finished. Hime's First Citizen can't be said to have been tamed by a foreigner."

Affecting as prosaic a grimace as she could, she went on in a sad voice.

"The only reason you're being left alone now is because you're a general on campaign," she said. "Generals do this all the time, because it's just too bloody lonely when you're away from home and surrounded by cold iron, spilt blood, and little more. I should know, I've been there myself. But we leave it there, Shizuru, when we have

to go home, and most importantly of all, *we make it clear in our actions early on that we'll leave it there* . We don't look like we fall in love with our lovers, and we don't bring them home. Nor do we treat them the way you've been treating that girl."

She paused and looked pleadingly at the inscrutable face in front of her, feeling as a soldier would after attempting to take down a fort alone. Her hand came up and two of the fingers massaged a suddenly throbbing temple.

"I just need to know you understand all this early on," she said, more gently than before. "Either you reconcile yourself with the idea of eventually having to give her up and make it clear to everyone that you have every intention of doing that... or go with the knowledge that if you don't, it will be another nail your enemies will use to hang your head on. It's a warning for the future, a bit of advice. That's all."

She stopped here and waited with baited breath. It seemed to take an eternity before the younger woman finally replied. And her answer, when it came, consisted of only two words.

"I understand."

Midori searched her face after that, trying to wrestle some further indication of how the younger woman felt from her features. It was in vain, however, and she finally settled back in her couch in defeat.

"All right," she said, assuming a contrite expression. "Now that that's over, I want you to understand something else."

Two tawny eyebrows lifted, indicating that Shizuru was still willing to listen.

"I'm happy you enjoy being with her or seem to enjoy it, from what I see," the governor said, in as kind a voice as she could manage. "And personally, I don't care if she's Otomeian or Mentulaean or whatever race you can come up with, since I can see she pleases you a great deal. I was just trying to tell you that other people will care, and unreasonable as that seems, it's a fact you have to deal with in the future. A lot of the big canards against most senators come from things like this. Just something to remember. I wasn't

saying it out of spite."

The other woman unbent enough to smile.

"I know, Midori-han," she said. "I never thought you were being spiteful."

"Thanks for that, at least." She licked her lips. "So what are you going to do about it?"

"Just what you recommended."

"Which would be?"

"Remember that other people may be unreasonable."

The older woman had to grin.

"Sounds like something you do every day," she said humorously. Her hand came out to reach for the shortly abandoned wineglass on the table, eager to wet her unpleasantly dry mouth. "Anyway, I still agree with you on one thing, and that's your taste. Natsuki-chan's *gorgeous*."

Shizuru lifted an eyebrow: "I am beginning to suspect I have competition."

Midori looked up.

"You probably have had it, all this time," she said. "A pretty thing like that that doesn't go around without being noticed."

"I know."

"You too. Anyone after you these days, aside from Natsuki-chan?"

"No, and I doubt she may even be said to be 'after me'," she smiled. "Ah well."

The governor made a disbelieving face.

"Sure she is! You're just being modest. Or dull." She snorted inelegantly. "Since I just said earlier you're too arrogant and too

smart for your own political betterment, I'd say those aren't your excuses. Trust me. I know."

"Indeed," Shizuru said, suddenly looking sly. "You said earlier that you had been there yourself?"

"Oh, don't ask, it was a long time ago." Midori looked up, seeming to remember it to herself. "It wasn't with a fellow soldier, though."

"Do I detect a note of disapproval for the circumstances of my choice?"

The governor's leer became more pronounced.

"I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing," she replied. "But you know how it's generally discouraged, since it makes for awkward situations in what should be a smoothly functioning machine, all that."

"Quite."

"Say, for example, how would you feel about getting involved with a fellow soldier who's not Natsuki-chan? Generally speaking?"

Shizuru considered it.

"I confess I would normally be wary of the relation," she decided.

"But not if it's a cavalry captain with her superior officer."

"That is different. She may only be following orders."

The two of them laughed.

"And being reassigned a new mount, I'm sure!" the older woman said, unable to resist making the ribald jest. She was aware that the effects of the liquor she had imbibed were finally beginning to show. "Where is-who's there? Open it!"

The two women looked expectantly at the opening door, on which someone had just knocked. The face that appeared was not that of the girl both were waiting for, however, but one unfamiliar to

Shizuru.

The man addressed the governor of Argus.

"Governor, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but..."

Midori slapped her forehead even before he could finish.

"Don't tell me," she said. "It's the Arabs and Greeks again?"

He bowed apologetically. She got up from her seat.

"I'm coming. Tell them to wait there." Turning to Shizuru, she rolled her eyes upwards in a gesture of frustration. "I'm sorry about this, Shizuru. It looks like I have to go and listen to those idiots again. Can you tell Natsuki-chan I'm sorry I couldn't stay to meet your little pet? She'll think I made her go all that way for nothing."

"Not at all," the younger woman replied. "Please go ahead, Midori-han."

Midori nodded, already sweeping away.

"Wait for her here," she called over her shoulder. "Or she'll be wondering if I did something to you in case you're not here when she returns. Don't want that lovely coming after me with that daos of hers." A second's pause, as though remembering something important. "And give that birthday party a thought! I'm looking forward to it."

Shizuru smiled as the other woman finally left, the man with her closing the door. Her smile faded as soon as it shut and she was alone in the room once again.

There were a few moments of silence.

"The future, hm?"

The whispered words were soon followed by the sound of her rising, walking towards the doors leading to the balcony. She made her way there, a pensive look on her face as she passed through the doors and came into the open air. She took a deep breath and

smelled the tang of the sea nearby.

*In the future, I shall have to travel over that sea again.*

The older woman's words earlier weighed on her mind, much though she had pretended not to be affected by them. Midori was right-she *had* to think of the future. And what did the future hold for her? Great things, she was sure. Conquests, triumphs, the institution of First Citizen. All things she had always wanted. But now there was something else that she felt belonged to that list, and it went by the name "Natsuki". What did that mean?

*No more than what I have known for a while now*, she decided. It meant she desired the girl, wanted her badly. She wished for the girl to be by her side, as she was now. But did that desire reach the point of wanting her to be by her side beyond this campaign? To put it in Midori's question to her, would she want her lover to be with her even in Hime, once the time came to go home? Or would she leave her here?

The thought caused a sudden ache in her chest. She, leave Natsuki?

"Unbearable," she hissed to herself, closing her eyes as the breeze caressed her upturned face. She should not be thinking such things yet, should she, especially when even their relation was still so new? Circumstances could change, after all. She should not spend her time being anxious over a decision that was still long in coming. Why mind concerns when they were still so far away as to be irrelevant, even if only for the time being? It was a futile exercise, not to mention a waste of anxiety. And it was putting the wagon before the ox, at the moment. To worry about that took away the time she still needed to come to grips with the very fact of herself being in a relationship, of her first time taking anyone into her bed or life this way-and, most fearsome thing of all, of feeling so much for someone else. Shizuru was a senator already, yes, not to mention already legendary for her exploits in battle. She had achieved in a shockingly small time a great deal more than many of her peers would ever achieve in their lives. But that was not the sole measure of a woman when it came to life's greatest trials, love included. She was still, in many ways, very young herself.



So the question gnawing at her, voiced by the governor of Argus earlier and repeated by a voice in her mind: how earnest was she in dealing with Natsuki? And how much of it showed that even her old friend and tutor would feel the need to mention it?

She moved forward until she stood at the very banisters. She felt a great deal for this strange girl that had come in to her life, she was aware, so much that it consumed her on occasion. Witness the incident with Takeda Masashi. Even so, how much of an indication was that of her sentiments? How could she tell if that was merely jealous desire or something as reckless as *love* ?

"Frightening," she whispered to no one in particular, musing over that word. She was not someone known for expressing such sentiments, or even romantic notions. Which did not mean she could be prevented from harbouring them, she acknowledged. All the same, she had never even come close to considering this question before. It seemed so alien to her, so alarming a point. Not that she was about to run away from it, come to that: she might be young, she might be new to all of this and alarmed by it, but Shizuru was *never* a coward.

But it still discomfited her.

"And even now that I see the disturbance she causes," she murmured, looking out at the grounds, "I still wish nothing more than that she were here to comfort me this very moment."

As though her wish had been borne to some benevolent god, she caught sight of her lover's figure in the gardens before her. Natsuki was walking with her usual smooth stride, her gait matching that of the young panther at her side. Unlike Shizuru, who had compromised with the breeze by tying up her hair these days, she had her mane falling loose as always. The wind caught it up in a flowing river of blue-black locks that streamed to one side, some crossing her face but ignored even then. There was something unearthly in the picture she presented, Shizuru thought. Something unreal . She stared intensely at her, willing the girl to look up, and Natsuki did.

Shizuru felt her breath catch, seeing the flash of acknowledgment in

the emerald eyes even from far away. Then there was the slow, faint smile on the pink lips, just before the Otomeian lowered her head shyly, as if both embarrassed and flattered by the attention. The steady, graceful steps never faltered. Red eyes followed each footfall, unknowingly softening in expression as the young woman came nearer.

*I suppose I do look at you a little too much, a little too lingeringly,* she told the coming woman in a voice only she could hear. *But why should I not? You were made to be looked at-though I do not like it when others appreciate the same thing . Or perhaps I can stand it, if you return only my appreciation. I want you to look only at me. Does that really show so much when I look at you? Can they really see it so clearly, as Midori-han told me?*

Did she really look so romantic, so possessive when it came to Natsuki?

The governor's words returned: " *No. Shizuru, you look like you're in love with her.*"

Shizuru propped her elbows on the banister and leaned forward, unwilling to take her eyes away from the approaching figure and wondering if she even could.

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Back in Hime, a din was heard all over the Lower Forum as people filed out of the Well of the Comitia, stepping high and quickly to avoid being trampled. The tribunes of the plebs were left on the *rostra*, the beaks of ships vanquished by Himean generals jutting from the wall behind them. The day's Plebeian Assembly was finished, and it had concluded very satisfactorily for at least two of the men on the platform. The rest of the tribunes were clustered around their two colleagues, the ones who had successfully passed their respective proposals just today. It was these two victors who now stood at the centre of the group, shaking hands with the others as they were congratulated for their victories. One of them was the famous swordsman, Takeda Masashi.

# Chapter 27

*Thank you to both reviewers and readers.*

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## **Vocabulaire:**

1. ***Saltatrix tonsa*** - A Latin slur meaning "a barbered dancing girl", a ponce, or what might be considered a drag queen.

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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Nao was finally able to lay her hands on one of the Mentulæan killers a full fortnight after being tasked to look into the matter. The man she caught was one Neleus of Greek descent, not a registered inhabitant of the province but one of the immigrant "weeds" of which Argus's governor had spoken to Shizuru and the senior legate. He was also known as a heavy hand for hire: one of those men, in other words, who hired themselves out for tasks necessitating the forceful exercise, often illicit, of brawn. A sort of mercenary-cum-thug. The chief primipilus was said to remark after receiving this information that it was to be expected of his type-which could have meant a lot of things, given that Neleus seemed the sort to fit into many types, few palatable to general sensibilities.

Most likely, however, she had been referring to his appearance. Neleus was a tall, thick-thewed man, with the sort of knobbly and jutting jaw that indicated a pugnacious temperament. His nose was his most outstanding feature, for it managed to exaggerate the slope of the ideal Grecian nose into a grand, hooked fixture hanging proudly from the middle of his face. So great was this nose, so aggressive its shape, that some of his past employers had even

given him the moniker "The Beak". Given the man's usual line of work, it would have been even more appropriate for them to have called him "The Vulture".

According to intelligence, most of his jobs had been in assassinations or what was known in such circles as 'quick disposal'. He was not bad at it, for all that what substituted for art in his craft was a savage familiarity with his work. That he was caught was not so much a result of his inexperience but more an outcome of Nao's schemes.

During the last Mentulaeen killing, Shizuru's redheaded centurion had gone to inspect the scene of the crime with the Argus commander-of-garrison, Sakaki. The two women performed this inspection early morning of that day, and were thus able to conduct their survey before the clean-up detail could arrive to sweep away the mess. As fortune would have it, they were able to discover a choice piece of evidence during this survey. It was this crumb that led them along the trail.

The object was a crocodile's tooth bored through with a hole for a necklace. The chief primipilus found it under a table, its leather string broken. She surmised that it did not belong to the victim, for the Mentulaeans were known to dislike that particular beast of the Nile and consider it a harbinger of misfortune-a belief that might well have been true in this case, for if the primipilus was correct then the object had a chance of belonging to one of the assassins. If so, the man would return for it. Oh, not that the object itself had any outstanding value! One could find a dozen similar things from the hawkers in Egypt. No, what told her that it was irreplaceable was the minute, near-negligible inscription on the tooth itself: the words, *to N.*, followed by the Greek symbols for the familiar form of "father". It was personal, an heirloom. The owner would come back.

And so she outlined her plan, choosing the slave tasked with overseeing the clean-up of the crime scene for her purposes. Giving secret instructions to the man, she told him to pick up that necklace, ensure that the rest of the slaves knew he had done so-perhaps by bragging loudly about such a lucky find-and then keep it in his quarters, which were two adjoining rooms in a slum complex near the western side of the city. This place was then to be monitored

clandestinely by a trio of soldiers tasked to hide in the room next-door. The bait was set, and all that was left was to wait for the prey to bite.

It was a week before the man came sniffing, looking for the heirloom left him by his sire. He went about it by engaging the slaves who swept up the crime scene in casual conversation, eventually asking if they knew anyone selling animal's tooth necklaces. If they simply told him to check the markets, he would reply that it was a very special kind he wanted, one some priest had recommended to bring him good luck. Of course, it was none other than a tooth taken from a crocodile.

He was not a professional for nothing. He went about the matter cautiously, approaching them one by one and speaking very offhandedly, as if about something inconsequential, but also with bluster, as if he was a man who had every inconsequential desire fulfilled. Eventually, he hit on one slave who mentioned that the head servant during that job a week ago-the one to clean up that dead Mentulaean's place-had picked up something of the sort that he was looking for. Perhaps he should go ask the fellow if he wanted to sell it?

Neleus was not the sort of man to buy what he could just as easily steal. So he asked around a little more, found the address, and stole in to retrieve his heirloom when the slave left for an evening tipple. He was still rummaging around for it when the soldiers bore down on him with ropes and a gag.

He put up a fight-most people did-but was no match for the combined force of three veteran legionaries chosen specially for their skill and swiftness in acquiring prisoners-of-war. This was how he had arrived at his present state, hands upraised and lashed to an iron ring from the cellar's rafter. It was the very same ring used by the proprietors of that establishment to hang and carve up their slaughtered cattle.

"Fitting, don't you think?" said the primipilus, leering at him from her perch on a table. "You look like a great big steer about to be put on a spit. I could do that too. Would you like to be put on a spit?"

The lit torches of the cellar bathed her in a light that was at once sinister and sultry, and that was a shade that suited her very well, though it was doubtful that Neleus could actually appreciate the picture she presented. His eyes were swollen with bruising, the skin hot and bloated with the marks of a gruelling interrogation. And they had only started on him.

"We're just warming up, so don't get soft on me yet," the primipilus warned as she continued speaking in her deceptively gentle voice. "I'm hoping for a bit more entertainment out of you, you salty old *verpa*. So come on and show me some life, eh? Be a little more energetic."

The only response was a rumble from the prisoner, beetle-black eyes crawling up from their gaze at the floor to send the primipilus a hate-filled glance. Her smile grew even wider.

"Enough with the looks. I'm not impressed."

She got off the table and made her way towards him.

"It can stop if you talk, Neleus," she coaxed, folding both arms across her chest. "Tell us who's in this. Talk to me."

Neleus lifted his sweat-soaked head.

"Been talking to you a while now, Soldier," he sneered. "Told you I don't know anything. Was hired for a job and took it. That's all."

He spat to one side, the gob of saliva and phlegm marbled with blood.

"I don't ask any fucking questions because they pay me not to," he declared.

"See now, you're talking, but you're not really *saying* anything," Nao answered, faking a pout. "I wasn't born yesterday, Neleus. You weren't either. We both know someone at least paid you not to ask those questions you're talking about, and we also know that's the someone I'm asking for. It doesn't have to be the one at the top. I just want the messenger. Give me a name."

"Don't know his name."

"Don't lie, Neleus."

"Don't know his na-hnghf!"

"All right, let's try that again," the redhead said, inspecting the coiled rope in her hand. There were red spots on it, fresh from the new cut she had just opened on his lip. "I want a name, Neleus. What's his name?"

"Fuck you."

She laughed.

"I'm sure you'd love to, but that's too high a hope for your like," she said, using a finger to beckon one of the other soldiers in the room. There were three others aside from her, all from her own century. They were also all part of the official torture detachment. She addressed them.

"You heard what he said, boys and girls," she said loudly. "Fuck me, he says. *Me*. He's actually dreaming of fucking me."

She stopped to sigh.

"Can't say I blame him," she smirked. "But by Dis, that's a tall order, don't you think? He has gall, he does."

The others laughed, watching the captive bow his head after another seething glare to the primipilus.

"Might as well aim for blessed Juno while he's at it, Centurion," said the soldier who had come to stand next to her. "He likes his fantasies high and mighty, don't he?"

"That he does," Nao replied. "That, or he was dreaming when he said that. Since he's dreaming, it's our duty to wake him up."

She cocked an eyebrow at the soldier who had spoken and asked: "We don't want to bore him now, do we, Hideki?"

Hideki grunted at the tacit order, unfurling the rawhide whip in his hand. Its tails were knotted at the ends, wicked little things that left a sprayed tattoo on skin that looked like a kiss from Medusa. It was not even an instrument developed specifically for torture interrogations but for pure brutality. Used by an amateur, it could bring a man trembling to his knees. Used by a professional, it could bring his face to the floor, sprawled in a puddle of his own faeces and piss.

Hideki happened to be a professional.

"Let's give him a friendly little morning kiss, Hideki."

There was the snap of the whip, like the sound of old wood cracking under sudden pressure. It was followed immediately by a guttural cry.

"How's that?" said the primipilus, peering curiously at their prisoner. Looking unsatisfied by his pained grimace, she snapped her fingers at Hideki. "I don't think he's awake yet. Give him a few more love-slaps, eh?"

Hideki chuckled. This was followed by the cracking sounds of the whip licking out again and again. Each crack was followed by a scream, each one higher-pitched than the one before. Some people might have thought it unmanly or unfitting for Neleus to scream because of the whipping, but Nao-and every other person who had ever been lashed or had lashed someone-knew better. No man or woman could possibly hold back a grunt if it came to a good whipping. Veteran soldiers could stifle nearly all sounds if they were stabbed, pierced, shot, or even sliced. But no veteran soldier had ever been able to stay mute under the whip. Unless he was actually mute.

*The whip man is a great thing*, Nao thought with admiration. The good whip man could deliver fast, stinging blows that felt like wasp-bites for only a second before blooming into hell the one after. He could flick out that leather cord like a sadistic snake, reaching out to sting your skin but not cut it-or not yet, not just yet. He knew those places that hurt more than others, and he was precise. That precision, taken with that knowledge, was a cruel thing. Because a



good whip man, if he rationed out his blows and had enough stamina, could keep you in a bright and nearly unbroken haze of pain for as much as ten hours without stopping.

Hideki, Nao knew, was a good whip man . He knew enough to wait just for the zenith of the first bite's pain to pass before delivering the next. His arm tired slower than an Olympic athlete's in his prime. And he could break a man's vow of silence faster than anything else.

Another scream erupted from the prisoner's throat, chasing its way through clenched teeth.

*Well, it's not exactly anything coherent*, Nao conceded with a smirk. But it was still better than sullen reserve. It was always good to let the prisoner find his voice . It was still something.

She clapped her hands to stay Hideki's whip. There was an interval of silence as she waited for Neleus's sighing groans to die down.

"Had enough yet, Neleus?" she asked him afterwards. "This can stop, you know. Or it can go on forever. Would you like that?"

Neleus raised his head slowly in response, hair now almost completely matted to the skull with hot sweat. The look he sent her way was not at all forthcoming, and she nodded in understanding.

"I see."

Hideki began to raise his whip hand again, but she halted him by pushing off the pillar she had been leaning against and touching his shoulder. She approached Neleus, circling around until she was standing behind the prisoner.

"Look at all these love-bites," she crooned, lifting a finger to run it caressingly over a fresh pockmark, one of the blunt cuts the lash had inflicted on his skin. He gave a shiver of pain, his large frame quivering as he jerked away from her touch. She laughed.

"Squeamish already, Old Boy?" she taunted. "And this is just the foreplay. We aren't even getting started yet."

He tried to twist around, grunting as he turned his head in an attempt to look at her from the corner of a puffy eye. All he could see was a shock of red, however, and whether it was just her hair or the blood seeping from his eyelid, he could not tell.

" *Cunni*, " he hissed savagely into the air. "You *cunni*. "

"Talking dirty already. Ooh."

"I'll kill you!"

"Tch." She shook her head sadly, poking at another wicked little welt on his back. "He's still dreaming. A few more wake-up calls, Hideki?"

She moved away as Hideki bared his big white teeth, ready to eat up the rest of the man's skin with his lash. As soon as she was far enough away again, he began.

"He's holding up better than expected though, Centurion," said the other female legionary in the room when Nao moved to stand next to her. "Think we should change methods?"

Nao snorted, speaking quietly but just enough to be heard above the cries and the snaps of the whip.

"Ah, you just want to start breaking bones already," she said dismissively, motioning to the club smacking softly in the other woman's palm. "I don't think it's time for that yet. I want him to talk, not be completely reduced to bawling."

"A broken knee would do it."

"It could also send him straight into delirium from the pain," she retorted. "He's more liable to start thinking of suicide then, and we're lucky he isn't doing that now."

The soldier nodded, tossing brown curls over her brow: "He wants to get out of this alive, even if only in prison."

"Yes, but if you break his knee, it's another story. He'll either be in too much pain to think about going on with this shit or start thinking he'll be too incapacitated to make his escape when he lands in the

cells." She sighed. "Gods' sakes, I finally catch one and it turns out to be a good, old-fashioned trap-mouth."

"How about we break the fingers instead? A lot of little bones we could use there."

"Ahh, it's the same as incapacitating-"

She broke off abruptly and squinted at nothing in particular. All of a sudden, she grinned.

"You just gave me an idea," she said cheerfully. "Enough, Hideki!"

Hideki ceased. She snapped her fingers.

"Take him down, would you?" she instructed to the soldiers, watching them stride to Neleus's side. She pointed to the heavy oaken table nearby, the one she had been sitting on earlier. "Tie him down there. Lay him out so his hands are flat on the wood."

They obeyed. Two released the chains holding up his arms with a series of clinks, dragging him roughly to the said table and flipping his big body there with a few grunts. They worked with the swift care of experts, and soon he was right where Nao wanted him to be: lashed tautly on his back, both arms and legs pulled down with thick cords.

She walked over to look down on his red face.

"Well, I'll be damned," she said with a wide grin. "The bastard actually passed out. Get the water."

One of the legionaries fetched an amphora from a corner and filled it from a larger one nearby. Veins bulging, he lugged the container and emptied its contents on their prisoner, bringing Neleus awake with that shock. The prisoner shook his head dazedly, finding himself.

"See how accommodating we are, Neleus?" Nao said pleasantly, joining her hands behind her back as she regarded him. "You kept falling asleep on us so we even let you lie down. Now how's that for hospitality?"

He blew heavily through his nose, trying to clear it of water that had trickled inside. An angry grimace showed through the beginnings of his beard, and Nao was amused to see that a sliver of bravado had worked into his expression.

"You think-hnf-this is new?" he asked contemptuously, once his nasal passages were cleared of moisture. "I've had worse, had children hit me harder, *saltatrix tonsa*," he leered at Hideki, who scowled at him. "My hide's thicker than your fancy fucking armour, you goddamned *cunni*!"

The primipilus grinned outrageously at the tirade. She clapped her hands as if in approval.

"Well then, let me teach you something basic about armour, my leather-skinned man," she said cheerfully, looking at the others. "Get more water, now."

They refilled the amphora while she took the club from the other woman in the room. The thin end was forced roughly into Neleus's mouth, used to keep his mouth open. Nao looked at the female soldier.

"Hold his head fast," she ordered, motioning the men with the amphora closer. "Pour and try to get it into his mouth, boys."

They complied, and there was the sound of rushing water and gagging, mixing with wild thumping noises as Neleus banged and scuffed his feet against the table. The waterfall bearing down on him finally slowed to a trickle and he choked around the club between his jaws, spluttering water and trying to catch his breath.

"Again," the primipilus said.

It was done again, and again, and yet again after that. After the fourth time, it seemed that the centurion was finally satisfied and she let them put the amphora away. She removed the club and looked at Neleus, who was still spitting, making snorting noises and straining for air.

She smiled at him.

"Now here's the lesson," she began, speaking very gently. "Armour is made to protect you from getting hurt outside. So even if your hide is really thick enough to be armour, if I thump you just about... *here*."

She delivered a vicious blow to his abdomen, eliciting a sudden gag as the water he had swallowed rushed up from his stomach and erupted violently from his mouth. The others stepped back in mild surprise, finding the retreat vain as the gush of water drenched their already sodden footwear.

Meanwhile, the primipilus continued her lecture.

"You would do that," she concluded, looking especially amused. "And it doesn't really hurt on the outside, does it?"

She gave him another hard thump on the belly. It was rewarded with another retch as his body convulsed.

"No, you've got armour for your hide, after all," she said. "Your hide is hard as brass."

She chuckled down at him.

"But your insides are soft, Neleus," she whispered. "Soft and weak. Isn't that interesting?"

He groaned, too dazed by the havoc in his gut to deliver a biting retort. She beamed down at him like some munificent demon, bent on providing more pain.

"Now I'm moving on to the next lesson," she said, stepping a little away and taking one of his tied hands. She produced a small dagger from her effects and positioned its whetted tip under one yellowed, dirty fingernail. His fingers twitched, and she forced them down with one hand.

"Our next subject," she announced to the room, "is how to chip away at chinks in someone's armour."

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"How many slaughtered hogs?"

"Two per century, I think," came the Himean commander's voice. "A barrel each of wine. Decent wine, so they can water it if they like. The rest-cheeses, sausages, bread, olive oil-can all be reckoned easily in lump."

"That's true. It's just like the usual count."

"What do you think, Takumi-han?"

"I think your estimates are fine, Fujino-san," the young man answered, setting aside his quill. "I can handle the rest well enough."

"I would hate for you to overexert yourself on my account, though," she replied, watching him as he sprinkled sand onto the wet ink on his parchment. "And for something so trifling as my birthday celebration, no more. Be sure to tell me if you need help with any of it."

"That's appreciated, but I doubt it. Procuring stuff and arranging things like this is my speciality, after all."

Shizuru smiled at the confidently-given statement.

"Far be it from me to contradict you there," she said. "I think that should be all. Do you think I have left anything out?"

Takumi picked up his quill, tapping it lightly on the table before shaking his head.

"I really can't think of anything else," he allowed with a grin. "So don't worry, Fujino-san. The soldiers will be well-feasted on your birthday. I'll make sure I get everything to the letter."

She rose from her seat and he did the same, the two of them moving away from the table.

"Be sure of something else, Takumi-han," she said to him.

"What would that be, Fujino-san?"

She smiled as she breezed past him and through the door he was holding open.

"To honour me with your presence at my party," she replied, with a farewell tilt of her head. "Thank you again and good day."

He chuckled and waved before shutting the door behind her. She was left walking in the corridor with her bodyguard, who had followed her exit. The only other creature present was the leashed panther padding quietly on one side of the younger woman.

"Well, that takes care of the preparations," Shizuru said, still striding purposefully but with no true destination in mind. She noticed that her feet seemed to be taking her to the familiar route to the gardens outside, however, and she made no effort to change their direction. A bit of fresh air was welcome after an hour spent smelling the musty odour of papyrus and old parchment that seemed ever-present at scribes' and accountants' rooms.

"Perhaps I am cutting it rather close though, finishing this only three days ahead," she mused aloud. "Takumi-han would not complain, but I cannot help but feel that I am giving him little time for procurement. What do you think, Natsuki?"

Natsuki's only reply was a shrug.

"It should be fine," the older woman allowed, before changing the subject. "Anyway, I cannot help but think of another sort of party they must have had recently back home. They have probably finished putting *Bona Dea* to sleep in Hime."

She frowned thoughtfully: "The letters did not mention anything about it, but they were written a good while before, after all."

Indeed, the said letters were so long overdue that they had borne replies to mail sent out nearly two months ago. The latest post from Hime had finally arrived, come not over the sea but overland by travelling the length of the great Himean highways of northern Fuuka then trekking through the unpaved roads of coastal Caledonia before finally reaching Argus. It was not a difficult journey in terms of danger, but it was a long one. All Shizuru learned from her share of

the post was that Kaneda Izumi's bill was likely to find passage soon and that Chikane had spoken to the Princeps regarding their venture-when, at the time she read this, the passage of Izumi's bill was over a week old and Chikane had already moved on to speaking with other senators for support. But she had no way of knowing that, and all she knew for now was that her knowledge was dated. Hence she could not have confirmation either that the celebration for Bona Dea's winter sleep had already been held.

"Bona Dea is the Good Goddess," she was explaining to her Otomeian companion. "She is primarily a deity for women, cared for and attended not only by Hime's Vestal Virgins but also by all women in the city. She is one of the most important divinities for us. You have not taken her up in your studies of Himean culture?"

Natsuki shook her head, looking shamed by her ignorance in the subject. The older woman gave her a chuck under the chin for reassurance.

"It is all right. She is rarely mentioned aloud because her rituals are largely secret," she assured the young woman, who was tugging at her panther's leash to discourage it from pursuing its distraction by an indoor cat. "So secret is she, in fact, that the men of Hime have no idea what happens at her rituals. Only women dare to approach her temple precinct, from which all men are forbidden. Hence, only about half of Hime can ever claim to know Bona Dea."

The younger woman looked fascinated by this information, her thin black eyebrows slanting together lightly as she considered the mystery of such a deity. Shizuru waited quietly, knowing the girl would put questions to her soon enough.

"But why only women?" Natsuki finally asked, just as they passed through an archway and came under deep blue sky. "And why only women come to-come, um, come near her temple?"

She looked at Shizuru as she talked.

"Men are scared?" she asked. "Of her?"

"Well, now." The tawny-haired woman lifted her hands to adjust her



pulled-back mane; she tightened the cord holding it together. "One might say both men and women are scared of her, given that she is an awesome god. But the answer to your question is that only women come near her because she loves women. And snakes. Her precinct abounds with snakes."

"Snakes?" The girl looked surprised. "Serpents?"

"Yes, serpents," Shizuru affirmed. "Hence my parents always considered it a happy occasion for me to be born in December, since it is the same month when Bona Dea, whose favoured animal is the snake, goes to rest."

Natsuki frowned, saying only one word in reply.

"Confused."

The general laughed at the childishly-given expression of bafflement, leading the two of them to a stone bench. They went there, brushing snow off it before taking their seats.

"Let Shizuki loose for a while so she can play in the snow and then I shall tell you why," she promised, cooing to the animal with them before unleashing it herself. She ruffled its furry head and gave it a push. It rumbled with pleasure, then dashed after some dry leaves blown by the wind.

"Now tell me, do you remember my personal seal?" she asked afterwards, turning to her companion. "I believe King Kruger should have one too, though I do not know what you call it in your language. It is a block usually of metal, gemstone, or wood, often used to affix something like a signature onto parchment or wax."

Natsuki nodded, saying a word Shizuru took to be the word for 'seal' in the younger woman's language.

"The one for your letters?" the girl asked.

"Yes, the one I use to stamp the hot wax."

"Yes . Ah, yes. It has your initials."

"What else is on it?"

"An image." Natsuki replied, her lips giving an unconscious pout as she attempted to recall said image. "A lion."

A smile lit her face abruptly when she added: "And a *snake* ."

Shizuru smiled back, acknowledging the other's little victory.

"There you have it," she told her, changing position on the bench so that she was half-turned to the younger woman. "The snake comes from one side, the seal of the Fujino. The lion is from my other family-the other parental side. Usually, only one seal is taken by a successor. But they put them together for my personal seal, because both sides are of equal prestige and distinction enough to bear the weight of each other."

"So when I was born in December, the month of Bona Dea's rites of rest," she continued. "It was considered a lucky omen for me, because of the association with snakes." She smiled suddenly, one hand coming up to stroke the golden fringe brushing her forehead. "As for the other side of the family, the omen was said to be my hair."

It took Natsuki only a second.

"Lion's hair. The colour."

"Yes," Shizuru affirmed with a giggle. "I suppose it is because they do not really have hair this shade on that side of the family. Most of them are dark brunettes and even tend to auburn. Well, I have a cousin who is another stark exception, but she is most definitely not lion-coloured!"

"Oh." Natsuki squinted a green eye. "Ohh."

A grin broke out on the older woman's face.

"Imagining how I would look if I were a dark brunette?"

There was a sheepish chuckle as the Otomeian ducked and hid her face away.

Shizuru laughed, waving off the girl's awkwardness.

"It's all right, I suppose it would make little difference to my appearance anyway," she said. "But that is what I meant earlier, when I said it was thought a good omen for me to be born in December."

Natsuki nodded shortly, her eyes flicking back and forth from the panther playing in front of them and to Shizuru's hair. The older woman was about to tease her about it when she suddenly announced something, looking very embarrassed as she said it.

"I like your hair."

She tried to look indifferent after this, but failed miserably at it. There was something endearing about that, and Shizuru would have kissed the girl if the latter had not called to the cub near them, pretending to divert herself with it. So Shizuru gave her some time to cool her cheeks before saying, almost as casually: "You do?"

She got a nod.

"I like darker hair myself."

This time, she got a shake of the head.

"Yours is good," Natsuki said slowly, her eye still on the panther. "It is, um..."

Here came a word foreign to Shizuru's ears. The Himean lifted her eyebrows.

"What does that mean?" she asked her bodyguard, who was still frowning as she seemed to search for an equivalent for her words in the Himean tongue. She finally looked Shizuru's way after another moment, apparently having found a way to translate it.

"Like gold, when you melt it," she described, brow wrinkling above wide eyes in a way that reminded the other of the artless charm of a pup. "Like gold with bronze. Many shades, all together. Pretty. Warm."

Shizuru tried to pull back the too-wide smile threatening to show on her lips, feeling an absurd sense of pleasure at those words. This young woman's manner of complimenting her made her feel almost guilty, spoiled with praise simple though the given praise might be. Natsuki was far from effusive when it came to compliments, but her guileless and sincere delivery made them sound all the richer, as far as Shizuru was concerned.

"I see," she said in reply. "Thank you very much, Natsuki."

Natsuki shrugged again, looking away.

"Then, you like it because it looks warm?"

"Mm-hm."

"Well, then." She surprised the younger woman by shifting closer, pulling the latter against her chest so that the girl was pressed against it. "It gets warmer the closer you come to it, did you know?"

That earned her a laugh. The girl adjusted position for comfort and they ended with their feet up on the bench, Natsuki sitting between her legs and leaning against her front.

"So," the Himean began, resting her chin on the other's shoulder. "Would you like me to tell you more about Bona Dea's rituals?"

Natsuki nodded, turning her head and nuzzling the older woman shortly with her nose. Shizuru went on after receiving the gesture of affection.

"Bona Dea has a six-month winter sleep, from which she is woken on May Day," she said. "The women of Hime see to this and hold a private celebration in honour of her awakening. In December, however, the celebration they hold is for the other end of the cycle. Her death."

Natsuki's head moved.

"She dies?" she asked. "This god?"

"In a manner of speaking," was Shizuru's answer. "It may also be

called being laid to rest for the winter. December is when Bona Dea goes back to sleep, laid to rest by the highest-born Himean women. The event is held at night, in a house chosen by the Vestals in advance and honoured by that choice. On that night, no man may enter that house."

Natsuki hummed, an indication for her to go on.

"There are female musicians playing pipes, flutes, and lyres," she continued. "And the choicest food is set out on tables where women may eat from it as they pass. Countless silver vessels called honey-pots are placed around the house, constantly filled with wine. But on that night, wine is not called wine. It is called *milk*."

"Milk?" Natsuki echoed. "As milk from a goat? From a cow?"

"Yes, only it is actually wine that is called that-but only on that special night, and only by women."

"Why?"

Shizuru took a moment to think on how to explain it, burrowing her nose into soft dark hair.

"Because that is part of Bona Dea's deception," she told her. "Even the statue outside her shrine in her precinct is not an effigy of her but a false one, erected there to deceive the forces said to be generated by men. Her rites of rest give the appearance of being an occasion where women congregate for a mild dinner party, when the reality-and secret, from men-is that the women flagellate themselves into a high ecstasy with whips the latter part of that evening."

"In Bona Dea's world, nothing is ever what it truly seems. Or never completely what it seems. She is for women, and like them, is always shrouded in mystery," she said, thinking of how the description fit the woman in her arms remarkably well. "Little is said of Bona Dea in public, and that which is, is mostly a ruse."

Natsuki exhaled quietly, one of her hands going to rest on Shizuru's leg.

"A mystery," she murmured. "The men, they do-do, um-do not try to

find out?"

"You mean, don't they get curious?"

"Mm-hm."

"No, as contrary to human nature as that sounds," Shizuru answered with a smirk. "I suppose they do feel twinges of curiosity on occasion, but I have yet to hear of any man purposefully acting on it. Bona Dea deserves their reverence as much as ours. Do you know what would happen if a man profaned her mysteries by something as simple as sneaking into the house and observing the ritual?"

"What?"

"Every pregnant woman would be blighted," came the ominous reply. "Each woman would have to take the medicine to make the baby exit their wombs. If a baby is born alive, it is abandoned outside the city limits and left to die. There are no exceptions and no woman tries to make one, even for her child. Because if Bona Dea is displeased, no baby shall be born whole. Each one, it is said, would be born monstrous and deformed. That is her curse."

She felt a small pause in Natsuki's breathing, an indication of amazement.

"The religious colleges would have to do their best to appease her," she went on. "Both men and women. The State Augurs-I am one of them-would watch the skies for weeks for any omens of misfortune. And the rites would have to be held again, of course, with added sacrifice. That is what no man wishes to risk, for the sake of a little curiosity. Hime is a religious nation, My Dear. We take the eccentricities of our deities very seriously, in exchange for them taking our wishes and prayers with equal seriousness."

She felt a squeeze on her thigh.

"Bona Dea is an awful goddess," the young woman breathed to her. "A great one."

"You see?"

"Yes."

She tugged at the edges of her cloak, pulling it forward so that it wrapped both of them in its embrace. Natsuki nestled closer, still rubbing her thigh.

"I would attend those rites were I there," Shizuru told her. "I still recall the sight of all those women, coming together in their finery. Everyone looked so wonderful."

"What do you wear?" Natsuki asked. "The women?"

"Dresses," she replied. "Everyone comes in dresses and gowns and glittering with jewellery. It is a special night, after all."

"Hmm."

"Which reminds me," Shizuru said, smiling broadly into the girl's hair. "You do know I expect you to wear a dress on my birthday, yes?"

The girl tried to turn her head, but was prevented by a playful bite on her ear. She let out a sound of surprise.

"No arguments, Natsuki," Shizuru murmured, her lips still on the other woman's ear. "And yes, I know that you need to protect me, but there is no reason you cannot do a good enough job of that while wearing a dress, since I am not entirely defenceless on my own merits. Unless you think me a perfect cripple?"

Natsuki made a sound of denial.

"Good!" Shizuru pronounced. "Between the two of us, that should compensate for any lack of mobility and possible downgrade of ability you may have if you are not wearing this uniform, so ease your mind. And trust in me: I can handle my own security fairly well, child. So can I look forward to seeing you in the loveliest dress possible?"

She felt the relaxation in Natsuki's posture that signalled concession.

"Good girl," she said as she angled her head, placing a kiss on one

delicate cheek. "I doubt you brought a dress with you on this campaign-I know you military-minded Otomeians!-so I thought we could buy or have one prepared post-haste. Would you like me to help you find one later? I shall engage a dozen seamstresses to finish one for you quickly if you wish."

The younger woman turned her head.

"Um," she said hesitantly. "I will do it, Shizuru."

Shizuru lifted an eyebrow before bringing it down slowly when it suddenly occurred to her that Natsuki might want to surprise her with her choice of attire. She did not dislike the idea.

"You are sure you can manage by yourself?" she asked.

"Yes."

"All right, then."

She brought her lips to Natsuki's ear again, only nuzzling it this time. *Pretty little ears*, she thought, liking the way they looked against the stream of blue-black that was the younger woman's hair. They were just so white and delicate, with a little pinkish tinge in the shell, that she could not help thinking of them as newly made. She murmured little endearments into one of them now, not words but short breaths meant to caress the pale skin. She felt Natsuki shiver, the younger woman's finger tracing circles on her thigh.

"Shizuru," she heard her say, a few moments later.

She looked at the top of the dark head on her shoulder.

"Yes?"

She received no answer, however, and decided not to bother the girl with it. Natsuki had a habit of doing that, after all: saying her name and no more. She felt, on such occasions, that the younger woman was merely saying her name for the sake of saying it and not to actually call her attention. Did Natsuki, perhaps, simply like the feel of the name on her tongue?



The girl did it at night too, or in the early morning. Sometimes, Shizuru would wake with the dark form still half-tangled with her, but far enough apart for her to be able to peek at the younger woman's face if she opened her eyes. She would pretend to still be asleep then, knowing the girl was already awake. The first time she acted so, it was out of curiosity to see what Natsuki would do while waiting. She had been pleasantly surprised by the girl's actions, which had been to stroke her back so gently she almost failed to feel it. She had continued her farce then, feeling those large green eyes on her and wondering what expression would be there if she opened her own eyes. But then she heard the girl whisper her name in that half-caressing, half-marvelling tone, and she knew she had no need to look.

The mornings after, she would do the same, simply basking in the secret attention given by the other woman. Sometimes, she could feel Natsuki's fingers ghosting just above her eyes, barely brushing the mark sustained in the Battle of Argentum when an enemy falx cut an eyebrow. Other times, the fingers simply laced into her hair or stroked it. What she liked best of all the silent caresses was the low whisper of her name, though, because there was something in the way Natsuki said her name that made her thankful for it. Natsuki said her name with something like wonder. And how many people could say it that way?

*I know of no one else, come to think of it, she thought. Perhaps that is part of her gift, that she can say my name and make it seem like the only name in the world.* It was clear that Natsuki was not a person used to speaking gentle things aloud, not someone used to exteriorising her feelings. And indeed, she rarely did so, even with the Himean. But when she said Shizuru's name like that, the older woman could not help but feel that there was little need for her to do anything else.

It worried her sometimes, though. Natsuki's taciturnity made it difficult to talk of certain things, particularly those Shizuru had on her mind these days. Several times now she had begun conversations meant to probe the girl's affections for her, only to retreat in the face of a fearful discomfort in those emerald eyes. In a way, however, those eyes were her only ally in that stoic countenance, for they

spoke twice as much as the rest of the younger woman, and perhaps thrice as much as the Otomeian's mouth. During those situations, they would speak of a terror of being seen through even while holding a kind of desperation for understanding. It was as though there were things Natsuki wanted to say, but never could.

She supposed this was largely due to the way Natsuki had been raised. From what little she had learned of the Otomeian's childhood, it seemed that she had been brought up within the ranks of her nation's military, most of her caretakers being the officials most dedicated to the army and the like. What else was to be expected, then, but for her to hold expression in distrust and cultivate a careful detachment proper to soldiers in the army? What else but to shackle expression itself?

Yet she could not be sure that was all there was to the girl's enigma just yet. What of her bloody past, for instance, which would surely have played a part in forming her shell as well?

Natsuki stirred, jolting her from her meditations.

"Shizuru," she whispered again, making a movement to indicate that she wanted to get up. Shizuru held her fast, however, and looked questioningly at her.

"Yes?" she said, expecting a reply this time.

Natsuki fidgeted again: "Someone comes."

"Oh?"

She looked around-while still keeping her hold on the younger woman-and searched for an intruder. She found one approaching from a path on her left.

"Ah, it is Nao-han."

Finally disengaging herself gently from her bodyguard, she arranged herself so that both feet were resting on the ground. Natsuki stood up beside her, looking faintly uncomfortable.

"I never shall understand how you can hear them approaching no

matter how far off they are," she told the girl. "Your hearing must be keen as a bat's. How Chie-han would love to have the same capacity."

The younger woman suddenly smirked, apparently familiar enough with the senior legate by now to understand the jest.

"But then again, it would probably come with a trade-off," Shizuru continued mirthfully. "The gods are Greek when granting gifts. She might find the price too high to pay."

"She would," Natsuki said, smiling now.

Shizuru grinned at the response.

"What *is* the price for having godlike hearing, Natsuki?" she asked.

"To keep godlike silence."

That broke up the older woman. She was still bent over laughing, Natsuki trying not to do the same, when Nao finally reached the two of them. The centurion's lips twitched as she regarded the pair, seemingly infected by their good humour. After Shizuru finally managed to greet her, she delivered her report.

"I'm glad you're in good spirits, General," the redhead announced. "Because I have good news."

Shizuru returned her smile.

"What is it?"

"We've got a name."

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### **Omake:**

*This is irregular, yes, but here is something one thought to share. I recall the conversation I once had with a male friend-who watches anime-when I told him that I was about to write an explicit scene for this story (the first such scene, in ch.21). After a quick review of the*

*plot, I went on to ask:*

**I** . Have you any suggestions?

**He** . Maybe some exhibitionism? To add to the excitement?

**I** . Yes, that is a fair idea, I suppose.

**He** . There you are.

**I** . How does it go?

**He** . Hmm. They have a bathroom, right?

**I** . Yes.

**He** . And they share a bedroom.

**I** . Yes.

**He** . Then how about they go to the bathroom, get into some heated foreplay there, make out desperately in the hallway because they're both really aroused and can't wait, and finally burst into the bedroom to have sex in the bed.

**I** . That sounds nice.

**He** . Doesn't it?

**I**, *frowning*. Ah, no.

**He** . What's wrong?

**I** . I realised it just now. That cannot work.

**He** . Why not? It's sexy, it's exhibitionist. They'll love it.

**I**, *smiling* . The readers or Shizuru and Natsuki?

**He**, *grins* . It's safe to say all of them.

**I** . Cela va sans dire! Oh, but, wait. That was not what I meant to say. Pardon, but your idea cannot work.

**He** : Like I said, why not?

**I** : Because they start in the bath, move to the hallway, then finally to the bed. Was it not so?

**He** . Yes. Well?

**I** . Well, the bath is adjacent or connected to the bedroom by a passageway.

**He**, *after pausing for a few seconds* . Oh. So the bathroom is connected to the bedroom? Directly?

**I** . Mm . They do not need to pass through the hallway to get from the bath to the bedroom or vice-versa.

**He** . So to make it clear... if you go with my idea, that means they start to make out in the bathroom, then dash out and pass through the bedroom so that they can *for no apparent reason* leave the privacy they already have there and snog passionately in the hallway...

**I** .... Then run back into the bedroom to finish doing it.

*Long pause.*

**I** . That sounds rather like nonsensical fan-service for Exhibitionists Anonymous.

**He** . Yeah, you're right. I guess that wouldn't work.

# Chapter 28

*Thank you to the reviewers and readers.*

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## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Augur** - An interpreter of omens; there were official, state-sanctioned augurs as well as non-state ones.
2. **Bellerophon** - Mythical hero who attempted to ascend to the home of the gods, Olympus, atop the winged horse named Pegasus. He was cast down for this attempt.
3. **Croesus** - Lydian king reported in countless accounts, including those of Herodotus, to be fabulously wealthy.
4. **Denarii** (pl.), **Denarius** (s.) - The denarius is a Roman coin, often made of silver. It weighed about 3.5 grams, with each silver **talent** (s.v.) being worth about 6250 denarii.
5. **Eureka!** - Archimedes' famous exclamation, after making his discovery on water displacement.
6. **Impluvium** - The shallow pool found in most Roman atriums; it was under the skylight.
7. **Meum mel** - A choice endearment; translated as "my honey" or "my sweet".
8. **Scylla and Charybdis** - Mythical monsters from Greek lore; the reference made here is to Charybdis, who was an underwater fiend that created whirlpools whenever she swallowed and fountains when she spat.
9. **Stibium** - A dark cosmetic used to rim the eyes, an ancient eyeliner.
10. **Talent** - The load a man can carry (usually, of silver or gold),

*around 25 kilograms.*

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## ***Inter Nos***

*par ethnewinter*

---

"The virago returns, though not in triumph-and how it must rankle her!"

"And shall the rest of us too, now that she has returned for retribution," came the reply to these words. "I wonder how many senators took leave today as I have, in anticipation of her wrath."

The woman on the other couch giggled quietly.

"I really do think you should have attended today's session, Chikane," she said, lifting her head from the cushions upon which it reclined. Her legs moved under an ochre-hued dress that ended at her shins, the heel of one foot shown to be rubbing silkily against the other foot's ankle. "Armitage is sure to be bawling out the House at the moment for not having granted her petition for that triumph. More excellent entertainment than any Grecian tragedy!"

Chikane sighed and crossed her own legs. Unlike her companion, however, she was seated upright on her couch, both feet over one side. Now she peered at the other with a lofty tilt of her chin.

"'More tragedy' I can do without," was her retort. "I have been doing *her* job for the past two months, listening to the senators' daily harangues on nonsense and nothing. After all that entertainment, I dare to think myself deserving a day off from that madhouse she has so kindly forced me to oversee with her untimely vacation in Africa Province."

"You're taking an untimely vacation in abandonment of the others, yourself, right now. You should have gone." A thoughtful sound. "Think of it as divine justice. Instead of delivering their harangues to you, someone delivers a harangue to them."

"To me as well, were I there. I doubt myself exempt from being visited with that lecture."

"Well. If there is good one thing you can say of dear old Armitage, it's that she discriminates against no pair of ears."

The black-haired woman grinned, acknowledging the point with another tilt of her head. Her attention was diverted from the dialogue by the sound of a familiar step coming in the room. She turned her upper body to look for the new arrival. Sundrenched as the atrium was, it seemed to her that an even brighter star had arrived to light it... and the thought showed plainly on her face. The woman with her watched the display of fondness, privately entertained by the uncommon emotion on Chikane's generally schooled visage.

"Darling," Chikane was saying to the new arrival. One slender hand came up in welcome. "Have you finished painting? How is it?"

"I had to stop. I got tired, Chikane-chan," the newcomer answered, coming to take the proffered hand. She bent to give the black-haired woman a quick kiss on the lips, her golden tresses falling forward to kiss the raven ones near them. "But I'm halfway through. And I think it's going well."

She turned from Chikane to the other blonde in the room, who had risen from a supine position to greet her. They kissed each other on the cheeks before returning to their places: one on Chikane's couch, and one on the couch just across.

"Urumi-chan, I'm so happy to see you."

"I feel the same of you, of course. What are you painting this time, Himeko?" Urumi asked her cousin's wife. "It wouldn't happen to be Chikane, would it?"

Himeko coloured as Chikane laughed.

"How did you know that, Urumi-chan?" the urban praetor's wife wondered. "That's amazing."

"It was a calculated guess," Urumi responded. "Five of the seven times I asked this question since I've known you, your answer was



'Chikane'. Any gambler would say it was a safe speculation."

"Oh." The other blonde still looked quite embarrassed. "Oh, you're right."

"The subject, I guarantee you, is far from complaining," Chikane reassured her mate. "There are few things better than having myself captured by your hand, Himeko."

"In more ways than one," Urumi added naughtily. "Or so I imagine."

Himeko smiled shyly at them, failing to see her wife's dour look to the younger woman.

"What were you talking about before I came in?" she asked, before catching herself. "Oh, I mean, if it's important I can lea-"

"If it were that, there would only be more reason for you to stay," Chikane said kindly. "Still, it was nothing of import. We were merely discussing our senior consul's return to the city."

"Ohh. Senator Haruka Armitage?"

"What do you think of it, Hime-chan?" asked Urumi. "Our outgoing consul's homecoming?"

Himeko took some time before giving her answer.

"I think I'm relieved, somehow," she admitted with slight reluctance. The other two women gave her encouraging looks, seeing that she was afraid of expressing an opinion before them. Understandable. They were far more familiar with the political enterprise than she was, having been brought up within the ruling class and the machine itself. Who was she but a former commoner and plebeian both-or, at least, had been until her marriage to the urban praetor. All the same, her misgivings were actually for naught as both her present listeners little cared about her humble roots. They looked at her expectantly now, waiting for her to elucidate.

"It's good, I think. Because now we can really hold the elections, right, Chikane-chan?" she told them. "With Armitage-san here. They're only five days away, too."

She looked to her wife for a confirmation. After obtaining it, she turned back to Urumi with an unsure expression on her face.

"But it doesn't seem like she had a happy return, did she?" she asked, prompting the cousins to exchange looks. "What I mean is, people didn't really celebrate her coming back. It doesn't seem like they did. To me... I mean. I don't know, really."

Chikane smiled wistfully, letting her body fall gracefully to the right until she was lying on one side with a hand supporting her head, her torso just behind her sitting wife. The blonde's lower back and rear were snuggled into the crook of her hip and thigh, and that contact warmed her more than the braziers surrounding them.

"You are quite right," she told Himeko, her left hand coming up to hold the woman's waist. "They did not. Poor Haruka-san has had a somewhat lukewarm reception, I expect, ever since she arrived in Hime. As I told Urumi earlier, it is as well that I have chosen to sit out today's session, her first since her return, for I expect that she shall get back at everyone for not having wined and dined her as she doubtless deems fit."

Himeko looked down at her wife, confusion wrinkling her forehead.

"But Chikane-chan," she said. "I thought you said she was one of those people who don't like wine and feasts?"

"Who-oh. *Stoics*, you mean?"

"Yes, those."

Urumi interjected with a scoff.

"Oh, Haruka Armitage is not a true Stoic, Hime-chan, whether she knows it or not," she asserted. "It's true she doesn't take wine, but that might be because she cannot handle her liquor, for all we know. Besides that, she is not a real Stoic."

Chikane smiled: "Do you think so, Urumi?"

"Decidedly. Real Stoics dislike pomp and splash."

"Which she does."

"Which she does," the young woman agreed. "But only if they're coming from someone else. She's a great example for both things herself. Why, she makes the most bombastic splash whenever she jumps into any enterprise. Or conversation!"

"Bombastic splash?" Chikane repeated mirthfully.

Urumi grinned at her.

"Yes, I know it was a ridiculous image," she admitted. "I'll wager it would have great currency with the local parodists, though. Imagine Armitage leaping into the sea and dislodging Poseidon and his kingdom-now there's a formidable woman!"

"The worst of it is that I can imagine it happening," Chikane replied, tracing patterns idly on the back of her wife's robe. Himeko squirmed but did not move away. "Horrid picture."

"She's a veritable Leviathan, our senior and only consul," Urumi followed. "Scylla and Charybdis both, though she spits out more than she actually swallows."

"You are terrible," her older cousin said, eyes averting to cast a grimace towards the shallow pool at the centre of their atrium. "Now I shall have to spend the rest of the day with images of our consul draining the *impluvium* by simply jumping in and displacing all the water. Would it be too much to imagine she would cry 'Eureka' instead of 'Ecastor'?"

"And you call *me* terrible," Urumi smirked, imagining the senior consul making that verbal gaffe all too easily. "Poor Armitage, always subjected to such farcical jests. It's not even her fault that she makes a perfect caricature, really."

Chikane was tucking her hair behind an ear, and sneaked a smile at Urumi as she replied.

"Perhaps," was her allowance. "But we are all partly responsible for how people imagine us, so it is never proper to consider ourselves- or anyone, for that matter- purely victims of circumstance. Least of all

those of us involved in the public enterprise."

"I know that. Still, it's primarily Armitage's bad luck that when she contrives to look impressive, which she does in any enterprise, she is perceived instead as ludicrous."

"You find her ludicrous, then."

"You don't?"

Chikane's only response was another smile. Urumi rolled her eyes humorously at her cousin's caution.

"It's only my opinion, anyway," she said to the couple. "And it doesn't change the fact that there are people whose opinion of her is more flattering, as one would put it. Kikukawa-san, for instance, has always thought the world of her. Now there's someone who surely attempted to wine and dine our consul when she returned."

"Kikukawa-san shall be holding a dinner party soon, to celebrate Armitage-san's return."

"A dinner party in honour of a militant Stoic. Dreary thought. What would she serve, olives, dry bread, and gristle?"

"Haruka-san served something of the sort last I attended one of her dinner parties."

"Heavily watered wine, too, I suppose?"

"Do you consider a cup of water to ten drops of vintage 'heavily-watered'?"

"Good god. That atrocious?"

A stifled cry from Chikane's wife interrupted them. The woman had one hand to her collarbone, her large lilac eyes shining.

"Parties," she murmured, in her soft voice. "I'm so sorry for interrupting. I just remembered, Chikane-chan: it's Shi-chan's birthday today!"

"Ah, that's true," Urumi said. "Someone mentioned to me it was coming up last week. I nearly forgot."

"It does not matter so much if you do," Chikane replied. "She is too far away for our greetings to reach her ears."

"Shouldn't we make an offering or something at a temple, though, for her sake?" Himeko asked. "It feels like we should do that, at least."

"I have already taken care of it."

"Oh, I see." A brilliant smile. "Thank you, Chikane-chan. I'm sorry I wasn't there to help."

"That is perfectly all right. The gods shall surely send your regards to her as well," was the gentle reply. "Your remembrance of it on your own, at the very least, should please her in my next missive. Our talk of parties does make me wonder what she has planned today, though. She shall have to feast her soldiers too, troublesome though it may be. 'Tis only expected of a commander, and Shizuru herself is the kind to desire everyone participating in the celebrations, from common slave to commanding officer."

There was a loud giggle from her cousin just then. Urumi flashed bright teeth giddily at her, both blue and brown eyes dancing.

"While we're on the topic of Shizuru-san and her officers..." the younger woman began, in a tone indicating whatever she had to say next was of great interest. "I just heard the *juiciest* rumour a few days ago. A prime piece of tattle, Cousin, that will have those immaculate eyebrows of yours climbing to Olympus itself, in defiance of Bellerophon's fate when he was dashed down by the gods."

Himeko laughed at the elaborate preamble.

"A rumour about Shizuru?" asked Chikane.

"Oh, yes!"

"Do illuminate us."

"Word among the recipients of letters from the North is that our ever-unattainable, yet ever-eligible bachelorette is now involved with a young woman of foreign citizenship and descent, whom she met while spearheading her present campaign in the Northern territories."

The haughty eyebrows *did* climb-though not all the way to Olympus, as high as they could on the smooth brow.

"Shizuru?" was the incredulous answer.

Urumi continued unheedingly.

"Certain foreign young woman described in the letters," she intoned, "as being, quote, a delicious morsel of flesh, a tender piece of womanhood, a dark goddess incarnate."

Chikane flicked a glance at her now thoroughly blushing wife.

"Cousin," she half-heartedly warned Urumi.

Still the pale blonde continued, her small and attractive face crossed by a mysterious smile.

"Certain 'goddess incarnate' also said, by the writers of this news, to be an officer from the Otomeian support army," she concluded.

Now Chikane sat up, her long body folding from its stretch on the couch.

"*Ecaster!*" she uttered, looking disbelievingly at her relative. "Now what madness have you heard, Cousin? Perchance you are making it all up to bestir me?"

The blue-brown gaze met hers equably, twinkling as the younger woman replied.

"Whatever for?" she demanded. "I wouldn't even think of such a thing. Shizuru Fujino taking one of her subalterns as her lover, and a foreign subaltern, at that? It's rather too imaginative, even for me!"

Himeko suppressed a giggle as the two patricians arched eyebrows

haughtily at each other.

"Anyway, it's what I heard," Urumi sighed. "And read, from letters shown to me."

"By?"

"By some of the people I meet at the crossroads colleges," was her reply. "Wives or whatnot of the soldiers from Shizuru-san's army. It's supposedly all the talk among the rankers over in the northern barracks."

"Do you think it worth crediting?"

"At first, not really," Urumi confessed, playing with a flaxen lock. She twirled it around one finger as she mused aloud on the topic. "The people have always had a fascination for anything to do with characters like Shizuru-san, which often leads them to speculating a gold mine from a mere nugget when it comes to her life. I thought they might've exaggerated it from something like Shizuru-san teasing some young woman over there-and we all know that your dearest friend is so friendly that many others often end up imputing more-than-friendly intent behind her actions. Those who don't know her that well might see more into it than we do, finding it more interesting to do so than otherwise. You know how the common people are."

Chikane nodded. As for Chikane's wife, she simply listened with a faint smile. After all, she had still been part of "the common people" only months ago.

"But then I talked to some others, like Miyabi Wara-she's affianced to one of Shizuru-san's legates, you know." Urumi pursed her lips and squinted at the fresco opposite her. "They're saying the same thing among the higher ranks. Word has it that Shizuru-san is most probably *involved*, in the full meaning of the term, with that foreigner. Nothing confirmed, of course. But these are old letters, so something may well have happened to confirm it by now. With so many writing the same thing, I can't help but wonder if this much smoke indicates an actual fire."

She looked at her cousin, who was frowning at her feet. After a few more seconds of silence, the older woman finally spoke.

"Fool that I am!" she said to them, touching slender fingers to her brow. "I remember it now. I have my own addition to what you have already gathered, Urumi. There was something of the sort from Suou's last letters as well. I chose to disregard it, however, because I thought it made in jest. Suou tends to be more facetious when she is speaking of people she knows well, and Shizuru would be that, if anything."

The other two gave their full attention to her.

"What did she say?" Urumi pressed.

"Nothing confirmed or definite either," Chikane replied, lazy blue eyes narrowing in recollection. "It was more in the nature of an inference from observation. If I recall correctly, she said something to the effect that she thought Shizuru was growing extremely fond of her Otomeian attendant and bodyguard."

Himeko and Urumi stared at her. She returned their surprised looks.

"Her attendant and bodyguard?" Urumi echoed, finally. "The one the Otomeian king 'lent' to her?"

"So Suou mentioned in another missive, yes."

"Why didn't I know about that titbit? The plot thickens!"

"Chikane-chan," the urban praetor's wife called. "Is that true? Suou-chan really said that?"

"Yes," Chikane confirmed. "But she has never written outright that Shizuru and that woman have an actual relationship of the kind we are imagining, either."

"But given how many people are mentioning it," Urumi reminded, "you know where the probability leans."

"Yes," Chikane nodded. "Shizuru's lack of a history in this regard actually strengthens the case for this one now, because you never



even hear of thing such as this about her. There is a possibility of it being true."

The other patrician flopped onto her stomach, resting her face on crossed arms.

"Oh, isn't it fascinating?" she sniggered, looking like a very pleased imp. "I wish I were over there with Suou now, so I could see it for myself. I wonder what she looks like, that foreigner."

"I thought you said," Himeko told her, "the letters said she was beautiful?"

"She would have to be, to hook as big a fish as Shizuru-san. Ah, what wriggling little worm has played the bait to that catch? I would give so much to know."

The urban praetor made a face.

"How is it that you make even a beautiful woman sound repugnant, Urumi?" she teased. "Metaphors of worms are hardly likely to quicken anyone's pulse. It is just as well you are neither a painter nor a poet, else your talents make gruesome work of the goddess of pulchritude herself."

"Ahh, you know what I mean." She sighed and fixed her cousin with a brown eye. "Tell me you're as amazed as I am, Chikane, because I'm stunned. Shizuru-san always seemed immune to Aphrodite's charms, though I admit I don't know her like you do and am going from a few passing meetings and a ton of love-less gossip. I was even entertaining thoughts of her being a sworn celibate."

"I do not claim to know Shizuru perfectly, but I am quite certain she has taken no Vestal vows of chastity," she said. "All the same, we are yet uncertain of the actual nature of this alleged relation between her and that other woman."

"But you did say earlier that it was possible. Probable, even. Supposing she has, in fact, taken a lover?"

"Supposing that, I am as amazed as you are. Barring the allegation that the woman is a subordinate officer, all of it is rather too normal a

thing for 'the general going on campaign', you see."

"And she hardly ever does live up to 'normal expectations', this particular general." Urumi flashed a cheery smile, turning afterwards to her cousin's wife. "And you, Hime-chan? This strikes you with a slap as it does us, I hope? What do you think of it?"

Himeko seemed surprised by the question, her expressive eyes going wide.

"If it's true," she told the two. "If it's true, I'm very happy for Shi-chan."

Chikane and Urumi smiled at her receptively as she went on.

"I mean, it's great news, isn't it?" she asked them. "I think it would be good for her. She's always so lonely."

Her wife suddenly looked very curious.

" *Lonely* ?"

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Evening of that day in Argus, Shizuru's birthday was celebrated-as Chikane had guessed, by all and sundry. While some of the more select personages of the province were invited to a dinner party at the governor's palatial residence, the soldiers and lower-ranked members of the army were treated to their own share of the festivities at the barracks and inns, courtesy of the celebrant's purse. There was wine and food enough for everyone, most of it provided through the efforts of the *praefectus fabrum* . Merry faces were everywhere that night, no stomach grumbling from emptiness and no gullet dry for lack of wine. Even the locals joined in, knowing that festive occasions were good opportunities for trotting out their businesses. Prostitutes paraded the streets and inns, decked out in their scarlet dresses and togas. Artists, dancers and musicians were out as well, hoping to get at least one free drink for their troubles.

Argus was astir, and would keep stirring well into the early morning.

In the main reception hall of the governor's residence, things were

much the same as they were on the streets, though a little less raucous. Instead of rough wooden benches and tables, there were sumptuous couches for the guests to recline upon and long tables laden with food. These extended to the veranda and even as far as the garden, where a faint but noticeable slackening in the Northern Winds had allowed benches to be set out for the guests who wished to do their mingling in the evening air.

Minstrels and other performers displayed their routines by torchlight, both inside and outside. Of prostitutes there were none, however, although a few guests did bring professional-and rather expensive-courtesans as their escorts to the evening. It was these people whom the celebrant's favourite primipilus and senior legate discussed as they waited for their friend to return, the woman having excused herself halfway through the revelry in order to visit the soldiers at their barracks and convey to them her gratitude for celebrating with her.

"Are you sure that one's a courtesan, Chie?" Nao was saying, tucking heartily into a platter of roast duck on the table beside her. "Because she sure doesn't look like one. If you'd have asked me earlier, I would've thought she was his wife. Too pretty for him, sure, but still classy enough to be his wife."

Chie smiled at her, peering tranquilly at the couple on the veranda.

"That's why they're called courtesans and not prostitutes," she said. "They're expected to act like all of this is natural. The clients expect it, and it's what they're trained to do. Notice how she looks like she really is a member of the upper classes?"

"She's so snooty she looks like she was born into it."

"Some of them actually are. They've simply fallen into misfortune and so enter this line of work."

She flicked a sooty lock of hair from her forehead, glad she had just had her mane cut this morning. It had grown quite long and troublesome in the past months.

"It's perfect for them, since they already know the way things work in

these echelons," she continued. "I'd wager that woman is probably one of those who are relatively high-born but has had a fall in station. Oh, probably not senatorial or higher knightly families' members! Just people from the middle class families, near the top end. And, since the higher-classed the courtesan the higher the wage, she must be expensive."

Nao reached out to take two goblets from a slave. She handed one to her friend. "I do hear they cost a pretty penny. How much for that, say?"

"Thank you. And for that one, accompaniment and service would probably cost around six to seven thousand *denarii*."

"That's a silver talent!"

"Whoever said elegance comes cheap?"

Nao frowned and took a deep swallow of wine, as if needing something to wash away the bitter taste of such a high price.

"I'll take my regular 'accompaniment' from the streets, thank you," she snorted. "Who are they kidding with seven thousand denarii? Bugger them."

Chie looked sideways at her: "You'd love to, if you only had the money."

"If I had the money, I wouldn't waste it there. Women like that are probably snooty in bed too, anyway. They'd squeal at a little rough usage."

The other woman grinned suddenly.

"Actually, I beg to differ," she said. "Some of them wouldn't squeal at all, from what I've heard."

The redhead met her jovial eyes, tilting her head in order to make up for the difference in height. Chie looked away pointedly, suggesting to her a particular direction.

"Look over there," the legate said, eyes fixed on a group of people

watching some dancers. "Do you see the pair with their arms linked?"

Nao snorted: "Half the pairs in that group have their arms linked."

"Well, it's-oh, there! Suou-san is talking to one of them." She paused suddenly to consider her fellow legate, a small smile at her lips. "And Himemiya Minor is looking quite fine, by the way. That colour flatters her."

"Isn't it that she's such a looker that most colours do? Anyway, the couple you're talking about is the blonde with the exotic, Arab-looking one?"

"Precisely. The exotic one is a courtesan, so gossip has it, who is popular for getting paid to give her clients, er, pretty rough usage . "

Nao let out an abrupt giggle.

"So, you mean..."

"I mean that she's getting paid to be the *domina*," came the wicked reply. "It's practically established that the people she shows up with have a desire to be dominated in sexual activities. So goes it for that woman with her right now-who happens to a very rich, very influential member of the local trade council."

The other woman held back her laughter.

"This is why it's fun to be with you at these things, Harada," she said, lifting her cup in salute. "You know about that scandalous little underbelly the bigwigs all have, and you tell it better than any public announcer."

Chie smiled at the dark compliment and raised her glass in response. As both of them sipped in toast, she ran her eye furtively over her friend's attire. The senior centurion of the Ninth, she thought, cleaned up very well. The woman more often seen in military gear had a fine body that wore dresses nicely, a good example of such dresses being the shaded green that the centurion was currently wearing and which flattered her unusual, apple-coloured hair. Of jewellery Nao had chosen to wear little and of

cosmetics she used even fewer . But she had a pretty face and a tempting smirk and those were sufficient adornments for someone of her style.

"I like what you're wearing, Nao," Chie told her. "It suits you, this shade of green."

"Well, you look good too," the other said. "You're a regular lady killer. See those ladies over there giving you the eye?"

Chie only sighed loudly, not bothering to look in the direction indicated.

"I'll save the killing for battle, thank you," she said. "I don't want to get into trouble."

"Jupiter, it's not like you're married!"

"Well, I have to start practising now, if I want to be anytime soon."

"I wish you luck with that. Oh, now-looks like she's finally back."

There was a hubbub at the end of the hall, people clustered at the entrance, which indicated the celebrant had returned. Nao craned her head to get a glimpse, and let out a whistle. She nudged the peering Chie with an elbow.

"That's sure a change from the formal toga she had on earlier."

Chie nodded, thinking much the same thing as Nao's admiring whistle had conveyed.

*Shizuru-san*, she thought, *again looks like a law unto herself* .

Their commander had opted to wear a flame-coloured dress tonight, its sleeves held together at the shoulders with thin bands of gold thread. The gown was unusual in that its shade skated hazardously close to the scarlet of a prostitute's toga, and yet also contrived to give the appearance of being perfectly respectable. Her make-up too was faultless-mere touches of stibium and carmine here and there, the former darkening seductively-hooded eyelids and the latter adding a touch of colour to fair cheeks. The honeyed hair was

also loose tonight, cascading over her shoulders and devoid of jewelled pins or any such adornments. Chie remembered that even back in Hime her friend had always gone against the fashion of adding ornaments to her hair on special occasions. Well, it did not matter. Her hair was of sufficient lustre to be left alone. Besides, letting it fall freely as it was now displayed the lovely wave it seemed to have naturally at the ends. Yes, it suited her.

"And there's really no surprise here," she said to Nao. "She looks magnificent. As always."

"True. Never seen her look anything close to ugly, actually. Even when she's properly kitted out and dirtied up with the rest of us after a battle."

Chie shook her head.

"She'll never look close to ugly, Nao," she said. "I believe she'll come to find us after all those fawners are done, so we should just stay put."

The redhead was taking another goblet of wine from a passing slave, and asked her if she wanted another. Chie responded positively and yielded the empty chalice to the servant before he left.

"I'm just a bit surprised, is all," Nao said. "That she didn't make that pup her escort tonight. Thought she would. It's what everyone thought she'd do. Girl'd stick to her like a burr as usual, anyway, so she might as well."

Chie looked up from her drink and looked towards Shizuru's direction again.

"Why," she said, "isn't Natsuki-san with her?"

"There." Nao tipped her chin towards the familiar dark figure, standing a little behind Shizuru as the celebrant accepted greetings from those around her. "But she's in uniform."

The senior legate furrowed her brows. "That *is* unexpected."

"What d'you think that means?"

"I have no idea."

"Huh. Makes you wonder." Nao frowned in thought and looked away, only to see another familiar dark figure walking nearby. She called out. "Sakaki! Over here!"

Argus's commander of garrison made her way over to them.

"Good evening," she said quietly, giving the pair a timid smile. Nao grinned back and introduced her to Chie, whom she had yet to meet. They exchanged pleasantries, after which Nao drew attention to the other's dark blue gown.

"That's a nice dress you have on, Sakaki," she said, bringing a hint of pink to the woman's cheeks. "But it makes you look even taller. That's just wrong."

"You'd say that of anything she wears, Nao," said Chie, smiling up at the other woman with them. "She's always finding fault with taller people, Sakaki-san. The only one who gets off without a tease is Shizuru-san."

"You just got here, didn't you?" Nao asked. "I don't think I saw your head poking out of the crowd earlier."

Sakaki nodded her head-which would indeed have poked well out of the crowd.

"I took the first two shifts," she explained. "My rounds finished just now."

"Ah, yes, both of you set a more regimented shift for the guard on duty tonight, as I recall," Chie said to both senior primipilii. "I can imagine it must've been bothersome, finding soldiers willing to forgo the oblivion of drunkenness just to keep alert for any trouble."

"Ah, it's fine," Nao answered. "The more disciplined the pool, the easier we can assign duty, and our kids are disciplined. So are the local ones, which would've been surprising if Sakaki wasn't here."

"What do you mean?"



"Sugiura's not really known for military discipline," came the glib reply. "She handles other things better. Say, trade, politics and that stuff, like she does now."

Sakaki reacted to this with a smile that, though demure, was understanding. As for Chie, she simply looked at Nao with surprise.

"Wait," she said. "You speak as though you know her. I didn't know you knew Midori-san."

The redhead smirked: "I do, in a sense. Not the way you do, but still."

"How and from where?"

"Let's just say an old job-scandalous old story too," she told the pair, who were listening to her keenly now. "I can't forget it. I was on an intelligence-gathering mission at a party. Typical upper class people getting sloshed with wine, so of course, she was there. The woman gave me one look and latched onto me in a second, getting me drinks and getting too close like a damned lecher."

She let them giggle, letting out one of her own before continuing.

"And at the end of the night, when I'd finished getting all the information I wanted on the target, who was one of the other partygoers, she was still sticking to me. She looked so dead drunk I was afraid I'd have to carry her home. Couldn't very well leave her alone though, seeing as everyone had seen her leave with me. What if she didn't get home that night? So the least I could do was get her into a carriage."

"So I called a litter and was helping her into it when she just gave me this look," she continued. "Oh, it wasn't a wrecked look, though she *was* wrecked. Gave me the fucking fright when she said, really nicely, 'So who do you work for and why do they want to know so much about him?' Then, just like that, she gives me this sloppy kiss on the cheek and tells the carriage to start away. I was so surprised I even forgot to wipe the damn slobber off." Nao started laughing. "And just when I thought she had to be one of the coolest drunks I'd ever met, I hear this groaning sound down the street and see her

head poking out of the carriage, leaving a trail of vomit down the main avenue."

Her two listeners were laughing too, shaking their heads. She mirrored the gesture.

"Ran into her a few times after that," she said. "So I know how she is. That-" She motioned to a cluster of merrymakers in the garden outside, an energetic Argus governor leading them. "-is no surprise to me."

"Midori-han *does* know how to enliven a gathering."

Three pairs of eyes snapped back to the hall at the sound of the distinctive accent, surprised to find the celebrant herself coming to stand beside Chie. They saluted her and Sakaki expressed her greetings as well. She returned all their salutations, and then suddenly turned to her bodyguard.

"All right, Natsuki, I trust you find this suitably safe company?" she told the young woman. "I shall stay with them for now, so you may go. I am eager to see what you have picked at long last."

The Otomeian-who seemed to have made an effort to add some more of those minute golden clasps and braids into her mane tonight at the very least, Chie noted-nodded in that timid, sparing way most of Shizuru's officers knew by now. She turned on one heel and walked off with a flick of star-spangled hair. Shizuru smiled contentedly at the retreating figure before turning back to her present companions, only to find all of them looking at her with varying degrees of curiosity.

"Oh, that?" she said. "It is so Natsuki can change out of her uniform as well. She wanted to be sure she could leave me with trustworthy people first, before going off to dress." A chuckle. "She is not normally so paranoid, I should like to think, but I believe the fact of this being a very large party worries her. She told me that such gatherings can often harbour assassins and similar dangers."

"Assassins," Chie echoed smilingly. "It's a very foreign concern to have at a party, don't you think so?"

"Girl has a point, though," said Nao, who had used to take on jobs as an assassin. "Lots of people make kills easy sometimes. Easier when most of them are drunk too."

"Still, you get my point."

Nao shrugged and nodded: "Yes. Foreign enough for your high-class parties, that."

"We have to remember that Natsuki *is* foreign," Shizuru reminded them.

"Yes, of course. So... Natsuki-san will be wearing a dress too after all, Shizuru-san?"

"I believe so, though I have yet to see what kind of dress it shall be," Shizuru replied to Chie. "I expect it shall be a most pleasant surprise. It is not every day you see the most attractive female soldiers in our force in a dress. Witness our two centurions here, Nao-han and Sakaki-han."

Sakaki pinked and mumbled something diffident, whereas Nao smirked and gave her thanks. Chie grinned at the near-polar reactions.

"And Chie-han, of course, looks dashing as ever," she said. "Rather unusual attire-I daresay most people shall say choosing grey as a colour for party attire is unorthodox-but very fitting."

Chie swept into an affected bow.

"I return the same words to you, Shizuru-san," she said. "Unusual attire, but very fitting."

"Why, thank you! Now then, shall we have some wine? Do tell me all about what has happened while I was away from the party."

---

"You think Shizuru is lonely?" Chikane asked her spouse.

Himeko coloured a little. Her hands fluttered in front of her as she

strove to explain her words.

"Well, I thought so," she stuttered. "I don't mean she looked sad or-or friendless-or something like that, Chikane-chan. I know Shi-chan always has a lot of friends and people around her, I just, well, she just seemed so lonely to me. Or I thought she was. Maybe I'm wrong."

Chikane eyed her wife appraisingly. She was in reality surprised that her wife had noticed this, even while knowing the person in question for a far shorter time than she herself had-to say nothing of many others, who would never say what Himeko had just expressed. How many would even think, let alone dare, to call Shizuru Fujino *lonely* ?

She supposed it was because Shizuru never gave the impression of deserving that adjective, come to it. The woman always managed to impress upon those she met that she was completely satisfied with both her state and her solitude. That she was perfectly content with only her career to think about.

Still, to Chikane, who had known her all her life, she was hardly that. Chikane was familiar with the art of seeming content even when otherwise, being a past master in it as much as her crimson-eyed friend was now. She could tell when someone was merely pretending satisfaction... or unaware of the incompleteness within oneself.

"You may be correct," she finally said. "Surely no human being can be so deprived of that social relation philosophers have spoken of time and time again. It does you credit not only as a painter but a philosopher, Love, that you are able to make that observation. Then again, perhaps all painters are philosophers in their own way."

She was pleased to see her wife blush brightly at her compliment.

"I do agree," Urumi put in. "Now I am tempted to ask what she sees in you, Cousin, when she makes you the subject for her painting. There's an intriguing philosophy, I say."

"One might say the same thing of you."

Himeko spoke up.

"Oh, that reminds me, Urumi-chan," she said with enthusiasm. "I was going to ask if you would mind sitting for one of my paintings someday. If you don't mind, that is."

Chikane smirked at her astonished relative.

"Well, Urumi?" she said provocatively. "Afraid of being subjected to the same philosophical scrutiny?"

"On the contrary. Hime-chan is welcome to prise all the nasty demons she can from the mechanisms of my soul."

"I hope not, else the sheer multitude of them keeps her at the task forever."

"So that's why she's still painting you until now!"

"Ahh, Chikane-chan, Urumi-chan," the urban praetor's wife interjected meekly, looking slightly embarrassed once again as they turned to her. "I'm only a painter..."

At their amused smiles, she continued.

"I'm not an exorcist."

The two patricians were silent for a second before bursting into hilarity.

"Ah, my dear Himeko, how you find us out for what we are!" Chikane told her baffled-looking wife, dropping a lingering kiss on the woman's temple. "You speak things so plainly it shames us when you have it exact in a quarter of the words we use."

Urumi agreed with another peal of mirth: "Hime-chan, you are the most brilliant person in this room. My cousin is a lucky woman to have you, most definitely."

The subject of their praise merely looked from one aristocrat to the other, looking as bewildered as before. She smiled uncertainly, not knowing what she had done to deserve such speeches.

She was prevented from asking by a patter of feet on the floor, followed quickly by the appearance of their head steward. All three women looked at him, Chikane and Urumi still giving out final chuckles.

The steward bowed: "Domina, a messenger from Izumi-san is at the door. He claims urgency."

"Please show him in."

"At once, Domina."

He swept a courteous, though still-dignified bow.

"He's somewhat *grand*, for a steward, isn't he?" Urumi asked her cousin when he had left. "Despite his looks, I mean, for he seems weathered in age. There's an old-fashioned gravity to him that I quite like, though I can't explain why I get that impression."

"I understand," Chikane replied. "It is what convinced me to take him as my steward, in the first place. When dear old Anthenor died of a stroke, I had to search a good while before I finally found someone capable enough to take his place. This one does it rather well." She smiled meaningfully. "Why, even Otoha deems him acceptable, and that says a great deal of him."

"He looks as if he would lend the role dignity without sacrificing functionality, I agree. How do you find him, Hime-chan?"

"Oh, I like him," that woman replied. "He can look serious sometimes, but he's actually a nice man. He always puts freshly-cut flowers in my studio whenever I go there, even if I never ask for it."

"I was not aware he did that of his own volition," Chikane said, knowing her wife's penchant for fresh blossoms. "I shall commend him."

"Mm," Urumi said. "Good stewards are nearly impossible to find."

They ceased their discussion when they heard someone approaching from the corridor once again. After a few more footsteps, a man with whom Chikane was familiar appeared at the

archway. She rose from her seat and excused herself.

"I wonder what it is now," Urumi told Himeko, as they watched the urban praetor go to meet the messenger. "I hope it isn't anything ghastly like Armitage having slaughtered the rest of Senate by bleeding out their ears with the force of her bawls."

Himeko giggled.

"You don't like her, do you, Urumi-chan?" she said.

The other woman's lashes fluttered with surprise.

"Did I make you think so, Himeko, dear?" she asked. "No, actually, I quite like her. She's definitely more entertaining than half of the people in the House put together, and that counts for something."

"You do like entertainment more than anything else, after all," the other blonde teased gently.

"Boredom is my greatest enemy," Urumi replied. "It leaves me dreadfully melancholic, you see, and that is something I would rather not be if I can help it. Alas! Not so many are willing to offer me entertainment that I can avoid being gloomy altogether."

"I wouldn't like you to be sad either," Himeko suddenly said, with such sincerity it made the other pause. "If I can be entertaining to you, Urumi-chan, just tell me how."

Urumi answered with a heartfelt smile.

"You can be your usual sweet self, Hime-chan," she said. "That would amuse me more than anything else."

Chikane's voice sounded at the archway, calling urgently for some slaves to fetch a quill and paper. They looked at her as she strode towards them, both caught off guard by the solemnity of her expression.

"She did not tell me anything about this," they heard her mutter as she approached. "It may only be the delay, but something seems off about it. I do not trust this."

"What's the matter?" Urumi asked, sitting up in interest. Chikane turned a contemplative frown to the younger woman, showing that whatever it was had her so troubled she could barely articulate it just yet.

Himeko peered timidly at her wife.

"Are you all right, Chikane-chan?" she asked. "Is something wrong?"

Chikane looked at her spouse, a curious look on her face.

"My dear Himeko," she said. "That is precisely what I would like to know!"

---

"I wonder if something's wrong over there," Nao was saying to the other women. Her eyes were turned to a part of the room where people seemed to have crowded, and where all heads seemed to be twisting to turn the same way. "What's the hubbub? I can't see with all those people."

Chie shrugged, making no effort to rise from her own position. Like the rest of the company, she was reclined on a soft, comfortably-padded couch. She had no intention of letting someone else claim it in her stead.

"We'll find out soon enough, Nao," she said. "Anyway, returning to our topic, I'd say I prefer his later plays. They have more economy of language."

"Indeed," said Shizuru, who had not stirred from her seat either. "I suppose tha-that-oh."

The rest peered at her in astonishment, wondering what had caused the odd-and extremely rare-stutter. The red eyes did not meet theirs, however. They turned in unison to follow her line of sight, just as she let out a sound evocative of surprise.

And *awe*.

"Dear me," Shizuru breathed.



Chie said almost the same thing: "Dear god . "

There was a moment's silence among the members of the cluster after these two expressions. After the moment passed, a flurry of questions and remarks were hurled at Shizuru.

"Oh, Fujino-san, isn't that your attendant?"

"Would you look at that?"

"What a clever dress that is! Is it of the Otomeian style, General Fujino?"

"Jupiter, the girl's a sight!"

*She is indeed that*, Shizuru was telling herself, rising from her seat without conscious volition. The girl had finally made her way through the people peering at her, her searchlight gaze immediately alighting on Shizuru's crimson figure. Shizuru appraised the young woman as the latter came, her mouth drying out faster than a desert in summer.

The girl had gone with something evocative of the Otomeian fashion, she thought. She recognised the predominance of white, for instance, in the cloth draped with artful carelessness on the Otomeian: a many-layered affair of white material so fine it was faintly translucent. She could actually see hints of flesh where the layers thinned out, particularly from mid-thigh down to the hem-at which point the sheer cloth appeared almost tattered, trailing in filmy shreds that curled around the girl's legs. They looked like smoke. Or perhaps they were smoke, lit by a fiery pair of crimson eyes.

Shizuru ate up the girl as much as one could by look alone, trying to come up with reasons not to just pick her up even as she approached and bear her off to the nearest dark corner, party and attendees be damned. How long would it take, she wondered, before those interesting, sleeve-like lashes of cloth hanging from the girl's dress at the shoulders tore off in their passion, a festoon of white ripped from either the join at the shoulders or the one at the wrists? How long before that fragile, about-to-fall-apart dress did what it promised and revealed a body that still took her breath away

every night?

Natsuki's voice intruded on her heavy-lidded stupor.

"Shizuru," the girl whispered once she was close enough, and that was all.

"Ah, Natsuki," Shizuru started, swiftly finding composure. She was aware that all those in and near the group of couches were watching them with great interest, having seen her abnormal lapse in self-possession. Time to recover it! "Welcome back. I am glad to see you."

The girl's head bowed.

"If I recall, you hardly ate earlier," Shizuru went on. She turned to the people surrounding them. "Do excuse us a moment as I direct Natsuki to the tables. Shame on me, after all, if I let the officer who saved my life in Argentum perish of hunger at my celebration, which is only possible due to the heroism she displayed that day."

As expected, that broke loose the chains on their mouths. Another round of queries was directed towards her-and even some to Natsuki, who looked faintly taken aback by such direct attention.

"She *saved your life*, Fujino-san?"

"How did it happen? May we know, Natsuki-san? It is 'Natsuki-san', yes?"

Shizuru smiled and looked to Chie, conveying the subtlest call for support. Ever the good officer, Chie agreed with a nod.

"Chie-han was there," Shizuru told the gathering crowd, which was impatient for a story. "She is a much better narrator than I, and shall doubtless render it more lifelike than I possibly could. If she agrees, perhaps you may hear the tale from her?"

"I'd be happy to," Chie said with a show of teeth. "And maybe afterwards, the Primipilus Nao Yuuki here can tell you more about our exploits with Shizuru-san, as she's served under her in some of the most unbelievable battles ever."

Nao smirked and added her own bit to it: "Maybe I can tell them about the time Shizuru-san and I snuck into an enemy camp one night and made off with an officer's head."

Shizuru sent both of her officers another smile, gratitude spoken silently by her eyes.

"Well then, I leave you to the story-telling," she said in farewell. "Methinks there are a few people I have yet to speak with, anyway, and needs must or I will be thought an ill host indeed."

Thus excusing herself and her companion, she left the crowd to Chie and Nao's tale-telling devices, gratified to see that more people were being drawn to the group she had just left. She hoped this would mean fewer persons would interrupt her and Natsuki, whom she swiftly led to a shadowed and hence more or less unfrequented table at a corner of the hall. The girl followed her willingly, saying nothing about her recent lapse.

Once they were alone at the table and no people were within hearing range, Shizuru leaned towards her bodyguard and snuck a quick kiss on one ear.

"Cruel child," she said in a deep, husky tone. "Was this your intention? Did you want to surprise me with your appearance now, in front of all these people, when I cannot have you as I would like? Surely you saw my start earlier-I daresay everyone else did. You are turning out to be quite the tease, Natsuki."

The other woman flushed.

"No," she replied. "No."

"Really?"

"No. I mean, um, yes."

"But you did want to please me with your attire, I hope?"

She elicited a quick, jerky nod.

"You have succeeded-though only in part," she followed. Upon

seeing the other's puzzlement, she went on. "Your appearance pleases me very much, Natsuki. But I expect it and you to please me much more, later, when you take me to that place where you say you left your present. You did say you prepared it just for the two of us."

Not giving the younger woman time to articulate her protests beyond a choke, she turned towards the food before them and picked out an oyster in its half-shell.

"Try this," she said, delivering it to the other woman's mouth. Natsuki stared at her bewilderedly before parting her lips and accepting the morsel with a sip. Shizuru cast the shell onto a platter supplied for it afterwards. "How is it?"

She took another for herself, watching her companion chewing carefully around the meat of the shellfish. They swallowed at the same time.

"Good," Natsuki pronounced, licking her lips. "Shellfish?"

"Oyster."

"Oy-ster. Ahh."

Shizuru nodded and handed a goblet to her.

"Drink," she instructed.

They continued to eat this way, with the older woman selecting pieces of food for both her and her lover. Every now and then someone would approach them, making conversation with Shizuru and complimenting her attire-and without words, that of her bodyguard-or conveying their greetings for the occasion. Each one Shizuru spoke to with customary grace, thanking them for coming. There were some to whom she would rather not have spoken politely, however, and it was an hour or so later, after having just spoken to one such guest, that she disclosed her discomfort and the reason for it to Natsuki.

"I am beginning to think I should not have made you wear a dress, after all," she said, with the barest trace of moodiness deepening

her trademark lilt. "If I had a *denarius* for every lout who has stared at you with lover's eyes since you arrived, I would be rich as Croesus by now."

Natsuki looked at her.

"Are you not 'rich as Croesus'?" the girl asked.

The older woman sighed heavily at the unexpected question.

"Yes," she said in defeat. "Yes, I am. Even so, you take my point."

She washed her hands in a bronze basin, drying them afterwards on the towel offered by a servant who had rushed over as soon as he saw her dip into the rinsing water. Once finished, she began to walk towards the far end of the room, where the open doors showed the rest of the partygoers in the terrace and spilling into the gardens, which were blazing with torches and where some dancers were performing gymnastic heroics on their impromptu stage. Natsuki walked close to her, their fingers brushing at their sides.

"You know I dislike it when they stare at you that way," Shizuru murmured to the younger woman, pretending to nod and smile at the people they passed. "They look at you like dogs in heat."

"You too."

She swivelled her head to the right, finding only the girl's profile.

*Sometimes, she thought, Natsuki really does touch the point with a needle.*

"Yes, I admit I do that too," she said wryly to the girl. "But that is differ-

"No, not you, Shizuru," Natsuki interrupted. She sounded impatient. "Not you doing it. Them to you."

The fair brows went up; Shizuru looked genuinely confused for a moment.

"What do you mean, them to me?" she asked, before apprehending

the girl's meaning belatedly. She quirked her lips. "Oh, you mean some have been looking at me in the same way?"

"Some?" Natsuki mumbled. "No. Many."

The older woman stopped to exchange salutations with a few more guests before turning back to her companion.

"Is that so?" she prodded, wondering that she had not noticed. But why should she? She was so used to receiving such attentions that they no longer registered properly for her, and she had learned to bat them away on instinct. Yet she had managed to notice every little unspoken accolade given her bodyguard tonight, had she not?

"Yes," Natsuki was saying, while lifting a hand to flick black hair over her shoulder. Shizuru watched the feminine gesture, a little amused by its haughty execution. "They do."

"I see. Tell me, Natsuki, how do you feel about that? Do you dislike it, when they look at me that way?"

"Dislike? I, um..."

"Yes, dislike. Or does it not trouble you at all when others undress me with their eyes?"

"They-I-I do not-"

"Or do you not mind?"

Shizuru knew she was being wicked, fishing so obviously for a declaration from the girl. Why not? It was her day, after all, and she would love to hear a confession of possessiveness from her young lover. She herself had expressed it so many times to the Otomeian that it only made it more noticeable that the latter had not done the same to her.

"Oh, Shizuru-san, there you are! We've been looking for you."

Sighing inwardly at the interruption, Shizuru gave Natsuki another questioning look before turning around to face the person who had intruded upon her petty interrogation.

"Takumi-han," she said, affecting a pleasant smile. "Akira-han as well. You are enjoying yourselves, I hope."

"We wanted to wish you a happy birthday, Shizuru-san," Takumi said, after returning the greeting. "We weren't able to do that earlier. I hope you'll like our present when you see it later, by the way. We already put it in your servants' care, like the others."

Shizuru conveyed her gratitude in a grin: "I am sure I shall appreciate it as much as I appreciate your work for tonight, Takumi-han. And yours as well, Akira-han, for I do not doubt you assisted him in a significant way. Everything has turned out perfectly."

"I'm happy to hear that." The young man swivelled on his heel to look behind him. "And everyone seems to be enjoying the festivities. Things are pretty lively, don't you think?"

Both Himean females suppressed smirks at his innocently-voiced observation. Things were indeed becoming 'pretty lively', considering that a good many of the guests were already flush with wine. Among these people was the governor herself, made conspicuous by her efforts to rouse the musicians to louder playing and attempts to get more people on their feet to dance with her. Said woman spun around in wild circles with another, patently inebriated guest before suddenly looking their way. Her eyes lit up forebodingly even from a distance.

"Oh, damn it!" Shizuru heard Akira say. The handsome young woman frowned at her mate, all apprehension. "She's seen us, Takumi."

"Expecting trouble?" Shizuru asked.

Takumi answered her with a helpless smile.

"Sugiura-san's been after Akira and me all night, asking the two of us to dance," he explained, drawing a surprised laugh from his commander. "Can you imagine?"

"She would think of something that mad." Shizuru peered beyond them to see that the governor was indeed approaching, though

rather drunkenly. It would be a while before she reached them. "In that case, allow me to begin paying you back for your help, Takumi-han."

The two other Himeans looked up at her: "You mean...?"

"Flee," she said simply. "I shall prevent her from following you."

The pair saluted her and quickly made their escape, Shizuru watching them with a small smile.

"Um, Shizuru."

"Yes, Natsuki?"

"What if she makes *us* dance?"

The fear in the younger woman's voice made her turn her head, and she had to suppress a laugh at the sight of her lover's face. Natsuki looked truly horrified. Well, what aristocrat would not be? Dancing at a party, of all things!

"You do not want to dance?" she teased. "But it might be rather amusing-"

"No," Natsuki said, her voice beseeching. "No, Shizuru. Please?"

"Oh, all right."

A thought occurred to her suddenly and she decided to run with it.

"Listen to me, Natsuki," she said. "I have an idea. If we stay here any longer, the chances are that we shall be made to join in the revelry one way or another. And given how drunk people are getting, dancing shall be the least of our worries soon. If you wish, we can leave now and go to the place where you said you wanted to bring me."

Natsuki nodded.

"If it is fine with you, we can go a little earlier than planned, and leave everyone else here. They shall be too drunk soon, anyway, to



notice my disappearance. Would you like that? Yes or no?"

Natsuki nodded again, though more swiftly.

"Yes," she said.

"Your horse is already saddled outside, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Fetch it and meet me at the end of that path." She pointed to a lane flanked by tall, snow-covered shrubs trimmed to create a tidy wall. It was in shadow, just beyond the area touched by torchlight. "Quickly, Child, or we shall miss the opportunity!"

Natsuki nodded a final time, her green eyes lingering for an instant on the older woman. Then she slipped away, passing swiftly through both people and shadows. When Shizuru could no longer see the trailing white shreds of the girl's clothing, she returned her gaze to the direction from which the governor had been approaching, only to take a swift step back at the onslaught of alcohol-scented air slapping her face.

"Midori-han," she said, trying not to wince.

Her greeting was returned in a medley of slurred vowels and consonants.

"There y'are, Shizuru." Midori smiled happily, if a touch hazily. "Excellent party. Excellent, I say! Excellent dress, and excellent escort. Wait. Where's your girl?"

"She had to arrange something," Shizuru replied, taking the elder woman's arm and leading her to the outskirts, away from the light. "Now, Midori-han, I fear I must ask something of you. Tell me, could you possibly help us? Natsuki and I need a favour. I would be most grateful if you lent us your aid tonight, as you are perhaps the only one who can assist us here."

The older woman's ears seemed to prick up at this, her unfocused eyes sharpening. She lifted an arm to slap Shizuru heavily on the back. The latter was caught off guard at the abrupt gesture and felt

her muscles flexing instinctively under her dress at the blow. She relaxed quickly, however, and returned the other's sloppy grin with a composed one.

"What d'you want? No, don't say it, let me guess," Midori sniggered. "Want to get out of here, do you?"

"You have found me out, of course," Shizuru said with a practised sigh. "The difficulty is that it would be eminently difficult to do so, given that this is supposed to be, well, my party."

"To Dis with the party!" Midori shrugged off her arm and turned to face her. "Go if you want t'go, My Girl! You deserve it already, for giving us this bash. Have a bash of your own, eh?"

She laughed at her own words, doubling over for a moment. Shizuru waited patiently.

"So!" the governor finally said when she was done with her laughter. "You want me to take care of it while you go cavort with your girl? Don't blame you. Delectable. And that dress! Love to cavort with 'er too, you weren't in the way. I would, you weren't."

Shizuru chuckled at the threat: "Thank you for stepping aside for my sake, then."

"We young 'uns must stick together," was the reply. "Right. Go, go already. I'll keep them happy and drunk. Go elope with your woman."

Shizuru stayed only long enough to note that it was not an elopement, although she doubted the other woman really cared about that little nicety of term given her state: Shizuru had not even finished speaking to her than the governor had already tottered off to stir up the partygoers with a nicely lascivious song that was popular in the taverns, and which everyone else took up in a warbling, hiccupping chorus.

Turning away from the scene with a shake of her head, Shizuru strode towards the garden path where Natsuki was supposed to meet her, her own chorus thrumming in her veins. She waited

beside an oak tree, her arms at her sides and soon realised what she had overlooked when she felt a shiver course through her.

*My cloak.*

She chuckled scornfully at herself, unable to believe she had been so remiss as to forget that necessity of wintertime. The galloping sound of hooves sounded and she looked up eagerly, trying to see through the shadows. She squinted at the darkness that was one end of the path. So intently did she peer into them that she nearly gave a start when what she had been waiting for appeared, the familiar black stallion exploding from the gloom as though born of it. Astride it was Natsuki, both her legs naked from the upper thigh, the shred-like strips of her filmy dress trailing behind her. She wore a black cloak, and its length covered her horse's rump.

"Shizuru!" the girl whispered loudly upon reaching her. The stallion pawed anxiously at the snow-tracked ground, its haunches rippling with muscle. "We will go?"

"Yes."

The older woman went to the beast's side. She pulled up her dress. Before the girl could reach out to help her, though, Shizuru had already swung herself atop the animal's back, to Natsuki's bemusement. The older woman smirked at her companion.

"I do ride often too, you know," she said.

Natsuki smiled. Suddenly reaching into a pack tied to the saddle, she produced a large bolt of cloth that Shizuru recognised in an instant.

"My cloak," she said in amazement. "You have my cloak?"

Natsuki nodded and handed it to her, motioning that she should put it on. She did so, securing it with the clasp.

"Thank you, Natsuki." A short pause, where she settled herself more securely behind the younger woman. She held onto her with both arms. "Let us go."

There was the brief slide of the girl's thighs against hers as Natsuki dug her heels into the animal's ribs, spurring it into a thundering gallop. Shizuru felt her cloak fly out behind her as they rode away. She felt her face sting with the cold prickle of wind rushing at it, but found that enjoyable. What she told Natsuki was true: she *did* ride often and happened to like it very much.

Efficiently clearing the maze of the gardens, they reached the gates of the residence, where several surprised-and drinking-sentries saluted them. After passing them at a canter so that they could mark their identities, the girl urged her steed again into a mad dash that seemed to take them all the way to the ends of the city. For a while, Shizuru simply held on quietly and accustomed her body to the easy, shifting motions of the galloping horse, rocking instinctively with the rhythm. When she saw that they were passing the gates of the city itself, however, she found herself wondering where Natsuki was taking her, almost tempted to stop the girl and ask. Eventually, she did ask.

"Where are we going?" she called over the wind. Natsuki called back.

"The lake!"

*Oh, yes, she thought. There is a small lake in the province, now that I think about it .* Well, it did not fall within her considerations as a commander, so she had never actually been there. How had Natsuki learned of it, however? She shut her eyes as she considered the matter. The lake was a strange destination. Surely the girl was of sufficient sensibility not to hazard swimming there in this season? But what else would one do at a lake?

*Fishing, perhaps, her mind supplied humorously. But I rather doubt she plans to do that.*

It seemed as though it had only been minutes after thinking this that the horse slowed to a trot. She opened her eyes, finding a blue-black sky and leafy branches overhead. They were on the path towards the lake, their steed's hoof-beats the only sounds around them. Doing a series of calculations, she estimated that they had been riding for nearly an hour by now, judging from the ground

covered.

"We are nearby, are we not?"

This time, the girl turned her head.

"Yes," she said, smiling.

"Wonderful."

She wrapped her hands more securely around the younger female's middle, fully appreciating the thinness of the girl's dress. She could actually feel each fine ripple in her fellow rider's abdomen as it moved. The taut muscles seemed to respond to her fingers, contracting slightly after every press or stroke. She occupied herself with this playful study of the other woman's musculature for a while, halting only when Natsuki reined in her stallion and announced that they had arrived.

They slipped off the horse, one after the other. Shizuru stood gazing at their surroundings for a few moments. They stood on a relatively unforested clearing, replete with small shrubs and plants, as well as a few odd trees. All of these had a fine dusting of snow, the white powder glowing blue in the darkness. About a hundred metres away was the lake itself, its water black in the shade, and its surface chased with silver flecks. Beyond it and them were the woods, thick and chilled to an austere beauty.

As she admired the dusky atmosphere, Natsuki led her stamping horse away, into a small shed at the end of the clearing that appeared to be for stabling purposes. Shizuru's brows quirked with interest at the structure, wondering why it should be here. What truly caught her attention, however, was the edifice next to it.

"Natsuki!"

The girl had disappeared into the shed with her stallion, and now reappeared in the lit doorway. Her dress showed nearly transparent on her from the light, and Shizuru felt a rush of heat warm her cheeks at the provocative vision.

"Where are we? Does anyone live here?"

She motioned to the modest house by the stable in particular. Natsuki shook her head, and Shizuru went to her.

"Does anyone own these?" she asked, once she was near enough to speak at normal volume. She stood at the doorway of the shed, taking in the old, salt-encrusted wood that was the mark of all aged Argus buildings. Weathered as the outside was, the inside seemed well-kept.

Studying the neat interior of the stable, she watched Natsuki covering her horse with a heavy blanket as it rested on some hay.

"I suppose you prepared the hay as well?"

Natsuki nodded before finally rising and facing her. Some bits of straw clung to the shredded bottom of her gown, and Shizuru found herself wanting to pick them out carefully.

"A man lived in the house," the Otomeian was saying. "Long ago. He went somewhere and left it to his family here. I asked."

Shizuru smiled, leaning against the doorframe.

"I see," she replied.

"The man who has it now hires it out," Natsuki continued. "I hired it. For this."

She suddenly flushed after saying this and covered it up by returning her attention to the reclining horse. Shizuru said nothing, content with simply watching her.

A while later, she finally spoke.

"Thank you, Natsuki," she said softly, reaching out with one hand. The other woman came nearer, willingly letting herself be enveloped in the warm embrace. She burrowed gently into Shizuru's neck. "I am very glad I can be with you tonight. Was this my birthday present?"

The dark head jerked backwards, the younger woman looking up to meet her eyes.

"No," Natsuki denied. "This is not. No."

The red eyes widened a fraction before returning to their usual gentle gaze. Shizuru placed her hands on the other's waist, holding her at arm's length.

"Well, then, where is my present?" she asked with a laugh. "My, does that ever make me seem demanding!"

Natsuki laughed as well. Removing the hands on her waist, she took one of them and laced their fingers, leading the older woman away. Taking care to close the door of the shed first, she went on to bring Shizuru to the house, pausing to extract a large, rusty-looking key from a pouch in her cloak. She fit it into the door's heavy lock, making a small sound of pleasure once she managed to work it open. She opened it and walked in, disappearing into the darkness.

"Wait," she told Shizuru, who had remained at entryway. "Light."

There was the sound of flint rubbing, and Shizuru saw the dim outline of her bodyguard in the gloom with each spark flying out. A few seconds later, a lamp was lit and the interior of the house was finally visible. Shizuru stepped inside.

It was, she saw, quite an old house. The floor was made of wood, much scuffed with old footsteps, but obviously swept clean. She could see a few dark spots at the corners, which she guessed were from the same damp that had discoloured the walls. At the very centre of the room was a recessed area in the floor that she guessed to be for cooking as well as a fire, since there were ashen lumps of what seemed to be used-up charcoal in it. Around this hearth were very thick woollen rugs and several pricey-looking furs she took to be provided by Natsuki, since they looked too new to be part of the original furnishings. There were even two large cushions, which seemed to invite her to settle in. For all its apparent age, the small house had no mustiness. She could scent fresh air coming in from the windows on each wall.

She looked up again to see the younger woman smiling softly at her, the lamp she was holding giving her an unearthly radiance. Beautiful as Natsuki was to her, a shiver of fear shot down her spine at the

image the girl now presented; she was reminded suddenly of the portraits and sculptures of Death she had seen at home, which was a beautiful, dark-haired woman in a flowing white dress, a candle in her hand.

"Natsuki," she said urgently, in such a sharp tone that it baffled the younger woman. "Give me that lamp. I shall light a fire."

She crossed the distance between them in five powerful strides, taking the lamp before the other could begin to yield it.

"Do you have kindling?" she asked briskly. "Coal?"

Natsuki nodded, turning away and heading for the stone counter behind her. Shizuru walked over to the sand-floored hearth, trying to still the rapid beating of her heart. She brushed her hair out of her eyes, and was surprised to feel her fingers trail slight moisture on her brow. Her hand had the glisten of cold sweat.

*It means nothing*, she said to herself, suddenly more haunted than ever before by the lessons on signs and portents that she had been given in training to become an augur. *It has to mean nothing*. How many times had she seen persons disturbed by such malign-seeming visions, and gone into a panic of prayer and offering only to find that what they had been fearing had not even been possible, given their particular circumstances? How many times had she seen such ill omens reported by the other augurs with lugubrious or foreboding tones, only to be proven mere exercises of a morbid imagination? Yes, what she had seen just now was nothing, it meant nothing .

That was hard to believe when she was beginning to suspect that the subject of it was starting to mean everything to her.

She started when something heavy fell on her shoulders, atop her cloak. Her eyes found two green ones looking uncertainly her way.

"Umm."

The Otomeian had apparently removed her own cloak: this was what Shizuru felt draped around her.



"Sorry," Natsuki whispered, looking contrite. "Are-are you cold? I can make it now, Shizuru. The fire."

The older woman looked from the cloak around her shoulders to the lamp in her hand, and finally to the hearth, which was indeed prepared. She essayed a smile as she answered.

"No, do not apologise when there is no need for it," she said gently. "Come, let us go to the hearth. We should both be much warmer once I have lit the fire."

They made their way over to the fireside, Natsuki kneeling on the shaggy rugs while the older woman stepped into the recessed box and began the flame. After a minute or so of careful nursing, there was finally a fine glow to the embers, and Shizuru could take her place beside the girl.

She took off the two cloaks around her and set them aside. Natsuki gave her a questioning look.

"We shall not need them for the moment," she told the younger woman, placing a hand on her shoulder and easing her gently down. When Natsuki was finally lying on the rug, she followed and stretched her length on top. Two arms made their way around her neck, rousing her with their light burden.

She turned her head and met plump lips, parting them slowly with her tongue. The body underneath hers shifted, moved, and she anchored it with her hands as though imploring it not to leave. Even then she felt as though it could slip through her fingers, and she realised some of the fear from her vision was still inside her. That was all the more troubling as she was not a naturally superstitious person.

*Let it go*, she told herself irritably. *It was nothing.*

"Natsuki, my beautiful Natsuki."

She tilted the girl's face away to expose the pale neck, which was already rippling from Natsuki's swallows. Shizuru dipped in, sucking on the smooth ridges of muscle and tendon and dipping her tongue

in exploration of the crevices beside them. She held the other woman tighter with each kiss, pressing her further down with the weight of her own form.

"It was fortunate for you that we left early," she breathed. "Had we stayed with the others any longer, I might have ravished you on the spot."

She bit into the girl's neck when she heard the faint protests, stuttered sounds cut short by gasps. Suddenly hands were pulling her head up and dragging her mouth back to the one waiting for her. Natsuki whispered her name before kissing her eagerly, their tongues tangling once again. There was a pause as both took deep breaths, followed by a very weak bite on the older woman's lip. Shizuru smiled: one would think her made of glass to see the way the girl treated her.

Then came the sound of a shuffle followed by a thump.

"Wha-Natsuki?"

She had not expected it; all too suddenly, Shizuru found their positions reversed. It was *her* back on the rug, *her* lover pressing her against it. The other's mouth was hovering in front of hers, and Shizuru could see the flash of teeth as it parted, releasing a hot stream of air that licked at her chin.

She decided to wait and see what the Otomeian would do.

"Mnnn," came the purring rumble from the girl's mouth. She was finding the constant caress of air from it quite arousing, and would have given up her plan to be patient when it suddenly ducked. Natsuki nosed under her jaw, making little sniffing sounds as she touched the tip of her nose to the fair flesh repeatedly. The older woman tilted her face upwards compliantly.

*Ah, yes, she thought, enjoying the curious form of attention. I applied a touch of fragrance today, and no doubt she is taking it in. I wonder if she likes it.*

She shivered when she felt Natsuki's nose trace fire from her jaw to

her collarbone. Another hot breath slipped against her skin.

*I daresay she does.*

A gasp left her when she felt the nose replaced by a wet tongue.

"I do not," she heard the younger woman whisper, in between drawn-out licks on her neck. She strained to focus her attention on the words, and not on the velvety touch of the tongue on her skin. "I do not like... it."

Shizuru brought her hands up, yanking on the dark tresses so that Natsuki's face was hovering before her again. The younger woman's eyes were still lidded; her parted lips glimmered wetly in the dark. Shizuru could see her teeth, heard them click as Natsuki brought them together in a short, strange bite on the air. It struck her, not for the first time, that the girl looked even stormier than usual when she was excited.

"Natsuki," she said. "What do you not like?"

There was a sudden flicker in the green eyes, an unexpected shyness. She held the dark head firmly to prevent it from quailing.

"Tell me," she pressed, slipping one of her legs between the younger woman's. She slid it upwards gently against the white dress, which glided upwards to accommodate her. Her leg bent at the knee and rose until it was just below the apex of the Otomeian's thighs: they trembled at the contact. "What is it that you do not like? Tell me now."

The slender black brows drew together. Another low rumble left the girl's throat as she struggled to voice a reply.

"People," she finally managed to say, very softly. "Looking at you."

The fair-haired woman stared at her in amazement as she continued in an ashamed, sulky voice.

"I do not like them looking," she mumbled. "Like-like that."

Her eyes, so large they seemed infinite, stared at the object of her

jealousy.

"At you," she added. "Shizuru."

Her grip tightened on Shizuru's upper arms after that, eyes darting away. Hence she did not see the emotion that crossed the Himean's face after her pronunciation. But she heard Shizuru's request and complied, her lips descending over the older woman's.

They kissed. The immensity of previously held-back emotions was swept into the gesture. Shizuru dropped her hands from the black hair after a few seconds, bringing them down and grasping at the girl's dress to pull it further up. Soon the gossamer cloth was gathered at Natsuki's waist and her bare legs shivering from the cold. She gave another shiver momentarily, however, this time from Shizuru's bent leg pressing further up between hers. She parted their mouths with a moan.

"I am very glad," the older woman murmured, pressing her thigh harder between the welcoming legs. "I would hate to think I am ever the only one who is jealous. It always seemed to be so."

She felt the younger woman move, hands trying frantically to pull up her dress. She let them do that, even raising her hips from the floor to help.

"I am happy to know what I thought I saw was wrong."

Their fingers were inside each other. Shizuru's breath whistled as she clenched her teeth, watching the woman atop her curling up tightly and grinding into the hand she had placed on her lifted thigh. She groaned loudly when she felt the hand touching the apex of her own legs moving faster, clenching upon her with such strength it came close to being painful. Perhaps it *was* painful-she could no longer tell where one feeling left off and another began. Pain was the same as pleasure, which was the same as hunger, which was the same as satiation. All nuances of sensation cascaded together in a foamy pleasure that nearly drowned her, the sea-salt scent of Argus in her nostrils, the same sea-salt taste on Natsuki's skin.

"Shizu-"

She heard the attempted vocalisation of her name, followed by several broken words she could not understand. Her hand slid from the knobby protrusions of the other woman's spine and up the fair neck, ending finally at soft black hair. She took a fistful of it in her grip and used it to bring Natsuki's lips to hers, whispering an endearment before doing so.

*I wish we could always be like this*, she thought, hardly coherent from bliss. *To be together this profoundly, without the complexity of everything else.* Whenever they were alone in this way, she found herself in a dream where neither she nor Natsuki existed-where they became lost in each other so completely that it seemed they were only one being. Even now she could feel the hot flesh sheathing her fingers tightening when she tightened, the mouth near hers gasping when she gasped. Even the muscled body she could feel shivering atop her no longer seemed smaller or more slender, feeling suddenly like a perfect mirror and extension of her own. Was it so wrong of her to want that feeling forever? Was it too much to ask?

Her eyes closed shut as they convulsed at the same time, seizing onto each other's flesh. She felt her hips leaving the rug and thrusting upwards, releasing herself into Natsuki's palm. She could even feel the fine, wet mouth of the younger woman as it brushed her cheek, its owner too far into ecstasy to discipline utterances into actual words. But words were superfluous, words did not matter at the moment, and both women tangled on that rug knew it. So no words were spoken.

It was much, much later, when the only sound was that of the wind rustling from outside, that words passed again between them.

Shizuru was the one who spoke.

"Natsuki, thank you again for this," she said, while stroking the black tresses that had splayed all over her chest. The girl's head moved and nuzzled softly against her bosom. "This is a very happy celebration indeed."

She felt the responding nod to that and fell silent once again. Her fingers were content playing with the other's sleek hair, dipping into it repeatedly as through a river. She even felt a tug on her own

locks, which she took to be the girl mimicking her actions before realising that it was a call for attention.

"Your present," Natsuki whispered, "is not here yet."

She lifted her head too peer at the one on her breast.

"Oh," she said with surprise. "Do you mean to say that was not the present?"

"Mm-hm."

"Is that so?" She paused thoughtfully, lowering her head. "I see."

A moment later, she asked: "Then where is it?"

She had to laugh when Natsuki murmured, in parody of her words earlier: "Demanding." She knocked her knuckles gently on the back of the dark head, smiling broadly.

"Ah, tell me already, Rascal," she implored. "I am awfully curious, you know, since you went to all this trouble for it. What could it be?"

There was a short pause, broken by Natsuki slowly bringing herself up into a sitting position beside the older woman. Shizuru noted that her companion was focused on something outside, or so it seemed given how she was staring out of a window. She sighed and decided to be patient, already missing the heat of the other's embrace.

"It is soon, I think." The vague words made her wonder. "I hope, today."

She sat up, a little concerned now. Natsuki looked anxious.

"What is it?" she asked the younger woman. "What do you mean, Natsuki?"

The emerald eyes turned towards her, and she tilted her head expectantly.

"Shizuru?" said the girl.

"Yes?"

"We may sit there? At the door?" she said, sounding like a child asking for a treat. "Now?"

Shizuru took some time to consider the odd request, eventually nodding in acquiescence. Both of them stood and picked up their cloaks, with Shizuru bringing along blankets and furs for added comfort. It was Natsuki who added another rug to the pile, spreading it on the floor of the now-open doorway and covering it with the soft and thick pelts. She settled afterwards into it with the taller woman behind her. The two snuggled under the protection of the heavy blanket and each other's embrace.

"Is this all right?" Shizuru asked while wrapping her arms about the girl. "You want to sit here?"

"Mm."

"What is next?"

"Next we wait."

Shizuru released a sigh at the succinct answer and ducked her head, resting her cheek against the other woman's hair. She wondered what in the world all of this was about, what with all the preparation and waiting Natsuki deemed necessary to put into it. Oh, not that she was complaining! She was quite happy to do what her companion asked, finding contentment in the simple act of sitting in wait for some unknown thing intended for her pleasure. Thus she sat silent and facing the immense night with this strange woman in her arms.

*Still I do not understand so many things about you, she spoke silently into the black hair, knowing that the other simply took the movement of her lips to be caresses. What secrets are you hiding that you must be so unfathomable? You are both the shell and the pearl, confounding me as you do now.*

Her mind travelled at that thought to the secret she herself had been keeping for some days: a gift she intended to give Natsuki. When

the governor of Argus had suggested that she take the girl shopping for a very belated birthday present, she had taken the suggestion and ended up buying an eclectic collection of presents for her lover, who had been so overwhelmed by the carelessness of the older woman's expenditure that she hardly even managed to articulate her reluctance beyond a stutter. She accepted the gifts with charming embarrassment, though, and thanked Shizuru that evening-several times over. Even so, Shizuru had felt a niggling dissatisfaction haunting her after that. It was almost as though her own gratitude at being given such a girl as her lover was could barely exhaust itself and could not be expressed properly with the presents she had already given. In years to come, this would stay the same: her love for giving Natsuki presents would never go away, and the same gratitude, that near-disbelief she felt upon looking at the girl and marvelling at the fact that such a priceless creature had chosen to be hers, would never actually fade.

Deciding that she would remain discontented until she found a present truly worthy of the younger woman, she had then searched for one. Though not at the markets this time. This time she went to the specialists and private vendors, who eventually directed her to someone they claimed to hold the most expensive and superb finds in jewels and gems: he was also a supplier for some of the more expensive gem merchants in Hime. Shizuru went to the jeweller, who presented her with something that he said would meet her demand for "the best you have, the sort that even kings would cry to own". It was a necklace of fine golden chain, the links handsomely worked indeed. But the chain itself was a paltry thing compared to what dangled from it: a huge and perfectly round, purplish-black pearl.

She had known immediately upon seeing it that it was what she wanted. The pearl was so large that it struck awe even in her, a woman whose jewel chest at home was a jeweller's dream. It was roughly the size of a fat strawberry, but round, and it was black in the way only pearls could be: with a hint of purple luminescence even in the darkness of its skin. She found that fitting. And so she bought it without any qualms and paid well for its worth-nearly two hundred silver talents, in fact. Well over a million denarii. *A fortune* .



But it was worth it, was what she thought contentedly to herself. And the woman to whom she was giving it was worth far, far more. How she wished she had brought it along! Then she could see the younger woman's face, see whether she liked the present or not. She hoped fervently that Natsuki would, hoped to see that flushing brightness the girl always rewarded her with after a present.

"Shizuru."

She broke off her thoughts at hearing the younger woman mumble

"Ah, yes, Natsuki?"

Natsuki shook her head, mumbling incoherently to herself. The older woman looked down at the bundle of cloth sheltering them, wondering if the girl was feeling the chill. Certainly the air was prickly with cold now, and she tightened her arms.

"Natsuki, *meum mel*, are you cold?" she asked, shifting a little. "Perhaps we should be going home, or nearer the fire, at least."

"No. Wait, please."

She felt the girl stir and loosened the embrace to allow Natsuki to look at her.

"Wait? Soon." the young woman pleaded. "A little more. Soon."

She nodded acquiescently.

Satisfied, Natsuki turned back to the view of the lake. It seemed as though they had been waiting for only a few minutes when Shizuru heard the younger woman whisper to her that 'it had arrived'. The Himean looked around, searching for whatever apparition her lover was referring to.

"What has arrived, Natsuki?" she asked, finally. "I confess I see nothing."

There was a low chuckle.

"The sun," came the whisper.

Shizuru looked up to see a greying sky melting into amber towards the east, past a hilly horizon. So occupied had she been with searching for something on the ground that she had failed to realise that the sun was indeed rising, allowing her vision to reach farther than a mere hour before.

Her day of birth was over and a new day had begun.

"So it is the sun."

After a moment, she said: "It is beautiful, Natsuki. Is this what you wanted me to see?"

"No. Wait."

She wondered what she was really supposed to be seeing when she heard the girl mumble softly to herself yet again, this time muttering foreign words that sounded remarkably like a prayer. She was about to ask what Natsuki was praying for when the younger woman perked up, clutching her hand excitedly underneath the blanket.

"Shizuru," she whispered enthusiastically. "Shizuru, look there. The lake."

The older woman did as she asked, unsure of what to expect. All she could see was the shimmering surface of the lake, still dark and silvery within the shadow. The light of the sun had yet to touch it, though she could see the glow coming closer like a flood of gold. It was a beautiful sight, and she said so.

"It truly is beautiful, Natsu-"

"The lake. *The lake*."

"The lake? What do you-oh."

Now she understood what the younger woman had wanted to show her. The lake's surface, upon being touched by the encroaching flood of sunlight, had frosted over in an explosion of white ice. The light continued to stretch, chasing the rushing spread of crystallization as it shot out in all directions of the water. Shizuru held her breath as she saw something she had never imagined to be

possible, the silvery fingers of ice splintering over the lake surface at a speed faster than any mortal steed, followed by the sluggish radiance of the sun rising.

"Jupiter," she whispered, her voice failing beyond that. She could only watch silently and in awe, knowing the sight would forever be burned into her memory.

Or crystallised there, clear as the purest ice.

Meanwhile, the person who had let her see this flicked her own eyes back and forth, torn between watching the phenomenon itself and the reaction it had caused on Shizuru's face. She finally settled for the latter, noting with pleasure the slight moisture in the older woman's crimson eyes. She waited patiently for Shizuru to speak, knowing the event was almost over.

Still, there was only silence after it was done and the lake had completely frosted over. The only sounds were the sounds of the forest awakening from its sleep. Natsuki had to wait a while again, it seemed, before the older woman could even begin to say anything. But she was patient, and so she waited without complaint. That was one of her gifts: the mystery of her silence.

It was a full minute later that Shizuru finally regained herself enough to speak to her.

"By the gods," was the woman's reverent whisper. "Natsuki..."

Natsuki said nothing, simply smiling. Shizuru looked down at those knowing green eyes, unaware of the emotion still brimming in her own.

"Natsuki," she said. "That-that was-"

She trailed off here, to the younger woman's amusement. After a few seconds of patient silence, the latter finally finished the sentence for her, speaking in husky but gentle tones.

"Beautiful, Shizuru," she said softly. "That was beautiful."

## Chapter 29

*Another long chapter. Pardon, it was inescapable since the most prominent characters in this chapter are ones with a tendency to being prolix.*

*Oh, and **ma chère Gale**, as to how many chapters are left in this tale, I honestly have no idea. There are few points fixed as non-negotiable in the plot, and so they are the only markers I have when writing. Nearly everything else is made up during the writing, as was already intimated in earlier explanations of why so many chapters are drafts.*

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### **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Censor** - Typically the office a politician hoped to eventually ascend after becoming a consular; the two censors were elected every five years and carried out several duties, one of those duties being the census of members of Senate. Qualification for becoming (or staying) a senator covered various aspects, some financial. If the senator failed to meet one of the qualifications, he could be legally expelled from the House.
2. **Corona obsidionalis** or **corona graminea** - This was the highest decoration for valour in battle, and extremely rare. It awarded the recipient with right of immediate entry into Senate.
3. **Curule chair** - The ivory chair used by public officials/magistrates owning imperium (a certain degree of authority).
4. **Eleatic School (of philosophers)** - group of pre-Socratic philosophers based in the Greek colony of Elea. The group was founded by Parmenides.
5. **Prorogue** - An English verb, here used in the original and now-rarely-used sense after the Latin root "prorogo", meaning 'to extend' as in 'to extend a term of office'.

6. **Tarpeian Rock** - The traditional place of execution for traitors and murderers who were Roman citizens. These people were either cast down from it or forced to jump and dash themselves on the rocks some distance below. There is yet no evidence claiming that anyone who leapt from it ever survived the fall.

7. **Wakizashi** - A traditional Japanese blade about the length of a forearm. Thus shorter than the katana, it was primarily used for defence, and generally held to be one of the best weapons for this purpose.

8. **Zeno** - A philosopher belonging to the **Eleatic School** (s.v.). He is most famous for his paradoxes.

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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The approach of the Himean elections always signalled a heightened presence of politicians and their clients in the city streets. This meant that traffic-congested enough normally to merit a few curses by those riding in conveyances-reached abominable levels of clogging due to the cliques milling about. The situation was especially dire in that area known as the Forum, where both political hopefuls and heavyweights inevitably congregated. There was the heart of Hime's bureaucratic machine, home to the senatorial offices and the Well of the Comitia, besides all the primary tribunals and temples. There as well was where all the eavesdroppers gathered after the House's daily session, hoping for a chance to pick up a juicy quote or two from some wit-wielding politician.

Already the Forum crowd was in full force, the day's assembly just having been concluded. The senators already out their hall were swarmed upon and willingly let themselves be eaten up by the mass. Today was the last date of electioneering and tomorrow the day of reckoning for many of them: the elections were coming at long last. No one was likely to overlook that event, least of all the

woman slated to preside over it. It was at the fore of her mind as she stood inside the Curia and watched the other members of the House make their way out of the great doors.

"Haruka-chan."

She winced a little at the familiar address, deeming it inappropriate for such a venue as this. She could not find the heart to chastise the speaker, however, when she saw the softness of the brownish-green eyes looking her way.

"What?" she asked, perhaps a trifle brusquely. The other woman's smile only broadened.

"We should go," was the answer. "If we want to catch her. She's on her way out right now."

Haruka Armitage frowned and flicked her hair with annoyance as she thought of what lay in wait outside. She gathered her toga and leapt off the curule platform, choosing to forgo the four short steps leading from it.

"*She* can wait, Yukino," she said, watching her companion walk down those same steps. "She's a consular candidate."

She enunciated those words with obvious disgruntlement, brows interlocked.

"She'll be held up by those people out there," she added. "You should be going around too and wooing the electors."

Yukino Kikukawa shook her head demurely at her best friend and senior, joining her on the floor. She bestowed another smile.

"I've been doing that all the time you were away, Haruka-chan," she said, in the dulcet tones she reserved for the woman. "The elections are tomorrow and people have more or less decided which candidate they're going to vote for. An eleventh-hour spot of promotion isn't going to change their minds."

"But perseverance helps," the other grunted. "It shows them you're dedicated. The unsure ones can be swayed your way if they see

how serious you are about winning. How many times do I have to tell you that you need to be more forceful about what you want, Yukino? You can't win battles without that."

She twisted her lips ruefully when her companion failed to answer.

"Never mind, don't worry," she said, to take the sting off her earlier words. "You'll get in."

"Thank you, Haruka-chan," the younger of the two said.

Haruka nodded, already starting towards the doors.

"Let's go find her," she muttered, eyeing the clusters of people ahead. Already some were headed her way, made up of fellow Traditionalists and their adherents. There were no minor clients in the group, of course, since those would be waiting outside the Curia. Only clients of high stature dared to enter the Senate floor, most of them either senators or public officials themselves. She shook hands with one, nodding at his compliments for her rousing speech to the House today-which had been on the iniquities resulting from extravagance, a subject brought up by the latest charge levelled against a couple of senators alleged to be heavily in arrears. It was always a touchy matter since, officially, a senator could not be in debt. If he was, he could be expelled from the Senate by a censor.

Unofficially, many of the senators qualified for this expulsion. Whether it was as a result of having gone on a real estate spending spree or of having used the money for bribes to gain office, the matter was that many of the members of the House were in debt to one moneylender or another. That they were not brought up for investigation before the censors was due to the clannish mentality of the Himean ruling classes, which firmly believed in holding together for such crises. Whether or not a senator was part of the opposing faction was irrelevant; the fact remained that they did not turn on one of their own. One only had to imagine the risks. What if, in order to fill up the vacancies left by the debarred senators, the censors resorted to bringing in people of dubious ancestries-provincial yokels who could not tell one end of the rostra from another?

Appalling thought, that much was certain. Much better to put up with

people whose ancestors were established, whose familiarity with the way things worked could not be questioned. So the moneylenders continued to prosper and the senators continued to borrow, all of which made people like Haruka—who would rather throw themselves from the Tarpeian Rock than be in arrears-itchy with annoyance. She was, furthermore, the informal leader of the conservative rump, and thus the one scratching her head for a solution whenever some member or other of the Traditionalists was charged of being deeply indebted. All very irritating, to be sure!

"It's only right we senators should mind. This sort of thing must stop," she announced, in answer to the positive remarks being made about her speech. She accepted a few more compliments, eyes darting busily all the while. "Ho, Wang! Sergay Wang! Here!"

The man she had named detached from a flock of clients, all of them making way for him to pass. Salutations were called out and more than a few fawning faces turned his way. He was a popular man, Sergay Wang, and with good reason—several, in fact. Not least was that he was a military man with a successful army career under his belt, something his devotees found patent in the masculine face with the prominent scar on its brow. Of that cross-shaped mark Forum wits had found material for a pun or two, the most popular and long-standing one coming from his detractors: that blemish on his forehead, they said, was meant to make it easier for some charitable Bowman to pick him out from the crowd. Such was the thoughtfulness of this particular target! But to his admirers, that scar was merely further proof of his manliness, a rugged adornment to a fine, patrician countenance.

In any case, another, perhaps less disputed source of his reputation was his skill on the House floor. Sergay was thought one of the better—some even said 'great'—orators in Senate. He spoke more often than not with straightforward good (conservative) sense and fine rhetoric. While many agreed that he was not in the league of such powerfully admired speakers as the *Princeps Senatus*, he still commanded a good following in his own right. As such, he was one of the great pillars holding up that powerful bloc in the nation's governing body, the ultra-conservative faction.

"Haruka," he said, holding both hands out to clasp those of his fellow



'pillar'. "That was a great speech earlier. I cheered like a lunatic."

"That's good," she said with a grin, showing surprisingly small and even teeth in a mouth ironically said to be capable of producing the full vocal range of a horse. "Now! Are you going to Kurauchi's place tonight?"

"Yes, I wouldn't miss it," he answered. "And you? Yukino too?"

Both women answered in the affirmative.

"It's been a while since we've had a proper gathering," he said, before catching himself swiftly. "Not counting your welcome get-together, of course. But many of us weren't able to come then due to prior engagements. Tonight will be well-attended."

He turned to the people behind him and added, with a debonair smile: "It will be an advance celebration too, in anticipation of Yukino Kikukawa's impending victory! The rest of you had better bring congratulatory gifts already."

There were replies of agreement. The candidate in question half-heartedly reproached him for his statement, having the grace to blush as she did so. While she was feeling quite assured about winning, Yukino was also a woman who preferred not to taunt the gods. To celebrate a victory in advance was simply tempting fate and that was never wise. She would have preferred to wait for the actual turnout with as much quiet dignity as possible. But how could she complain, really, when dear, sweet Haruka looked so proud?

"Please, you're too kind," she settled for saying, demure smile a contrast to the brightly positive ones of her companions. "Though it's encouraging, naturally, when I have such formidable competition."

At the mention of the word 'competition', Haruka seemed to recall their errand. She pursed her lips and threw Sergay a terse glance, which he took as the hint to draw attention so that they could leave unhindered. He drew a breath.

"Speaking of formidable competition, that reminds me of something I've heard bruited about recently," the orator announced, with a

careless laugh. "Word on the streets is that I'm having a competition with none other than Kanzaki Princeps Senatus! Imagine our surprise when we found out about it at the pub, while having a friendly-not competitive, I assure you-drink with each other. It's a story how the tale made its way to us."

Their attention diverted from thoughts of the elections to an anecdote anent the two rhetorical rivals, the group pressed Sergay for details. This gave Haruka and Yukino their opening.

"We've already heard it," the senior consul said, taking Yukino by the wrist and leading her away. "So we'll go ahead, Sergay. We'll see you later."

Sergay nodded, already beginning his tale. Haruka pushed her way out of the group and began to stride at a brisk pace to avoid being held up by any others, dragging Yukino with her to exit the hall. The younger woman followed uncomplainingly, although she did take to scrabbling with her toga to better keep up with Haruka's gait. In no time did she find herself drawn into the open air and taking salutations from another crowd, this one larger than the last.

"Keep your eyes open, Yukino," her companion told her, above the incessant buzz of conversation. "Tell me if you see her. It'll be a job looking for that woman in this lot!"

The 'lot' they faced was the Forum horde, and they waded their way past each of its denser points in search of a certain woman. Not sharing her friend's apprehensions regarding their search, Yukino actually believed it would not be too difficult a task. Their objective was sure to be in one of the larger groups in the area, being of such popularity that she regularly amassed followers without even having to make any overtures towards parading herself. Yukino simply let Haruka tow her through the mass and relinquished herself to the older woman's singular verve. Sooner or later, she was convinced, they would run into their goal. She occupied herself with waving to those senators that they passed in the meantime, counting a laughing Jin Akagi, Mai Tokiha standing with Yuuichi Tate, crusty old Jiguro-san, the ever-dry Hajime...

"There she is. Follow me, Yukino!"

And Yukino, having no other choice, followed. The woman leading her kept both eyes fixed on their goal. Said goal was standing side by side with her cousin-whom Haruka soon identified as the patrician-turned-plebeian candidate for the Plebeian Tribunate. Haruka could hardly her lip from curling as she spied this character. Here was another controversial figure! Not to say the other woman paled in notoriety by comparison. *Both at the height of infamy and controversy.* And to think there were so many people around those two, seemingly drawn like flies to honey. Why were the people always so taken by controversial figures?

But that was easily answered. The masses loved nothing better than a good controversy, particularly when it came attached to charisma. Haruka distrusted such dark techniques as charisma. She believed that charm was often a mask for a lack of substance. Having none of it herself, she had seen enough people use it for distasteful purposes to be wary of those who possessed it in overwhelming quantity. Take the person she was heading towards, at the moment. Such a beautiful woman! So tall and elegantly built. And so noble-looking that one was tempted to attribute to her all the virtues of the Himean eidolon without even having personally ascertained her character. The woman herself was aware of this, of course, and that was the problem. Haruka knew that that sort of effortless charm, taken with a similarly effortless claim to unimpeachable origins, made for a treacherous combination.

*Everything is much too easy for her and all her kind!*

They irked her so much, all these smug new aristocrats with their haughty disregard of rules as though strictures merely slid off them and their high status. And there were so many of them now: these entitled brats who rode into public office without raising a finger to work for it, then used that public office to enact ridiculous and pernicious changes to ruin a perfectly good system. They got away with it all because of that outrageous sense of entitlement they carried on their shoulders. Well, that was all they ever carried that seemed to be a burden! They rode off with that alone once they had done their deeds, leaving people like Haruka to shoulder the fallouts of their actions. She was the one left to patch up the Republic they left in tatters, without anyone appreciating her for it. What was with

the people that they fell prey so easily to the glamour of these radicals, who often created their revolutionary sensations merely for their own petty amusement? Was it really so hard to see that what they were doing could only breed danger? Was it so difficult to understand the peril to the Republic?

Was it so hard for The People to see that the colour of revolution was also the colour of blood?

"Himemiya!"

The magnificent head turned her way. An affable smile lit the finely-cut features upon sight of her, and for that Haruka did not know whether to feel resentful or a little gratified.

"Our senior consul approaches," the woman herself said to those nearby-most of whom Haruka recognised as prominent Forum note-takers. "She gave an outstanding speech today, which I dearly hope you all had the privilege to overhear."

There was a buzz of acknowledgement, most of it lauding the senior consul, although there were a few titters as well. It was common knowledge that when Haruka Armitage was speaking in the House, everyone standing in the Lower Forum was bestowed with the 'privilege to overhear', like it or not. That stentorian voice was said to have the capacity to haemorrhage eardrums, so what more the simple feat of seeping out from under the senate doors?

"I just said the obvious," Haruka said with curt modesty, not liking the fact that it was one of her most stalwart foes who had brought attention to her latest victory. Why did it feel cheapened after that? Odd, how praise from one person was the same as ridicule from another. "So then, this is a nice meeting. How goes it, Himemiya?"

The other woman inclined her head.

"Quite well, my gratitude for the enquiry," she said evenly, aware that the crowd had actually hushed down in hopes of picking up something interesting from this conversation. "I hope all is well with you too, Haruka-san, Kikukawa-san."

Yukino replied with the same quiet courtesy, whereas Haruka rejoined with a declaration about everything being 'perfectly fine'. The patrician allowed both of them to finish, then ushered forward the flaxen-haired young woman beside her.

"Please allow me to present my cousin, Urumi Himemiya-Kanzaki Nemura, formerly Urumi Himemiya-Kanzaki," she said, with utmost correctness of preamble. "You have yet to be formally introduced, and this seems as excellent a time as any to rectify that matter. Urumi, our outgoing senior consul, Haruka Armitage and my fellow senator, Yukino Kikukawa."

The young woman being presented bowed in salute, then lifted her head to exhibit a smile nearly as breathtaking as that of her elder cousin. While the crowd practically sighed with appreciation, Haruka felt a crawling feeling at her nape. Of course she had heard of this young woman-her scandalous move from the patriciate to the plebs made sure of that!-and had heard as well that her eyes had the singular trait of having two different colours. Nevertheless, finally having those asymmetrically-tinted irises a scant metre away was proving more disconcerting than she expected, especially since they stood out so starkly in that very blonde, very fair face. Jupiter and all the gods damn her if those eyes did not promise mischief!

"Yes, good to meet you," she said, with a peremptory nod of her head. Her companion was longer in greeting. She actually complimented the young woman for something apparently written and published in the latter's name, citing it perfunctorily.

"I read your dissertation on the Eleatic schools of thought," she informed Chikane's cousin, with an appreciative look. "It was very interesting, Nemura-san."

The beautiful smile grew wider.

"Urumi, if you please, and I'm obliged to hear you think so," came the reply to Yukino. "Re-reading it after publication, you see, I myself started doubting if it was even that."

"Of course not!" interjected another voice, coming from one of the people nearest to them. Yukino identified him as a well-known

scholar of the mentioned philosophies. "It was far and away the most thrilling piece of work this year, Urumi-san. I found myself so engrossed with it that after having begun I could not put it down! I even had to take it to bed with me."

"Where, no doubt, it most thrillingly augmented your slumber," the writer of said tome replied, to collective laughter. "I daresay I shall begin to promote my work as therapy for all those unwilling owls of the night. If you manage to get past the first three paragraphs then you should be a most consummate scholar, being able to read in your sleep!"

After the laugh from her cousin's words died down, Chikane turned to the senior consul, who had scarcely smiled during this interlude.

"Haruka-san, if I recall, has something of an interest in one of the Eleatics-Zeno, I believe," she supplied with patent understatement. "The two of you may find amusement in talking over his teachings, perhaps."

"Most definitely," her cousin answered. "Armitage-san espouses Stoicism, is that correct?"

Haruka answered in her loud voice.

"I espouse only right acts," she asserted. "And Stoicism happens to teach about right acts. It only follows."

"As is correct or, dare I say it, *a right act*," Urumi responded easily. "I would so love to discuss Zeno's teachings with you, Armitage-san, one of these days. Surely you could be of some guidance to me, philosophy-attempting ignoramus that I am."

She sighed then and suddenly looked very vulnerable.

"I find myself so confused sometimes about how Zeno would interpret and resolve certain situations. The question of passion, for instance, and how Zeno would see it. Would it be a right act to give in to a passion, or would it be wrong?"

The senior consul had a ready answer to that: "It would be wrong."

"Even, say, if passion does not always preclude genuine care? Even, in fact, if it contains it?"

The answer almost came out from her mouth without her thinking about it. Haruka clamped her teeth tight to hold it back, knowing that she could not speak it aloud in such a gathering. *Never care, for to genuinely care was to feel genuine pain.* A natural answer for one such as her. Everyone she had ever truly cared for had given her nothing but pain in return, from the alcohol-addled, over-exacting father who had only ever seen her as something that fell short of his ideal daughter, to the elder brother who had been nothing but kind to her, only to die far too early as victim of a plague. What of her mamma? She had died prematurely as well, too early for Haruka to know anything like a mother's love. And as for love... Her first love had ended in a most disappointing manner, the person proving to have only used her as a source of entertainment while waiting for the one for whom he truly cared. Better to forget that! She already had so many disheartening precedents, really, without remembering that too. Who cared about *care* ?

She shook away the memories, unwilling to surrender to them. She knew the hard truths of life, understood the disappointments it could give, and that was enough. Reminiscence was useless except for the lessons one could draw from it, as well as the courage to apply those lessons. But how best to phrase that in front of the people looking at her, waiting for an answer? How, too, to explain it to the aristocratic pup looking at her with unequal eyes that had probably never seen true disappointment, their spoiled glimmer most likely going to be confused by the truth that could answer the question?

"Always be wary of passion! What kind of care is reckless enough to be considered a passion?" she found herself saying with contempt, unaware of the brief sadness her words brought into a pair of olive green eyes. "Only responsible care is considered proper. If it is reckless, as passion is, then it cannot be care, which is its opposite. So passion is never care, not a right thing, nor its exercise a right act."

Her interrogator responded with particular delicacy.

"Yet I have heard it said that the great sentiment, love itself, is most

properly and in its best and true form considered a passion," Urumi said smoothly. "For eros cannot be eros without ardour, and that is exactly what makes it passionate. But the same may be said for its aspect of caring, which is one of the true measures of authentic affection, and hence said to be one of the prerequisites of genuine love. Care being a facet of the thing above it, or love itself, a passionate care may then exist, in that both passion and care can be said to hold true of and be existent in what many call true love. Is it not so, or am I being foolishly mistaken in these understandings, Armitage-san?"

Haruka blinked, somewhat confused by the unexpected onslaught of philosophical polemic. She was aware everyone had eyes on the two of them now, not to mention ears, and it was a little unsettling. Before she knew it, she had given a nod.

"Given a kind of passion then, that can be considered part of 'true love'," the blonde in front of her followed gently. "Would you still hold that it is wrong to act upon it, all circumstances being equal? Zeno, if I recall correctly, only forbade wrong acts, and never forbade love. He even advocated love for good acts, and all that is generally good. The two parts of love that we have mentioned fit nicely into the scheme of this advocacy, in that to love the good means *to care for* and *have a care to choose* always for good, while the necessity of unflagging belief in that choice requires one to have an ardour for it, to espouse this philosophy with *passion* else the flame of one's conviction die out."

The young woman paused for effect before tilting her head to one side, looking happily unaware of the discomfort she had wrought in the senior consul.

"If we are duty-bound to love all that is good then, as Zeno teaches," she said in conclusion. "Can we still say that he would consider all passions, that of love included, to be wrong?"

The silence around them now had become so distinct that people from other groups had begun to come over in curiosity. Anyone asking the reason for the hush was told one of three things: enthrallment in the young intellectual's words; exasperation coming from lesser minds trying to process the argument; or the heady



anticipation of what the senior consul would say next. That public official seemed a little lost at the moment, unfortunately, and the hush seemed to stretch forever. In that time, Chikane Himemiya sent her cousin a sharp look, eyes communicating in secret that she knew exactly what Urumi was doing. That architect of silence, however, did not even bat an eyelash. She simply continued to smile expectantly at the senior consul, looking for all the world like an innocent kitten that was only seeking its ball of string. Whom, exactly, was this wayward kitten fooling?

*Many of the people here, curiously enough, Chikane thought to herself, while furtively surveying the crowd. There are some like me, nonetheless, who see that she has merely rolled out that ball of string to bait something at the end. And one of those people seeing it happens to be my fellow consular nominee, Yukino Kikukawa.*

She ran a surreptitious glance along that woman's expression, noting the darkened colour of the often-squinting, olive-green eyes.

*She is most certainly not pleased.*

The senior consul suddenly responded to Urumi's query in a frightfully grave air that rather brought out the twinkle in Chikane's eye. The woman drew herself up with a deep breath and stated her answer in the usual hectoring tone of voice.

"In that case it is no longer wrong, of course," she brayed, obviously disliking the concession she had been pushed into making. "It *is* a right act to love all that is good. But one must temper one's love with disinterest always, and never let it rule oneself! Nothing that degrades thought and the mind must rule, and all emotions degrade the mind."

Urumi's eyes lit up. Chikane was intrigued by the realisation that her cousin was truly pleased by the senior consul's answer. But then again, things that might not please a regular person could often please Urumi, so singular were the young woman's tastes and amusements.

"A most fascinating response," that impish genius was saying now to Haruka. "I'm ignorant as to Zeno having said that last part about all

emotions degrading the mind, however. Dear me, how embarrassing."

"Oh, I was interpreting from between the lines."

"Ah, of course." Urumi nodded sympathetically. "Yes, many with at least an elementary knowledge of philosophy have a talent for doing that, I've noticed."

Her older cousin hid a smirk at the jibe. It was Yukino who interceded, ending what was rapidly turning into a farcical game of cat-and-mouse.

"Himemiya-san," she said, drawing the urban praetor's attention. "I just remembered, and I hope you'll excuse me for mentioning it only now. Some papers were sent to the senatorial scribes. They were meant for you."

She motioned to the building looming above them and the cool blue eyes followed her direction as she explained. "They were papers from the last cases you heard at your tribunal, I think, and should actually have been handed to you earlier. I felt it prudent to hide them away for the time being so you could pick them up yourself, instead of sending them over care of a courier. Some of the more recent cases at your court seemed to deserve that caution, I thought. I'm sorry, was it a nuisance of me?"

The patrician did not even seem to think about it.

"Not at all. Mine is the fault, in fact, for having obliged you to do such a thing by failing to receive them promptly when they arrived. My sincerest apologies and thanks for the trouble, Kikukawa-san."

"Please don't mention it. Would you like to leave it for another time or get the papers now? I don't mind either way."

"I venture it would be best to relieve you of that burden now. Unless you are occupied with something else, of course."

"No, I'd be happy to. We're already here and only a few steps away."

"Then please lead on." The urban praetor dipped her head close to

her cousin's ear, whispering something those close by overheard as instructions to meet her at 'the usual place'. Afterwards, she nodded to the company.

"Please excuse us to attend to that matter," she said in a clear-carrying voice. "Urumi here shall surely entertain you in my stead. I am unashamed to say she does it much better than I do, and if her eyes are any indication, twice the colour."

Thus leaving smiles on their faces, she allowed herself to be led away by Yukino and to the direction of the offices the official scribes of House meetings occupied. The senior consul accompanied them, guiding the conversation as soon as they were free of followers. She seemed to have regained her balance and swiftly forgotten much of her discomfort from the episode with Urumi.

"I see you're doing your share of promotion, Himemiya, with the mob." Her eyes flickered to Yukino at this. "Well? Tired of it yet?"

"It goes quite well enough, thank you, Haruka-san," Chikane answered. "But I do grant it is strenuous work."

"Anything of value needs real effort. Still, you look like you've done pretty good work."

"Tis pleasant to have you say so. I would so love to hear people say that of my tenure as urban praetor as well, once the year is over." She smiled. "It feels strangely satisfying to know that our terms shall soon be concluded, does it not? Or perhaps that is only my fatigue from hearing so many cases in my court. Please excuse me if I have unwittingly included you in an opinion that is merely my own."

"It's fine. It was a troublesome year," Haruka replied with puckered brow. "There was trouble everywhere. Here, in the South, in Africa Province. And in the North."

"Most especially in the North," Chikane said, a little feelingly.

The senior consul stiffened.

"Maybe if Fujino was doing her job properly there, it wouldn't be that way," she said tightly.

"Permit me to offer an alternative interpretation, if you please. Perhaps if she were truly not 'doing her job properly', it would go further *that way* ."

To which opinion Haruka merely huffed, pursing her mouth in displeasure. Chikane changed the subject.

"May I ask how your assignation in Africa went?" she asked, tilting her head in order to look politely at the other's face, instead of her yellow hair. The senior consul was shorter and Chikane's remarkable stature required that she look down on her. She was aware, too, that Haruka hated that fact. But there was scarcely anything she could do about that, was there?

"Just fine," Haruka was saying, treading her way up the building's steps. "I gave those barbarians a good run for their money! These foreign monarchs should learn to control their people. When a rebellion comes up, it's to us they all come running! They don't begin to give us enough for our pains-and then they have the gall to say we're meddling too much."

"A few of the allied nations do have an inclination to crying 'aid' a little too often. The misfortune of it is that when Hime steps in to lend assistance as they ask, they quickly find fault with the extent of interest we display in what they suddenly deem internal matters... when they were the ones who strenuously drew our attention to our relation towards the affair in the first place."

"They're a treacherous lot," Haruka agreed. "They should make up their minds in advance about where they stand, on the edges of Our Sea! First they say we're affected, then they say it doesn't concern us at all."

"It can be wearisome."

They were inside the building and walking along a deserted corridor. Haruka waved her hands at it, indicating gratitude for the empty space.

" *There's* another thing I'm sure you see is wearisome, Himemiya," the senior consul said crossly. "That mob outside. It's hard to talk

seriously about anything with all those psycho fans crowding around."

*Sycophant, Haruka-chan, they're sycophants*, Yukino chanted in her thoughts, scarcely restraining the urge to correct her older friend. Since their only companion appeared willing to ignore the slip, however, she supposed she had no need to draw attention to it. She often tried not to embarrass Haruka any more than necessary during such occasions, correcting her only when it was obvious that a potentially dangerous misunderstanding might arise from the older woman's gaffe. Hence, seeing the comprehension in the the urban praetor's unchangingly polite countenance made her sigh with relief. One had to give the woman her due: Chikane Himemiya was as renowned for her discretion as for her beauty.

"The public can grow intrusive," the patrician was saying. "It is wise to guard all one's words before them lest they take a mere jest in earnest."

"That's something that happens a lot," the senior consul replied, launching into a discourse on the pitfalls of popular interpretation. She related one of their mutual colleague's experiences, expressing her disgust at the trouble that had arisen almost with relish. Her listener nodded and hummed thoughtfully, looking completely absorbed in the story.

In truth, the urban praetor was actually studying Haruka. The senior consul, Chikane decided, was looking very well. Her short tenure in Africa Province seemed to have suited her, for those cheeks held even brighter colour than before and the gorgeously thick, waving masses of hair looked more golden than ever. On the whole, she was a picture of perfect good health. But that had always been a large part of the woman's physical attractions. Even in repose, Haruka Armitage presented an image of such ready vitality that it reached the point of brashness, animation practically leaping from her skin.

So similar yet so different, Chikane allowed as she pictured her own friend, having been prompted to do so by her guess that whatever the senior consul had taken her aside for was related to Shizuru. Shizuru, who had much the same colouring and who gave off the

same impression of radiant health as Haruka did now. Where the senior consul shone starkly, however, Chikane's friend was luminous. That Armitagian brashness took on a subtler form in the younger woman, from the softer, browner shade of blonde to the paler and less ruddy cheeks. And anyone seeing Shizuru for the first time would never call her animated, could only describe her as laid-back and indolent as a basking cat. Who could possibly know that someone so lazy-looking could leap and have you by the throat in one blink? But that element of surprise suited Shizuru, just as the element of vigour suited Haruka.

*Which lioness is more prone to catching its prey then, she wondered idly. Is it the one who waits silently with sheathed claws or the one who brandishes them with a roar?*

"On another note, I hope you forgive me for being unable to attend your dinner party," she said to Yukino after Haruka was done, though obviously addressing the apology to the latter woman as well. "I had every intention of coming, but my wife suddenly took ill and I feared to leave her alone in such a state."

Yukino expressed sympathies summarily.

"We did receive your gift," the younger of the two Traditionalists said. "Thank you so much for the wine, Himemiya-san. It was very thoughtful of you."

Chikane shook that away with polite charm and Yukino had to stop herself from saying any more. The gift the patrician sent that evening had been a deft joke, after all, that had Forum pundits giggling the whole day after. The package of wine-a standard present for such occasions-was an apology for being unable to attend a party honouring the senior consul. Everyone knew the senior consul did not take liquor.

"'Tis only correct that I offered my regards, since you were thoughtful enough to invite me to dinner," Chikane said, as though perfectly oblivious to her own jest. "I am only regretful I could not offer my presence as well, insignificant though it may be."

"Oh, of course not. But I wish you'd sent word that it was because of

your wife that you were absent," Yukino returned. "I would've sent something, maybe our physician, back for her."

"How kind of you. We called over the Athenian doctor named Youko-san."

"Ah!" Haruka cleared her throat as she rejoined the conversation. "Good physician. She's fine now, your woman?"

Chikane smiled warmly.

"I thank the gods it was merely a one-day fever," she told them. "As it was, though, I still had to stay and look after her myself."

It was on the tip of Haruka's tongue to ask whether or not the urban praetor had servants to do that much, but she changed her mind about it. Chikane Himemiya had a terribly wary streak when it came to her wife and though generally mild of manner, also had the sort of haughty comportment that told you it might be life-threatening to provoke her. Better to leave the eagle's nest alone, Haruka decided in a rare fit of metaphorical imagination, and tackle the bird itself in its flight.

"It's better to watch out for things," she declared. "What looks like a one-day fever could have something worse behind it so it's good to look into every matter."

"I could not agree more. Cases that seem insignificant may well have a darker source behind them."

"That's what I mean." Haruka nodded vigorously. "Some of the latest happenings, for example, look simple at first. But they're also suspicious to me."

"I am interested to hear you say so."

That was her cue. She began to slow her walk and let them follow suit.

"I don't like the way some things have been going. Something bad is in the air and I can feel it, tickling the back of my neck." Haruka patted said body part. "My neck itches when someone's plotting

something."

The urban praetor blinked, it seemed, very slowly.

"But if you would allow me to point something out, Haruka-san," the woman said. "That would mean your neck is constantly prickling, since someone somewhere is always plotting something."

"Not just any 'something.' I meant something *unpleasant*, Himemiya."

"It seems to me that the statement holds even so. All the more for us, since we three are in politics, and in politics there is always someone plotting an unpleasant something. I would imagine many of us have at one time been guilty of that."

"Hah!" The senior consul scoffed. "I, for one, have always had a clear conscience. That can only mean one thing, you know."

A pleasantly curious expression: "A bad memory, perhaps?"

Yukino swiftly bit her tongue to restrain the titter welling up in her throat. Wickedly tongue-in-cheek as the urban praetor's response had been, she had to appreciate the patrician's sense of humour. Haruka, on the other hand, was neither amused nor insulted; wit tended to escape her.

"Not when it comes to these things," she was saying in reply, tapping a finger on one temple. "I remember all my actions and monitor them carefully. It's only right that we should be self-aware, even if being that way shows us things about ourselves we don't want to see."

She nodded complacently and concluded: "Truth is a universal virtue."

The other woman smiled.

"I have often heard it said so," she answered.

Haruka looked grand at this ostensible concurrence.



"It's good you appreciate it too," she said. "Because I want to know the truth about something."

Chikane looked nothing if not obliging.

"In that case, Haruka-san," she offered. "Please tell me if I might in any way prove enlightening."

"You just might, Himemiya."

Haruka stopped walking and wheeled to face her, looking straight into the languid blue eyes. Both Yukino and Chikane realised she was going to put the question directly, devoid of either artfulness or prevarication.

Not that they had expected either thing from her, anyway.

"What is it you wish to enquire of me, Haruka-san?"

The blonde suddenly looked severe. Chikane continued to smile amiably, not bothering to alter expression before the fierce violet gaze.

"Tell me the truth, Himemiya," the senior consul ground out, in her extraordinarily truculent voice. "Did you know Fujino was going to run for praetor this year and were you the one who put her up to it?"

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Suou Himemiya eyed the cutting edge of the weapon in her hand, running a finger cautiously on the steel to test its polish. Looking to one side, she gripped the shaft with both hands and touched the blade of the naginata to an imaginary foe's collar, grunting in an effort to halt it from dipping further than her make-believe target.

*A little too much.*

She frowned at the excess.

"I don't understand how you can use this," she told one of the other two persons in the room. "It's unreasonably heavy."

She handed over the pole-arm. A wry laugh passed her lips when the other woman proceeded to lay it carelessly over her own shoulders using a one-handed grip, seeming to give the lie to Suou's complaint.

"Oh now, see, that's just mean," Suou said with a smile, a touch of rebuke in her voice. "You're painting me in shabby colours with that display, Shizuru-san."

Her friend grinned unrepentantly.

"My excuses for that," Shizuru said, not bothering to remove her naginata from her shoulders. "But you must recall that I am accustomed to its weight whereas you are not, and so it should hardly be make you look shabby when I wield it this freely only because of having forced myself to do so for near a decade, Suou-chan."

"Now there's something I haven't heard in a while," came the other's answer. "I thought I would go mad if I heard 'Suou- *han* ' one more time. It was amusing at first, but I didn't think you'd be carrying it so far. What a production you do make, ye gods!"

The darker blonde laughed.

"Did I trouble you so, Suou-chan?" she asked apologetically. "Such was not my intent, of course. If you would prefer that I no longer use that honorific I would gladly accede to your wishes."

Suou said nothing, merely sparing her friend a playful smile as she went by. She headed towards a weapon rack on the wall, intending to pick up a practice spear from there.

*Of course she knew* what Shizuru had intended in addressing her so formally during the campaign, appending to her name the honorific of - *han* instead of the more familiar -*chan* . It had been a replacement made in Suou's interests. Shizuru had probably been hoping that avoiding the more childish nickname would make it clear to everyone within earshot that she esteemed Suou as a fully matured and capable woman: something that was held in question when Suou, not yet even a senator, was given the significant

position of legate on this campaign. A surprisingly unorthodox decision, most had cautioned, and a foolhardy one. But Shizuru had not been swayed and had insisted on having Suou on her staff. And so the qualms had begun.

It was no matter that this daughter of the Himemiya was only a year younger, in point of fact, than the commander herself. There were crucial differences between the two women, particularly in the realm of experience. Suou had been given this position without ever occupying any public office before. The only military experience she had was as a *contubernalis*, that position of cadetship all senators were required to undergo in their youth, and then as a military tribune, another type of cadetship for young senators. Shizuru, on the other hand, had already served and even generated on numerous campaigns. She also had the near-unbelievable distinction of a *corona obsidionalis* wreathing her record-which decoration also happened to be the step that gave her early entry to the Himean Senate a few years back. In short, whereas Shizuru had the benefit of certain pertinent credentials justifying her generalship, Suou had virtually none to justify her taking a legatal position. The most the latter woman could lay claim to, as far as most were concerned, was her family's name. Hardly enough for the greater sceptics, was it? Of course not.

Thus Shizuru had taken to making a show of confidence in Suou, meticulously treating the youthful legate as one would a person of seniority and respect. It was part of this display that she began to address Suou more formally in public, to further convey her regard for the young woman. In private, however, she reverted to the name she had used for the younger patrician ever since childhood... for they had all but grown up together.

Tacit accomplices, they had never even discussed this substitution of honorifics until now, simply reading each other's intentions and following their unmentioned script. It often brought secret smiles to their faces whenever they did so. Suou, especially, found something terribly amusing in being called "Suou- *han* " so constantly by a woman who had only ever called her "Suou- *chan* ", her own address for said woman only retaining the more formal -*san* out of deference for someone she considered almost an older sister. That

too was an amusing thought: imagine being addressed so formally by your elder sister!

*Not that I can imagine my elder sister doing it, really,* she amended to herself, with a private grin at the very idea. *Chikane would imbue the honorific with such dryness I'd probably choke.*

"It's fine if you keep calling me that, I understand," she finally said, having selected a spear for herself and approaching Shizuru with it. "As for the exceptional heft of your naginata, I swear I will never understand why you don't just exchange it for something of lighter make. It's not even an obligatory inheritance, unlike our bow, is it?"

Shizuru nodded, turning her beloved weapon slowly in her hands. She understood the comparison, knowing the object Suou had mentioned: the heirloom of the Himemiya, an imposing and beautifully-crafted bow, required such strength to draw that the heirs of the family actually had to dedicate a good part of their education to training for it. Suou's older sister was no exception, and still bore the calluses on her fingers to prove it, aside from the wide and impressively built back many would be surprised to see on such an elegantly-shaped woman. But Chikane was tall enough to preserve slimness even with such musculature, and Suou thanked the gods she was the same. Long limbs permitted stretched, lean muscles, instead of bunching them up too much into a stocky form. A good bit of curves was a help too, reflected the merciless observer as she glanced at Shizuru: the other, even more statuesque woman's fairly-sized bosom lent an illusion of feminine softness to what was an already hardened body.

She found herself studying her commander more closely at that thought. *Outrageously tall, even by masculine standards, and very well-muscled.* The latter was the soldier in her. Wearing only a short tunic as Shizuru was now, Suou could see the shaped calves that attested to the miles of hard marching expected from a Himean soldier. Flat belly too, as she could see whenever the tunic was pulled tight on the tapering waist. Good, very fit-looking shoulders.

What she had to say she most appreciated in Shizuru's form, however, was the shape of the arms. Those appendages were so long they contrived to appear slender despite being superbly

muscled, the area near the biceps even producing subtle, sinewy little bulges in the proper places. She supposed it was the result of using that heavy polearm. If so, the dratted thing actually had some advantages then. Such splendid arms those were!

*All of it's splendid, in fact, but I can imagine some disadvantages to her look as well,* she allowed later, while watching the other woman go to the weapons rack to look for a practice spear of her own. Relativity, as always, played a part. Shizuru's size was a definite consideration since, even while possessing the correct proportions in itself, it could not be denied that placing her next to someone of average height and build would usually dwarf the other person. Just as well she preferred women. Most Himean men were not romantically predisposed towards someone whose physical strength and stature so obviously rivalled theirs. Someone of Shizuru's looks roused competition or sheer admiration from them more than amorous affection.

The musical voice broke in upon her concentration and she thought for a moment that a query had been put to her. She realised quickly, however, that it was not she being addressed. Shizuru was talking to her bodyguard.

*Now there's another interesting study in physical type,* she thought with sudden interest, watching as the Otomeian approached her friend and held conference. Both were obviously military women, with the vigorous looks expected of the type. Shizuru's Natsuki, however, also seemed the type most men would quickly go after, the thwarted Takeda being only one example. Why was that?

She set aside the matter of their facial features for now. Instead, she considered the Otomeian's figure next to Shizuru's, noting the heights of the pair.

*Another tall one, though definitely the shorter,* she determined. *Almost my height, and I do fall below Shizuru-san and my sister.* Very slender, too, though possessed of a fine set of shoulders. Not entirely flat-chested, but small enough to be willowy. Quite similar to the older woman. What in there was the crucial difference?

Shizuru's hand came up to the girl's arm, her slender fingers

wrapping around it. Suou blinked as she realised what it was that she had been looking for.

*Natsuki-san's actually much smaller, she concluded, pleased at having an answer. Fantastically lean, she would say, to the point of looking nearly delicate. That was interesting in such an athletic person. If Suou had to guess at what was underneath all those layers of dark clothing, she would say that it was a body with muscles similar in shape to those of the Ninth's chief primipilus: long and stretched out. As Natsuki was taller than the primipilus in question, however, her muscling appeared leaner. She had fine bones as well, judging by the width of the neck and wrists. Almost fragile! If her guesses were correct, that girl carried hardly an ounce of spare fat. How in the world did she manage to stay warm?*

*Well, I suppose Shizuru-san sees to that, she thought playfully, not knowing that the general actually was pressing her bodyguard to eat more as a result of similar-though more intimate-observations. And I suppose that's also why the men would find it easier to go for her. She doesn't look as stunningly powerful as Shizuru-san, which means she's not as threatening.*

The memory of one of her subordinate's complaints came forth and she added a clause to her conclusion: *So long as she doesn't glare at them, that is.*

The other practical ramifications did not escape her. She understood now that any sparring match between the two would boil down to a match of speed against strength. True, Shizuru had a name for being one of the fastest warriors in Hime, but from what Suou had seen of the Otomeian, even the fastest warriors in Hime would weep. Her agility cost her in another area, however, as the disparity in size and stature determined an advantage for Shizuru in terms of pure force. Of skill, Suou supposed they were matched. So which one would win?

"Shizuru-san, it just occurred to me to ask," she said simply. "Have you ever tried sparring with Natsuki-san?"

Shizuru cast a smile down at her bodyguard before answering: "No, truth be told, though I have asked time and time again."

The ashen brows went up.

"Do you mean Natsuki-san refuses you?" she asked, with authentic surprise. "I must say that's unexpected."

The other Himean sent another quick glance at Natsuki, who shuffled back to her earlier seat with an uncomfortable look on her face. The panther tethered there leapt on the bench and curled up next to her.

"Yes, Natsuki refuses me."

Shizuru sauntered over to Suou, carrying a bladeless spear similar to the one the latter had.

"Natsuki rarely spars, or so she tells me," she revealed, while arranging her position to indicate that Suou could attack. "At least, not with her weapon of choice, the daos."

"What a pity. Nao's been saying she'd love to try her with that thing."

"I was rather disappointed to learn it too, at first, but soon understood her reasons for it thereafter."

She swatted away the incoming spear and began moving, sometimes just avoiding the blows instead of parrying them. They talked while Suou continued her shower of jabs.

"What are the reasons, then?" Suou asked, freeing the end of her spear from under Shizuru's foot with an outward kick. This was to avoid it being broken by Shizuru's other foot coming down to snap it against the floor. The older woman executed a nimble step back and pointed her spear forward again before Suou could return to attack.

"One might say there is only one reason, actually," Shizuru said, lowering her spear and circling the other woman with a casual step. "All others would stem from it, I suppose."

There came the sound of wood hitting wood as she flicked away the spear jabbing at her.

"So what is it?" Suou asked.

Another clacking sound, followed by a giggle from Shizuru as she threw her own spear over her shoulders in patent relaxation. She wiggled her eyebrows tauntingly at Suou, who grinned back.

"Natsuki says it is because she does not know how to use her weapon for sparring."

She affected a sigh of boredom, obviously trying to provoke her opponent into making a move. Suou merely looked at her.

"So for only what does she know how to use it?" Suou asked.

They smiled innocently at each other.

"She only uses it with the intent to kill," Shizuru answered.

No sooner had the words left her mouth than Suou lunged, the blunt tip of her spear aimed at Shizuru's unguarded chest. Shizuru immediately dropped to avoid the charge and rushed at a crouch past the younger woman's side. Suou compensated for this peculiar evasion by bringing her spear down at an angle to her foe-only to miss when she was startled by a firm blow on the back of her neck. She stumbled forwards and away, feeling her spear pulled irresistibly from her grasp as she distanced herself to retrieve balance.

"*Ecaster!*" she cried in frustration upon turning back to her opponent. "Now that was foul!"

Shizuru, now proudly holding both spears, laughed. The spear she had wrested from Suou during the younger woman's moment of surprise was in her right hand. Her own spear, which she had thrown up to cause a surprise when it fell back down and on Suou's unguarded nape, was in her left.

She smiled at her friend.

"And here I thought it was cleanly done," she said teasingly, before looking at the others in the room. "Both Natsuki and Shizuki seem to agree with me. What is the collective verdict, Natsuki?"

Suou looked behind to see the girl with one leg pulled up, face



buried into the knee and further shaded by one hand as her shoulders shook noiselessly. The panther next to her had its mouth open, pink tongue lolling in what seemed a coincidental comedy. Suou laughed too.

"I plead an unfair jury," she complained. "You can be mean sometimes, you know."

"Untrue," Shizuru answered, while returning to her the spear. "You confuse me with your sister. She would have added a spank to your rear in that exercise, which would indeed have been mean."

The very attractive, very fair features pulled into a grimace.

"So she would," Suou said, the fondness in her voice belying her scowl. "And she only ever does it to me! See, I've seen her give lessons and spar with dozens of people and she never teases any of them that way."

Shizuru tilted her head to one side.

"I suppose it may be a token of her affection, Suou-chan. You are her only sister, after all."

The other woman rolled pale blue eyes upwards as if in divine supplication.

"Oh, heavens," she heaved. "You and Himeko-chan get sweetness galore as tokens of affection while I content myself with the occasional spank. What diverse kindnesses my sister does bestow!"

"Even so, not entirely unwelcome, I suppose."

"'Not entirely' being the operative words." Suou twirled the weapon in her grasp, looking at it pensively afterwards. "As I thought, I really do better with shorter weapons like swords. I can't get a good feel for what to do with the extra length, and having so much more of it confuses me." She sighed in resignation. "Even more with your weapon, which is so large. What a long pole you have there!"

She received no response, however, and looked up curiously at her opponent. To her surprise, the older woman had a hand to her

mouth, laughing quietly into it.

It took a few more seconds before she understood.

"Natsuki-san." Suou turned and cast a grim look at the listening Otomeian, trying her hardest not to give it away by giggling. "Your charge has a *very bad* mind."

"Pray do not corrupt Natsuki's mind against me!"

"Pray you haven't already corrupted it yourself!"

Both started chuckling, ignorant of the Otomean shaking her head at their antics.

"That was a fine rebuttal," the young general was saying to Suou, wiping away the moisture from her eyes. "I should have seen it coming."

"I'm glad you didn't, or I wouldn't have been able to showcase my, mmph, verbal virtuosity."

Shizuru grinned with distinct enjoyment.

"Now *that*," she said, "reminded me of Chie-han."

"That's a compliment. Chie-san has a great feel for wordwise humour."

"You cannot be described as laconic, yourself."

They were moving again, making brief and stabbing attacks at each other. Two sets of feline eyes watched as they danced, one set golden and the other green.

"No danger of that," Suou said to Shizuru. "No Himemiya has ever made a reputation for being laconic. We love playing with our words a little too much."

She parried a thrust and went on: "Unless you count old uncle Ayato, I guess."

Shizuru leapt away from her reach.

"Your uncle Ayato?" She tilted her head in perplexity. "I thought he had a speech impediment."

"He did," Suou smiled lazily. "Can you imagine a better reason for becoming laconic?"

A laugh: "Fair enough."

"But you see what I mean-we're all insufferable when it comes to our talk. And it's so difficult to resist dropping this little jest or that, sometimes at the expense of being concise."

"I have the same conceit. It tends to rule me too."

"You more than me."

"Reito-han more than all of us."

"He *is* the Princeps Senatus," Suou said, with a sling that was flicked away contemptuously by Shizuru. She grinned and persisted in her attempts to hit the older woman. "Chikane is on par with him, though. Yet my cousin Urumi defeats them both."

"Ah." Shizuru sidestepped another thrust. "That prodigy interests me very much."

"You've only met her a few times, right?"

"Yes."

"She's a terror."

The other woman laughed, crimson eyes sparkling with humour.

"If *you* say so, she must be," she said.

"Actually, it's Reito who says so." Suou shrugged. "See, she picks on him."

"I was under the impression that they got along."

"Oh, they do. It's not that she dislikes him as a *paterfamilias* or anything." She stopped to catch her breath, resting the butt of the spear on the floor. "It's more that he presents her with such opportunities that she can't resist. I remember one time she took him down for size in front of us. It was just before we left for this campaign and Chikane was having him, Urumi, and another Kanzaki over for dinner. Himeko-chan and I were there too."

"What happened?"

"It was after the meal was over and the topic of conversation was past military expeditions," Suou recalled. "Chikane had just finished describing hers, when Reito recalled his own experiences, lamenting that he wasn't able to go on more than one campaign as part of the high command before becoming Princeps. And as Princeps, he claimed he wouldn't be getting any more chances to go on another—so went the excuse."

Shizuru furrowed her brow thoughtfully.

"He spoke the truth," she told the younger woman. "The Princeps is never sent out in battle because his theatre of war is ever after the senate floor. Reito-han is actually no mean swordsman, you know, nor is he a coward."

"I know. But he would much rather stay in Curia than go waging wars with his sword elsewhere. Not a coward but careful. Reito doesn't take risks in the sense that he likes to ensure he's never in the immediate line of fire. It's hard to preserve himself that way if he's in a place where real arrows are flying and not ones he can easily deflect somewhere else—like in politics. It's more his area of comfort being crafty and manipulating battles from the curule chair."

The red eyes fixed almost eerily at her, seeming to rise in attention.

"Suou-chan," came the lilting voice. "That is a very good assessment of Reito-han you have just made."

The flaxen-haired woman shrugged again.

"He is practically family," she told Shizuru. "Besides, Urumi's the one

who drew my attention to it. She understands him very well."

"Which spells disaster for Reito-han, if your cousin's temperament is as you say."

They smiled at each other.

"Going back to the story," Suou prompted, tucking away a few strands of wayward hair. "Reito was making his excuses. Since he's Reito, naturally, he had to say it in a flowery way. He struck his gravest pose and declared: 'Tranquil as it is to remain safe and not sore, I do sometimes wish for blood and gore .'"

Shizuru emitted a chuckle: "As expected of Reito-han. Not bad."

"Yes. But just as we were thinking so, Urumi took up the rhyme with singsong sweetness: 'You do keep saying you want action more, yet here you remain with us, playing a bore .'"

They doubled over with mirth, forced to lean on their upright spears.

"I adore your cousin's style," Shizuru managed to say. "But poor Reito-han!"

"It was his fault. He shouldn't have paused to allow Urumi a word in edgewise. Be careless for a second and she'll do as she did to him, taking your laughs and running away with them."

"An oversight on his part. Perhaps he forgot because he was busy admiring his own 'verbal virtuosity'?"

They cried with laughter again.

"You know," Suou said, when she had recovered enough. "I think Urumi's going into politics too. Soon."

"Oh? Was she planning to run for quaestor or some other office?"

"I thought so, but her letters give me the impression otherwise. She wouldn't say exactly." A grin. "See, she's sly like that."

"I should hope to have her as a friend rather than a foe, then."

"Chikane will rein her in for you-as much as anyone can, anyway," she said almost ruefully. "I'm afraid you'll have to do the rest yourself, since Urumi pretty much operates on her own terms. If she finds you amusing, she'll like you. The problem is telling which way that like is going to go, or how she intends to show it."

The older woman nodded thoughtfully, glossy strands of hair waving on her brow.

"A complex one, then."

"Yes."

They levelled their spears at each other once again and resumed their former activity. For a while, nothing could be heard except the sound of their feet on the training room's mats, their spears clacking as they met and clashed off each other. Then Suou asked a question.

"When your plan with Chikane comes through," she said, pausing to wipe at the beaded moisture on her forehead. "I'm curious to know how many of the legates you want to keep with you."

"As many as possible, of course." A short pause, accompanied by a slice towards her temple. She tilted her head to avoid it. "Unless there are strenuous arguments to the contrary. Why, do you wish to return to Hime already, Suou-chan? I would understand if you wanted to."

"No, I've every intention of staying." The frosty eyes met hers. "To be honest, Shizuru-san, I had someone specific in mind when I asked that."

"May I know who it is?"

"Chie-san."

Shizuru jumped a few steps back, wiping damp hair from her forehead.

"Oh?" she said. "You are concerned about my keeping Chie-han?"

Suou nodded.

"For her sake," she explained. "I hope you will pardon me for saying it, Shizuru-san, but it seems to me that Chie-san could have reasons to go back to Hime instead of staying for a full-on campaign, which could go from a year to years."

"To be precise, a reason: Aoi Senou."

"Unlike the rest of us, she has that unfinished business," Suou agreed. "Kenji-san, while also waiting to come home to someone, is at least assured of her waiting for him too. They're already affianced, after all."

"Whereas Chie-han has not that guarantee," the other said wistfully. "Ah, I do feel for Chie-han. If only Senou-han-the father, I mean-were not so stubborn! He could scarce do better than Chie-han for a daughter-in-law and a faithful partner to his daughter! She is as excellent in her sentiments as in her scribal sentences."

"That's so." Suou looked hesitant for a second before adding: "Senou-san is quite *conventional*, isn't he?"

Rusty eyes twinkled: "You mean to say that his affections lie with the Traditionalists."

"Well, yes."

"Oh, you have no need to say it so delicately, Suou-chan," Shizuru said, with a laugh. "I am aware of it. One of the reasons he opposes Chie-han's suit is because she is part of the opposite camp... or more specifically, part of mine."

Suou heard the guilt in the lightly-spoken words. She rested the knuckles of one hand on her hip.

"It's hardly your fault," she stated positively. "Even without you considered, Chie-san in herself isn't conservative and would never be. Senou-san would still have found something objectionable about her, politically speaking."

"But were Chie-han closely allied to a less suspicious non-

conservative instead of me, he would not find her as objectionable, of course," came the retort. "Were that only the case, we know Chie-han's suit would be at least marginally smoother. You need not attempt to allay my guilt by arguing to the contrary."

The other heaved a sigh at that.

"We choose our allies, anyway, and can't hold anyone else responsible for that choice," she said. "But excuse me for bringing it up."

"Oh, no. I suppose I needed to finally say it aloud, in any case."

"Just in case, isn't there someone else in whom Chie-san has an interest, at least? She's an attractive woman. There have to be a dozen others who'd be glad to have her."

Shizuru shook her head, looking amused by the very thought.

"One of Chie-han's best qualities is her loyalty," she told Suou. "She has never been the kind to blow hot and cold in her affairs, and that much may be said of her affections as well."

Suou conceded the point.

"If you say so, I believe it. And I do think so too. She's in love with Aoi-san, isn't she?"

"One could say it is far from a mere infatuation."

"I see. Too bad about the *tata* ." A pause. "So would you let her go, if she did ask?"

"Of course. Besides, Chie-han's support has worth whether here or in Hime. Outstanding as her performance has been here, one could expect even better from her were she fighting instead in Senate. After all, she would then have the attention of the one she loves upon her, and every person strives to be more outstanding under his beloved's regard."

Shizuru then suggested that they take a break, both to slake their thirst and to rest. Suou agreed and presently found herself on a



bench, facing the general and her bodyguard as they rested on another. The older woman was bantering with the girl, drawing half-heartedly sullen responses.

"Natsuki here has a way with words as well," Shizuru remarked to Suou, who lifted her brows in answer. "We were talking the other day about the Mentulaean killings. I told her that I wondered how Midori-han would handle it, since we already provided her with a lead as to the masterminds."

"You left it up to her, I heard."

"It is *her* province, in the end." Shizuru pressed a towel to her neck. "What we did was adequate. I would hate to encroach on her authority."

"I see."

"In any case, I was pretending to guess at her actions. One of the possibilities I mentioned to Natsuki was a table-meeting with the masterminds, though I also pointed out the difficulties. I told her that it would be quite hard, talking to them diplomatically."

"Yes. And then?"

Shizuru shot a mirthful look at Natsuki before replying: "If that was the case, Natsuki said, perhaps we could just thrash them diplomatically."

Both Himeans chuckled as Natsuki frowned their way. Afterwards, Suou turned a contrite smile to the girl.

"Pardon us, Natsuki-san," she said. "But it was a good answer. See, what you suggested was an actual option."

The Otomeian said and did nothing, although Suou had the impression from her eyes that she was nodding in comprehension. Meanwhile, Shizuru placed a hand on the girl's head and patted it fondly as she asked her about something else. Suou's eyes stayed on them, part-hidden by the platinum fringe of her hair.

"I suppose one could do that, instead," Shizuru was saying. "What

if..."

The conversation faded away as Suou took to watching instead of listening to their dialogue.

*I know she's unconventional, she thought, but does she really think that's how people treat their bodyguard?* She took a sip of water from a ready decanter, trying to hide her smile at the general's affectionate gaze upon the girl. *And that's not how they look at them either. How my sister would laugh to see her like this! She looks like an adolescent after her lover.*

A sudden insight came to her and she almost let slip a laugh.

*Oh, Shizuru-san, you are a rascal,* she thought with amusement. Unknown to the other legates, she had actually sparred with Shizuru many times before, only never spoken about it. She was wondering today why the older woman was not as gentle with her as usual, for Shizuru often scaled down her own prowess when they used polearms to allow for the fact that Suou's preferred instrument was not the spear but the sword. Today the woman had not gone easy, and Suou first thought it was in keeping with the act of equal regard they had started ever since this campaign. But then again, there was no one to see the show, was there? No, the only one seeing them was Natsuki.

*And it's that audience that matters for another reason,* she concluded. In retrospect, she should have seen it earlier in Shizuru's glances whenever she paused to address Natsuki, eyes bright and shimmering. The woman would have died rather than disappoint that exquisitely young thing watching her as though she were the most admirable being ever beheld. But how peculiar to find her so conscious of someone's attention. Or should she call it revealing instead?

*Shizuru-san, you are caught! Your words on Chie-san earlier apply to you as well, and that means this is no mere infatuation. She has you in her hand as firmly as a fish trapped in the net!*

She looked away for fear she should fall about laughing, her glee shown only in the taut corners of her mouth. What would her sister

say about this, she wondered? Surely it was time to write again, to make what she had been hinting at clearer. After all, the truth was that Chikane had suggested her as a legate to Shizuru not only for Suou's experience but also to keep an eye on their beloved friend, whom both considered a third sister. Suou was supposed to be Chikane's eyes and ears, reporting to her anything out of the ordinary.

Suou knew it was not that her older sister lacked faith in Shizuru here. It was, rather, that Chikane was a woman of calculation. There were times, she had explained before Suou's departure, when she felt that Shizuru had a tendency to being too complacent, where a combination of the younger woman's innate self-sufficiency and her sense of embarrassment prevented her from seeking help when it might be essential. This, from someone Suou thought had the same trait! In any case, that was her purpose: to be on the lookout for such occasions.

*And if I'm right, Shizuru-san will be needing help on this particular occasion,* Suou decided thoughtfully as she pulled out the cord tying back her hair. The pair in front of her was still happily chatting-or one of them was, while the other nodded and mumbled-and for all purposes looked caught up in their own world. She paused to look at them, fascinated by the change the girl could work on Shizuru's attitude and composure. Perhaps even more than fascinated...

*This isn't something I can put off any longer. Chikane would want to know, so she could start thinking of something in advance. She should know if there's something to do, or anything that can be done.*

Yes, her decision was made. She would write to Chikane as soon as possible and express her judgments in no uncertain terms. How interesting to visualize what the older woman's face would look like, once she received the letter. Suou had to wonder if her sister ever imagined, seeing them off on this venture, that her best friend was going to the north only to encounter a situation nearly the same as she had, not too long ago.

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"No."

There was silence and then the word was repeated by another voice.

"No?"

"No." Chikane smiled helplessly as she delivered the answer a second time, even teeth coming out in a dazzling exhibition of white. "Haruka-san, were you under the impression that Shizuru informed me before she made her tardy decision to be among this year's praetorian candidates? Close friends she and I may be, but I doubt our relationship would remain so healthy if we ceased to surprise each other at times."

The fiery violet eyes bored into hers, showing flames of doubt.

"So you're saying it was a shock to you too?"

"Yes." Seeing the other's distrustful look, she closed her eyes and sighed lightly. "If you do not believe me, you have leave to ask my wife. She was there when I received the news."

A loud snort. "How can I trust her account? She's *your wife* ."

"As well as the worst liar in the world." The dense lashes fluttered up, revealing a playful glint in the blue eyes. "Why do you think I never even bothered to attempt concealment of our relationship from the outset? I submit Himeko could not have lied successfully about it to her own mirror-which practice attempt of hers I chanced upon, in fact."

She turned a twinkling eye to Yukino and concluded, with obvious delight for her wife's 'failing': "I am sorry to say not even her own reflection looked convinced."

Again Yukino had to bite her tongue, though to no avail; the chuckle escaped. Haruka, on the other hand, merely harrumphed.

"If she's the only witness, we'll have no choice but to take your word for it, won't we?" she said in her most prosaic tone of voice. "How lucky for you."

"My cousin Urumi was there as well, if you would let another vouch for me."

"Your cousin!" It was clear the name did not inspire confidence in the senior consul, who was still smarting from her first official meeting with that patrician. "Another rule-bending nominee! I guess you're going to tell me her little game with the Plebeian Tribunate was a shock to you too?"

"It was."

"You're the one who endorsed her adoption!"

"Which did not prevent me from having been genuinely surprised prior to that, when she first informed me of her objective," Chikane replied with great calm-something she was aware drove the senior consul to distraction. "My initial reactions out-of-the-way, I fail to see how Urumi's actions constitute 'rule-bending', however. True, they have engendered surprise in many others, but only because it is still beyond most of our aristocratic peers' sensibilities to even consider giving up patrician status. That Urumi is willing to do so, thus going against the common grain, should speak of the strength of her feelings for both the office she seeks and her desire to serve the plebs... not to mention her observance of the rules, since it is only in cognisance of them that she has even come to such a decision."

The thick, brightly-furred eyebrows slanted down angrily. Yukino knew what had set this storm brewing on her friend's brow: the urban praetor's citation of the elevated regard many people still harboured for patricians. Never mind that she had not given any indication of agreeing with it and had only delivered the statement as an accurate description of prevailing attitudes. The fact was that Haruka held a grudge against patricians, deeming nobility the great enemy of the Republic. What was to prevent one of these blue-bloods, she often asked Yukino, from trying to crown himself one day as the King of Hime?

*It makes things worse that the one who just reminded her of it is someone so well-bred that her family's name is actually taken from that of the nation itself.* The Himemiya could practically trace the cobwebs of the state in their blue veins. Yet they were also known

for being a peculiar, if brilliant brood. Against all expectations, no Himemiya had ever even attempted to be dictator, had ever attempted to usurp the powers of the Senate to a truly crown-seeking degree. Yukino herself had an explanation for that. The members of the clan, she felt, had the enviable right to rest with perfect security in their exalted pedigree. Why attempt to be a monarch when it was sufficient for everyone to know that you could be one? No wonder Haruka was wary of them.

*There's no guarantee that one will not someday go against the family history, she reasoned out for both her friend and herself. A sudden image of mismatched, blue-and-brown eyes came to her and she added another thought to her musings: It's only more reason to be guarded, when we face their latest, and what looks to be the unruliest, generation.*

"It's an insult to the plebs, you mean!" she heard Haruka saying heatedly. "It goes against all tradition to have a patrician become tribune of the plebs!"

"I would not say it goes against all tradition," the other woman replied, still mildly. "Many of the past tribunes actually had patrician blood a few generations along their roots. Some of them intermarried whilst some simply 'turned plebeian' later on. Divers former patrician families' members have taken up seats on the tribunician bench."

"A travesty! The offices of the plebs should be left to the plebs!"

The urban praetor was facing a window now and she looked sidelong at Haruka. The light shining upon her gaze seemed to bring its colour a little closer to that of the other members of her family: the wintry, light blue tint so evocative of a glacier. But the illusion vanished quickly and her eyes were wholly her own again, with depth upon structured depth of fathomless blue waters. Yukino, who was watching her closely, thought that she understood the woman a little better after that vision. Each layer of that mind was stratified, she realised, in the same efficient yet impenetrable logic that scholars claimed stratified the deep seas into supporting life. It was rational and it worked, but the reason was apparent only to its god and owner-and if one was reckless enough to simply plunge into it,

there was a distinct possibility of being surrounded by the sharks.

"I recall hearing something of the same kind," the woman was saying gently. "When my grandfather used to tell me about the days our ancestors joined in the movement asking for plebs to be allowed seats in government as well. The naysayers-not all of them patricians-used to cry that 'the offices of the patricians should be left to the patricians'. Interesting, the cycles of history."

Yukino slid a worried gaze to her best friend. The urban praetor's family *had* historically been one of the first to endorse plebeian rights in political office. The woman herself was married to a plebeian, and one of unmentionable rank too. What could one say to that?

Haruka, being Haruka, found something to say.

"Are you saying you'd like to take those offices back, then?" she said accusingly. "Since they should have been left to patricians?"

Yukino chewed on the inside of her lip at this blatant misinterpretation. Whatever she had expected in reaction from the urban praetor, however, it was not the tinkling laughter that hit her ears, coming from the raven-haired woman at the window.

"Haruka-san, do you think me such a villain?" Chikane asked, producing an astonishingly large and generous smile for the dumbfounded senior consul. "I never even thought of it, what you just suggested. Even had I done so, you would have been the very last person to whom I would express such an idea, vanguard of plebeian rights that you are. Acquit me of stupidity, if you please."

She bowed after this, bending gracefully with her neck.

"Methinks I shall simply have someone pick up those 'papers for litigation' later, as I do have a prior engagement that beckons me irresistibly at this hour. If our walk has concluded, permit me to take my leave now," she said, smiling pleasantly at the two women. "And I believe it has indeed concluded, since we appear to have returned to the very place from which we set out."

Haruka's brow lined with confusion as she glanced quickly around; they were not in the same place they had begun their walk, after all. But the woman beside her was nodding, for Yukino knew what the urban praetor meant.

"Thank you for your time, Himemiya-san," she said now, offering the other senator her exit. The two of them shared a look, dusky olive eyes meeting clear blue ones. It was over in a second. "It was a pleasure walking with you."

"And with you," the woman replied. "Please feel free to call me Chikane, Kikukawa-san. We are not in session any longer and it is allowed of such old colleagues as we are."

Yukino was about to answer in kind when Haruka interrupted, glaring terribly at the other woman.

"Don't think you can mislead Yukino with your charity," she said, making both her companions wonder if she was being ironic or had simply confused the word 'charity' with 'courtesy'. "I wouldn't try anything funny, Himemiya, whether with your cousin or Fujino. I'll have my eye on you."

Something crossed the patrician's face for the briefest instant. Was it annoyance, Yukino wondered? Or *amusement*?

"That shall be eminently simple to do in the coming year, I expect," came the woman's unruffled answer. "After all, sitting on the consul's chair tends to make one easiest of all to see. Ah, but you would know that better than either Kikukawa-san or I do."

Inclining her head once again, she turned on one heel and left a stiffening Haruka behind, the latter's fists clenching at her insinuation of victory in the elections tomorrow. But that was only Haruka and how Haruka understood it. What the senior consul failed to understand was that the urban praetor had been declaring something other than her certainty of winning a consular seat-since that much was already so obvious that it could be taken for granted. It was Haruka's protégé who took the true meaning of the parting words. The senior consul's seat was in front of the junior's on the curule stage, which meant it was the easier chair to see. Whoever



was seated on it, in fact, was the most prominent person on the entire platform.

Chikane Himemiya was saying that she was going to be elected tomorrow as Hime's senior consul.

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The woman who had just left the head of the Traditionalists with words tantamount to a declaration of war strode along an empty walkway, tapping at the weapon hidden under her clothing. It was her *wakizashi*, a precaution she had begun to take with her ever since the start of electioneering. She was obliged to mingle with the crowds more often than usual, after all, and had to be mindful of enemies. For the same reason had she taken to using gigs more often than palanquins, because the latter were so slow and easy to ambush. A palanquin borne on servants' shoulders could not intimidate a crowd into parting quickly in an emergency; a small carriage pulled by thunder-hoofed stallions could.

Thus it was a two-horse coach waiting for her now, parked at the side of the building instead of the front. The location was arranged for safety as well. People looking for a senator leaving one of the State edifices tended to look to the front steps of the building, which afforded many an attention-hungry politician his grand entrance or exit, as the case could be. No one expected a senator to leave from one of the side portals, which were so ignored that most of them had been barred up by the keepers. She passed through one of the few still-functioning ones now, shutting the door behind her on hinges creaking from disuse. There were no people around, save for the waiting carriage's handlers and its occupant peering at her.

"What did our senior consul want?"

"To inform me, apparently, that she holds me under suspicion."

A merry laugh: "Of what?"

"Conniving with you and Shizuru for something or other. At any rate, she says she shall 'have her eye on me'. That statement was ominously delivered, and in a manner that would have undoubtedly

delighted you, Urumi."

She entered the carriage after these words, ordering the coachmen to start off. The two women soon felt the jiggling motions that meant they were moving on cobblestone roads, and eased themselves into more comfortable positions on seats facing each other.

"Oh, what a poseur!" Urumi was giggling, manifestly pleased by this turn of events. "She *is* marvellous though, isn't she? All the lines you would find in a standard epic. Or a farce."

The other woman smiled tolerantly at her.

"You were somewhat cruel earlier, you know," she said. "Was all that really necessary?"

"Do you mean to say you didn't enjoy the show?" Urumi asked with near-guileless curiosity. "I have to say, dear Chikane, that I thought you would at least appreciate my performance."

Chikane was conciliatory: "It was frightfully entertaining, yes."

"There you are."

"Indeed. There we probably all are."

There was a short pause after this, during which she looked appraisingly at Urumi.

"Your besetting vice, Dear Cousin, is that you play with people as an already well-fed cat does with a hapless mouse," she said all of a sudden. "Often for no other purpose save your entertainment, and with the cool detachment of a smile."

Her relative's brows went up at this analysis.

"Vice," Urumi countered, "is not always without value. Between the two of us, we've often found good use for my little custom without purposes related to debauchery."

Chikane was not quite able to stifle the smile. Urumi returned to their earlier topic.

"Please don't keep me hanging, it's mean. What did she ask you, exactly?" she demanded. "I'm sure she conducted an outright interrogation, since it's not her style to wander about when there's something she wants to know. God forbid our darling Armitage beat around the bush, else the whole garden end up looking trimmed by a cyclone!"

The older woman paused to contemplate the metaphor, eyes crinkling in good humour.

"She enquired if I was aware of Shizuru's intent of candidature prior to her name being officially registered, as happened a few days past," she said. That candidature had shocked her too, in fact. "She undoubtedly thinks I had a hand in it."

"Ah. And you told her...?"

"The truth."

"How forthcoming of you. You do know that's going to make her even more paranoid that you're telling a lie, right?"

Chikane smirked. Urumi reciprocated the expression.

"Well, I don't see any harm in making *them* worried," she continued. "What I would like to know is whether you're worried about it, this very moment. You spoke to Marguerite-san yesterday, didn't you?"

"Ah, yes. I did meet her." A short pause. "Shizuru's cousin is an interesting young woman."

Urumi laughed.

"In the same way that people would say of me, *Chikane's cousin is an interesting young woman*?" she teased.

Her elder chuckled.

"Hardly," was Chikane's answer. "Remarkable as you both may be, I submit I much prefer your characteristics to hers, in a relative."

The asymmetric eyes flashed.

"Then you think the rumours might be true?" she asked. "I've picked up the one about her being involved in a provincial landowner's death, though I'll grant it may simply be an unhappy coincidence that he suffered the seizure at her home and she knows a dozen substances that could conceivably elicit that reaction from his body." She shuddered, though not entirely without enjoyment.

"Apothecaries are always suspect when someone chokes at dinner."

"I would not go so far as to credit that rumour with truth, but I would not be so quick to dismiss it either. It still falls within the range of possibility."

"Always so careful, Chikane! But you think her dangerous?"

"Dangerous? Perhaps." She took a moment to mull over it. "Perhaps the better word is 'venomous'. That seems more fitting a description, especially given her famous specialisation in the area of poisons."

"I notice you don't add 'and their antidotes'."

They shared a glance.

"What saith the venomous Tomoe Marguerite, relation of your dearest Shizuru Fujino? They're related on Shizuru-san's matriarchal side, yes?"

"That is so, though not by blood. Her father married Shizuru's aunt."

"So what did she say?"

Chikane exhaled a weary breath.

"No more than I expected her to say," she revealed. "She claimed that Shizuru gave her the instructions in a letter a month or so ago, and described an agreement Shizuru forged with Takeda Masashi-san, whose timely return to Hime made possible the bill allowing her *in absentia* candidature. According to Shizuru's cousin, Masashi-san actually agreed to this scheme during his sojourn in the north, where Shizuru approached him on the matter. This is consistent with what Masashi-san has told our man."

"The rumours about that praetorian-hopeful friend in Sardinia being wrong," Urumi added, knowing Chikane had sent her own tame tribune of the plebs to get what he could out of Takeda Masashi. "What else?"

"That was all."

"Then she doesn't know about your scheme to take on the Mentulaeen Empire with Shizuru-san. Or is she feigning ignorance?"

"That, I am inclined to doubt," Chikane answered. "If she is feigning anything, it would be innocence. One wonders what she has to hide that I should get that impression. Nevertheless, I do admit that it is still possible that Shizuru would have asked her to carry out all of this... as Tomoe-san claims."

"Possible, but not likely. It stands more to reason and previous experience that Shizuru-san would have informed you of it first."

"Conceded."

The urban praetor settled herself into the plush covers behind her and sighed. Her hair seemed to melt into the near-black, expensive Tyrian purple of the seat and the contrast made her face look paler than ever.

"Tomoe-san posited some of her own suppositions," she began. "She gave me to think that she believes Shizuru's intent in this plan- assuming it is her plan- is to use the praetorship to break the stranglehold the Senate currently has on her army. Once I am consul, I can arrange for the lot she draws for the governorships to be for a suitably rich province, whereupon she can then claim the right to move her army into that province as part of its garrison. She would also be able to draw upon the State's moneys for her military funding as well, if she does indeed become praetor - governor of a wealthy territory."

Urumi made a sound of agreement.

"All very easily done, of course," she replied. "Shizuru-san is sure to win and it would be a simple enough thing to rig the drawing."

She suddenly cast a knowing look at the older woman.

"Whether or not Marguerite-san is telling the truth that this is Shizuru-san's scheme, it fits nicely into the one you two already have for the Mentulae, doesn't it?" she asked shrewdly. "It may even be beneficial. All you have to do is fix the lots so that the province whose praetor-governor she becomes will be one in the North. Sosia would be ideal, since the governor for Argus seems very likely to be prorogued again."

Chikane nodded and she went on.

"She'll have to come home for the drawing first, of course," Urumi continued. "But provided you're successful at fixing the lots, she can be off again in no more than a month. That way she can still mobilise quickly once you get that declaration of war you're seeking. Why, she'll already be there, or headed that way!"

The dark-haired woman nodded once more. Something was brewing in her mind, however, and Urumi could sense it. The young woman waited for her elder to speak, voluptuously stroking the thick drapes of their conveyance.

"No doubt you shall say I am becoming over-wary in my old age," Chikane finally said, provoking a laugh from the younger patrician-who was well-aware that Chikane had yet to even reach the Himean standard for middle-age or forty. "Yet I cannot help but fear something else being both the result and purpose of this development. Perhaps it is only that this has come so unexpectedly. I cannot help but harbour misgivings about something whose author is still uncertain, since it goes against my knowledge of Shizuru that she should have failed to inform me of this decision."

She closed her eyes meditatively and affected a conciliatory bow of her head as she made her allowances.

"True, there is the matter of our correspondence being much-delayed at the moment owing to various circumstances, but I doubt she would have failed to apprise me of such a scheme while managing to tell her cousin and a tribune-of-the-plebs whom she only recently met. Furthermore, it seems to me that this was not

managed in Shizuru's usual style - and that, above all, strikes me as sinister . "

Urumi produced a sound in the back of her throat, urging her to go on.

"These uncertainties render me restless," the older woman disclosed. "Hence I cannot help but fear some nefarious plot running underneath. I can deal with anything adverse if it comes, but perhaps only after it has run a good part of its course already and thus caused some damage. I worry if I have indeed gone through all the undesirable eventualities this could possibly hold for us and made all the possible preparations."

She smiled quietly at the flaxen-haired woman, who had knit her eyebrows together in thought. Urumi understood Chikane's concerns since she was of same mould as the older woman; both of them were most at home with being provocative and dealing out the pivotal strokes. It was more in a conservative's nature to be reactive or on defence. Chikane's personality, in particular, tended for even her reactions to be phrased as provocation, her responses given so far in advance to an opponent's moves that they often prevented the move itself from coming about.

In a situation like this, however, she was forced to await an incoming blow and suffer its effects prior to being given the chance to counter. How irritating to be deprived of the opportunity to dodge! Still, taking a hit was sometimes necessary in brawling. Chikane was hardly a gawky greenhorn unable to weather a little damage, and the same held true of Urumi.

"I appreciate your thoroughness, Cousin, since I always expect it from you," the fair-haired woman said after a moment. "But all your misgivings considered, wouldn't it be best to whittle those myriad 'undesirable outcomes' away until you come to the most uncomplicated ones? There are too many uncertainties, as you say, and we have no choice but to disregard what we don't know at this point. The simplest answer is often best. You yourself taught me this."

Chikane nodded approvingly.

"Well put," she said. "And I did think of that. After putting the razor into practice, however, it struck me that there is a very real possibility of the true function of this scheme being something that may delay our plans against the Mentulae for at least one more year."

She looked straight into the differently-coloured eyes opposite as they stared attentively at her.

"A year of postponement, of course, is not too bad," she allowed. "Which is the only reason you do not see me worrying so much yet. But one cannot tell in matters such as these whether a year is indeed reasonable allowance or not. The Mentulae may decide to launch wide-scale invasion within a year, thus robbing us of the advantage of first strike. Then again, they may not act against us within the same year at all. The ambiguity is unsettling. And I am not the only one who feels so. The true author of this development-of Shizuru's sudden candidature-may well be risking it all on a gamble with popular opinion, if the purpose is indeed as I fear it to be."

Not for nothing was Urumi considered a genius. She heard her cousin's intimations as plainly as though they had been spoken directly to her.

"So that's where you're leaning, hm?" she told the older woman, silvery brows drawing close again in consideration. "I thought of it but didn't know whether to think it more likely than the other possibilities or less so. It's not impossible, either. Do you really think it could turn out that way?"

"You may be even more attuned to the electors than I am. What think you?"

There was the briefest pause.

"Now that I consider it, Shizuru-san just might-"

Any following words suddenly turned into a shriek. Urumi was unable to continue as a whirlwind tore through the shut drapes of the carriage and burst upon them, jerking their conveyance into a halt. Loud voices rang outside, at least a couple recognisably belonging



to the urban praetor's servants riding outside the carriage. The coach rocked slightly on its wheels, the frightened horses reined in and clucked to by a groom. Once the beasts finally quieted down, it was the murmuring of the bystanders that seemed to grow in volume. What on earth had happened to the urban praetor's gig?

One of the coachmen finally realised that he had better check to see if his mistresses were all right. He stood outside the lightly fluttering drapes, now concealing the trap's interior, and called to the people inside. There was no reply. He called out once more, swallowing nervously. Still no answer came from within, however, and he pulled back the drapes with trepidation.

Whatever evil picture the man expected to see went flying away as he found a remarkable tableau: his still-seated mistress pinning an unkempt figure to the floor of the coach and brandishing her unsheathed wakizashi, while the mistress's cousin sat pressed into the seat opposite with eyes wide open. He breathed out his gratitude to the gods, thankful for the domina's skill and admiring the swiftness that had allowed her to get the upper hand even in surprise. He would have relieved her of the culprit when she suddenly pulled the trespasser up and- *How bizarre!* -flashed that person an easy grin. The culprit grinned back.

That was when he recognised just who had barged into their carriage.

"Mikoto-chan, I welcome you," the domina said, petting the girl's cheek tenderly with the hilt of her blade. "I do wish you would give warning the next time you do that, though, so you do not alarm my men. See how you have frightened them."

She turned to face the servant looking in through the drapes.

"You see who it is," she said simply. "All is well."

The man nodded and pulled away to see to the horses again. Meanwhile, the cause of commotion rolled happily on the seat next to Urumi, Chikane having relinquished her grasp.

"Mii-chan, you scamp!" Urumi was saying to the bouncing girl. "You

gave me a turn with that entrance. That was an excellent jump, I daresay."

There was a soft metallic screech in front of her and she glanced to see Chikane returning the wakizashi to its sheath. Chikane saw the look and returned it with her smile. Urumi exhaled in a whistle of staged relief.

"You're lucky Chikane's reflexes are just as good at stopping as they are at swinging," the blonde chided their latest companion, helping smooth down her dishevelled clothes. "Else cousin Reito would be one sister less. What in the world are you doing here? Shouldn't you be with your pedagogue or something?"

The younger sister of the Princeps Senatus shook her head, sending two long braids waving from what was otherwise a closely-cropped mane. She beamed at the older woman with an untrammelled smile.

"I wanted to see you," she said cheerfully, before pulling aside one of the drapes and poking her head out of the carriage as she went on. "I was with Mai but she was talking to someone! I think she's done talking. Mai! Maaiii!"

Urumi and Chikane exchanged looks as she screeched the well-known senator's name. One might have thought that instead of calling to such an important woman, she was calling to heel a pet.

"Mikoto!"

The call was from outside, audible enough for the occupants of the carriage to hear the reprieve in it. Chikane leaned over to pull the drapes aside entirely, thus baring not only the squealing girl's head but her body as well as that of the other riders of the coach.

"You shouldn't just vanish like that!" the woman rushing their way was saying with exasperation. The sunlight seeded fire into her hair as she came forth, her ginger locks tousled by the wind. "It worri-oh! Hello, Chikane-san, Urumi-san! I'm so sorry about that. She just disappeared on me, you see."

"Don't worry, Tokiha-san. We know what a handful Mikoto can be," Urumi answered, with an affectionate ruffle for said handful's head. She waited for the senator to reach their carriage, smiling down at her.

Chikane spoke next.

"Good day to you, Mai-san," she said, giving a smile of utmost charm. "Would you prefer to collect Reito-kun's errant charge or would you allow us to collect you, that you may come to dinner at my house? Our conservative friends, I hear, have a gathering tonight. It might satisfy their inclinations to suspicion if we did the same. I would hate to disappoint their most basic expectations."

She paused and gave the chuckling woman on the ground a significant look as she went on.

"Perhaps we may even humour them by taking up discussions on the same things they shall. One fancies it easy to guess at the subjects, certain noteworthy events having taken place."

The red-headed senator's eyes showed understanding that Chikane was referring to the announcement of Shizuru's *in absentia* candidature, but they showed hesitation as well. Chikane wondered what it was that made her pause and-for just a second-was tempted to entertain a flicker of worry. But then the senator standing below her smiled brilliantly and lifted both arms in a gesture of apology.

"I'd love to, Chikane-san," she said repentantly. "I really would. But I'm afraid I've already promised Mikoto dinner at my place, and she's been holding it over my head for three days now. We were on our way to my home, in fact, when she bolted into your carriage."

Chikane nodded, already formulating the proper regretful response. The other woman beat her to it, however, and produced what she found to be an excellent alternative.

"But I'd be very happy if you and Urumi-san came over," Mai told her, with a hopefulness that contained heart-warming authenticity. "And I'd be thrilled if you brought your wife too, if she's willing to sample my dinner."

She slanted her head to one side and looked quietly embarrassed.

"I'm sure it's probably simple stuff compared to your usual fare, but-"

"On the contrary, Mai-san, I have no doubts it will be exceptional," the urban praetor interrupted, extremely pleased that her spouse had also been invited without any perceptible trace of derision. That was quite unexpected. But then she remembered that derision was rare indeed from the woman in front of her. "Consider us your willing guests. I trust Urumi desires to accept as well."

Urumi answered in the affirmative, causing a wide smile to break out on Mai's face. Chikane held a hand out to the red-haired senator and beckoned her into the vehicle.

"Do get in, Mai-san, and we shall save you the walk," she said, fluidly helping the woman into their midst. "If you would permit us to pass by my abode first, however, I shall pick up my wife in order to let her honour your gracious request."

"Oh, yes, please do so."

"Thank you." A pause to let their host for tonight settle in. "We may set off. You are ready, Mai-san?"

The eyes that came up to meet hers flashed a bright, dazzlingly-hued purple. Chikane was reminded suddenly of the two other sets of purple eyes she had seen today: one belonging to a woman who woke up with her in the same bed and another belonging to a woman who had been set on making it clear that she was an adversary. This day was one of purple eyes, she thought, and of women. Should she consider it a sign that all day her thoughts seemed to have constantly centred on another, faraway woman whose eyes were coloured crimson joined with her own blue was a necessity for producing a supreme violet? If it was indeed a sign, it was a sign of what?

She sighed to herself, hiding the wistful expression from her companions. Who would have known that she would harbour the same misgivings as the senior consul, had the same fear of someone plotting something unpleasant? And why this

uncomfortable powerlessness to guard against it, even as it loomed on the very horizon? Why all of this so suddenly and now?

*Shizuru, My Friend*, she found herself thinking, almost as though speaking to the woman herself. *If only you were here you could clarify my doubts for me. But you are not, and I must wonder at what is happening. Not only to you but to us. For whatever clouds are approaching head your way as much as mine, and I am so strangely afraid that, in your part of the sky, you have no way yet of seeing them as they come.*

"Yes, we should go now, Chikane-san," Senator Tokiha was saying, breaking into her silent meditations. Chikane reacted instinctively by conferring a standard smile upon the woman, only to receive in response an unusually warm, yet still very lucid one. The latter could sense some of the concerns troubling her, she apprehended, and was silently offering support.

"We do have a lot to talk about," the redhead ventured good-naturedly. "But that can come later, I think, after we've all had a good dinner. It's hard to keep yourself in good spirits on an empty stomach, right, Mikoto?"

Mikoto chirped in agreement. Chikane smiled in answer, suddenly glad to have this woman as an ally. She parted the carriage's drapes and peered at the driver outside.

"As you were," was all she needed to say, and soon they were moving along again.

# Chapter 30

*Thank you to the reviewers and readers, as ever.*

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## **Vocabulaire :**

1. **Bona Dea** - *The good goddess; a deity more fully detailed in the last part of **Chapter 27** . The use of the name here is the same as when one would say "Jupiter!" or more proper to the modern context, "God!" In other words, it is used as an exclamation.*
2. **Censors and their investigations** - *The censors of Rome, who also regulated the member rolls of the Senate, were in charge of expelling them from that governing body if they contravened the rules regulating senatorial conduct. Some of these rules concerned the acceptable methods for a senator to make money (see note on **senators and moneymaking** below).*
3. **Contubernalis** - *A military cadet; a contubernalis coming from a reasonably upper-class family was often kept in the command tent, far away from the fighting.*
4. **Denarii** (pl.) - *The singular form is 'denarius'. The denarius is a Roman coin, often made of silver. 6,250 of it make a silver talent or 25,000 sesterces.*
5. **Domina** - *The English equivalent would be "mistress" or "madam".*
6. **Femina mentula** - *A lethal insult to a man; literally "a woman with a penis".*
7. **Gerrae!** - *In English, "Rubbish!" or "Nonsense!"*
8. **Hispania Ulterior** - (L.) *in English, Further Spain. In Roman times, Spain was divided into two parts, and the one that was more distant from Rome was called Hispania Ulterior. It was the more*

important Spain, during that time, to the Romans, especially because its mountains were rich with ore. Modern-day Cádiz lies there.

9. **Ineptus** - A n incompetent, a bungling fool.

10. **Senators and moneymaking** - A senator had limited paths open to him in the realm of business. The most acceptable method was in the ownership of property/real-estate, although owning shares in companies was also permitted. The most he could do with the latter was to get a sleeping partnership in the company, which meant that he had no seat in its board of directors and had no say in how the company was managed. All he could be was a source of capital. If a senator went beyond these methods in moneymaking, he could be expelled by the censors (see note on **censors and their investigations**, above). Hence the senatorial squabbling over potential campaigns and their command, since it was one of the few legal ways a senator could hope to make money-chiefly from his lawful share of the campaign's booty.

11 . **Stimuli** - Singular is "stimulus". These were the fire-hardened, pointed stakes used to mine military ditches.

12 . " **Tace!"** - In English, "Shut up!"

13 . **Vestal / Vestal Virgin** - One of the women ordained to serve in the priesthood of the goddess Vesta; from induction to the time they finished their terms thirty years later, they had to remain chaste (virginal) so that Rome could stay in good favour with the goddess. Vestal chastity was jealously guarded since it symbolised the fortune of Rome itself; if sullied, Rome's fortune would be as well. After those thirty years of chastity were over, however, they were released from their vows and allowed to marry and (speaking euphemistically) do as they pleased.

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**Inter Nos**

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Shizuru stirred in bed, searching the room to ascertain the time of her waking. There was only darkness, however, and when she turned to the direction of the window she saw the bluish glow that meant the stars were still in the sky. She turned away from that luminescence and to the shadows again so that her eyes could grow accustomed to the dimness. After a while of this, she could make out the vague shapes of things in the room.

One shape was clearer than the rest and it breathed softly beneath her. It was Natsuki, asleep and naked from their lovemaking. Her body was covered by Shizuru's limbs under the blanket, and the slim length of her felt cool and smooth to the latter woman's skin. Shizuru peered at her face, in profile since her head was turned to one side.

Moving gently and trying not to wake the girl, she rose up to kiss the exposed cheek. She moved down again to rest her head on the bare chest, something she loved to do because it calmed her so much faster than anything else ever had.

She loved too that she could hear the young woman's heart. Her ear was on one of the small, soft breasts and she felt its tip remain supple as she put her weight against it. But it had been different earlier, she remembered, when she held it in her palm. It had been soft then, yes, and small too, but rounded with heat and firm-pointed against her flesh. How nice it would be to hold it like that now. She felt her face redden and frowned at herself for even thinking about rousing the girl from her sleep for that purpose. Natsuki deserved her rest, especially given the exertions through which Shizuru had put her earlier.

Shizuru herself had to marvel at it. In the past, she had often heard people widely considered 'degenerates' boast of spending uninterrupted afternoons or even days in bed with the object of their passion, but had always thought it empty swank. Now she herself spent nearly every afternoon- and on two occasions, the entire day- in bed this past week with her lover, who was just so lusciously accommodating that Shizuru found it nigh impossible to exercise restraint. They certainly did not spend that time sleeping, either, and seemed to allocate only a minimum of time for the necessity. Oh yes indeed, she marvelled at it! Was this behaviour a sign that she had become 'degenerate'? She liked to think not, or not until she became



so crass that she felt the need to boast of their nightly excesses to others.

*One can hardly fault me for acting this way with such temptation as I have,* she pretended to comfort herself, listening to the sluggish beating of Natsuki's heart. *Natsuki could crack the resolve of a Vestal in her prime. Even one word from her is enough to torture the most resolute ascetic.*

It was the voice that was responsible for that delicious persecution. It did things to her she could not define, and she doubted she would ever understand the effect. How had Chie described it? *Like black fur brushing skin.* Yes, it was like that. Low and soft in approach, with just enough intimation of something predatory underneath to be devastating. *Exactly like that.* Chie certainly knew how to put things well.

What Chie had not described, however, was the special style conveyed by that voice. Since Natsuki rarely spoke to the legate, it was only natural for Chie not to notice the girl's odd manner of speech. Being her most constant confidante, Shizuru was the one who did notice. After all, it played havoc with her as much as the voice itself did. She could still remember their conversation earlier when the other woman's speech had played so much havoc with her that it spurred her into initiating several rounds in bed. They had just finished doing the deed once, in fact, when the exchange took place.

"Ahh," she had been sighing, feeling the last tingles of pleasure all the way to her tongue. "Oh, Jupiter, methinks I almost died."

Natsuki had bolted up from her side of the bed, looking distraught.

"What?" she asked then with some alarm. Her eyes were on Shizuru's hand, resting over the older woman's heart. "Why? What is wrong? Not all right?"

Shizuru looked at her and chuckled, reaching out to guide her gently back down. The girl obeyed a little unwillingly, eyes still riveted to her as she stretched lazily on the covers.

"Do not worry so much," Shizuru coaxed, propping herself up on one

elbow. "Come now, be at ease. I meant no ill by it, Natsuki."

She gazed at the black hair spread out in rivulets over the sheets. The river-length of it always fascinated her, even after Natsuki explained that her people rarely cut their hair and usually trimmed only to keep it hanging a little past the waist. Some let it grow even longer, working into it those handsome tiny braids and either letting it hang thus ornamented or catching those braids into knots, whorls-all manner of loops-atop their heads. Very rare it was that an Otomeian settled for the simplicity of a single and unornamented tail or a twisted bun, though there was no shortage of complicated modifications of those either.

It was only one of the myriad disparities between their cultures. While it was true that many Himeans sported long hair too, most had no qualms about cropping their hair to a mere two inches' length. Witness the short hair on many of her soldiers' heads, for example. But to Otomeians it was as much a point of custom as of pride to wear it long, and so it was to Natsuki too. Shizuru could not speak for the rest, but she certainly did find reason for pride in the girl's luxuriously dark mane.

"I did not mean anything ominous by it," she said, while running a finger through one of the raven locks nearby. She picked out one of the few braids the girl had woven in, less than half the thickness of a finger and owing most of its weight to little bands of thin gold thread. "It is no more than an expression we have, and is not meant in the literal sense of dying and losing life."

The Otomeian's face changed. She had a look Shizuru knew, recognising in it something she often portrayed herself. It was the face of a person quietly sorting out new categories, carefully making room for information in the stock of what she already knew.

"You are not bad?" she asked, no longer so anxious. "All right?"

"Yes. Quite the opposite of 'bad', in fact. Such is that expression."

Natsuki nodded against the sheets as she repeated the word carefully-something Shizuru noticed she did often, especially with words that seemed to fascinate her.

"Expression," she murmured. "An expression."

"Yes, an expression," Shizuru said. "A poetic conceit, you might say, meant to express one thing by comparing it to another. It means that you experience such pleasure your soul leaves your body in ecstasy, as though you were dying."

"Oh, that," Natsuki said, as though discovering what she meant for the first time. "Yes."

"You understand now?"

"Yes."

She nodded thoughtfully afterwards before speaking again.

"I die too."

"Do you?" Shizuru asked, fascinated by the strange statement. "Really?"

"Yes." Natsuki took a leisurely breath. "Each time, I die."

"Each time?"

"Mm."

The words echoed in her mind: *Each time, I die.*

*What a curious way to phrase it*, she had thought then, looking at the girl's lips as they moved. *What a very foreign way.*

It was true, she thought, that Natsuki spoke their language very well. She spoke it absent any foreignness of accent, and indeed seemed to have a talent for picking up pronunciations almost instantly, upon being told how a written word that interested her should be spoken. But there were times when the manner in which she used the Himean language showed how distant it was from her. The pronunciation was perfect enough to be local but the construction was so different it bordered on alien. She could go from sounding like a child to a poet, and Shizuru thought her style had the ring of truth always because it expressed that which was complex as

though it were simple.

She grinned to herself at this appraisal and thought, *This is of her too and hers alone.*

"Then," she had ventured. "Is it so pleasurable for you as well?"

The colour scalded Natsuki's face even as she answered with a mumble.

"Um." A second later: "Yes."

Shizuru looked at her a little proudly.

"Wonderful," she told the girl. "I would like you to feel that kind of pleasure when you are with me."

And she added, with more tenderness: "Each time."

Natsuki said nothing to that, looking away in another of her weak efforts to hide embarrassment. She only moved one of her hands so it was brushing Shizuru lightly on one lean thigh. After a while, when the latter was beginning to wonder why the blush on the girl's face refused to go away, she finally explained its persistence by stammering out something very unexpected to the older woman.

"Thuh-thank you."

Shizuru's jaw dropped even as a smile fought to close it. She stared at her companion while delivering a reply.

"For what are you thanking me, Natsuki?" she said, already knowing what it was the girl deemed worthy of gratitude. What odd courtesies she could have! Still, one had to admit they were part of her oh-so-exotically-alien charm. "You need not. It is only natural that I should hope always for your satisfaction, and more than that, if possible. You must not expect any less from your lover."

Natsuki's complexion darkened further at the word 'lover', and Shizuru was tempted to repeat it. She did not do so immediately, however, and merely looked at the girl as she continued to flush, choking out words in the attempt to explain herself.

"Still I said that because I think, um," she babbled, as Shizuru had realised she was wont to do when flustered. "It is puh-puh-proper to duh-do that because you are, um, you are..."

She shook her head as she lost what she had been about to say.

"You are-" she tried again.

"Your lover."

The large eyes looked up at Shizuru's interruption. The older woman repeated it.

"I am your lover," she clarified mildly.

An odd sound left Natsuki's lips, and Shizuru had to steel herself not to laugh at the awkwardness of it.

"You're blushing again," she said with some mischief. "You do blush quite often, do you not?"

Natsuki scowled at the quip, nearly snapping out her answer.

"No," she *lied* shamelessly, looking indignant. "No."

Again that pride!

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Yet you are blushing now."

Natsuki shut her mouth and turned away again, looking to the other side in a childish show of displeasure. But Shizuru continued watching her and so when the girl peeked to see what she was doing she only found the older woman looking at her the same way as before, the flirtatiously-lashed eyes studying her with all their blood-infused intensity.

She mirrored their colour with her cheeks again and Shizuru giggled.

"Yuh-you do that," Natsuki said grudgingly, after a few more

chuckles had sounded. "You make me do it."

Shizuru smiled apologetically.

"I force you into it?" she asked.

"Uhm, no."

"Yet you say I make you do it?"

A confused look.

"Would you like me to stop?" she asked. She saw the sudden indecision her query brought to Natsuki's face, and spoke again. "I know I must be intolerable at times. So, as I thought, if you want me to stop-"

"No!"

Shizuru allowed a small grin to come to her face.

"So you do not want me to stop?" she exhaled, practically dripping curiosity.

Natsuki was mortified, the colour on her face eclipsing that which had been there before.

"Nuh-no, you can, Shizuru," she stammered. "You can or not. You can do it."

"Now you are making me confused."

"That you can if you want," came the still-embarrassed reply. It carried a touch of exasperation now and Shizuru realised the girl was annoyed at herself for having difficulty saying what she wanted. She felt bad for teasing her then. "It is fine to do it if you, um, if you want. I will not be troubled."

Shizuru let some time pass to let the girl calm a little.

"That is very kind of you," she eventually said. "But is that really what you want?"

The hand resting on her thigh went up. Fingers brushed the proud ridge of her hipbone and lingered.

"It is what you want," the girl said, once again with her simple complexity. "What you want, I want that. Always."

Shizuru blinked, affected in some inexplicable way by that answer.

"You want *that*," she echoed later. "Natsuki?"

"Mm. That."

Natsuki looked at her then, with eyes that were suddenly impatient and full of hunger. Shizuru understood and moved too.

"Come to me and I shall show you what I want," she said, gathering her up and kissing her. "I want to have you die again." She continued kissing her, the younger woman returning the kisses. "And then I want to summon you back to life."

"Shizuru."

"Always, and each time."

So it was that they had fallen to making love over and over again, with the driving sweetness of people completely satisfied with yet unable to tire of each other. And after that, had fallen asleep from sheer physical exhaustion, still in this undressed state. She had been too worn out earlier by their exercises to do more than glance at the water-clock in the room, noting only vaguely that it was too early to go to sleep since it meant they would wake at an ungodly hour later. She had gone to sleep anyway. Now she was awake, and it was indeed an ungodly hour, but she did not repine any of their actions for it.

*She shall wake soon as well*, she told herself, feeling contentment settling dully over the need to touch the other that way again. Natsuki had much the same sleeping patterns she did, which meant they often slept and awoke within minutes of each other. So she could be patient. Or she could go about her ablutions, since she had neglected to do so earlier before sleeping.

*No, a bad idea.* It was too chilly and there was no one to draw hot water. Besides, it was better to wait for Natsuki to wake so they could perform that daily ritual together. Oh, how nice to be with someone who was also fanatical in matters of hygiene! She could not even begin to imagine being with someone who did not smell sweet or did not engage in plucking body hair to guard against revolting things like lice. Let the others make the jests and call her pernickety. At least this way she was sure she and Natsuki could enjoy more of each other: there was nothing to mar the taste.

So that went onto the list: bathe together. Other necessities like replenishing themselves with a meal followed. What else did she have to do come morning? Check in with the centurions, see that the legionaries were behaving. The coldest part of winter had started and inertia in extreme conditions tended to make the veterans jittery. Have them continue drills but cut the frequency, just to make sure they stayed fit but not overwrought. Continued discipline would also serve as a hint to the rankers that there was another, more profitable campaign being planned by their superiors. Best to give them that hope: the promise of real fighting with real booty in the future.

What else, what else? Oh, finding good ballistae and artillery-makers from the locals to help their engineers. They had not brought nearly enough pieces from Hime, intending to get most of the supply from the local artificers. It was easy enough and also necessary for the coming invasion. Siege engines could be wonderful things even on the march if they were not too large and cumbersome. She did not need anything too large and cumbersome. She wanted nothing that could slow her down.

Then to find guides and accumulate information about the area. Study the terrain, memorise its features. It was never too early to begin preparations when going into foreign territory, and part of that preparation was to learn the lay of the land until it was no longer so foreign. The coming expedition would cover a large area and that meant a lot of marching. She needed to see as many of the routes as possible early on. She had heard there were fewer roads, though, than should be for so much land. That was troublesome. The Mentulaeen rulers obviously did not grasp the concept of mobility and its advantages. Most of the walking would have to be done on



unpaved soil, not on roads that made it easier for the legionaries. Never mind. If there were none, she would *make* the roads where they needed them.

Having wholly reconciled herself to this invasion, she was now only waiting for the official sanction of it. Once her friend took the consul's chair-and Chikane was certain to do so-the only question left was how fast the woman could obtain Senate's approval. A hard task, perhaps even monumental. But knowing Chikane told her it would still happen, probably within a month or two. Ample time for her to make the necessary preparations.

*Have the elections not been held yet*, she wondered. Surely they had. She doubted the House was feeling lenient enough to permit the elections to be delayed any longer than they already were, errant senior consul present or not. It was already so late and the new year was fast approaching. She looked up to see the round, dark object on the sheet near Natsuki's neck and recalled that it had been more than a week since she had given that ornament to the girl. That had been over a week before the Calends of January; Natsuki received the pearl the morning after Shizuru's birthday.

To think that it was only a few more days before the start of a new year. How queer to realise that the old one was almost finished! The latter part had gone by quickly, or so it seemed. Perhaps that was because she had enjoyed it so much? So it was true what they said, that time flew when you were happiest.

She put a stop to her reflections when she felt a change in the body beneath her. Natsuki was waking. *Good*. Smiling inwardly, she had an idea to play a little prank on the girl by pretending to be asleep, but also restricting Natsuki's movement with the weight of her body. Natsuki would not be able to rise from the bed, nor engage in her usual secret attentions whenever she thought the older woman was sleeping. She wondered what the girl would do.

Thus she waited. It was not long before she felt the girl's head stir, trying to peek at her. It fell back onto the pillows after receiving no sign of consciousness. All was suddenly still again, and a few minutes went by this way, without excitement.

*Oh, I almost forgot*, Shizuru thought wistfully, nearly releasing a sigh and thus breaking her own farce. *Of course she would simply wait. Natsuki is nothing if not patient, come things like this. This sort of game with her is of little use.*

She did not give it up, however, and simply satisfied herself with resting there. It was not a bad place to be, after all. Natsuki was such a pleasant medley of contrasts, all gentle contours and sharply sloping angles in her spare frame. Shizuru might actually have fallen asleep again had that spare frame not stirred, its owner calling gently to her.

"Shizuru?" went the whisper. "Shizuru?"

She wondered if the girl had caught on.

"Uhhh..."

The mumble was succeeded by an attempt to slide out from under the prison of her limbs. Shizuru smiled privately, apprehending that the other woman wanted to go somewhere and was being held down by her supposedly asleep body. Natsuki tried to move her again with a gentle motion. Since she was larger and heavier than the girl, however, it was in vain. All the more so since she had taken to using a breathing trick, shown to her by a past instructor, that had the effect of making her weight seem to be greater.

Natsuki apparently felt the change.

"Shizuru?"

She continued 'sleeping'. Another minute of silence went by, broken only by the girl's occasional calls.

"Shizuru," Natsuki said again, before wriggling in another attempt to move her. "Shizuru, pardon me, I am... umm."

Ah, yes, that voice. It really was a pity the girl was not a talker!

"Shizuru," it went again. "Shizuru? Shizuru?"

There was a subtle difference there. She could not be sure, but it

seemed that the young woman sounded a little more insistent, almost beseeching. She frowned to herself, wondering if Natsuki had discovered the game.

"Hnn-Shizuru, are you..."

The rest faded into a delicate jumble of foreign words that rolled over one another, lulling her with their softly guttural notes. She listened to them, captivated by the unfamiliarity of the sounds. As she listened, Natsuki continued trying to move her, failing again and again. Dimly, Shizuru noted that the girl's attempts were becoming slightly more forceful, her trapped arms moving more clumsily. But she was too enchanted by that deep, melodious voice muttering unintelligibilities to really pay attention to it, and so Natsuki's struggles continued, her pleas eventually devolving into hoarse, strangely urgent whispers.

" *Shizuru!* " came a harsh gasp. "Hhhah-Shizu-Shizuru!"

That was when Shizuru saw that something was wrong.

*Why does she sound like that*, she wondered, tempted for a second to turn her head and check if there was anyone else in the room. But she knew there was no one: she would have heard them herself and Natsuki would have at least given a shout to alert her of it. Or reached for the dagger she always kept nearby, either by the headboard or on the nightstand. *Why, whatever could be bothering her if not-?*

Her train of thought broke as Natsuki's body suddenly went dead like one asleep. But it was not like sleep in that it held a rigidity to it, and that was enough to bring Shizuru out of her detachment. Even more when the older woman felt the heartbeat under her ear erupt, the tense form beneath her spasming almost into convulsion. She jerked up, hands set on either side of the younger woman's body, and looked down upon an alarming sight.

"Natsuki."

The whisper left her lips, amazed and afraid. The girl lying below her was shaking uncontrollably, eyes blind and staring up unseeingly at

the still-dark ceiling. *No, not blind, not unseeingly* . She was seeing something Shizuru could not see, some immense fear taken form in the shadows, and it was terrifying her.

"Natsuki!" Shizuru cried, frightened too. " *Ecaster!* Natsuki, what is it?"

She shook the girl with one hand, pulling her up swiftly to sit on their bed. Still the fit continued, and Shizuru was afraid the young woman was having an episode of some malign disease, as was the case with people who had the wheezes or epilepsy. But the young woman's eyes were not rolling upwards, her mouth issuing no froth. Her gaze was not insentient; it was just turned to another world. She kept staring up and forward into somewhere Shizuru could not reach. Had Shizuru only been able to do so she would have beaten back whatever figment made the girl this way, slain it for all eternity. But she could no more reach it than see it, and it continued to torture Natsuki and Natsuki alone.

"Ye gods!"

She leapt off the bed and took the young woman in her arms, fear fuelling her so soundly that she made it to the bathing room in scarcely five seconds. There she knelt and set the quivering body on the tiled floor, reaching into the cistern for some water. She cupped some in one hand and splashed it onto the ashen face.

"Natsuki, look at me!" she demanded, drawing the girl up with her other arm. "Natsuki, listen to me. *Natsuki!* "

As if weakened by her voice, the shivers began to diminish. She spoke again and again until Natsuki's eyes fluttered, the green irises coming out from that awful flatness and seeming to regain depth.

Shizuru took heart at the change.

"Natsuki, listen to me," she repeated urgently. The younger woman's eyes twitched away, then towards her. It was as if she were seeing Shizuru only now. "Come back to me, *meum mel* . Please come back to me."

Natsuki responded with a gasp, drawing air more loudly than Shizuru had ever heard her do. The Himean could feel the girl's hands clawing and scratching onto her skin, one hand on her upper arm and another on her back. She cupped the back of Natsuki's head and chafed it soothingly with her thumb, ignoring the clipped nails digging into her own bare flesh.

"Shhh, it's all right, it's going to be all right," she assuaged, her low voice slipping into the younger woman's ears like a charm. "It's fine, Natsuki. I have you."

Relief flooded her when the girl finally nodded, breaths slowing and becoming quieter. She held her that way for a while, unmindful of the discomfort coming to her knees from the achingly hard and cold floor. All she could focus on feeling was Natsuki's body, loosening slowly from whatever dread nightmare had twisted it around itself and coiled the whole so tightly it had almost snapped. Her own body was coiled-up too, tense with frustrated energy, and her mind was racing.

*Ye gods, what was that*, she thought. She tried to still her own pounding heart with a few deep breaths as she thought of what had just happened and attempted to dissect it, tried to find an answer for all her questions. *What could have caused this? Could it be she has an illness? But no, she has never shown anything of the kind until now. I doubt it has something to do with the soundness of her body. What was that, then?*

Something was whispering to her in her memories and she gave her attention to it, hoping it could provide answer. Where had she seen something like this happen before? That sudden paroxysm, the open eyes focusing on something unseen. She *had* seen it before, she was sure of it. Where and from whom?

*Oh. By Jupiter!*

She had to restrain herself from banging her head on the floor as she realised the answer. Of course she had seen it before. Quite a few times, in fact, though rarely of such paralyzing violence as she had just witnessed. It was a symptom of what the Greek physicians called a mental trauma, the manifestation of some past harm done

to a person's psyche. She recalled that they held it to be the residue of a malign event the person had either witnessed or experienced, and could be summoned up by certain triggers reminding them of that event. It was something common among soldiers or war victims, and in such people had she herself seen it.

One of the cases she had been privy to had involved a fellow *contubernalis*, on her first campaign. It had been that other youth's first war as well and like most upper-class cadets, he had not expected to be thrust into actual danger while doing scribal duties in his commanding officer's tent. A good way from the front lines, that! But an enemy band had somehow skirted round the battlefield and ambushed their marching camp, taking the members of their cohort prisoner and executing them one by one. The youth had been among those at the end of the execution line, so he was one of the few saved by the relief force sent to retrieve the camp. The damage, however, was done. He had seen nearly all his comrades impaled in execution and it stained his nerves forever. Shizuru could still recall the vicious twitching that broke out in him whenever he saw spears or even mere *stimuli* lying around their camp. It had been such that he could never go into battle again.

In Natsuki's case, she supposed that what she had triggered was a remembrance of the massacre of the young woman's kin. From what little she knew of that event, Natsuki had survived by being hidden under their dead bodies. Only natural for the girl to have such a violent trauma, then! But how thoughtless it had been on her part not to remember that! She should have known or at least considered how her little game would affect the young woman. This was her fault and she was furious with herself for it. How could she have done this to Natsuki?

"Forgive me, Natsuki," she murmured, in between endearments. "I did not think. It's all right now. It was my fault. Please forgive me for it."

Her fault; very much her fault. She said that, yet part of her begged to differ. How could she have known, after all, that such a thing would cause this reaction? How, when she knew so little about the girl on the whole? And things like this were what she needed to know, really, if she had to know anything at all. She needed to know

them! Look at what had happened due to her ignorance, what it had wrought upon Natsuki. Oh, but it showed how remiss she had been! She had not yet done everything she could do to learn more about this young woman now trembling lightly in her arms, the selfsame young woman that accompanied her everywhere and saw everything of her in the daylight. She knew nothing of the demons that this girl had or of the dreams that lit her vision, yet she held her each dark and delicate night.

Yes, she knew hardly anything. And yet her heart still broke to see Natsuki this way.

"Shh. You shall be fine now. I have you."

A pitiful whimper sounded, and she redoubled her caresses to soothe Natsuki into silence again. She whispered and heard the strangeness of her own voice husky with pain.

"It's all right, Natsuki. Whatever it was, it is gone. I am here."

What a strange quality it had, this pain. Tied-up and bunched in her throat straight down to her chest, where it seemed her heart was being pulled by each whimper coming from the girl's lips. Remorse and concern and empathy and sorrow: all those things were bound in the two of them, both where they touched and did not touch. And nakedly embracing as they were, there were so many areas where they did not touch. Shizuru had known that before but had never fully apprehended it until now. Now it was the full awareness of it, more than the freezing-cold tiles, that sent a chill through her core.

*I could have prevented this*, she berated herself, holding Natsuki tighter in an effort to keep away the grief that was suddenly assaulting her. *I could have. But I did not because I did not know. And that is my failure, not an excuse. To say that you did not because you did not know is the excuse of the feckless!*

The young woman's voice cut through her concerns. Oh, that her voice should be weakened this way!

"Shizu-Shi-"

"It's all right. I am here, Natsuki," she said again to the whispers, trying to keep as much of the girl as possible from touching the floor. She did not want her to be chilled any further, and the girl's skin already felt cold and damp. She was sweating, the poor darling. "Better now?"

There was a mumble of assent, followed by an attempt to say something that she cut off, after recognition of the coming word.

"Shizuru," Natsuki whispered. "I am sorr-"

"No. Do not be sorry."

"But-"

"Please do not be sorry for anything. I apologised because I had reason to be, whereas you have none."

Then, as an afterthought: "Although you may if it would make you feel better, Natsuki, but rest assured you have no compelling reason to do so."

Natsuki mumbled incomprehensibly into her chest, and she stroked her once more.

"It's all right," she said another time, both to Natsuki and to herself. "It shall be better now."

*I swear it. Upon my word, I swear it shall be better.*

She knew what she had to do. This was something that had only returned a long-standing concern to her attention and galvanised her to finally act upon it. There were things she had to find out, and some of them by herself, because she knew it would be too cruel to ask Natsuki. She would have to begin with those she could not ask the girl, because those would tell her the beginnings of it all.

Suddenly the words of her father returned to her, words that had been given as instruction for military strategies but which she saw now to be applicable to so much more. Had he known it when he produced them for her benefit? She had to wonder.



*Remember the obligations you have when you make a resolution to shield another, he had spoken to her years past. Remember that you are obliged to gather intelligence for that task, whether with the shielded party's permission or otherwise. Whether you shield a fellow soldier or an entire city, you must know what it is that you shield it from.*

*And if seeking that intelligence is impossible, she had asked, only to have him frown disapprovingly.*

*It is never impossible, had been the answer. If you think it impossible then you are only making excuses for your own laziness in searching for it. The necessity of protection arises only in relation to the awareness that there is a foe. How can you protect something if you don't know that foe? You might as well be a net against arrows. Your determination is worthless without the information of the arrows' origin. And if your determination is strong enough and uninformed enough you can destroy the thing you are trying to keep safe. You might as well cut its throat with your own hand. You might as well send it all up in flames yourself.*

*Never - no - not I to Natsuki and never, she thought angrily, seized by anguish at the idea. Never would she want to cause harm to this creature resting quietly now in her arms. Never again would she hurt it in the way she had just done, thoughtless and uninformed as she had been. How could she, when just seeing this it in this state hurt her so much? They had already become bound together, she realised, in such a way that this mutual feeling and destruction was now possible, and protecting the other already meant protecting herself. What a strange feeling to learn oneself capable of such a relation! Yet she did not know if Natsuki shared the awareness of it and that uncertainty sent a fresh pain in her. She was pitiless enough with herself to credit that possibility, though just acknowledging it hurt in a way she had never imagined. What if the girl did not feel the same way? It was *still* a possibility.*

The thought made her feel so cold. Even the consideration of it left her feeling empty in the gut, sick with a feeling of rejection she had been fortunate enough never to truly experience before. *Discipline your pride, Shizuru, and swallow that consideration*, she rebuked herself. But even then she knew that it was not merely pride that had

her feeling so suddenly alone, an instinct trying to gain control over her body and curling her. Oh, but why did this torture her so much? So this was what they meant when they said that emotion could actually be a vulnerability.

*And that its strength, more often than not, is actually proportional to its weakness.*

"Nnh, Shizuru..."

She felt the warming body in her hands and knew she could not stand it. She could no more stand the feeling of being separate from the emotions animating this person than she could stand the thought of being separate from this other body, left alone by its absence. The knot in her continued to tighten. She was being assailed by suddenly unstrung emotions and unexpected resolutions and the world-rocking sense of accepting something that changed all that would go on now and all that went before. All of it rendered her speechless. Even so, it was in that chest-aching, hollow-making loneliness that she was finally able to say to herself something she had been looking to articulate for a very long time.

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Late morning of that day found Shizuru's senior legate and chief primipilus with their heads together, inspecting an item the senior legate lay on the table. They were seated at a corner of an inn, the only other people in the shop being the barkeep himself and three Argus locals having breakfast. The primipilus had actually been accompanied by her faithful body-servant, but the girl had chosen to stay outside, having "run into"-Nao believed they had set it up between them-a certain dark-haired Otomeian trooper fixing her boots on the bench there.

"So what do you think of it?" Chie asked the primipilus, looking just the slightest bit fretful. "It's not too shoddy, is it? Do you think it's enough?"

"Enough for what?" was the answer. "Wait. Let me have a look-see."

She picked up the brooch on the table, turning it over carefully in her

hands. It *was* a pretty little thing, she decided, and would be even prettier in Hime, for it would be something very unusual there. It was the gem set in the middle of the ornate silver curlicues that made it so. Shaped like a tiny flower, it was a translucent green cut with fernlike patterns that could be mistaken for petals. If not for those she would have thought it to be glass.

"What do you call it again?" she asked, flashing it in the light. "This crystal."

"I forgot, " Chie told her with a laugh. "One of those unpronounceable names the northern peoples use, you know! I doubt it's made its way to Hime's shores yet, so I'm hoping this advanced present will please Aoi."

"It will," Nao said, returning the brooch. "She'll love it. Are you holding it or sending it now?"

"Sending, with the next homebound mail."

"Eager to remind her you're still alive?"

Chie sighed, still smiling.

"I'm vain enough to think Aoi remembers that much without being told, at least," she said.

"How'd you find it?"

"Just went stalking through the shops," was the reply. "Everyone's been on a jewellery-shopping kick lately, ever since news got out about the pearl Shizuru-san bought Natsuki-san."

She grinned with lingering enjoyment at the juiciness of that topic.

"Scandalise though it did some of us, people soon realised it was a smart idea," she added. "You can get stuff here that you'd never find from the hawkers back home, and it's much cheaper to buy here too. So those of us who have someone"-a cough-"are buying something. Granted, it's not as spectacular as Shizuru-san's choice, but we're not all *that rich*."

"Few of us are," Nao said, with a snigger. "So that's why my soldiers have been totting baubles lately. Probably comparing finds with each other."

"Yes, I'd suppose so." Chie looked at her meaningfully. "Really have no one to give something to?"

Nao suddenly smiled.

"Know what?" she said to her friend. "I think I will go shopping for trinkets after all."

Chie gaped.

"I was joking!" she said. "There *is* someone?"

"More than one."

"You dog! What have you been hiding from me?"

To her surprise, the red-haired woman simply started laughing, strawberry-hued locks flying as she shook her head.

"I'm kidding, Harada, so don't get your hopes up," she confessed. "But I am buying trinkets for some girls and boys back home, so there."

Chie eyed her balefully, a little disappointed.

"Who are they, though?" she asked.

"Clients, I hope," Nao answered. At the other's baffled expression, she explained. "If I buy the jewellery cheap here, I can make a profit if I sell it for the regular price back in Hime. It's a nice opportunity and I'd be an idiot not to take it, don't you think?"

Chie smiled: "According to your lights, you would be."

"Why don't you do it too? You'd have more capital than me so you can afford to get pricier gems like that one." She pointed to the brooch in the other woman's hand. "You'd get bigger returns too."

"True, but not actually possible," the legate answered. "If I do buy enough precious things to make a profit worth reckoning, I'd be in trouble once I tried to sell them. It's a little too mercantile to pass muster when the censors do their investigations. You know a senator has limited opportunities open when it comes to business."

"Owning property and a few shares in companies, right? Still, I don't think anyone's actually going to pay attention to a little jewel-hawking on the side, especially if you just say you overbought here and you're trying to make up the capital," Nao objected.

"I'd rather be sure and steer clear of it," Chie told her. "It's hard to sell jewellery without word getting around. There are some senators known for carrying out much grander and similarly forbidden activities while managing to hide evidence of it, but everyone who's aware of what they're doing hates them. There's no easier way to incur the House's enmity than to make more money than the rest."

The light green eyes were thrown open at her: "Our general does."

"Yes, and they hate her," Chie quipped, making both of them laugh. "No, seriously, however, you should know it's not unlawful in her case, and most of the hate is for things other than her wealth, anyway. All of her sources of income happen to be perfectly legal, from sleeping partnerships in companies to the real estate under her name... and all the way to her mines in Spain."

"Mines are allowed?"

"They're technically real estate, so yes."

"In the Spains. What's mined there, again?"

"You name it-silver, gold, lead, iron, copper, all there. And Shizuru-san owns mines or parts of mines for every one of them. More than you can count on one hand, and worth half of that country. She can pull out several thousand talents at the flick of a finger and I doubt she'd feel the sting."

There was an audible gasp: "Jupiter, no wonder she could buy that monster of a pearl! I heard it cost near two hundred talents!"

"Sounds about right. Perfectly round pearls are rare enough, but round black ones? And ones that size? A hundred talents wouldn't be enough."

"Damn. When she mentioned she had ownership in some mines, I thought she meant a few shares in one or two. But if what you're saying is true, goddamn!"

"So much for you being a great intelligencer," came the tease.

"No one ever contracted me to research her," Nao shot back. "I don't just go around poking into people's pasts, you know. Least of all the general's. But Juno and all them gods could slap me right now. I knew she was real rich, but not even that rich."

"Oh, she is, ludicrously so, in fact." Chie's brow wrinkled, eyes screwing up as she tried to recall something. "If I remember it correctly, it's the great-grandfather who's responsible for most of the mines. He served as governor of *Hispania Ulterior*," she explained. "That was still during the time we were contesting the local tribes there for ownership of that territory, and he was the one who led the exploits that pushed them out and our boundaries to the limits they have today."

"Took the chance and carved it up, eh?"

"Well, he was smart enough to buy land as soon as we gained possession of it. It was going pretty easy, what with the danger of the Spanish tribes still lurking nearby. Hime's Treasury is generally happy to leave ownership and care of land to individuals, so long as it gets a cut." She shrugged and finished the story: "So the Fujino descendants continued to own the Spanish mines, and now it all belongs to the only direct descendant of that name left. Shizurusan."

Nao released another string of invectives, obviously awed.

"Now that's lucky," she breathed, once her profanities had rolled down. "Damned lucky."

"I'd say so," her companion uttered. "The Fujino were said to be well

on their way to financial straits at that time, so the Spanish mines saved them. The Noble Families almost all reach a point where their finances run thin. Great-grandfather Fujino saved his line from penury."

"Shot it all the way to the other end," Nao put in, grinning. "You say them nobles get a lot of money trouble? Here I thought they were all as rich as their names."

"It's the name that makes them poor, more often than not. It's because of the obligations and politics they have to pay for, and the attendant luxuries expected of the upper-class. They really do beggar themselves for their pride."

"Huh. What about your woman's family?" She cast a shrewd eye upon Chie. "Are the Senou in trouble too?"

The sooty-haired woman smiled, nodding slowly.

"Somewhat, they're starting to feel it," she said, turning pensive. "It could be a little mean of me to say this, but I'm actually hoping it's worse by the time we get back. Maybe then I could present a good enough proposition to tempt Aoi's father, assuming my booty on this campaign turns out to be large enough. He has a weakness for money, does Aoi's *tata* ."

Nao smiled big-heartedly at her. "Bribing your way into marriage? Why don't you just borrow from the general for now, so you can seal the deal already? She wouldn't refuse you, go on!"

"Dear me, no!" was the shocked reply. "I'd be ashamed to do that, Nao."

"Rather beggar yourself for your pride?"

"It's too embarrassing, and it *would* make me look like a beggar," Chie explained, running a hand through her hair. "Shizuru-san wouldn't refuse, as you say, but what if Aoi's father does? It would all be in vain. I really think it's too early at this point. I'd be better off waiting for him to stew a little longer and searching for my own money to use, anyway. There's a good amount I've already tucked

away and I bought a few shares in some companies before we left. But it's better to have more leverage, just in case. This campaign will see nicely to that."

"You expect a lot of booty from the Mentulae."

"If the rumours about their hoards of gold are true, yes. Shizuru-san says they most likely are and even if they aren't, booty would still turn up. It always does, doesn't it?"

"I can't argue with that." Nao smiled jokingly at her friend. "So we wait?"

Chie sighed: "Much as it hurts, yes."

"Hope good old Father Senou doesn't marry her off to someone else first."

" *Tace*, you wretch!"

They laughed. Nao lifted her hand and signalled to the barkeep, who scurried over with a fresh flagon of wine for them. He set it on the table along with a new decanter of water. Having done this, he bowed and returned to his stool behind the counter, wishing he could have had a reason to stay with the two women longer. One of Shizuru Fujino's primipilii and a Himean senator at *his* shop! Oh, what an honour! He would boast of it to his wife later tonight-complete with an embellishment about having had an actual prolonged conversation with them, of course.

"By the way, I heard there haven't been any new murders yet," Chie said, pouring wine into her beaker. She diluted it with water afterwards. "That name you got from the man you caught seems to have helped Midori-san, though I don't know what she did with it."

"Glad it helped," Nao said, filling her own beaker. "He was pretty glad to give it to us too."

"Was that before or after you took the hide from him?"

A smirk. "I didn't take anything but his nails."



"Oh, *Bona Dea* ! Spare me the details, please!"

"Then spare me the sanctimonious righteousness!" the primipilus shot back. "It's not just Sugiura and this province who's ever benefited from me taking the hide off someone and you know it."

Chie smiled soothingly, holding a palm up in pacification.

"Yes, I know, and I didn't mean it that way," she told her peeved friend. "You know I wouldn't delude myself with that sort of hypocrisy, Yuuki. I just get the jitters when I hear that stuff, that's all. My stomach can't take it."

Nao sneered, but looked mollified.

"Lily-livered politician that you are," she grumbled good-naturedly.

"Yes, well. We lily-livered politicians are the ones paying for your dinner."

They grinned at each other. Both women knew the real source of Nao's irritation *and* Chie's discomfort, however. It was the fact that, even among some members of the army, Nao was considered with some apprehension as a barbarian: a dangerous, uncivilised, un-Himean element who thought nothing of torturing a man for her purposes as well as entertainment. Part of the slur came from the detail that she was of shady origins, claiming to be from Hime's Sulpician territories but without any creditable proof of ancestors. She had no real evidence that her parents were locals, some said, and she did not even have the look of a real Himean. Besides which, no real Himean enjoyed torture! It was barbaric action, distinctly alien.

*Or we 'real Himeans' would like to think so*, Chie said ruefully to herself. It was true that most Himeans still recoiled from ideas like torture and considered them specifically foreign phenomena, but ever since meeting Nao and serving in Shizuru's army, she had come to understand that torture was as alien to Hime as drinking . Nao revealed to her that many of the Sulpician intelligencers were actually trained for torture in case the eventuality should arise. Rare as it was that such a thing happened, it still served its purpose

militarily. This was why there was always a torture detachment in the army.

Nor was torture restricted to the military. Every now and then, a rumour would come up about some *dominus* or *domina* torturing his or her slaves for entertainment, though nothing or no one ever came forward to substantiate it, naturally. All of which shadiness did nothing to demolish the widely-held belief among Himeans that torture did not exist in their society.

*Even now, I still have trouble accepting it myself, she admitted secretly. And in that respect, Nao will never really be Himean. It's not Himean to accept the necessity of torture with as much pleasure as she does, in that most Himeans recoil before it. No matter if it's part of the job. It's those who take pleasure in it that are the outsiders, and she's one of them. An exception and an outsider. She actually enjoys that part of her work, and it's why they'll always consider her a little barbarian.*

She held back a grimace at the thought of her friend's candid remark on removing nails.

*I wonder if maybe I do too.*

"Anyway, you did a fine job actually getting a name," she said again. "Midori-san should have rewarded you."

"Oh, you didn't know?" Nao said, frowning quizzically at her. "She did. Pretty generous too, the old girl."

"What did you get?"

"Nice bag of *denarii*," she said contentedly, purring. "She'd have given me more, but I told her to buy me a drink instead. Bought enough to sink a ship."

"So that's what happened to you the other day, when I went to see you in the afternoon and Ers-chan said you were still in bed. Whooped it up with the governor, huh?"

"That woman probably taught Bacchus how to drink!" She started laughing. "Oh, she drank me straight under the table. I've never

seen anyone guzzle that much that fast."

Chie laughed too. "She knows how to drink, all right."

"Right master of it, that one." She looked at her cup on the table, still half-full. Up it went as she drained it in one gulp. "She can talk, too. Told me all kinds of yarn about her travels to this far-off place or that, complete with crazy adventures. Seemed to me like every story had a part about foreigners in revolt, though, and making a lot of mayhem. Crazy things, like trapping their kings in the palace and stacking up shit near the royal windows." She looked disgusted, though still amused. "Can't imagine that happening to our senators, even if some of them are regular bastards."

Chie took a drink, grimaced.

"It wouldn't. Our people are still more civilised than they are, even in revolt," she said. "And besides, we don't get true revolts in Hime. Not of the kind that foreign rulers see, and even when we do, they're few and far between. We like to complain the Himean mob is unruly, but it's still better behaved compared to the ones abroad."

"Oh?" The primipilus was refilling her beaker. "Why's that?"

"It's simple. What's the basic difference between our poor and theirs? What do ours get that they don't?"

" *Panem et circenses.* "

The answer came not from the primipilus before her but from another woman standing by their table, having just approached them. They looked at the newcomer in amazement.

"Shizuru-san!" Chie cried, looking pleased. "That's not nice at all, sneaking up on the two of us. And we being among your most trusted officers, I had thought."

Shizuru smiled: "Ah, I doubt I surprised Nao-han."

"You did," Nao admitted. "I didn't notice you coming up at all. Taking lessons on silent approach from your Sphinx, General?"

"I can only hope to be half as stealthy as she is."

"You did a good job just now." Nao chuckled and clapped, the fingers of one hand tapping the other's palm softly. "I'd know. If she won't applaud you, I'm doing it now."

Chie smiled at the two of them, her eyes taking in Shizuru as she bowed and pretended to accept the applause. The woman leaned down, the luxuriant hair with its curl at the ends-of which she was surely vain!-sparkling in the light from the windows as it spilled over her shoulders. The sun upon her was a different thing: golden even when low, the shadows having the lovely deep warmth of brass. She was such a radiant woman, so easily noticeable. How had she ever managed to creep unseen upon them?

"I don't see your usual escort," she began, only to have Nao point at something behind her. Following the pointing finger's direction, she found the girl she had been looking for, complete with a leashed panther at her side. The Otomeian was standing just outside the door of the inn, talking to the other Otomeian there, or Erstin's. She remembered something in a flash of insight : the two Otomeians were cousins.

"Ye gods!" she said, turning her attention instead to the black-furred feline sitting calmly near the door-and drawing uneasy glances from the only other breakfasters at the inn. "That beast's growing longer and more frightening by the day. Isn't she the least bit worried it could turn on her?"

It was Nao who answered, slurring through a yawn: "Ah, the general has that girl on a tight leash."

Chie and Shizuru exchanged a look.

"I was talking about *the panther*."

"Oh. Well, I think the other beast can take care of that one," Nao said with a wink. Her companions laughed. "Sit down, General. What's that you were saying earlier? *Panem et circenses*, you say?"

Shizuru nodded, taking up the primipilus's invitation by pulling a

spare stool from a nearby table. The barkeep—who had been holding himself back with stunned awe for a while now—rushed over to provide her with a beaker. She thanked him as he simpered reluctantly away.

"That would be the crucial difference Chie-han was talking about earlier, which determines the relatively rare incidents of rebellion we have compared to other nations."

"Bread and games?" Nao echoed.

"Foreign rulers rarely subsidise the poor's supply of wheat, as we do," Shizuru explained. "Nor are they in the habit of providing them with free entertainment."

"More likely, they're the ones going to become the entertainment," Chie followed. "A look at most foreign histories shows ruler after ruler suffering a rebellion because of famine and hardship on the people's parts. That's something Hime's leaders recognised when they founded the Republic. Our previous rulers had to deal with the same thing during their time—it's even part of why our Kings and Queens were done away with in the first place." She looked at Nao. "Keep the people fed and entertained and they won't complain more than a peep. Right, Shizuru-san?"

Shizuru smiled and quoted the maxim: "Hungry bellies roar the loudest."

"Well, I get it," Nao said to the two of them. "But wouldn't it be hard to do that constantly? I understand Hime can do it because we have grain provinces of our own aside from having contracts with most of the other grain suppliers but some foreign states and rulers might not be so lucky. It'd cost them more, somewhat."

"Yes, as you say, somewhat," Shizuru answered, with a conciliatory tilt of her head. "But that difference in cost is still generally conscionable, and not something that should prevent a ruler from providing his people with grain. If a state's purse is so poor that it cannot even afford to weather the cost of the people's food when they have none, then it has not the right to be a state at all as far as I am concerned. Nor does its ruler have the right to such a position."

No ruler has ever gained title without the people and if the people are dead of hunger, much good may his empty label and stored-up wealth do him."

"It's hard to fatten the purse without thinning the little people, I guess," Nao said with a nasty smile, her lip curling to reveal the sharp canines she often kept hidden. "Many a *verpa* doesn't have the gumption and still can't resist it."

"Perhaps," Shizuru granted. "Then there are also those who simply do not consider feeding the people part of their kingly duties. Witness Egypt, and the unremitting uprisings of Alexandria."

"Oh, don't get me started on Alexandria!" Chie suddenly cried, looking both dismayed and amused. "It's a fright how often the mob takes up arms against the rulers there. And not just out of hunger, either!"

Nao nodded: "Fractious people, them Alexandrians."

"As we all are," Shizuru said, smiling.

She decanted some wine into her beaker, then diluted it with water. She took a sip and flashed a smile of approval to the anxious barkeep. He beamed with pride and a measure of relief.

"So what brings you out, Shizuru-san? I haven't seen you about as much as I used to, though I guess that's to be expected since winter's in full swing."

"Ah." She set down her beaker. "Yes, the weather is rather taxing."

"Chilling!" Chie agreed. "Even Midori-san admits it still bothers her, and she's been stationed here for years now. I'm just glad we're not wintering up in Otomeia-now there's a prospect that freezes me immediately."

Nao grunted in assent.

"I was actually going to see Midori-han later," Shizuru remarked absent-mindedly. The two women looked up at her, both taking on pleasantly inquisitive expressions.

"Going to ask her about the Mentulaean murders?" Chie asked, receiving a tilt of the head in response.

"I had meant to mention it, yes, but my chief agenda today has not so much to do with the public interest."

"Oh? Are we allowed to ask about it?"

"Indirectly, you already have," Shizuru pointed out. "Yes, since I intended to ask you for help, too."

She paused here and surveyed their surroundings lazily, Chie thought, though both she and Nao understood this was more than a casual glance. For what she was searching, however, neither of them knew yet.

"I have been occupying myself with tracing the histories of foreign nations recently," she began, eyes seeming to settle with satisfaction on the figure of her bodyguard talking to the other Otomeian outside the door, a good distance away. "All quite fascinating, so much so that it is fast becoming my favourite pastime of late. Chie-han surely understands why."

"Definitely!"

"I always did have an interest in the subject, but only now found the joy of probing more deeply into it from a scholastic viewpoint. I run into a constant impediment in my latest hobby, however: one I am certain you run into as well." She sighed and produced the problem: "It seems to me that some nations have great patches missing from the tapestry."

Chie let loose a knowing chuckle.

"That's a beautiful way of putting it," she said, before looking at Nao. "Some peoples don't keep as many and detailed accounts as we Himeans do. Sometimes, you run into what we call a dark period in their history-dark because there's nothing and no one who can shed light on it."

"Sort of an uninvestigated hole, eh?" Nao said. She pointed her chin at Shizuru. "So what's the hole you're looking to plug and who does

it belong to?"

Shizuru smiled broadly while Chie hit their friend's shoulder.

"Nothing so sordid as plugging, I hope, but I shall hazard some peeking," Shizuru said playfully. "I was looking into the past of the people known as the Ortygians."

Both women easily recognised the name, of course, since it was part of a famous legend. Nonetheless, the quality of that recognition was tinted with two different colours, she realised. Chie seemed to perk up visibly, her interest in the name unvarnished and without the taint of anything but scholarly curiosity. Nao, on the other hand, seemed to retreat slightly into herself almost as though her interest had waned. Shizuru knew this meant the exact opposite of what it obviously conveyed. Nao knew something.

"A recently extinct northern people," Chie was saying. "Most have heard of their massacre, of course, supposedly by raiding Mentulae, though no one still knows for sure. It's all very shady. Is that what you've been reading?"

"Yes, in fact."

"It's hard finding sources for that, all right. The whole affair's shrouded in mystery."

"So I have found."

"I'm not sure I have anything on that. I've read texts mentioning it in passing or as an example, but not really from any direct sources, which is to be expected. Most direct sources are dead."

Nao finally spoke up, pellucid green eyes meeting the deep red ones looking at her.

"No," she said, offering a small measure of mutual comprehension in her smile. "They're not all dead, are they?"

Shizuru said nothing and only quirked her lips in reply. It was Chie who talked.



"Maybe," she said. "But of texts or records you can find nothing. Well, maybe because it's still relatively recent. You won't find much on it yet in the absence of scholars doing investigation."

"Sure about that?" Nao asked.

Chie replied in the affirmative.

"Huh!" the primipilus coughed, taking a sip of her wine. If she could not feel those crimson eyes on her before, she could feel them now.

"Why, Nao-han?" she heard Shizuru say, voice soft but compelling. "Do you know anything?"

Their gazes interlocked and did not narrow; neither was willing to cross that line of aggression, out of respect for each other.

*But you think it, don't you,* Nao asked the other woman silently, not betraying any unease at having those quizzing red eyes upon her. She was too much of a professional to even hasten a blink. *You think I know something, Shizuru-san, and you want it out. The question is, will I tell you, or won't I?*

She did know something. It had been told her by none other than her body-servant. The adolescent, as much her living companion as her friend, had disclosed quite a bit about the young Otomeian who was cousin to the general's Natsuki-the one named Nina. Nao actually knew that both Nina and Natsuki were not really Otomeian, were survivors of the famous massacre of Ortygia. She also knew that one of the troopers in the party that had found them that awful, long-ago night was still alive and right there in Argus, serving as arms- and stablemaster to the Lupine Division. This person, Erstin claimed, was highly-esteemed by both surviving Ortygians. Erstin also said that, according to Nina, Natsuki had a particular affection for this trooper because he was the one who had found her. If there was anyone who had the rag-tag 'patches' missing from the general's 'tapestry', it would be that man. Yet she hesitated to tell Shizuru.

Nao's vacillation stemmed from a very personal reason, one neither Chie nor Shizuru knew. Her silence on the present matter was

related to her silence on another: her past.

Nao's past was a murky, muddled thing, and she kept it that way. Even though she was aware of the hearsay about her not being truly Himean, she never produced the evidence that could dispel all such rumours. And she had evidence! She had Himean ancestors, certified by the census and written on the list of Himean citizens in her hometown. But she did not say anything about them because she wanted no one to know the identity of her mother, who had been the town whore.

It was not that Nao was ashamed of her mother-or not chiefly that. Nao had resigned herself to *mamma's* occupation a long time ago, when her father perished in some cold ditch after a night of trying to escape his creditors. Village loan sharks, those same men had returned to their little home and taken everything, including her mother, again and again. Nao's mother had begged them to leave Nao alone, which they did, and to leave something for their sustenance, which they insisted they had. They left the bed, they said, and the roof over their heads. They left her life, which, with her body, could surely find some purse willing to open in exchange for the privilege of opening her. Nao's mother took the hint. What else could she do?

*Many other things, all more decent*, the young Nao used to think. But the wisdom of age let her admit these days that that was not true. Her mother had been a sad, pathetic little thing-not very smart, clumsy with her hands, too weak for any kind of decent work. Her only gifts, in fact, were those she had passed onto her daughter: eyes the lovely colour of a lime; hair so red it mimicked the skin of a strawberry; and an attractively small, pretty face. All things that worked well for her chosen profession. Half the town eagerly bedded her, and the other half might have done the same... if only a vacationing politician passing through the district had not slept with her, then given orders afterwards to have her killed. Nao had seen it all, since she rarely bothered to sneak out if her mother was with a client; she had grown used to it, and the only way out of the house was past her mother's pallet.

Why had the politician ordered her mother killed? Most likely to shut her mouth. He might have been in a position where news about him

with a prostitute would have been somehow damaging. Nao did not really care. The point was, he should have thought of that position before getting into a position with her mother in front of his hips, his voice urging her to part her lips. The horny *ineptus*, *femina mentula*. He was such an *ineptus*, in fact, that he failed to check the little room where Nao had been watching through a crack in the wall. She escaped from that town and ran, ran, ran all the way to the Sulpician territories, where some fighting instructor discovered her innate talent for activities to do with espionage after she tried to burgle his home. He sponsored her entry into one of the province's special schools and it was there that Nao found her calling. That was at fifteen.

What did all this have to do with her hesitation to help Shizuru? Even she was unsure. If she had to guess, it was a furtive sense of camaraderie with someone who had experienced something similar to what she had, a reluctance to disclose that other person's secrets knowing she had ones of her own. Nao still had dreams sometimes, farcical repetitions of memories where her mother lay folded in a pool of blood and blankets while that man pushed the knife under her ribs. If that girl-the general's Natsuki-did not have dream-memories like that, Nao would eat her cape. And if Natsuki did not guard those memories like an awful inheritance, Nao would eat the rest of her gear, sword and all.

*It's a bad thing that pup's doing, and I know because I did it myself*, she thought now, eyes going to the trio of young women visible through the wide doorway. It was the tallest one that she looked at, the general's girl, and it seemed she had a vision of her past in doing so. Now that girl was smiling, seemingly young and cheerful as the other two, but Nao knew it was a lie. Oh, she was different from them! A shadow prowling the light. Nao could feel her holding that shadow to herself like a broken treasure, a balled-up secret. She wondered if the girl could see her own balled-up secret, still riding on her back.

*But hers isn't on her back, is it*, she pondered, studying that young woman's eyes in the distance. *No, it's different from mine. She's holding her secret to her chest.*

*A real bad thing*, she thought again, but with more conviction. That

young pup outside did not understand that what she was harbouring so close to her core could destroy her, bind her in a different way from how it had bound Nao. To that extent, perhaps it would be better if she told Shizuru about the old trooper? Who knew, perhaps the general could take that dark bundle from the girl's hands and be the one to throw it away. Oh, not all of it: never all of it. But even a little was a start, and it could spell all the difference between certain destruction and a lessening of the pain. But what if Shizuru could not do it and only made it worse?

*Well, hoo-hah! Who'd have thought I'd be so bloody thoughtful*, she thought irritably, surprised even at herself. Never in her life had she thought herself capable of thinking so deeply for the sake of another this way. For the most part, never in her life had she done so. But it was that past the girl had, really, and her own past could not resist the call of something similar to it, curse the thing!

Nao thought of this as a rare abnormality since she believed herself incapable of compassion. But it was only that she refused to believe the existence of compassion in any of her actions, having decided long ago that compassion was both a failure and a weakness. She would not permit such a weakness to dwell inside her, and hence failed to see it in herself, choosing instead to label it with names like cold pity or concession or sensible consideration. She did not have many opportunities to show it to the degree where she would have to question these names, anyway, so it did not trouble her too much. But this was a rare situation indeed, so she chose to blame it on whatever vestigial weaknesses that younger Nao from the past had left. It was thus that she laughed at herself, perhaps a little bitterly: *Nao Yuuki, you're turning into a soft-hearted, sentimental idiot.*

She thought about it a little longer, weighing the possibilities against each other. As she had no other respondent, she was forced to answer the questions herself. Would she have liked someone making inquiries about her past when she had been younger? Definitely not. Would she have liked someone trying to unearth her secrets to the roots? No, naturally. Would she have liked someone enduring her opposition and persisting in trying to know her? Well, that was a difficult question to answer. But would she have learned to be more normally, *happily* human had there been someone strong

enough to do all of these things, little though she would have liked it? Yes, she supposed. Most likely, yes.

*And maybe that's the answer*, she told herself. She knew that in her case, cruelty had been the refuge, the sublimation of all those nights of watching her mother fornicate with stranger after stranger, and the shock of that woman's death. Cruelty more than killing, for the latter was no more than a chore to dispose of an exhausted source of amusement, to end a dried-up man's puny life-strand.

But that girl outside, at the door, was different. That girl's refuge was a different thing altogether, Nao could feel it in her bones. She could not tell exactly what the quality of that refuge was, but she did not like the feel of it. It was too quiet and mysterious and turned upon itself, like a festering guilt. Given time, she thought she could be afraid of what was building in that guilt, but she was only someone who looked upon the girl as a stranger. She was someone who would be afraid of what was in that young woman, but she knew Shizuru would be different. Shizuru was someone who would be afraid *for* her.

*Gods help me, but I'm going to do some bloody good for once*, she decided. *Shizuru-san wouldn't thank me for keeping the information secret, anyway, and I'm sure she'll find out one way or another. Better tell her now, while she's still expecting something.*

"I think you'd best talk to Erstin," she finally ventured, gaze returning casually to Shizuru. "She's cosy with your pet's cousin, General, and that girl told her something about an old cavalryman who rode in after that massacre-one of the members of the original party sent out for rescue."

Both her listeners sat up at the information, though for different reasons. Ironically, it was the legate who said something.

"Jupiter, now that's interesting!" she said. "Someone who was actually on the scene? I'd love to talk to him too."

Shizuru looked at her.

"Chie-han," she began. "You have already spoken to at least two

people who were also on the scene and even more so than he could have been. You did not know? Natsuki and her cousin are surviving Ortygians."

Chie's jaw slackened. It became apparent to her from Nao's grin that the primipilus knew about it too.

"You *both* knew?" she said, astonished. "I didn't! Why didn't I know and how could it have escaped my ears?"

Nao shrugged, whereas Shizuru offered an answer.

"Perhaps, Chie-han, because it is not really the kind of thing of which people would often speak?"

The legate saw the justice of that.

"True," she agreed. "But it's astounding."

"Indeed." She looked out at Natsuki on the street, pleased to see the younger woman fraternising with others closer to her age for once. "Thank you for the help, Nao-han. I truly do appreciate the information."

"Nothing to it," Nao said flippantly, swishing the wine in her beaker. "Say, have you taken breakfast yet? We have, but we wouldn't mind keeping you company if your want to get yours now."

Shizuru obviously found the merit of the suggestion.

"Ah, yes, we might as well," she said, looking again at her companion through the doorway. "It might be best if we did not eat here, however, since Shizuki could make others uneasy and that would be damaging the good innkeeper's commerce. Forgive me for being unable to honour your invitation, Nao-han, but I hope you understand if I am loath to injure this establishment. Natsuki and I would do better to take some food with us to eat as we walk."

"You sure? I don't think the man will mind. There's few people coming in this early, in this weather."

"It's quite all right," Shizuru insisted, already beckoning the barkeep.

He dropped the rag he was using to wipe the counter and scurried over. "I do not think Natsuki will mind if we do not stop here to eat."

That was an interesting sentence, especially to both her officers: why did it matter at all if Natsuki minded or not?

"General Fujino?"

The barkeep was there, all ears for her order.

"Would it be possible to have some honey cakes-about four, five-and hard-boiled eggs wrapped for me?" she asked the man, who nodded eagerly. "A couple of eggs should be fine. And perhaps a skin of wine, two parts of that liquor and one part water."

He grinned hugely, obviously more than happy to comply with her wishes. He apologised while asking her to wait a moment, assuring her he would get it ready as soon as possible. Oh, the sheer excitement: Shizuru Fujino herself talked to him!

"Chipper little man," Nao observed, when he was gone. "He's good wine, though."

Shizuru glanced at the jug on the table.

"Oh?" she said curiously.

"Yes, not bad at all," Chie concurred. "Try it. It has a sort of Tuscanian taste, I think, though with a little something different."

"*Gerrae* !" Nao suddenly objected. "It's not Tuscanian. I'd bet you ten *denarii* the general will say its closer to Chian!"

Here the three launched into a healthy discussion of vines and vintage, each one enjoying herself immensely-for if there was anything a Himean enjoyed, it was wine. Stoic anomalies aside, there was hardly a Himean living who did not revere the fruit of the vine, and Himean viticulture was the most sophisticated in the world. Its product was taken in the morning, in the afternoon, and in the evening; it was drunk by the richest of Himeans all the way to the poorest of their poor, who would sometimes take to begging for a cup from some munificent passer-by instead of the usual alms. Oh,

wine! The average Himean's lifeblood, so the joke went, was half red wine.

The trio bantered cheerfully on the subject for a while, and were soon surprised by the barkeep's shadow looming above them. He had finished preparing Shizuru's request, carrying in one hand a small wicker basket. It was covered by a tidily arranged cloth, and the top of a wineskin poked out of it. He presented the basket to Shizuru, who stood up.

"The honey cakes are a little small, Domina," he said. "So I threw in a couple of bread-pockets for you. They're good stuff and have good, high-quality mincemeat in them. Good clean pork, not beef, and onions. I make them myself."

"Oh, thank you: it smells delectable," she said appreciatively, detecting the aroma of spiced meat from the package. She reached for her coin-purse and proceeded to pay him, declining when he offered to get the change.

"Keep it, please," she said. "I have already deprived you of a wineskin and basket. Please take the cost of the items from the excess and excuse the trouble I have given you."

"No, no!" he said, mightily pleased. "It's no trouble at all, Domina . "

She thanked him again and he returned to his counter happily, carrying with him the image of diffident crimson eyes and a red-lipped smile. He would cherish the encounter for a week, telling anyone coming to his inn for a drink that *the* Shizuru Fujino had thanked him.

"I shall go now, Nao-han, Chie-han," *the* Shizuru Fujino was saying to her friends. "Forgive me for being unable to stay. I had a wonderful time talking to the two of you, however, and hope to continue our discussion another day."

"I'm not letting it go, it tastes like the wine from Tuscania, and that's it," Chie said, amidst their laughter. "It tastes like wine from Tuscania."



Nao raised her beaker to Shizuru, the little liquid inside swishing audibly.

"She won't believe me, General, but we both know I'm right," she said to the blonde, who was still laughing at Chie's stubborn expression. "And about that other thing, just talk to Erstin whenever you want. You know where we are."

Shizuru nodded.

"Thank you again, Nao-han," she said with quiet authenticity. "It really is kind of you."

And then she left, provisions in hand, going to meet the girl waiting for her by the door. Nao watched her go, thinking about the words the woman had spoken in gratitude. Kind, she said. But Nao was not kind, so she could not have been being kind. So it had been something else, and Shizuru only mistook it for kindness. What was the word for it? What else could you call it?

She could not come up with a word yet. She needed a drink.

*Well, now, we can't say I was being kind*, the primipilus told herself as she lifted her beaker, the claret beverage in it reminding her of her commander's probing eyes. She was the sort of woman who would admit to dangers she considered powerful enough to threaten her, so it cost her nothing to admit that she had been unnerved by those eyes earlier. It was hard not to be, especially when they fixed upon you that way, like small beads of fire trying to set off sparks in you too. What she had felt on her earlier were just tiny warm embers, but she had seen Shizuru enough times in battle to see them blaze up into two pools of conflagration. Hot and scorching. Terrible.

A tiny smile drew up her lips.

*Kind*, was what the general said of her actions just now. But she was wrong; Nao was not kind, so she could not have been being kind. *You just can't call it kind*.

Maybe you could just call it self-preservation.



# Chapter 31

*Thanks to the readers and reviewers, once again.*

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## **Vocabulaire :**

1. **Grammaticus** - A teacher of rhetoric or public speech
  2. **Insula** - The literal translation is "island". However, the word also refers to an apartment building. Romans had high insulae (plural form), sometimes reaching up to 30m in height. These buildings were given the name of insulae/insula because they were often surrounded by lanes or streets on all sides, like islands surrounded by waterways and channels.
  3. **Lamia** - A mythical child-murdering demon.
  4. **Lingua mundi** - The common language (of the world).
  5. **NOTE on the calendar** - The story uses the modern calendar's months as we have them today, to make things a touch simpler. Hence, for instance, December has 31 days in this story, as opposed to the 29 days its equivalent had in Latin times. September too has its present total, which would be 30, instead of the Latin 29. Here we eschew the proper Ancient Latin terms Quinctilis (which we call July) and Sextilis (which we call August) in favour of the ones we have today.
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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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Two days later, Shizuru was with her senior legate and primipilus once again, having a late breakfast at the hired house where the

primipilus had her quarters. They were in the main room of that edifice, which functioned also as the receiving area as well as the dining space. It adjoined a smaller room that held the kitchen, and it was from this kitchen that Nao's body-servant, Erstin, came out bearing two bowls for the pair of Otomeians accompanying them as they broke their fast.

The Himeans were already eating, for the table already held dishes of bread and fish, as well as fruit. The two Otomeians, however, had been promised a certain dish by Erstin, and had chosen to await it instead of taking from the fare already on the table. Shizuru and her officers had been in discussion over matters relating to the army when Erstin had spoken to the Otomeians, however, so they were unaware of what food the young woman had promised to bring the dark-haired cousins. Hence their curiosity when Erstin came out of the kitchen and served the two foreigners their special fare.

As Erstin returned to her seat, Shizuru leaned over to her side, where her bodyguard was seated. She peeked at the bowls the two young Otomeians had before them: they were full of a white and creamy gruel with coarse bits of grain. It steamed too, hot and smoky to the air. It had the look of that soup she knew the Himean poor were reduced to eating during grain shortages, the thin gruel of millet that was their staple during an unavailability of bread. Yet this was far whiter, and had none of the usual bits of flavouring one typically saw in those bowls, from little chunks of salt pork to dark speckles of pepper. It did not smell savoury either, as such gruels often smelled. Rather, it smelled oddly sweet.

"A gruel?" she said, looking at the brew curiously. "What is that, Natsuki?"

The others had been eyeing the stuff too and lifted their brows when the girl answered, "Oats."

Shizuru smiled and jested: "I do hope you haven't stolen it from your horse."

The rest chuckled as the young woman frowned at this answer. Shizuru apologised charmingly for her rude humour, however, and explained that it had caught her by surprise since it was uncommon

fare in Himean culture-although she did qualify that it was fairly common to use millet in a porridge as well. The Otomeian's displeasure faded quickly at this intelligence.

"Is it regular food for your people?" Chie asked aloud, tearing her roll of crusty, white bread with deft fingers. Natsuki nodded in reply while her cousin answered the legate verbally.

"Yes, it is regular, Legate," said the younger Otomeian, speaking again with her brand of quiet formality. "We eat bread too, but in winter, oats are more common for breakfast."

"Do you put anything in it?"

"Only milk."

"Milk?" The Himeans exchanged looks: they were not a milk-drinking nation, after all, at least not after being weaned from their wet nurses' breasts. "That's all you put in it?"

"Those who like it sweet add honey. This has both, along with apples." Nina paused and seemed to think of something. "You want to try some, maybe?"

Chie looked at the coarsely-textured porridge-with *milk*, of all things!-then at her own sweet-tasting, deliciously soft white bread. She smiled and declined a little sheepishly, to Nao's obvious amusement.

"I think I'll do that some other time, thanks," Chie said, trying to work up a glare for her sniggering friend. "And I'm not saying this out of any misplaced sense of Himean culinary superiority, I assure you."

Nao remarked that her friend's refusal was rather out of "a sense of upper-class weakness in the gut".

"I do hope you shall allow me to defend the upper-class stomach," Shizuru said while setting down her own roll of bread. She turned her head to the side and to the listening Natsuki. "Would you permit me to try some of yours, Natsuki? I confess myself curious as to how it tastes."

Natsuki nodded and moved the bowl a little closer to her. Shizuru picked up the wooden spoon and gingerly lifted some of the gruel to her mouth. The rest watched.

"Hmm," she mumbled, after swallowing the morsel. "Sweeter than I expected, I daresay, and with a good deal of texture. The taste of milk is prominent, but not unpleasant. The honey and apple augments it, so it tastes closer to a dessert course than breakfast, I think."

She slid the bowl back in front of Natsuki and thanked her, picking up her bread again.

"Not bad at all," she announced to the company. "Though I admit I still do prefer bread."

A smile crossed Natsuki's lips, but it vanished quickly when she took up her spoon and resumed eating.

"All Himeans prefer bread," the primipilus was saying. "But if you say it isn't too bad, then it likely isn't, General. Hear that, Chie, you chicken?"

Chie would have retorted had Nao's body-servant not beat her to it.

"But you did refuse to try it last time too, Nao-senpai," the girl said to everyone's amusement-save Nao's, of course.

Chie laughed the hardest, beaming appreciatively at Erstin.

"I'm not the only chicken here, Yuuki," she crowed at Nao, who was sparing a dry look for the girl who had practically sold her out. "Oh, at least it shows you're Himean through and through, all right. No oat-lovers, we, just as we're not a horse-people either. Himeans don't ride but trudge close to the ground, so it only makes sense we'd rather peck at other grains like old hens scratching the soil, cluck!"

Even Nao laughed at her last statement, for she delivered it with a comic flap of the elbows and even more ridiculous bob of the head. Only Nina's cousin did not emit a sound, though the tightly-controlled smile on her lips showed how close she had been to

doing so.

"By the way, I'm curious," Chie said, later. "You say both oats and bread are staples-or common, anyway-at your tables, but I can't say I remember any farms in Otomeia. You're a citadel high up in the mountains, after all! The most I saw growing on the ground was that thick, hardy grass you have, and the rest of it was snow. I doubt you could grow oats there."

Shizuru agreed with the legate's statement.

"Indeed," she said, looking at the cousins, one after the other. "Whence do the grains come?"

As everyone expected, it was the younger Otomeian who answered. Nevertheless, she did wait to receive a nod from her older cousin and superior before doing that.

"Our other land in the valleys," she explained. "We trade too, when the harvest is too little. Often with Rheia, and also here, with Argus."

Chie slapped her forehead lightly.

"Of course, I forgot!" she said. "You do have other territories, like us. One tends to forget that Otomeia is just the capital."

"Just as we tend to forget that Hime is in only part of Fuuka," Shizuru smiled.

"Ah, but it's not the same, is it?" Chie returned. "From what I remember of the Otomeians, the inhabitants of their other provinces are still all considered Otomeian. Theirs is an empire. Ours, a republic of one city with allied nations around it. An Otomeian of the plains is still considered the equal of an Otomeian of the capital, am I right, Nina-san and Natsuki-san? Yes? There you are, then. By contrast, a Fuukan is not the equal of a Himean."

"That is debatable," Shizuru grinned, provoking droll looks from her two officers. "You remember how often the Fuukans used to debate it all the way to arms with us."

Chie laughed uncertainly.

"Still," she said. "They did lose all of those debates, as you call them."

"Which does not mean the argument itself is concluded." The tawny-haired woman sipped at her drink. "But going back to our subject, yes, Otomeia is much larger than Otomeia Citadel, not so, Ninahan?"

Nina nodded, intrigued by the discomfort the foreign commander's digression had brought to the other Himeans. It was interesting, she supposed, that there was such a distinction being drawn between Himeans and Fuukans-but it was ultimately not interesting enough for her to give more than a moment's thought to it. She was not as much of a scholar as her cousin, nor as politically sharp.

"The valleys and plains are also where most of our horses are bred," she went on to say. "There's also a big, flat place low down the mountain but still close to the city where grass grows well, and we graze the city horses there. Also the goats and cattle."

"Ah, yes," Shizuru said. "I remember it, your city's permanent cavalry camp. I was shown there some months ago, and I recall it had a finely-kept road winding from that grassy bowl and up to the main citadel."

A thoughtful furrow passed her brow, all of a sudden.

"It was a good path," she said to them. "Had there only been another path leading *down* from that camp and to the base of the mountain, it might have been a better route for the army to travel, since the camp was in the right direction for a party travelling between Otomeia and Argus. We must have passed by it when we took the more winding main road, instead. What a pity. I am certain we could have saved more time had we passed through the camp itself, instead."

"Can't we, if we go thereabouts again?" Nao put in. "Maybe there's a path and we didn't see it."

Shizuru sounded denial.



"As it was, I saw only rocky crags on all sides of the camp," she said. "The only path out from or into it seems to be the one going up to Otomeia, so I suppose even their cavalry has to go up the path leading to the city first, then turn from there to the main road, if they wish to descend the mountain. A wearisome detour, I should imagine."

Everyone saw Nina's meaningful glance at her older cousin, who returned the glance expressionlessly and with the merest flicker of her eyes. The latter set down her spoon and, unpredictably, answered Shizuru's questioning look herself.

"There is a path," she said. "Through the crags."

"Do you mean a proper path, Natsuki, where wagons may pass?"

"Yes," Natsuki said, before adding: "Small wagons."

Shizuru expressed her interest in the matter, and Natsuki sent her cousin a look the Himeans took to mean that the younger Otomeian was being tasked to answer by the elder, for that was what Nina did.

"One of the crags is a false wall, General," she explained, addressing Shizuru personally but speaking as well to the others. "If you pass to the side, you see a gap in the rocks. It's dark because of the cliffsides around it, but wide enough for small wagons. If you go deeper you reach the forest and pass through it, then come out near the end of the road you took when your army was going up. The main road. The turn to the cavalry path is kept hidden for safety."

Nao grinned as her fellow officers digested the information wonderingly.

"I'm surprised you told us about it, then," she said to the younger Otomeian, who looked a little surprised too at her next statement. "What's to prevent us from using that information against your people, one of these days?"

Shizuru winced inwardly at her centurion's impolitic bait, preparing to diffuse any arising tension by writing off the words as a joke. But Natsuki spoke before she could do this.

"Nothing," that sombre young woman said, without a trace of animosity. "You may try to use it. Against us."

Everyone at the table stared, her fellow Otomeian included.

"Heh," Nao snorted, once she had recovered. "That sounds like treason to me, girl. You're practically giving me licence to use that knowledge against your people's interests."

The deep green eyes met lime-sharp ones with a challenge.

"I said you may try," Natsuki said shortly. "You will fail."

Smiles appeared on all faces, even on the centurion's.

"Sure about that?" the primipilus asked bitingly. "I'd like to know why you sound so convinced about it. I don't see why I can't storm that path with a good cohort of Himean legionaries at my back."

Even as she said this, however, she already knew that would not be possible, as did Shizuru and Chie. They guessed-and their guesses were right-that the path was littered with protective measures and stationed guards, hidden in watch. The tops of the crags on either side of the end of that path, too, were probably prime positions for archers, just as the mountain shelves and nooks by the main road their army had taken up to Otomeia had been filled with look-outs toting bows. Any army trying to force its way up that path was easy prey for an ambush, especially given that it would be fighting its way up, and the defenders throwing their weight down.

Shizuru had a shrewd thought just then: *no wonder* Hime had always been on good terms with the Otomeians. Not only did the latter never impede Hime's actions in that part of the world, but their centre of government and main citadel was nigh-impregnable. Difficult to either overpower or invade! Too strong for the former, too usefully accommodating for the latter. In other words, their circumstances made it such that Hime's best policy with them was that of a friend.

She thought it was just as well, and not only for the sake of her personal interests in the matter. Hime always needed strong friends

to help keep the peace in other areas. Friends in high places, in this case, and quite literally. It was true that the mountain-based Otomeians were a mercenary and warlike race themselves, but they had only become so out of decades of effort to keep their own territories invader-free and peaceful. There were many other tribes in Otomeia's eastern lands, and they were not known for being peaceable.

"Again you may try," Natsuki was saying colourlessly again to Nao, breaking Shizuru out of her ruminations. "You will die."

Shizuru saw the grin struggling to form on Nina's face and wished it would gain victory over the girl's control, if for no other reason than that her own smile wanted to do the same. She reined it in, however, since she had to be ready for whatever scathing outburst the primipilus might offer as a reply. But Nao surprised them all by grinning hugely and replying to the girl in tones devoid of anger.

"Well, you're a gruesome little brat, aren't you?" Nao said to the young woman staring at her from across the table. "I can't say I like the way you just predicted my death so casually, but I like that you don't mince about."

She reached to Chie's side for the wine flagon and asked Erstin to fetch a beaker, which the girl did. Nao poured wine almost to the brim of the fresh cup and shoved it over to Natsuki's part of the table, grinning very roguishly as she quite affably delivered her revenge.

"Bugger trying to storm the path. I'll drink to your people's health, Girl, if you'll drink to mine," she said to the startled Natsuki. "Go on, have a drink. Don't tell me you'll refuse it, since I already poured the stuff!"

Thereupon she filled her own cup as well and tipped it to her mouth, swallowing the undiluted contents in three loud flexes of her throat. She set the beaker back on the table with a clatter, looking expectantly at Natsuki.

"Uhh..."

Shizuru stifled a chuckle, seeing that her bodyguard was eyeing askance the cup poured for her and making no move to take it. She assumed Nao knew the same thing she did, which was that Otomeians, more used to the alcoholic beverages they called beer and mead, rarely took wine unwatered. Added to which was the fact she knew and she felt Nao suspected: Natsuki was no great imbibor of liquor. Even when she and Shizuru drank in their rooms together, Shizuru drank a full cup for every sip from her. So the young woman was stuck, unable to refuse the centurion's gesture yet unable to temper the wine with water to make it more endurable, since the cup was already full. Shizuru could see her trying to work out the quandary and felt a twinge of pity, for all that she found the deftly-worked dilemma terrifically amusing.

She made her decision in a second and popped a piece of bread into her mouth, swiftly chewing.

*Forgive me, Nao-han*, she said silently, suddenly reaching for the cup the centurion had set before Natsuki. *But I am going to save Natsuki from teasing, this once* .

"Oh, dear god," she said with a cough, bringing the cup to her lips and drinking the contents to less than half the previous level. She grinned repentantly afterwards at the company. "Please pardon me for that, Nao-han, Natsuki. I felt a choke coming on from the bread, and my cup was empty. I was afraid that if I did not drink something immediately I would have hacked rather embarrassingly before you all. Nonetheless, it was still bad-mannered of me when Nao-han poured it for Natsuki, so please excuse me."

She said this while replacing what she had drunk with water from another flagon. The now-diluted cup of wine was returned to Natsuki.

"That's fine, and so you know, I know *just what* you were afraid of, General," the primipilus said humorously. She looked at Natsuki again and leered. "Well, drink it up already. The general's saved you, so drink!"

The Otomeian looked at her saviour awkwardly before turning her eyes to the beaker. Her knee rubbed gently against Shizuru's, under

the table, and the older woman threw her a quick, private smile. Everyone smiled too as Natsuki finally took the beaker in front of her and drank from the liquid quietly, two spots of red on her cheeks.

"Good!" Nao proclaimed, when Natsuki returned the half-empty cup to the table. "Want some more?"

Chie and Erstin giggled when the Otomeian responded with an earnest shake of the head, hastily holding up her palm. Nao laughed.

"Thought so," she said, pouring more wine for herself. She did not fill her cup this time, however, but diluted the beverage with water as well. "Go back to your horse-feed and teat juice, then. Oats and milk! Jupiter, you people are interesting. What else do you eat?"

It was to Nina that she directed the last query, so it was Nina who answered.

"Beef," the girl supplied, after addressing Nao as 'Centurion'. "It's mostly cattle and goats we keep, so we eat their meat and drink their milk. We make cheese from the milk. Black bread is common too."

"I was fascinated when I first saw it," Chie interjected. "Your black bread. Jupiter, I even thought for a while that it was that colour because you baked it until burnt!"

There was laughter and Nina shook her head.

"No," she said. "It's tougher than the white."

"Do you put anything on it? I haven't seen any of your people eating it with oil."

Shizuru nodded at that. The first time she had eaten bread in the Himean way-by tearing off hunks and dipping them in olive oil-she noticed that Natsuki had eyed her with something approaching fascination. It had been like that too when she first taught the girl to do the same, although she did notice that Natsuki already took to sopping stew with bread even before that. So she guessed that it was only dipping in olive oil with which the Otomeian bread-diners

were unfamiliar.

"We dip it in soup or broth," Nina answered, as she had expected. Then Nina offered another piece of information. "But more often we smear butter."

"Oh! Butter," Chie said.

"Yes."

Chie grinned.

"Except for the black bread, it seems that the average Otomeian runs on milk," the legate remarked. "All foods derived from the creamy, white stuff! Even the meat can be said to come from it, after all, since all calves and kids subsist first on their mother's milk. Milk, milk. I wonder if it accounts for the remarkable paleness of your complexion."

"No, it's the mountain weather, innit?" Nao said on behalf of the two snow-skinned Otomeians. "Stay in these regions long enough and you'll lose that brown skin of yours too, Chie. These parts are all around cold. Some of the Mentulaeans are also fair, even if they do live on lower ground."

"Not like the Otomeian fair, however," Chie said. "Some of the Mentulae are dark too, as diverse in complexion as us since some of their territories stretch further south and to warm weather. But I have yet to see an Otomeian who isn't *white*."

She turned to the cousins, who were following the conversation curiously.

"I hope you don't think we're being rude, talking about this," she said courteously. "I've just been wondering at the differences in physical traits among the peoples in these parts. As you can see, I myself am among the darker Himeans, both in hair as well as skin. Our race runs across the entire gamut of colours. But I find myself struck by the Otomeian tendency to run so exceedingly fair."

Nina seemed to understand.

"Most of us are fair," she said, stopping abruptly when she saw her cousin smirk.

All heads turned to Natsuki too, who bowed her head without bending the ramrod straightness of her back.

" *They* are fair," the elder Otomeian said matter-of-factly, twinkling eyes indicating a hidden meaning to the words. "My cousin and I, we are only pale."

There were a few seconds of silence after this enigmatic statement, broken when Shizuru finally worked out what the girl was hinting.

"Oh indeed!" she said with emphasis, prompting the rest of the Himeans to look to her for the explanation. "Have you not noticed, Chie-han? The darkest-haired Otomeians we have seen are still brown."

" *Ecastor* !" Chie cried, seeing what Shizuru was getting at. "You're right! I think the darkest one I've seen had hair just a shade next to the one we call mouse!"

All of them turned to look at the Otomeians present, who happened to be exchanging a look at that second.

"Why, you two must stand out among them, then," said Chie, giving voice to what everyone was thinking. "You're pale like the rest, but your tops set you out of the crowd, right?"

The two black-haired girls smiled: one with her lips, the other with her eyes.

"Yes," Nina affirmed, mouth still curving. "But I don't mind."

"Yes, none of the others even approach dark brown. So that's the difference between you and the fairer peoples of the Mentulae. They still have some darkhairs among them."

"Many Mentulae are fair, too," Nina replied. "But their fair people are not like ours. They are a little less pale of skin, more pink."

*When Natsuki is blushing, I doubt that,* Shizuru thought to herself.

Natsuki muttered something.

"Sorry, Natsuki," she said, drawing attention to the girl. "I fear I did not catch that. What did you say?"

Natsuki said it again a little more loudly, and though the words were perfectly clear, it was plain that their meaning was not understood by her auditors.

"Mentulae," she told them. "They have red."

The Himeans exchanged confused glances while Natsuki calmly returned to her meal. What did she mean, *the Mentulae had red*?

"My cousin is saying," Nina finally explained, "that there are people with red hair among the Mentulae."

Nao uttered an oath as all of them realised the implication of the girl's statement, which she voiced in the next second, herself.

"And Otomeians don't have any!" she cried, looking amazed. "Dis take you! So that's why Kenji and me got such odd looks when we were in your city."

At Nina's faintly curious expression, she explained: "Kenji's one of the legates. He's the tall, lean one with red hair."

"Not as red as yours, Nao-senpai," Erstin noted.

"No, not as red as mine," Nao replied with a measure of pride.

"But gods, I'm ashamed to say I didn't notice that either!" Chie exclaimed. "No redheads among the Otomeians, eh, and no black-haired ones either. Did you notice, Shizuru-san?"

Shizuru smiled.

"I did notice some other differences in physical type, especially compared to ours," she volunteered. "For instance, take the noses."

"Noses?"



"Otomeians have small, sharp noses I liken to blades," she expounded, stroking her own perfectly straight nose with a finger. "Whereas Himeans, though with a tendency to be sharp as well, have noses a little less thin and quite a bit longer. I am speaking of the typical characteristics of a classic Himean nose, of course. There also seems to be more of a tendency among our people to develop bridges or strong, pronounced bones in the nasal appendages... though intermarriages between Himeans and the other native tribes of Fuuka have produced some small noses recently as well. Even so, they are not straight then, but either curving or snub."

"You're right, that's so," Chie said, thinking on it. She sneaked a glimpse of Natsuki's nose, which indeed looked like a small axe blade. Then, feeling as though she had to contribute something, as she was the official describer of their campaign's adventures to the Senate, she said: "Something else I've noticed. Your people run to the long side, don't they? I mean the tall side. Most of you go past the average Himean's height, and I've seen more than a regular number of giants. The Mentulae are shorter and more like us in that respect too."

Natsuki agreed quietly.

"It's damned odd," Nao suddenly proclaimed, "how the Mentulae have so much more in common with us. They even speak our language! Why in Juno's name do they talk Himean, anyway? I know it's starting to spread, our tongue, but it's still Greek that's more popular outside our territories. Yet the Otomeians say most of the Mentulae don't talk Greek."

It was Shizuru who answered, having asked Natsuki the same thing before. Hence it was the girl's speculation that she offered to the rest, having the grace to credit the young woman for it as she did so.

"I have discussed the question with Natsuki and find her explanation of it eminently sound," she told them, noting quietly the faint blush on her lover's face. "Apparently, the Mentulaeans speak different languages among their tribes, or originally used to. When their kings conquered the whole and unified them into one nation, however, they took to using Himean as their common language. Natsuki feels

that this was because certain cultural and geographical circumstances meant that they had little commerce with the Greeks, and were not a people generally inclined to such Grecian interests as scientific scholarship, written literature, and philosophy. Even their distinct, varied tribal languages were restricted to the spoken word, rarely set on paper, which is why most of their tradition is passed by word-of-mouth and hymns."

"Given our relative proximity to them, especially with our early expansion north," she went on, "there was regular trade between the Mentulaean tribes and us, even before they became united under one ruler. Himeans scatter in every part of the world, after all, and when you think about it, the Mentulaean lands are not actually all that far from Fuuka. Why, we do not even have to cross the sea each time to get here!"

"Hence," she concluded, "it was not Greek but Himean that introduced the conveniences of written and read communication to them. It became the language with which all their tribes were familiar-because of contact and dealings with our travelling countrymen long before. Never mind that they were also familiar with other written languages by that time. Himean already happened to be the most widely-recognised among their varied peoples and the easiest-learned alphabet. The result of that convenience is that they adopted our language for their own, though with some variations due to their culture, of course."

The others digested this quietly. Even Natsuki's cousin, Shizuru noticed, seemed a little amazed by the explanation and once sent her elder cousin an admiring glance. It was well-deserved. She herself had sat silent for a while after the girl offered the theory to her, admiring the girl's scholarly explanation. How it pleased her to let others see Natsuki's intelligence! And how it tickled a little to realise it too, for that meant she was yet another "chicken" at this table: a proudly clucking mother hen!

"That's a good explanation, Natsuki-san, and I agree with Shizuru-san. I believe it too," Chie said later, offering a smile to the blushing girl. "But it really makes the Mentulae sound even more like barbarians, doesn't it, that they don't know the real *lingua mun di* . Now there are people of whom you can honestly say they don't have

an ounce of Greek!"

Shizuru smiled, acknowledging the legate's joke. It was a play upon one of the most common deprecations the senatorial conservatives cast against someone of questionable ancestry: that he or she did not have an ounce of Greek. Greek was the language of educated people, required of every Himean whose family could afford to send him or her to school, or acquire the services of a private pedagogue. Even if Himean was spreading around the world, it was still Greek that dominated inter-state relations. It was also the supposed original language of scholarship. Hence every educated Himean had to know Greek.

*Although of course, "knowing" is just about all there is to it for most, she thought pitilessly, aware of the truth about her fellow senators and upper-class citizens. A good deal of them are still shockingly awkward when reading Hellenic texts, or even conversing in the language. So much so that I can barely understand what they are saying, on occasion .*

There was another thing about Natsuki of which she could be proud, she realised. Natsuki spoke not just any Greek excellently, but Attic Greek, the most refined and cultured of all the variations. It was something she-to be perfectly honest-had not expected at all. Imagine the shock it had given her one day when she muttered something to herself in that language and was answered by the girl with a perfectly appropriate response, in equally perfect and appropriate Greek!

What a pleasure it could be to share certain kinds of knowledge with someone you liked! That was aside from sharing the quality of having an acute mind. She definitely appreciated it, all the more as lack of that last faculty had always been one of her most damning criticisms for potential matches when discussing them with her now-deceased mother. She could still remember those times, quite a few years back in the past.

"What about her?" her mother had often asked, pointing to a name on a list. There were only ever female names there, as Shizuru's preference had long been common knowledge to the two of them. The problem was, Shizuru was extremely difficult here-as in many

other things, her mother often said to friends. The difficult daughter could still recall, years afterwards, the many times her mother had tried to argue the value of a certain candidate to her, only to be turned down without hesitation.

"A respectable child," she had said once, during one of the last times she had tried to make her daughter finally consider someone. "As is fitting from such a respectable family. She's reasonably sweet too, if what I've seen is any indication."

As expected, Shizuru declined.

"To be honest, Mother," she said, "I fear I found her rather dull."

"I see." Her mother pointed to the next name on the list. "What do you think of this one? She comes from a rather more unruly brood than the last one, but still generally respectable. She has a lovely face too, so you certainly cannot tender a complaint in that department."

"Then I must tender the complaint I did about the previous one."

"Really, Shizuru? I myself find the girl interesting, so I doubt she would put you to sleep."

"I'm afraid I failed to make my meaning clearer, Mother," Shizuru smiled. "When I said 'dull', I was referring to mental acuity, which is nevertheless part of what generates interest."

"Ah." The older woman sighed. "Both of the young women I have just suggested come from well-to-do families, so I expect they are well-educated. Even so, I take it you do not simply mean that they are, er... ignorant?"

"Not merely, no."

"I see." Resigning herself, the older woman looked at the next name on the list and smiled with approbation. "This one may finally meet your criteria, then. Not only does she have all the good qualities the other girls have but she is also clever. If I remember aright, her father boasted of her pedagogue's regard for her, as she was already committing sections of the law to memory at thirteen. I have

also heard her name being trotted out by many a *grammaticus* on the watch for future great advocates. There, now, shall you still dare to tell me she is dull?"

Shizuru suppressed a giggle.

"I'm afraid so," she said.

Her mother gave her a long-suffering look.

"I do not understand, Shizuru," she said. "Are you going to tell me she is not mentally acute, when everyone else would say otherwise?"

"She is clever, as you say, Mother," Shizuru answered with a deferential smile. "However, she has not the kind of cleverness I find interesting. She has wonderful capacity for retaining information, yes, but she does not possess the faculty for producing it. While having a great memory is an excellent thing, it does not always make one more interesting. Oddly enough, it may even make you duller! The reason they laud her so much is because she sticks to the tried and tested formulae, recites lines from old and accepted speeches. Or the laws. It's all repetition and regurgitation, never original construction! How can that be interesting?"

The elder Fujino had her lips pressed thoughtfully together and frowned.

"Much as I am loath to admit it, I see the justice of your argument," she told her daughter. "Nevertheless, I am only suggesting these names to you for the sake of your initial forays in companionship... for while all your friends have begun to venture in that field, you still have not done so, even at this age! It is high time that you did. In other words, these are only suggestions for a trial, not a permanent match. You need not marry any of these girls I am suggesting, Shizuru, so you have no need to be so exacting from the outset."

She stopped and fixed a querying eye on her daughter.

"I asked you this before and you denied it, which answer is the only reason I have actually decided to help you along with this. So I shall

ask you again. Is there really no person who catches your fancy, Shizuru?"

"I fear not."

"Yet you make eyes at everyone," her mother said shrewdly.

"Only because I have eyes for no one."

"Really!"

It had been Shizuru's turn to sigh.

"The unfortunate fact is that the whole business scarce interests me," she confessed. "I cannot force myself into feeling excited about it. Being charming is all fine and good and also amusing, but I confess I cannot imagine myself being so earnest with anyone. If I must make a venture, as you suggest, then the person with whom I must undertake such a venture needs to be tremendously interesting, else the whole endeavour be doomed from the outset. I would rather not be a churl, either, by feigning my own interest in the person for the sake of gaining the experience in matters of companionship and romantic relations. No, Mother, I must be exacting."

"How exacting, pray tell? Can you not supply me an example for someone who would meet your rigorous measures?"

She thought for a second.

"Chikane would be excellent, but since I feel no romantic attraction for her and she is already my friend, the point is moot."

"Chikane!" her mother echoed dryly. "Chikane of the Himemiya, child?"

"Yes."

The shaded auburn eyes, darker and browner compared to her red, regarded her wryly. Shizuru tried very hard not to smile.

"Sometimes I wonder if you are not trying to play your games with

me as well," her mother told her, voice gaining a low drawl of exasperation. "For I swear only mischief could have prompted you to supply such an example. Chikane is far too singular a young woman in every respect, intellect included."

"As singular, perhaps, as you would permit your daughter to be?"

"Oh, my daughter is undoubtedly singular," the older woman replied with faint irony.

"She believes herself to be so too," Shizuru replied with an unrepentant grin. "Oh, don't you see, Mother? I cannot be interested in someone average, someone dull. When I do choose someone, it shall have to be someone singular too, else I would simply expire."

"I do not expect you to be so melodramatic as to express mere boredom through suicide, Shizuru," her mother replied witheringly, eliciting a laugh from the young woman. "Though given your nature, boredom really just might cause you to die in another sense."

The elegant planes of the older woman's face, still smooth for one her age, suddenly drew into a taut expression.

"I fear for your marriage, as it seems it shall have to be terribly exciting to last," she told her daughter. "That, or be quickly relegated to the flames of divorce once you have lost interest or excitement. And an exciting marriage is only ever a tumultuous one! It is not seemly to have such a relationship, though it is only a little more seemly to have instead an endless series of affairs. I hope you remember this, as I have no desire to see you turn out to be a philanderer like your older cousin."

Shizuru did not need the name to know exactly which cousin.

"I thought you liked her," she replied.

"Do you?"

"I do, as a cousin."

"I feel the same, as her aunt. I like Shizuma for what she is, and due to her own charms. But I do not like that she goes through the

female population of Hime as though it were her private harem, especially when she bears the name of my side of the family. It is unseemly."

"Ah."

"While I know that you are capable of generating similar adulation, I still expect more restraint from you. But not to such a degree that you turn sixteen without even having taken a fleeting interest in anyone!"

The still-fifteen-year-old smiled with her teeth, saying nothing.

Her mother lifted an eyebrow and continued: "Can you not lower your standards a little for now? I do fear you may turn out the other way altogether if you keep this up and put me in the delicate position of informing your father that we are the proud parents of both our families' first self-determined spinster."

Shizuru emitted a chuckle.

"Before that, allow me to say this," she said. "You and Father have been married for nearly two decades now and with hardly any disputes or tumult at all. If you would not gainsay me, your marriage has never been a tumultuous one, which would mean in light of your earlier words that it is not exciting either. I hope either of us is mistaken, then, because I would hate to think my parents' marriage has no excitement or interest for them. But to return to our topic, please permit me a question: did you ever lower your standards for father?"

Her mother's lips had been trying to twitch into a smile ever since Shizuru made the jest about her relationship with her husband. She tried to hide it now as she answered.

"Decidedly not. But our relation is that of marriage, a more serious thing by far than the ventures of which we have been speaking."

"Conceded. But did you ever lower your standards in such ventures, prior to meeting Father?"

Her mother finally allowed the smile to come out.



"Of course not," said the extremely proud, extremely patrician woman.

Shizuru tried to hide her triumph.

"Then you have my answer," she said. "I must be exacting even now because it befits me to be, and that means I cannot abide someone I consider to be dull."

The older Fujino regarded her daughter, then finally exhaled gently, settling back into her couch.

"I find it intriguing you should say that, Shizuru, since you are constantly surrounded by people who are undeniably dull-for most people are that, compared to you. Chikane and a few others are the only exceptions." She tilted her head, a mannerism Shizuru had taken from her. "Have you not learned to tolerate lesser minds, until now?"

Shizuru looked at her.

"If you would permit me to point it out, you taught me to feign tolerance, Mother," she said mildly. "I was not aware I had to manufacture the genuine article."

"I was hoping that by dint of practice you could produce a perfect facsimile."

"Fool myself to that extent I cannot. Nor, I think, would you like it if I did," Shizuru replied. "My apologies, but I cannot concede this point. Frittering away my time with someone less than what I hope for would be distasteful to me, and it seems to me that romance often proceeds by frittering away time. It strikes me as superfluous already, so the very least I can do is find someone with great personal worth to salvage it."

She added then, provoking a small frown from her mother: "You know, I believe I would quickly grow to hate a lover who is dull. She would be nothing but an uninspiring burden, to the point that I would prefer to have a brilliant lunatic instead. At least I could then have the benefit of both intelligence and a source of interest."

"Sometimes, Daughter, you almost make me wish I had given birth to someone duller," her mother retorted wittily, making Shizuru dissolve into soft laughter.

*As though someone of her ilk could ever have spawned dull children*, Shizuru thought, shaking the memory away. She was aware of a rueful smile turning her lips. Why was it that even the mere remembrance of her mother always made her feel like a young girl again, a feeling her father had never been able to provoke from her? She did not feel off-balance, not smaller or reduced to infancy, but somehow-with the attendant advantages and disadvantages-younger.

She wondered suddenly what would her mother have thought of Natsuki, who made all those past suggestions for romantic interest seem so much duller indeed. What would she have made of Natsuki, who was not even Himean, was five years younger, was mentally crippled by some injury so grave it could near-paralyse her, was in spite of all possible objections to eligibility the only one Shizuru had ever found *interesting* enough to want?

But her mother was dead now, and it was no use wondering what she would have thought of Natsuki, she supposed. She would never know.

"I am aware that unlike the Mentulae, Otomeians know Greek," she said, returning to the conversation and her original train of thought. "Has it any exclusivity, however, or is it restricted to any levels of society?"

"The middle to upper classes," Nina answered readily, though without conceit. "Of course, my cousin and I both speak and write it."

Nao, who had struggled over Greek lessons as part of her training, raised both eyebrows.

"Well-educated little brats, aren't you ?" she said archly, in near-faultless Greek.

"As a matter of fact, yes," came the low-voiced answer, spoken in truly faultless Greek.

The primipilus narrowed her eyes at the unexpected retort from Natsuki, whereas Chie and Shizuru both started chuckling. Erstin, who had not had either the opportunity or the privilege to learn the language, looked about with polite enquiry until the younger of the two Otomeians turned and began to whisper to her what had transpired.

"Ah, forgive us for the amusement, Nao-han," Shizuru said, trying to prevent the centurion's hostility before it could crest and crash. "I doubt Natsuki meant anything other than to answer your query honestly. You know how earnest she can be; she sometimes takes even rhetorical questions seriously."

She looked at the girl from the corner of an eye, praying she would not contradict her words and give cause for Nao to be antagonised further. Her fear was in vain, however, as Natsuki was already back to eating her porridge. Shizuru turned back to Nao and saw that the red-haired woman looked torn between smiling and snarling. As was the centurion's custom, she settled instead for producing a halfway-nasty grin.

"Seems like sauce to me," she said with a shrug.

Shizuru decided a change of subject was due.

"Well, on another note," she said, after finishing her roll, "have you learned what Midori-han has done regarding the Mentulaean killings?"

"Mentulaean Murders, Shizuru-san, and Mentulaean Mur-de-rers!" Chie corrected, to her amusement. "It's what everyone is calling them now, for the sake of alliteration. Double the M's, if you please, for the sake of alliteration!"

"Alliteration's attractions are absolute, after all," Shizuru replied with light sarcasm, eliciting more laughter; even Natsuki smirked behind her spoon. "Forgive me. I acknowledge my mistake, Chie-han, and follow your lead. Have you learned what Midori-han-witness another M, which means I triple it!-has done regarding the Mentulaean Murders?"

Chie laughed gleefully before replying.

"Yes, I did," she said, before going on to an explication. "Well, she's given out that she's willing to prosecute the culprits in a proper court, to ensure that both justice and the law are observed. She didn't name anyone, of course, just made it seem like she had the names but was still keeping them quiet while waiting for more evidence. Which, she made clear, she meant to gather from the next such incident. In other words, the next Mmmmentulaean mmmurder," she hummed, provoking some smiles. "Curiously enough, it's been a long time now without any such murder happening. Care to make a guess on whether one will take place or never again?"

Nao snorted in amusement: "Of course it won't. She's practically threatened to murder the ones responsible, herself."

Her body-servant shifted, apologised for intruding on the conversation.

"I'm sorry, but can I maybe ask why?" she asked the elder women, looking slightly embarrassed. "I mean, the governor only threatened to prosecute them and didn't even name anyone, to prove she really can take it to court. She's been threatening them with worse things before now."

"It's because she never claimed to have any names or suspicions about their identities before," Chie began, waving a morsel of bread gleaming with oil. "Not even once did she claim to know, Ers-chan. She never cried wolf. So now that she's kicking up a racket about finally knowing the wolf, they're more inclined to believing her and her threat about the trial. Oh, they think the dogs are let out to howl now! But the truth is that there aren't any dogs at all. Midori-san would never take it to a court, let alone release the names to the public. She's too smart for that; she knows that a lynch mob of resident Mentulaeans would descend upon those she cites, even if they're only suspects."

She stopped here to pop the piece of bread in her mouth, and Shizuru continued the explanation.

"It comes down to this: the masterminds in this matter think they

have the cut of Midori-han, but actually misjudged grossly in what they think to be her measure." Shizuru's eyes looked calmly into the girl's light, sea-green ones. "Anyone truly knowing Midori-han would know that she is not the sort to risk a riot, or a lynching of the kind that we can expect if she did indeed disclose names by holding public trials. To be fair to their misconception, it is easy to think her a lackadaisical governor, on occasion. But that is an illusion, or a reality she reserves for other areas of her governance, such as economics, which she handles with a very free hand."

"Just right, since the circumstances of Argus mean that it flourishes better with less trade regulation than others," Chie followed. "Aside from that, though, there's also the fact that she goes around looking half-drunk all the time. So what would the citizens of Argus think? Oh, there goes our governor, a regular lush, always out for a good time, not very strict or sharp. A pushover."

She exhaled and nodded with approbation.

"Well, she may not be very strict, but she *is* sharp!" she exclaimed, her soft golden-brown eyes gleaming with pleasure in the discussion. "This talk about public trial, the shady release of information that one of the hired assassins was caught and interrogated-it's nothing but sharp! She has the ones really responsible believing that she knows who they are, and the ones who aren't really responsible but still in the know believing she thinks it's them. In effect, they're all on edge about the jug of retribution the crazy, *not sharp* governor just might pour for them. And they're probably warning each other not to try anything that can provoke her into doing that, since she just might be-in their opinion-stupid enough to do it."

Erstin looked impressed, as did the Otomeian beside her.

"She's not stupid at all," she said, face lighting up. "But she's counting on them thinking she is, is that what you're saying, Chie-san?"

"Yes, and that she's 'reckless' too," Chie said. "Oh, she's a fox, is our Midori-sensei, right Shizuru-san? Who would've thought she had such a grasp of human nature?"

Shizuru displayed her teeth in a bright smile.

"I suppose one who specialises in history would eventually recognise patterns in human action and reaction, Chie-han," she ventured. "And one of Midori-han's greatest pleasures in her studies has always been the identification of such cycles."

"Wicked old fox, all right," Nao said, re-inserting herself into the conversation. "That's a crafty trick she's pulling. What if people realise it's just a trick, though?"

"They won't, or they'll never be sure that it is just that," Chie replied. "The fallout's too dangerous to even risk it on the bet that it's only a trick. Oh, the idea will cross their minds, but that's all. They'll never actually get up the daring to try and see if the governor really is stupid and crazy, or if she's just crazy."

They laughed, stopping when Shizuru made a move to rise.

"Oh, please excuse me," she said with apology, looking around with a distracted expression. "It nearly slipped my mind! There is an errand I have to run nearby. Do you remember, Chie-han?"

Chie arched her dark brows, looking as though she had just remembered. The legate could see the general's bodyguard putting down her spoon, getting ready to rise as well, and immediately tried to prevent it.

"Well, let's go do that and leave the rest of them here for a moment," she said smoothly, getting to her feet and sparing the Otomeian captain a wide smile. "Oh, stay, stay and don't let our errand interrupt your meal, Natsuki-san! I'll escort Shizuru-san in your place, and somewhat poorer companion as I am compared to you, I still do flatter myself that I'm not completely useless."

Shizuru looked down at the girl, who looked uncertain about Chie's offer.

"Stay and eat, Natsuki," she said kindly, though with a hint of firmness. "You know I would feel bad if you do not finish your meal on my account. I am not going far, anyway, and Chie-han is with me."

Between the two of us, we should be able to take care of ourselves."

"Listen to 'em," Nao said, through a mouthful of grilled fish. "Those two together are stronger than you think. They'd bury anyone in range with just their highfalutin talk, words heavy as boulders!"

"Best artillery in town and we never run out of ammunition!" Chie said with a burst of laughter. "Don't worry, Natsuki-san. We'll just be a few minutes, and I'll get her back safe and sound."

Natsuki finally nodded. She took up her spoon and resumed eating quietly, glancing up at Shizuru every now and then. Meanwhile, the two women standing rinsed their hands in a bowl given to them by Erstin. Afterwards, they put on their cloaks and parted from the company, a pair of dark green eyes following their exit.

"I was afraid for a moment there that she'd try to send that giant cat of hers in her stead," Chie joked to Shizuru, once they were on the street. "So where is this ancient trooper and how do we get there? It really is close by, right?"

"Yes, actually," Shizuru said, smiling gratefully at her friend. They had discussed this beforehand, of course, and prearranged everything so that Natsuki would not be present on this 'errand'. "Thank you ever so much, Chie-han. I have troubled you yet again."

"No, it's all fine," the other reassured her, brushing dark hair from her brow. "It's my pleasure to be of service."

Shizuru's breath clouded into a faint chuckle.

"Then rest assured I shall provide you some service as well, once this is over," she said.

It was Chie now who laughed.

"I'm holding you to that," she said warningly. "I'm excited to know what you learn about the circumstances surrounding the Massacre of Ortygia. Though only what you'd be comfortable with telling me, of course."

"Interesting qualification. Out of consideration, you mean, for

Natsuki?"

Chie smiled and winced at the same time.

"The poor girl," she said. "I'm not such a ghoul for information that I'd pry into something that she might not want known, Shizuru-san."

An amused sound: "I must seem a ghoul, then."

"Oh, no!" Chie laughed too. "That came out wrong, I'm afraid. I meant that there were things she might not be comfortable with me knowing, but comfortable with you. It's different."

There was no use pretending ignorance of the relationship, as she had done in the past; everyone knew by now exactly how "different" it was.

"I see."

They walked on for a little more, two cloaked figures painted blue by the winter light. Both women had their hoods on, so people did not recognise them as they passed and gave them no salutations. Shizuru, in particular, kept her face well-buried in the great folds of her cloak's hood, since she was the person more likely to be recognised. The sight of her walking down the street was often enough to cause a murmur in the avenue, people eyeing the beautiful young general with a mixture of natural curiosity and admiration.

And sometimes, envy too, or even contempt.

"So if it's a secret for now, does that mean you're not going to tell her?" Chie asked, side-stepping what looked like a bit of frozen mule's dung. "Or will you do that after you've had your talk with the chap?"

Shizuru lifted her head. Her lips parted to reply and Chie noticed the lower, fuller one glistening so healthily that she wondered how in the world the woman kept them from chapping. Chie's own lips were sore with the cold, and had several dried wounds where the air had finally forced them to crack.



"I shall tell her later," Shizuru said. "For now I deem it wiser to keep to myself. Any discussion that may result from bringing up the subject with her shall be delicate. As in delicate cases during court proceedings, I wish to minimise the questions to which I know not the answers and maximise those to which I do."

Chie smiled, ignoring the faint pain from her lips.

"Going to put her on trial, Shizuru-san?" she said.

"Only for restitution," came the solemn reply. "As the victim."

Chie's smile faded.

"She must've had it bad, hasn't she?" she said gently, a few seconds later.

Shizuru drew a breath before answering.

"I suppose," she said. "Perhaps that is what I am going to find out."

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The 'ancient trooper' the two Himeans were set on seeing was a former cavalryman from Otomeia's cataphract division. Now past sixty years of age, he had retired from that position in favour of another: armsmaster of the Lupine Division. This meant that the maintenance of the Lupine warriors' *daos*, their armour and saddles, their gear and that of their horses, was all assigned to his care. Intriguingly, he was also supervisor of the detail that cared for the equine steeds themselves. Every cavalry member generally cared for his own horse, but non-combatant grooms were still necessary to ensure the steeds' fitness and safety. It was the ancient trooper's job to oversee these grooms and receive reports on the Lupine Division's horses' shape: a significant duty, since every cavalryman derived half of his strength in battle from his horse's performance. The arms-master understood this and knew this was the reason the horses were included in his care. In a sense, the animals were the cavalrymen's living, breathing arms.

Given these duties, the arms-master was an important man. It was no surprise to Shizuru that he merited separate accommodations

from the rankers. After conducting inquiries, she found his quarters to be in an *insula* only a few blocks from the barracks, and along the main road leading to her army's cavalry camp outside the city walls. It was this edifice that she now entered, passing unmolested by the few tenants in the courtyard and ascending the stairs to the second floor. There she searched for the door to his apartment, and upon finding it, knocked twice on the hardy wood.

She had been directed to this man by her chief primipilus's body-servant. After Nao's hint that she could learn something of use to her researches if she interviewed the girl, she had immediately followed on the suggestion, thus obtaining the old trooper's name. After that, it had been a simple matter to review her army clerks' accounts and look for his address. She had sent a message to this address detailing her request to speak with him, as well as a request not to inform anyone-the Lupine Division's captain, in particular-of the matter. She received a positive response, also by letter, and had continued to exchange messages with him until they agreed upon meeting today, the last day of the year. Never once did she have occasion to meet him until now, so it took her somewhat by surprise when he answered the door, all seven feet of him.

"Greetings, Mino-han," she said, not betraying her astonishment at his imposing appearance. Upon hearing of his age and occupation, she had been expecting someone more wizened-tall as the other Otomeians, yes-but not someone so healthy he still exuded physical power. Nor indeed had she imagined someone so extremely large he seemed so even to her, a woman passing six feet by several inches.

The Otomeian before her was not only tall but also gigantic. He had arms and shoulders heavy with the swell of muscle, a chest like a barrel, and neck more than twice the thickness of hers. He was an astoundingly well-kept man for his age, Shizuru thought, unable even to detect a paunch on the man's belly beneath his clothes. Why, there was another thing to note about the Otomeians! Why did they never have any podgy people? She struggled with her memory, trying to remember if she had seen any Otomeians with flab or excessive fat. No, none at all-but that was impossible! All peoples had some who ran to fat.

Had she asked the man in front of her about it, he might have explained what seemed so mysterious to her. In Otomeian culture, it was practically a mortal sin for a warrior to go to seed. In their society, even the retired members of the army were still called to return to the service on occasion, unless they were too old or infirm to do so. No right of permanent discharge after having completed sixteen years in the army! Warriors were warriors forever, part of a pool that could be called up at any time in the future. No exceptions for the unfit were allowed, because the Otomeians believed that the best way for a person to get into shape was to thrust him or her into battle. It was an enforced cultural prejudice against those in poor condition. This meant those who were weaker than the rest—the slow, the out of shape, the overweight—were usually the first to fall in battle. What other option was there for one who liked living but to keep fit, not fat?

"Thank you," Shizuru told the Otomeian as he let her inside. She saw that the room was large, and looked even larger since it had very little furniture and a bare (but clean) wooden floor. There was only one big rug at the centre of the floor, and over that a small, low table. There were no chairs either, which she took to mean that they would sit on the rug, as the Otomeians were prone to do. She removed her hood and looked at him. Their eyes met at that moment, for he had been eyeing her. She eyed him back.

Mino had blonde hair, and it hung all the way to his waist in great cords. Two large braids kept it out of his eyes, weaving the hair from the temples and pulling it to meet at the back of the head. The man was clean-shaven and square-jawed, with prominent bones in his face. Shizuru decided he had the look of a mountain warrior: sharp of profile and blue of eye, lips no more than a harsh and pallid slash.

He regarded her stonily, saying nothing as he motioned her to the table. She walked towards it silently too, and stopped at the edge of the thick brown rug to divest herself of her boots.

"No," he said curtly in Himean, revealing an unsurprisingly deep, bass-heavy voice. He also had a thick accent. "Boots are fine."

She nodded and folded her legs, settling down with so much poise that he seemed to find it odd. It showed only in his eyes, for when he

sat just across her end of the table, his mouth was expressionlessly flat.

He set a jug of some beverage on the table, along with two cups.

"No wine," he said. "Only beer."

She smiled cordially.

"I am thankful for anything you can offer," she told him. "And I do not find beer unpleasant."

He nodded and took up the jug, pouring the frothy dark liquid from it into both cups. Afterwards, both of them moved their cups closer to their ends of the table. But neither of them drank.

*How interesting*, Shizuru thought, meeting his piercing gaze with hers. *He's not afraid of me at all.*

After they had stared at each other to their hearts' content, she finally broke the silence.

"I am gratified you agreed to speak with me," she said, meeting only a flat look in response.

"You are the general," he said, sounding surly.

"Yes, I am," she said, in a cheerful tone that confused him. "But you could have refused, as I was not asking you in the capacity of a commander but rather in that of a comrade with whom you have fought."

He cast a doubtful look.

"So I could refuse?" he said, dubiously. "And what you do if I refused you? If, in place of saying 'yes', I said before 'no'?"

"Then I would have asked you again in my capacity as commander," she said, eyes dancing with humour. Mino's lips quirked, but he said nothing to this and she went on. "But this does not matter since you have already agreed to meet me. Permit me to ask: did you tell Natsuki that I asked for an audience-that I asked to speak with

you?"

He gave her another flat look.

"You said do not tell Natsuki," he stated.

She shook her head.

"If you would permit me to correct you," she told him, "my letter asked if you would be willing to withhold it from her for now. You had the option of telling her."

"And again you ask of me something," he said astutely. "If I refused, you would ask me again as a general?"

"Not in this case," she said. "Had you truly wished to tell her, then I would not have stopped you."

"I did not tell."

"My thanks, then, Mino-han. All the same, please know that you truly could have."

He finally lifted the cup in front of him, raising it to his lips and gulping half the contents in a fashion that would have been approved by Nao and provoked a competition from Midori. He wiped his lips with the back of his great, broad hand next and looked stern.

"Speak first," he said simply. "Then we see what I tell Natsuki."

Her smile widened: "A sound proposition."

"What you want?"

It was her turn to drink, and she did so with a smooth, noiseless sip. She could feel his eyes boring quietly into her, those fair blue eyes most of his race seemed to have. They reminded her suddenly of her legate and friend, Suou Himemiya. Surely that young woman fit easily among the Otomeians, for she had the same colouring as these peoples of the north. Whereas she, with her strange red eyes, would be found out easily for an intruder. Oh, but these eyes made people uneasy with their colour! She knew that, and knew the man

had been studying her eyes ever since she entered this room, but without much of the usual apprehension others would. He was no weakling, this one, and not a man easily loosened in surprise.

*Nor*, she thought while smiling at him, *is he easy to loosen in the tongue* .

"I expect you know already what it is that I want," she said genially. "I want to speak about Natsuki."

He took a while before answering, and when he finally did, it was clear that he had been expecting her to say something more.

"Speak, then," he grunted in that fittingly large voice. "Speak of Natsuki."

She added a little helplessness to her smile: "Actually, I was hoping that you would do most of the speaking."

He scowled at that, two big ruts carving themselves into either side of his mouth. She fell a little inside, afraid that he would refuse to continue this interview.

"I sense hesitation," she probed, not losing her smile. "You are reluctant to speak about Natsuki?"

He finished off the rest of the beer in his cup, then began to refill it from the flagon. It was during the latter action that he answered her in the form of a question.

"Why speak about Natsuki?" he asked gruffly, and she saw from his face that her answer would determine whether or not he would be willing to say any more. She sighed to herself and picked up her own cup, draining it in several quiet sips. How she wanted wine just now, for a moment like this!

"Why speak about Natsuki?" she echoed, once the cup was empty and on the table again. "Because it is the only way I can truly begin to know her. I wish to know her. The difficulty is that I must learn certain things in order to do so, and they are things of which I cannot speak to Natsuki, because I do not want to pain her simply because of my selfish desire, or no more than necessary."

She met his stare evenly.

"Yes, I will speak with her about them in time," she said, "because that is inevitable. But if I can spare her at least the rawness of speaking them to me for the first time, and if I can spare her the pain of a clumsy tread, I shall do so. Hence I speak not with her first, but with you, that I may know the path."

A little of the coldness, it seemed to her, left his blue eyes.

"You want to know her?" he asked, still sternly. "You want to know things you cannot speak first with her? I do not speak Natsuki's secrets for her."

"And I do not ask you to. All I ask is that you tell me what she does not hold deliberately secret from others and what can help me."

"Help you what?"

"Help Natsuki."

"Help Natsuki how?"

"Help her live with the past," she said, too conscious of the truth in the words to wince at their triteness. "Or herself."

He narrowed his eyes, faint creases appearing like fans at the outer corners of each one. Shizuru suffered the intensified scrutiny with unruffled calm, neither moving nor saying anything. Oh, the feeling of being measured by someone! She was used to it, and knew exactly how to comport herself to suit a certain account, how to arrange even the tilt of her head to give exactly the correct impression. But something told her today that she had no need to pretend any pose other than that reflective of what she was really feeling, and so this once she made absolutely no adjustments to her mask. She gambled that it would be satisfactory to Mino, and her gamble was correct. After what seemed a long time, he moved again and reached for the beer flagon, refilling not only his cup but hers as well.

Shizuru knew she had passed the inspection; he was willing to speak now.

"You will be careful of her if I speak to you?" he asked, still sounding faintly suspicious. "This is the first time we talk. We do not know each other."

She slanted her head to acknowledge the point.

"But we understand each other, I hope," she said gently. "And you understand that I wish to understand her."

He put down the jug and picked up his cup, staring darkly at the liquid in it. He looked upon it, Shizuru thought, almost with disapproval. But he still put it to his lips and took a great swig, his tongue licking his lips after.

"You will ask questions and maybe not understand the answers I give you," he growled out. "That is not a child you understand if you are weak."

"Do you think me weak?"

The question earned her a stare that spoke volumes of wariness, of a hard-bitten secrecy, and of a resolute intent. *He is saying this because of Natsuki*, she realised then, finding in herself a sense of solidarity with the big, guarded man glaring at her.

"I think you are very strong and very powerful," he finally said, in reply to her question. "But I think you have weakness when it comes to her and because of that you can hurt her with your strength."

She stared levelly at him, hiding her surprise at the blunt-and somehow, ominously perceptive-statement.

"Then I shall alleviate one and diminish the other," she retorted. "I would hurt myself first before I hurt Natsuki."

A disbelieving look: "It is easy to say but not do."

"And do you believe the difficulty of an undertaking has ever been enough to deter me?" she demanded with such an air of certainty that he had to pause.

His lips parted for a second, then shut again. He lifted his cup and



drank deeply.

"You are really very strong," he rumbled later, holding on to the cup.

She inclined her head.

"I return the assessment with regards to your communication," she told him. "You don't pull your punches."

"You die fast in battle if you pull punches." He looked at her significantly. "We also talk about Natsuki."

She allowed a faint uplift at a corner of her lip: "That she is the subject prompts you to be direct?"

"We talk about Natsuki. She is already hard to understand when you are direct."

She saw the reason in that.

"I see," she said, nodding.

There followed a short but not awkward pause. This time, Mino was the one who broke it.

"What you want?" he asked again, though less frostily than he had the first time.

She responded without hesitation.

"I want to know what happened to her. I want to know what you can tell me, from the beginning."

The fair locks moved as he drew back his head and fixed his eyes in her direction. But that was only at the start, and soon she realised that his sights had moved somewhere into the distance, right through her and off into the fields of his memory.

"You call her people Ortygian, the people of the Forest of Ortygia," he began, voice echoing so lugubriously in the room that it gave her a small shiver. "They are a people who belong to the forest. Their forest was the forest you call Black, I think, the Great Black Forest.

No one who is their enemy goes through. I think your people met them, many years ago, when you tried to go up into their forest and steal their gold. Your people were eaten up."

She nodded assent, knowing the tale. It was true and written in history too, even before the founding of the Republic. Past centuries ago, a Himean noble on deputation to the north had learned about the rumoured richness of the far northern tribes in gold, and took his army to hazard a series of raids upon the peoples of the area. He had been successful the first few times and with the first few plain-dwelling tribes. But then he had the idea to take on what was said to be the richest of the barbarian peoples, the forest-dwelling Ortygians who hid themselves and their homes deep in the very heart of the Black Forest. They were also reported to have the least number of persons, which gave the Himean noble high hopes for a quick sack and loot. Unfortunately, the actual venture did not turn out that way.

When he drew up his great army with perfect confidence of winning against a tribe that was rumoured to have had no more than eighteen thousand to his forty thousand, he found himself thwarted by an arcane foe made up both of terrain and man. First was that the Black Forest had earned its name for a reason. It was so dark, the trees so large, the animals so huge, and the paths so mazelike that it deserved all the connotations that often went with calling a forest "black". It was not a forest of any type the Himeans had ever encountered, as indeed their local guides had been trying to warn them over and over on the march: this was a forest no one had ever penetrated absent the permission and help of its wards.

The second problem arose with the discovery of the wards themselves. The Himeans were astounded by a people so inhumanly swift that they vanished into the trees within seconds, so unexpectedly warlike that they really ate up the Himean soldiers to nearly the last man. For the Ortygians were the fiercest of all the peoples of the north, even if they were also the least numerous. And their leaders were intelligent, unexpectedly possessed of a military organisation previously thought absent in such barbarian peoples. They even had enough know-how to be aware of their land's natural fortifications and use them accordingly-in particular, the solid walls of the forest in which they lived. Alien to the lay of the land, laid out

before an unexpectedly strong enemy whose forest-tactics were unknown and unpredictable, that long-ago Himean noble and his army fell.

Following that atrocious defeat, which was related only by the few straggling survivors, the Ortygians became a sort of Lamia for a while to Himeans: legendary savages mentioned by mothers to their children when trying to frighten the brats to sleep. The Otomeians moved into the mist of popular imagination as easily as they had moved into the trees during that battle, a momentary glimpse of them provoking terror every now and then, and immediately after, vanishing into fantasy and fiction. Unbelievable beings, to destroy a Himean army with such ease and without the benefit of numbers. They could not possibly be real! They *had* to be mythical. Mythical or not, however, the lesson was learned afterwards: the Ortygian forest were left alone by all Himean armies that came close enough to the north to even consider marching to it.

Then Hime began its expansion, its people striking out in all directions of the world. Somehow or other, Himeans daring enough to risk journeying to the far north began to bring back word of the Ortygians again-but Ortygians different from the ones that had come to occupy the collective's forested nightmares. These tangible Ortygians still ran about the forest, it was said, but were actually-unbelievable thing-reasonable! For fantasies of Ortygians had grown to the point of painting them as bellicose savages who attacked at random, creatures with whom one could not reason. People forgot that it had been the Himean noble who antagonised them that fateful day, provoked them with a threat that they had had no choice but to repulse. So when reports came in about these mythical monsters acting like civilised people, the intelligence was greeted with incredulity.

Eventually, Hime cast off its kings and queens to become The Republic. When this happened, Hime also experienced another spurt in expansion, as well as power. The concept of foreign client-states began, and one of the first alliances made was with one of the also-growing and more civilised kingdoms of the North, the very kingdom with which Shizuru was now working on her military endeavour: Otomeia. It was upon establishing official relations with

this realm that the Himeans-or those Himeans who still remembered and cared about that mythical race called Ortygia-finally began to learn the truth about the Black Forest's people... for it turned out that the Ortygians and Otomeians considered themselves kinsmen, their leaders even claiming to have common ancestors along the kings and queens of the line. Kings and queens! The Ortygians, it appeared, were even more civilised than anyone could have thought.

The Otomeians provided their history. Both Otomeians and Ortygians, apparently, were not from this land. They were from one race, a people living on an island near the coast of the ocean to the far northeast and which they referred to with an unpronounceable name. It had been a damp isle, with a few chilly mountains and lush green vegetation.

While they considered themselves one people, the ancestors of the Otomeians had been distinct from those of the Ortygians. The Otomeians' forebears had lived up in the mountains of that island-as they did now, north of Fuuka-while the latter's forebears had inhabited the valleys and lowlands. Since their single citadel was built in a valley, it was the Ortygians' ancestors who had been kings, those lines of nobility being the ones inhabiting the physical seat of government. Thus the lower-dwellers were the ones of higher nobility, though there were some nobles among the mountain groups as well.

Unfortunately for the lower-dwellers, they had been last to heed the rumblings in their isle. They did not see the strange, sudden appearances of bumps in the mountain that were like the land's pimples, growing fat and bursting until they spewed some odd detritus with steam. It was the Otomeians' forebears who took the signs as warning, growing fearful of the tremors that seemed to roil in the belly of the mountain. They knew the mountains and the mountain gods and so they took the hint. They tried to persuade those dwelling below that what was happening was a sign from the gods to leave and settle elsewhere, but to no avail. Leave these rich and fertile valleys, these lovely wet forests because of some supposed omen? Insanity! Paranoia, even! Eventually, the mountain-dwellers gave up trying to convince them and left, led by a

family of nobles. Crossing the waters and travelling the new land for decades until they found yet another mountain upon which to settle, this group became the founders of Otomeia, the nobles leading them being the forebears of the present King Kruger.

And what of those left behind? They refused to leave that ill-fated island, believing the mountain-dwellers' predictions full of hot air, not knowing that the same could be said of the tallest mountain next to them... for those rumblings and signs so feared by the Otomeian's ancestors were the first belches of a waking volcano. Just before it erupted and finally sank the island and everyone on it, another group detached from the isle's population and crossed the waters towards the same direction their Otomeian kinsmen had gone. The rumblings had grown too difficult for all the lower-dwellers to ignore.

The second deputation was much smaller than that of the Otomeian one, composed of people apostrophised as heretical for leaving like that earlier, foolish group of mountain-dwellers. The leader of this newer, smaller group also happened to be the brother of the present king of the isle, which nearly got the enterprise branded as a political attempt at treason. But the group left, anyway, and slunk off into the new land, entrenching themselves finally in a near-impenetrable forest in the continent to the west and becoming the tribe of Ortygia.

It was just in time. A few years later the volcano on the island finally erupted, dragging all those left behind there into the sea forever. That ancient civilisation was gone, the race split in two distinct peoples with distinct lines of royalty-although the original ruling dynasty's blood was still present in the leaders of the Ortygians, the line that took on the name Chalinitis. These were Natsuki's ancestors, this was Natsuki's ancient pedigree.

*I never paused to consider it so deeply before*, Shizuru wondered, feeling a little awed at the thought that Natsuki was descended from royalty possibly even older than Hime's original bluebloods. It had been a while later in their acquaintance that she had hit upon the remembrance that Natsuki's house had in fact been that of the ruling Ortygian dynasty. Little wonder the other Otomeian nobles had been constantly and noticeably courteous to the girl during their stay in Otomeia. Little wonder too that the girl radiated such awesome dignity on occasion. The girl had a fantastic ancestry, if you really

thought about it! Perhaps even a little chilling, and imbued with a sense of tragedy. Strictly speaking, Natsuki was the only one left in that dynasty. The blood of those antique rulers was now almost completely extinguished in the world.

"I remember," she said, speaking again to Mino. "I also recall that the governors of Sosia and Argus at the time had been considering sending ambassadors to Ortygia to foster trade relations. Unfortunately, that event happened."

His thin lips managed to thin further at this, and she knew why. The mere mention of it almost made her grimace too.

"Everyone knows of it," he said, accents hardening all of a sudden. "What you call 'The Ortygian Massacre'."

"Yes."

Mino fixed her with a hard stare, pupils contracting into tiny pinpricks of black in an ocean of light blue. She saw the ridge on his lower cheek move, showing his jaw tightening. He was angry now, she understood, but not at her.

"Say to me what you know of it," he demanded. "I want to hear what you know."

She acquiesced and began to tell the story.

"A chieftain of one of the many northern tribes began to aspire for power," she started, speaking low and earnestly. "A certain Mithrii, of the people known as the Atii. This Mithrii, by dint of fighting all challengers and killing them, had risen to a position among his people where he began to call himself a king. But this was not enough for Mithrii, for he wanted to be king of all the northern peoples. And thus he began to bring together the other tribes, fighting at first for the right of rule, but eventually finding more willing groups submitting peacefully to his leadership. For his people had always been the most numerous of the northern tribes, and thus defeated all of their first enemies. By the time he had assimilated at least two more peoples into his own, the strength of their numbers often persuaded other, smaller tribes to simply go along without a

murmur."

She paused here to see if her description had met with approval. She was a little pleased to see the man nodding briskly, trying not to look too impressed by her knowledge of those events.

"Yes, it was so," he said to her, sonorous voice rolling in the room. "It begins with Mithrii, the false king, who wanted power. He wanted the power of the many tribes of the north. I knew he would go to us too, one day, but he went to the Ortygians first. He wanted them too."

"To submit and be part of his people?"

"No."

He surprised her by showing a scornful smile.

"No," he said again. "Mithrii wanted the people of Ortygia and Otomeia, peoples with true kings. But he was no king. After the massacre he was killed by the tribes he called 'his people'. He had no blood and was a barbarian. The Ortygians and Otomeians know this. It is why he had to kill them, not force them to bow. Ortygians, they never bowed."

"I am aware that the different tribes turned upon him afterwards and returned to their discrete groups," she said. "But I never was aware of why they killed him. What happened?"

A thin lip turned up in disgust.

"He promised to them wealth," he told her. "That is how they followed him in killing the Ortygians. He promised that he would give them the Ortygians' wealth."

"And he did not, I gather?" She held a humourless smile. "What a regular politician."

Mino sniffed the air, his thick but light brows drawing together.

"He did not give them because he did not find it," he rumbled. "The wealth was not there."

She arched her own fair eyebrow: "But I was given to believe the Ortygians were among the richest of the northern peoples, this being because their ancestors brought with them many of the royal treasures when they emigrated from the island, which were supposedly remarkable since the now-gone island had been rich in gold and gems. The Otomeian accounts say that the Ortygians stole the treasures from the royal vaults in the understanding that they were saving the treasure from whatever fate had in store for their island. There are also sufficient records from the lands of the east to indicate that they ransacked and plundered a great many towns and temples on their trek to the forest. Was that a misconception?"

"No," he said.

"So Mithrii merely failed to find it?"

"No. It was not there. It was lost."

"Lost?"

She noticed the chill back in his eyes, the freezing way in which he was staring at her. He was on guard, she realised, and it had to do with that missing gold. Why, and what was he not saying? Perhaps it was not really missing? But his guardedness was not that of a guilty man. There was a different quality to it, something like defence yet again, and that confused her a little. Just what was he protecting?

Well, never mind, she said serenely, deciding to hush her natural curiosity's desire to solve a puzzle. She had other things to discuss right now, things much more important to her. And in this Mino was actually able to further assess her, for he had fully expected Shizuru to press the matter. Every Himean, after all, wagged his tail at the scent of gold. Yet not this Himean general and politician, or perhaps not right now.

"Let us return to the subject proper," she said, prompting a nod from him. "As the accounts tell me, the Ortygians were slain by a confederacy of northern tribes under the instigation of Mithrii, who claimed to be their king. This confederacy even included some of the present Mentulaean peoples, if I recall aright. The stories say the slaughter of the Ortygians took place in the Ortygians' own home



forest, which strikes me as curious. How is it that they were unable to repel these aggressors, this time, when they did so with a full-fledged Himean army before?"

The lines on his face suddenly seemed to grow deeper.

"They were ready for your people's army," he told her, face growing darker by the second. "They knew your army was an enemy. But those"-here he said a word which she took to be an epithet, given the way he practically spat it-"pretended as not enemies. Friends. That false king, Mithrii, he said to the Ortygians that if they did not want to join his people, they could be friends of them."

"When you say friends, do you mean allies?"

He assented.

"Mithrii,"-here came another obvious epithet-"said he wanted to be allies because he needed to take his people to better lands up, far up north. He said he wanted his kingdom there, to be safe from growing powers here. Mentulaeans in the empire were getting stronger. Your people too. So his people wanted to cross the Ortygians' forest for safety."

She saw it now: "And they allowed him passage for that migration."

"After many peaceful talks, yes," he said, looking very gloomy now, even with his light colouring. He suddenly glowered at her and the fierce look was explained when he went on to say: "You do not think it because you think people who live in the forests barbarian. Your people are like that in their thinking. You think people who live with the trees are not good. But the Ortygians are-were-a good people. They talk of things, they are not barbarians. Their leaders were from kings. Even their city, though it was in a forest, was grand."

She nodded sombrely, to show that she approved.

"They were *civilised*," she offered, to which he agreed.

"Mithrii and those other tribes were not," he told her. "The Ortygians let them pass the forest, and they pretended to be the Ortygians' friends. But when they were passing near the Ortygians' homes and

the palace, Mithrii waited for the dark to come and then told the tribes to kill the Ortygians while they sleep. The Ortygians were too few, and not ready. That is how it happened and they were killed. That is the massacre."

"That perfidious wretch," she hissed, unable to help venting some of her own indignation at what Mithrii had wrought. When she spied her companion's face, she explained: "I was calling Mithrii a treacherous or untrustworthy person."

"He is," he concurred darkly. "It is a bad man who breaks an oath made in front of the gods. He broke his oath to the Ortygians. So he died."

"Certainly one may say his failure was divine punishment," she said. "If this happened in the Ortygian forest, it is quite far from Otomeia. How came your people to be there, then, in time to discover the remnants of the massacre? I take it that Mithrii's conglomerated tribes had already gone off to return to their separate homelands by that time, thus leaving the scene."

"A group of us, riders, were to see them with a message from our king," he replied. "There is much exchange between them and us."

"I see."

"When we went and saw what happened, it was late," he said. "They were dead. We sent our best riders back to tell Otomeia, and the rest of us stayed with the dead."

She was silent for a few seconds, her eyes on the weathered top of the table between them. One might have thought she was fascinated with the whorls and knots in the grain, for she looked at them so pensively.

"Then..." she started, still not looking up. "Then you found Natsuki."

Mino grunted in response, the sound somehow a clear affirmation. Shizuru finally lifted her eyes to his.

"Where did you find her?" she asked. "And how?"

"I was moving the dead nobles, like the others," he told her. "To burn first. They deserved that."

"Yes."

"I saw a big pile, in the middle of many dead," he continued. "I saw it because the pile in the middle looked big and high, like the dead people tried to fall over each other. It was only Ortygians in the pile. All the bodies around them were from their enemies, the other tribes."

She nodded slowly, knowing what was coming.

"I saw that pile," he said, suddenly looking aggrieved by the memory. "And I saw they were nobles. I saw their king too. I saw his face, and I knew him. And I saw too his queen. They were many, all dead. I moved them all, and then I saw the bottom of the pile."

Now she felt pained too.

"Natsuki," she volunteered.

He nodded. Shizuru took the opportunity to ask if Natsuki had been lucid when he found her, and received a positive answer.

"She had the eyes open," he said, his strong voice suddenly holding a faint strain, as though he were just peeling off its husk and discovering something raw and tender underneath. "She-she looked at me and her eyes were big and knowing. That was why I knew she was not dead too."

"Did she-" She cut herself off abruptly, knowing somehow that the young Natsuki had not said anything to him. She replaced the query with another. "Was it only her father and mother among her relatives...?"

He finished the sentence for her with a curt answer.

"No."

She blinked, held her eyes shut for a second after.

"I see," she murmured.

"They made the pile," he said, encouraged into saying more by her prolonged blink. "That is why they were that way. They tried to fall dead over each other."

"Would they not have tried to escape first, rather?"

For some odd reason, she saw that the question brought the guardedness back in his manner.

"Escape how? Where?" he grunted sulkily. "The enemy was around them."

She tried to soothe him: "I merely thought it possible their knowledge of the forest and their own city was such that they would have managed it."

"Not possible," he said, even more sulkily. "It is too hard. They still die if they tried. It is not possible, no way to do it."

She wondered at his sureness of the impossibility of escape when he had not even been there to see its circumstances. He was hiding something and she wondered about it, sensing it to be relevant to her purpose. But she also sensed that the best way to get him to reveal whatever it was would be to agree with his verdict, make it seem as though she believed he was hiding nothing at all.

"Of course, I should have realised it sooner," she said seriously, injecting just the slightest bit of embarrassment in her voice—embarrassment for having been unable to see his point. "It would have been impossible for them, especially with being hemmed in and unprepared for that attack."

He studied her for a second after. Eventually he nodded.

"Not possible," he repeated, before dropping his eyes to his cup a little surreptitiously. He took it in one enormous hand, obviously intending to have a drink. But he paused too long over it than usual. Right before it touched his lips, too, he ventured something with a close-to-perfect nonchalance that did not fool Shizuru in the least.

"And, too," he muttered casually, as if were of no consequence. "Hard to run for some. Like Natsuki. She had a bad leg."

She watched him as he drank, tamping down her stoked interest and keeping her voice level.

"A bad leg?" she echoed absently.

He continued drinking, swallowing slowly as though trying to draw out the process of chugging down the beer he had been gulping like a fish earlier. She waited for him to finish, perfectly patient on the outside but deathly eager within.

"Yes," he finally said, after finishing. "Her leg was bad."

"Do you mean the bone was broken?"

"Yes, it was broken. The bone."

There! Her mind flashed immediately to the time she had discovered something while studying Natsuki's body, her fingers detecting a subtle ridge of bone under the skin of the younger woman's left shin. She could tell that it had been a grave injury, even if the bone had healed, given the feel of the ridging. But Natsuki had refused to disclose more than that it was a very old wound, and Shizuru, seeing the Otomeian's dark uneasiness, left it at that. Now she was beginning to realise the reason for that uneasiness and just how 'very old' the wound was.

"This was an injury she received during the incident?" she asked Mino, treading carefully. "The massacre?"

"No." He allowed a few moments before elaborating. "Before that."

"So it was prior to the massacre."

The great, grave head nodded, and his eyes seemed so pale just then that they looked lightless to her. But he was watching her, and he knew she could already see why he had withheld this information until now, why he said it had been impossible for those dead Ortygian nobles to escape in any way. He could see too why she was not talking any more under the stifling weight of what this meant

for the girl she had come to speak about. And, though she did not plan it, this was what warmed him to her a little further-for if she could be so oppressed by a burden that belonged to Natsuki, he told himself, then perhaps she was not such a casual woman after all.

"It was already fixed. Fixed with cloth and wood," he began, struggling with the description of what Shizuru took to be a regular dressing and splint. "But it was very bad. It was bad because she tried to move it, we saw, when we fixed it again. We thought she would be lame."

"Natsuki's body heals well, fortunately."

If he noticed that she specified Natsuki's *body*, he did not comment-or not obviously.

"She is strong," was what he said.

There was a pause again between the two of them.

"What was she like?" she asked, conscious of their shared sympathy. "How was she, exactly, when you found her?"

His thin lips parted, releasing a whistling sigh.

"When we found her she was at first very strange," he started, creases folding into his high brow. "Today she is better. She used to shiver all over like a wet animal if you touched her. She did not speak even if spoken to, and only opened her mouth when we showed her her cousin. We found her cousin too, but not in the same place."

"Ah, yes. I know Nina-han."

He regarded her blankly.

"And then we brought her to His Majesty and he knew her and she knew him."

"Do you mean they had met before?" she asked. "Natsuki and the King?"

"Yes. They were close of blood," he said. "Her kin was close to his, like her people were close to us."

She tilted her head lightly, more curious now about the orphaned Natsuki.

"How was she?" she asked. "How would you describe her as a child?"

He frowned, reaching for the jug and emptying its contents into his cup. He took a drink before answering, and she saw that there was some white froth left on his lip.

"She was very bad," he told her, putting the cup on the table with a clack. "She did not talk and was too thin, like someone sick. She was a serious girl but when you are a child they do not think you are serious and call you strange instead. But she was young so they also took pity. It was different when she began to grow."

He threw her a strange glance.

"She was very beautiful," he said.

Her eyes narrowed for a second, a smile coming to her lips.

"She *is* very beautiful," she corrected.

It seemed he would smile too, but the intent was gone quickly.

"I mean when she started," he said, sounding morose again. "She was starting to become beautiful and was very young and many thought that her strangeness meant she was mute. Some even thought she was wrong in the head. What do you think happens to children like that?"

She felt anxiety rising, a flutter of trepidation. But she had to know.

"Perhaps you could tell me," she invited.

"The first family that took her in had a bad son. The baron-no, both his parents were good people but he went wrong."

She swallowed and found that her throat was barbed with thorns.

"Did he do something to her?" she asked.

"He tried but did not get far," Mino answered. His fierce warrior's face was furious. "She hit him with the daos of his father. It was hanging close and he did not think she knew how to use it or had the power to struggle."

He showed a scowl, a deeper one than the others thus far, and she knew that he was wishing he had been the one holding that daos when it hit that man. She knew it because she was wishing the same thing.

"She was strange in the head and quiet and small," Mino growled. "He did not think he would have his head split open by such a small and quiet girl."

"How far did he go?" The question, raging in her head, was spoken by her lips. "You said it was not far?"

"Yes." He looked apprehensive about saying more and would have fallen silent, had he not seen the expression in her eyes. He settled for saying: "Only touch. No more."

"I see." She thought back to the first time she had taken Natsuki, and remembered the blood. At least she was sure of that, and knew it had been the younger woman's first. "You say she was small. What was her age when this happened?"

"She was twelve."

Twelve! She herself would have been seventeen then, and getting her first taste of battle. Whereas Natsuki would have been getting what? Her first taste of violation?

Her hands were on her lap, out of sight because of the table, and it was there that her distress manifested. She clenched them convulsively into fists, the skin across the knuckles stretched so tight it nearly split open. And in her Himean mind, a mind that like all other Himeans took seriously the forging of contracts directly with the gods, she uttered a thousand defiant oaths and swore fealty to



the lords of the Underworld if they would only promise to give unending torment to the shade of the man who had attempted to lay a hand on Natsuki, her Natsuki.

"You said she split his head?" she said, voice unwavering. Oh, but how much it cost her to keep it that way! Even her face was tight with the strain of keeping her expression calm. "Did he live or did he die?"

"A man does not live after his head is split."

"Some men do."

"Not when what split them is a daos. That girl killed him."

"With good reason," she said severely.

"I know and so knew the baron, the father," Mino replied, growling as though she had insulted him by making it seem that he disapproved of what had happened to that man. "The father was a good man. But a good man loves his son no matter how evil the son. She had to leave."

"To go where?"

"His Majesty," he said. "His Majesty was very angry when they told him, so he chose to keep her in the palace after. He wanted her to go to people he could trust, the ones close to him and who lived with him. So people in the palace looked after her from that time. Many people, so she had many to look over her."

"And they treated her well, these others?"

"They did not touch her as that dead man did." He shifted and rolled a massive shoulder. "They taught her many things too. Some taught her lessons in books. Some taught her how to fight and kept her safe. You do not think they treated her well?"

She knew he had been one of these teachers.

"Humans are complex enough to contain limitless possibilities for negating the condition of treating others well," she retorted, only to

curse herself for her recklessness. Her agitation over what had happened to the young Natsuki had her disturbed; her tongue had run away with her. She had slipped into her usual manner of speech, and knew the Otomeian arms-master would grow wary with it. Swiftly, she rephrased her statement.

"There are many ways of hurting a person aside from what that man did," she said. "Especially when the person is a vulnerable child."

*Who happened to split a man's head with a scythe at twelve, but still*

He regarded her coldly, obviously put off by her earlier statement.

"They treated her well," he said. "What you want me to say?"

She inclined her head in concession, still trying to get a firm hold on her anger from earlier.

"I heard she was still passed around from one high courtier to another, even so," she told him. "Why is that?"

"His Majesty wanted her close," he replied, after moment. "She did not go to another family, after the first one, and was of the palace as the royal family. But there were different people told to see to her. Different people at different times. As one does with a prince or princess of Otomeia, to teach them much."

She wrestled a little with his words, trying to make sense out of them. The difficulties of the language barrier were more manifest with him than with Natsuki, and it drew her attention to the suggestion of learning Otomeian. She resolved to do that sometime in the future.

"Do you mean, then, that though she was passed from guardian to guardian for the purpose of education, her first guardian was always King Kruger?" she asked. "She did not go to live, strictly speaking, with other people any longer?"

He assented.

"She lived in the palace, yes. Sometimes, she would go away too,

but only for battle. This was when her guardians went to fight, so they would bring her to teach her. At first she only watched. Soon she could fight."

"What age was she, exactly, when she was allowed to participate in the actual fighting?"

"Fourteen."

That set confusion in her.

"As early as that?" she demanded. "The king allowed her to participate in the battle itself?"

"Yes," he said, making the word sound as though it meant 'of course'. "How was she to learn how to fight?"

*Oh, indeed, she told herself, realising her mistake. A military people. Naturally they think being thrust into battle at that age is normal.*

"I see." She looked thoughtful. "And now, in Otomeia, does she still live in the palace? Has she still her quarters there?"

"Yes." He shifted in his seat, moving one bent leg and repositioning it. "His Majesty orders her to live there."

"The king is fond of her," she observed.

"Many are," he said shortly, and she had to smile.

"I suppose they no longer think her strange, then," she said jokingly.

But he shook his head.

"Some think her strange still," he told her with some defiance, as though daring her to contradict him. "Because Natsuki is strange still. You know that. Why else you come to me?"

She met his glare squarely, as he was beginning to learn she would always do.

"I have already answered that question," she replied. "And as to

Natsuki being strange, it may only be that she is so special, she makes us all feel common."

They stared at each other for a moment. Then he looked away from those red eyes, those strange hot eyes, and at the rim of his cup, which was lifted to his lips. He finished it, using the beer to rinse his tongue.

He looked at her again, his face bearing faint curiosity, and asked something she had not expected.

"You said, before," he told her. "You think her beautiful?"

She lifted her eyebrows, and that already answered the question without her saying anything.

"Anyone with eyes would," she said, anyway.

"But *you* do?" he pressed. "You have such eyes?"

She looked a little amused now, although her answer had the sound of truth when she delivered it.

"I have never thought Natsuki anything less than magnificent."

"You tell her?"

It was her turn to look curious before answering: "Yes."

He grunted noncommittally in response, indicating neither approbation nor disapproval. She gave in and asked the question.

"I beg your pardon, Mino-han," she said gently. "But why do you ask me this?"

He was quiet for a moment, looking intractable and pensive.

"It is good you tell her," he eventually said, looking bad-humoured as he did so. "You tell her what you think."

"Permit me to ask why I should do that, for all that I already do."

"Natsuki," he said, as though that were an answer in itself. He

squinted shortly, and she saw that it was like a shrug to him. "She does not know it, but she is young. The young worry."

A thought came to her and she leaned imperceptibly forward.

"Does she-*does* she worry?" she asked. "Has she told you so?"

"Natsuki?" This time, the name was said with an amused rumble.

"Natsuki does not tell. Sometimes, not even herself."

She had to smile at the answer.

"True enough," she said. "Thank the gods her eyes do."

Her own eyes went to the window then, noticing the brighter light from the noonday sun, and so she did not see the brief flash of surprise that flickered across his face after her statement. She was too busy thinking of how long she had been away from the girl now, and that she had spent longer here than she had intended. But she did not regret it, for it had been time well-spent.

"Just as she shall *not tell* me later, I expect, that I worried her by going off on my own so long," she said suddenly, turning again to Mino. "I fear I must go now, Mino-han. As you say, Natsuki does worry, too much on occasion. And I hate that the cause of it should be me."

He unbent his legs and began to rise, actions she followed. They towered in front of each other for a second, the low table ridiculously squat compared to their heights, and then exchanged small nods of the head. She thanked him graciously for his time, taking care to put all her sincerity in it. He said nothing until she was already on the threshold, he in the room and holding open the door for her.

"She was right in what she spoke of you."

She stilled at the sudden remark, looking over her shoulder.

"She spoke to you about me?" she asked him, trying not to sound too anxious. "Natsuki?"

He squinted.

"She said you were strange," he told her. "And different."

Shizuru's lips pulled into a smile.

"Yes, I suppose she would say that," she conceded with a sigh. "Different from whom, I wonder."

"I asked that, too."

"And she said?"

"She said, 'from everyone'."

This time Shizuru said nothing, because she did not know what to say. She could feel the blood going to her cheeks, however, and though it embarrassed her she supposed the old trooper could take that as an answer. She inclined her head again in farewell and thanks, and then drew on her hood as a cover. She was expecting him to shut the door immediately after she passed through the entryway, but he did not. Instead, he produced another strange and abrupt remark.

"She had eyes on you," he said to her, in that rolling, deep voice. Whether he was talking about Natsuki's actual role of watching over her, or something else, he did not elaborate; his face was stony as ever. "Always, very seriously."

Shizuru turned to face him, standing outside the door. She had recovered now, and whatever colour was left on her cheeks was hidden by the curve of her hood. But he could see her mouth, and he saw it was smiling pleasantly.

"Does she still have them on me now, in your opinion?" she asked with some humour.

The spectre of a smile flickered on his face, a small muscle near his lips quivering.

"Why you ask me that?" he said curtly. "You had eyes on her too."

And giving a short nod, he shut the door.



# Chapter 32

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Meleager** - A very famous poet of ancient times; he was known for his poem *Love's Garland*, which is quoted by Shizuru and Natsuki in this chapter.

2. **Narcissus** - Mythological character who was supposedly so beautiful that, upon perceiving his own appearance in a pool of water for the first time, he became entranced by it and attempted to kiss his reflection, which led to him falling into the water and drowning to meet his death.

3. **"Semper ego auditor tantum?"** - "Am I only to be a listener forever?" This is from the first part of *IVVENALIS SATURAE* or *The Satires of Juvenal*, and is the opening line of the first satire, which is often titled by translators as "It is difficult not to write satire" (in Latin: *difficile est saturam non scribere*).

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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In the days following her interview with Mino, Shizuru did a lot of thinking. Part of the thinking was concerned with placating the subject of that interview, who had not exactly communicated anger to her for her actions, yet whose demeanour afterwards had evinced a quiet sullenness over the matter. Shizuru had confessed to her immediately after talking to Mino, and the young woman had said very little in reaction, save a few practically unintelligible responses accompanied by a faint scowl. The Himean, having prepared instead for a direct backlash, had been momentarily confounded by this response. It would have been much easier for her to deal with the young woman's ire as she admitted wryly to herself she had done



so several times before due to her teasing of the girl. But Natsuki's ire this time seemed so laced with other things, some of which she could not understand. Or not at first, anyway.

Later, after she began to decipher and dissect the many parts of Natsuki's reaction, she was able to soothe that tender spot more gracefully. It was a curious form of apology that reconciled them, delivered after an entire day of awkward silences and anxiety over understanding each other's positions. The two of them were more alike than they realised: both were prideful women, too dignified in their treatment of such matters to speak either in apology or anger unless in complete earnest. Then again, perhaps they were only so alike when it came to each other. Shizuru, after all, had had much practice in speaking apologies of rote to others, given her circumstances. Yet she could not bring herself to simply give one now, since she did not actually regret having gone around the younger woman to make those inquiries about her hidden past. After all, the fruits of that endeavour had been immensely valuable. Delivering a less-than-sincere apology to Natsuki seemed repulsive to her.

As for Natsuki, Shizuru had realised from long observation of the girl that the Otomeian actually had little difficulty expressing herself when angry: whether by scowl, growl, or some even more obvious gesture. Yet she also saw that Natsuki could not seem to bring herself to truly frown at her now, displeased as she seemed to be. Both of them were restrained in their reactions, both unaware of how to deal with this restraint. Thus, for an entire day following the incident, both were stuck in their own mires-which happened to be adjacent to each other's.

Shizuru in particular fancied herself in quicksand. It frustrated her. She felt as though she were sinking deeper with every hour of reserve between the two of them, even as she yearned for things to go back to how they had been before. And it was not merely the girl's easy companionship for which she longed; it was also for her skin, her lips-simply her touch. By afternoon of that sticky, sluggish day, she thought she had reached her limit. Just when she was about to reach out to Natsuki, an interruption came upon them in the form of a visit from some of her officers. Deeming the older woman

safe in the company of some of her most trusted mates, Natsuki asked to be allowed to go out. Shizuru gave permission a little wistfully, wondering where the girl would be going. Only later in the evening, when they were together again, did she realise the clue Natsuki had given, which was the mimicry of her own excuse when she had gone to see Mino. *"An errand."*

She understood. That same evening, right after blowing out the lamp by their bed, she had turned over and rested her hand over one pale shoulder. As she had hoped, Natsuki rolled over at the touch and looked at her. It was then that she had delivered her apology, to which she had given a full day's thought.

"Forgive me," she had whispered. "Not for what I did, but what I failed to do. I confess I am not sorry for having sought Mino-han's counsel, so I do not apologise for that. Nor am I sorry for not having told you of it beforehand, the circumstances considered."

Her grip had tightened on Natsuki's shoulder as she went on.

"But I am sorry if my methods, which I yet deem to have been necessary, have wounded you. I am sorry if I failed to come up with better ones."

It was dark, but she knew two green eyes were looking at her.

"I would have done it better had I only known how," she pressed on. "I would rather not have offended you. You must believe me."

She had fallen silent after that, waiting for the younger woman's answer. After enough time had passed for her to begin to despair of a response, Natsuki had finally replied.

"All right," was all she said. "It is all right."

Shizuru had nodded in the dark, wondering if it would be all right too if she drew the other woman against her. She had something else to say, however, before she dared to do that.

"I am sorry as well if, well," she began, speaking in a halting fashion that enlarged the green eyes in the gloom. "I am quite sorry if what I have done is presumptuous of me. After all, it may very well be

sheer audacity on my part to think myself having the right to inquire into your life in such a fashion or presume such necessities of going about it for your sake. You only have to say if you find it so, Natsuki, and I-"

That was as far as she got. Natsuki had stopped her with a kiss, one she had only been too happy to receive. That, as Natsuki's lips seemed bent on communicating to her, was that. The trifling crisis over, Shizuru's initial hopes for their reconciliation were nevertheless dashed by the days afterwards, for she had hoped that they would return to how they had been before.

They did not.

Shizuru was astute enough to realise this, even with the veneer of similarity their present relationship seemed to have with their past. What she was not astute enough to understand was *exactly how* their relationship had changed. She could not say it was a bad change, since it did not make her uncomfortable. Yet she could not outright say that it was a good one, either, since she was uncertain of it. She could not even identify it for what it really was. Finally, she decided to simply leave it and see what would happen overtime. If there truly was a seed sown, she believed, it would eventually manifest its fruit.

She thought of this now as she sat pensively in the bedroom and beside their growing pet, the panther cub she had given Natsuki. She scratched its black brow and watched its owner tying up her hair before a mirror. The mirror was a highly-polished sheet of metal, as flat-planed as the best smiths could possibly make it, and reflected Natsuki's image with only the slightest aberrations. It was a fine mirror, really, though still far from perfect. Red eyes acknowledged that with a swift flick.

It was a pity, Shizuru thought as she looked at it, that mirrors were so flawed. One day she would find the perfect mirror or one close to it and give it to the girl before her. She wanted to see Natsuki's expression upon seeing herself in all her beauty, just so the young woman could understand why people were always looking at her. She wanted to see, too, if the same young woman would be amazed at her own magnificence if she saw it as others did. She wondered if

the Otomeian would be so amazed as to play the part of Narcissus. She thought it was not impossible, but then that was only her opinion, and her opinions tended to appreciate Natsuki very highly indeed.

She especially appreciated Natsuki's appearance this afternoon. The two of them having elected to stay in all day, the Otomeian had chosen to wear one of those blinding white robes her people favoured. This was good to the Himean: Shizuru liked seeing her lover in white. She liked it too that the robes Natsuki chose were often interestingly cut. This robe fell straight from the young woman's shoulders, small enough to show the outline of her body, yet soft enough to hint at the angles and curves underneath.

It was not as soft as the dress she had worn on Shizuru's birthday celebration, however; that other dress had been made swathes of Egyptian linen, the finest and sheerest in the world. Nonetheless, it was still of good material, and the way it exposed so much of her neckline pleased Shizuru. What pleased her further was what Natsuki was doing at the moment: tying her long hair up in a high, tidy stream of black.

"You rarely put your hair up that way," she remarked, prompting Natsuki to look her way. "I never realised until now how fetching it is on you. Your neck looks magnificent."

Natsuki's lips quirked, embarrassment warring with pleasure on her cheeks. She turned back to the mirror with an awkward gesture, although the tilt of her head after that seemed to Shizuru similar to that of a filly prancing for the first time.

"I supposed you are not going to braid your hair today?" she guessed.

Natsuki shook her head.

"It has grown longer, has it not? You have not cut it since we left Otomeia?"

"No."

"It's lovely."

Natsuki looked at her again.

"You too," she said. "Your hair is uncut since then."

"Yes, it is," Shizuru affirmed, before asking the question: "Would you like to braid mine?"

There was a pause as Natsuki's brows shot upwards.

"Do you want it?" she asked Shizuru. "I can."

"Only if you want to do it. If you do not feel like it, it is fine."

"I will." She went to fetch her effects. "Wait. Please."

She waited for Natsuki to come back with the necessary implements, then patted her lap invitingly. The young woman looked at her askance, although Shizuru could detect some amusement in the expression. She produced a theatrical huff of air.

"It would be most convenient," she told the girl, who darted towards her one of the arrogant dark looks Shizuru enjoyed so much. "Really, Natsuki, you should be used to it by now. Or do you find me such an uncomfortable perch?"

The close-slanting brows eased upwards and Natsuki rolled her eyes. Despite her expression, however, she did comply with the invitation and walked forward to settle herself atop the other woman's thighs.

"No," she said generously. "Not uncomfortable."

"Thank you."

Shizuru leaned forward to give her a kiss on the forehead and paused there, sliding her nose to the raven wing of hair at the temple. A purring sound rose from her throat as she found herself sniffing deeply. This close, she could smell Natsuki's familiar yet also foreign fragrance; she could smell the warm female scent of her.

"Shizuru?"

"Yes? Oh, right." She sighed and put space between them again, smiling. "Forgive me. Of course you cannot do what I asked you with me being that close."

Natsuki chortled, brushing a finger against the older woman's jaw.

"You may commence."

Out came two pale hands, the fingers like white lilies falling into her hair. She shut her eyes as they began moving, tangling themselves into her tresses, then pulling out and letting her hair pour from the gaps. This happened several times. Once it had gone on for a while, she cracked open an eye to find Natsuki smiling at her hair.

"I thought you said you would braid it," she whispered teasingly, giving the other woman her full attention now. "Not play with it."

Her companion regarded her guiltily.

"Sorry," she said, ceasing her game and finally choosing a golden lock to braid.

"Oh, I do not mind, Natsuki," Shizuru reassured. "It felt quite nice, actually. You may do it for as long as you like. Incidentally, I have wanted to ask you about it for some time now. Why do you seem so interested in my hair? It is surely nothing new to you. All your people are blondes or fair."

The other frowned a little, working deftly with fingers used to the job.

"Yes, but... curls," she said, lifting the braid she was starting and indicating the waving ends. "Different."

Shizuru echoed her inquisitively: "Curls?"

"Such curls. Big and loose. And soft, Shizuru." Natsuki pursed her lips earnestly as she tried to explain it. "It is very nice."

"Is it?" Shizuru peeked at her own tresses, the ends of the locks falling over her breast and indeed curling into waves there. She

looked at Natsuki's perfectly straight, equally fine strands. "Curls are rare for your people, are they?"

"Yes." A nod. "And not like this."

"I see."

She knew what the young woman meant since she herself was aware of her luck with her hair: largely waving while remaining soft, lank halfway from the top until suddenly gaining volume near the ends. It was an inherited trait from her mother's side of the family and a rare one, at that. Most curly-headed Himeans had either wiry, rather undisciplined waves or small and tight kinks. While this was appreciated too, it was her form of curly hair that was generally preferred-and more unusual as a natural occurrence.

She was of sufficient vanity to understand all of this, which was partly why her hair had remained, despite all the contrary elements to which it had been exposed, so remarkably healthy and lustrous. She took great pains with its care. Even so, this was perhaps the first time she had ever felt so keenly glad for that trouble. Knowing Natsuki thought her hair beautiful made it more than worth it, she thought with a touch of pride.

"I am gratified for the compliment," she decided. "Though I like your hair too."

Natsuki smiled gently at her before turning back to the braid.

"For some reason, this brings Meleager to mind," Shizuru went on, watching the face so close to her own. The young woman's gaze was intent on her task, however, so she settled for closing her eyes and reciting in a low tone: "I will twine the white violet and I will twine the delicate narcissus with myrtle buds..."

She prised her lids apart when she heard Natsuki continue the verse absently in a murmur.

"And I will twine laughing lilies and I will twine the sweet crocus..."

She stared at the Otomeian, who had moved on to another braid.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, whereupon those eyes finally turned to hers. "You know that poem! How so?"

Natsuki looked baffled by her amazement.

"I read it," she answered flatly. "Before."

"But how is it that you remember it enough to recite it?"

The younger woman seemed to shy away at that, turning swiftly back to what she was doing and shrugging off the question. Shizuru pressed on.

"I meant to remark on it earlier," she told her. "But you really are well-read, are you not?"

A flicker of green.

"I like to read," came the defensive answer.

"Yes, and I love that, since it only shows again how much we have in common," Shizuru smiled charmingly, feeling the fingers in her hair falter. "From where or whom do you get your texts? In Otomeia, for instance."

"His Majesty's collection."

"Oh, I see. He lets you use it, then?"

"Mm."

"And what sort of things do you like to read, often? What kinds of texts?"

The fingers in her hair tugged, finishing the braid quickly, then moved on to a new one.

"Any."

"You mean you have no particular preferences, Natsuki?"

The pale face before her moved from one side to the other as Natsuki shook her head.



"I see. What have you read from his collection?"

Natsuki took a while to reply, and when she did, her murmured answer aroused another exclamation of surprise.

"All."

"All! And around how many books are there in His Majesty's library?"

A pause.

"I do not know," Natsuki finally answered.

"It is a very large room, though, of course? Larger than this?"

"Yes."

"Dear me," the Himean said, appraising the girl anew. "You must have read at least as many things as I have, Natsuki. I expect you have read Homer?"

"Mm."

"Virgil."

"Mm."

"Ovid."

"Mmm."

Shizuru narrowed her eyes: "Juvenal."

" *Semper ego auditor tantum?* "

They burst into laughter, holding on to each other.

"Oh, all right, I concede defeat!" Shizuru giggled. "Though I confess myself astounded. Reciting Meleager was a feat in itself, but Juvenal too? You *do* impress me, Natsuki."

The girl smirked victoriously at her before suddenly sobering, averting her eyes. Shizuru watched her as she seemed to struggle.

After a while, the Otomeian finally revealed the source of her discomfiture.

"No," she said, smiling hesitantly. "That, the first parts. It is all I remember, Shizuru."

Shizuru eyed her questioningly.

"From him," the girl expounded. "Juvenal."

"Well, I am still impressed, all the same," Shizuru chuckled, amused at Natsuki's candid disclaimer. "Perhaps doubly so now, because of your honesty. You might have just let me go on thinking you could recite it in its entirety, you know."

Natsuki shook her head.

"I thought, what if you make me?" she said slyly, eliciting another laugh from the older woman.

"And you were worried I would find you out then, once you're unable to remember any more?"

"Mm-hm."

"You could just change the subject once you run out of words."

"Like you?"

They traded smirks like mischievous children.

"Perhaps. Though I like to think I never run out of words," Shizuru said. "I suppose reading is one of the things you do when you have free time then, Natsuki? In Otomeia Citadel?"

"Yes."

"What other things do you do?" she asked, thirsty with curiosity about the younger woman's ways. "Aside from reading?"

"Umm, riding." Natsuki shifted a little. "I practise too, my fighting skill."

"You mean work with your weapons?"

"Mm, yes. That."

"I see. I confess I was thinking more in terms of purely recreational activity, though," Shizuru said and smiled at her. "Reading is an example, though what I am asking has to do with something more social. Pastimes, I mean, or recreational activities in groups."

"In groups? Like hunts?"

"Yes, if that is how you enjoy your free time with others. Is it a typical recreational activity with your people?"

Natsuki narrowed her eyes in considering it.

"Uhhm."

Shizuru offered another example: "For instance, my friends and I used to have parties, special dinner get-togethers, chats over cheeses and wines. Or we would go to see a play, or some presentation being made at the theatre. Those kinds of things. How did you and your friends make sport in Otomeia?"

The other's hands stopped abruptly at the last sentence, her head jerking back a quick, curt fraction as dark lashes shuttered away her eyes. Shizuru was puzzled by the reaction. Not until Natsuki finally answered did she know the reason why.

"I like to read," the girl said in a very low voice. "More."

Then she fell silent.

*Oh, Shizuru thought. Oh, I see now.*

No wonder the young woman was so surprisingly well-read. It was because she had little else to keep her entertained. More precisely, she probably had no one else.

*I suppose she has very few people she considers friends,* the Himean thought with some pity. What a consummate introvert this young woman was turning out to be! Prior to this, Shizuru had

always wondered if Natsuki's friends among the Otomeian cavalry did not seek her every now and then. Long before this she had even offered Natsuki a reprieve from her duties on several occasions, thinking the girl might want to have some time with her fellows, but was often met with a polite refusal. The few times Natsuki had taken her up on the offer, she realised from hints and hearsay later that the young woman had spent most of the free time by going through personal ablutions and either going off alone to some quiet spot or heading to the stables to cluck to her horse. Sometimes, she just went to meet with the other Otomeian commanders or her own troopers to do some work. And sometimes, she went back to their quarters and stayed there.

Shizuru guessed that the girl was reading again whenever she did that. Books had probably become her substitutes for companionship, her isolated world populated only by characters of literature and spectres of the past. Natsuki had probably gone through book after book in the King of Otomeia's collection while her peers caroused outside, in her youth. Strange to think that lonesomeness had made such a scholar out of her. Shizuru felt sorry for that, of course, but she knew that some part of her was glad for it too.

Now the green eyes were lifting again, touching fleetingly on Shizuru's gaze before escaping to hide in the wheat of her hair. Shizuru burned away that hiding place with a smouldering glance.

"I understand," she said gently but with depth, taking care too to keep the pity out of her voice, for she knew it would wound Natsuki to hear it. "I feel the same, you know. I like reading more too."

The slender black brows went up.

"I also prefer to read instead of those other things, most of the time," she said, permitting a sluggish curve to her mouth. "Sometimes they can grow so tedious, and reading is a welcome escape. Do you feel that way, as I do?"

Natsuki nodded, looking more at ease now.

"Also," she ventured with faint hesitation, "it is good because you,

um, you learn. Things."

"Ah yes, books can be a wealth of knowledge. I suppose you like to learn things, Darling?"

"I like to know them."

Shizuru agreed with a chuckle.

"But there are times when it can be nice to go out too, of course," the older woman followed carefully, taking Natsuki's hand with her own. "Sometimes it is fun. Theatre, for instance, can be very entertaining, all the more because it often features plays with which you would be already familiar from the written literature."

She hushed here and looked as though remembering something.

"I recall now what Midori-han told me a few days ago," she said, after an instant's reflection. "That she was having some actors from a troupe wintering in the province. I quite forgot about it, but perhaps it is not yet too late. Shall I inquire if they are putting on any shows tonight? It may be entertaining."

The young woman, she was pleased to see, actually looked interested in the notion.

"Actors?" Natsuki asked. "What kind?"

"I am uncertain. Methinks they specialise in farce, however, so I am afraid we shall not see any of the grand tragedies you seem to enjoy reading."

There was a smirk at that.

"But, actors," Natsuki muttered after. "Yes."

"Shall I make the inquiry?"

"Mm. I mean, uh, if you want."

It was clear in her eyes, though, that she herself did want.

"Wonderful." Shizuru put up one of her hands to give the trim waist a squeeze. "For now, though, shall you recite something to me? It does not have to be Juvenal."

She saw the expression on Natsuki's countenance just before the younger woman nodded, however, and so she stopped her before she could continue the rest of the poem they had been delivering earlier.

"Hold a moment, Natsuki," she said. "What is it?"

Natsuki pretended bemusement.

"Oh, cease," the Himean said again with a laugh. "You are turning into a regular actress yourself, are you not? You looked as though you had something to say to me prior to that. Out with it now. You know I shall manage to extract it in the end, so let us save ourselves some time. What was it?"

The young woman was amused, and seemed to restrain a smile as she answered, slowly, that she *had* meant to ask something but it could wait. Shizuru pressed her again, though, and she finally consented to express it-as Shizuru had warned her she would eventually do.

She did murmur something with wry humour first, however.

"Like a goat," she said to the Himean. "You."

Shizuru, whose only associations when it came to goats were those animals' incorrigible state of hunger and swift reproduction, made a face. She asked Natsuki what her simile meant, supposing it was an idiom in the younger woman's language.

"When goats try to chew through something," Natsuki said, with a small grin. "Goats, they never give up."

"Ah, you think me persistent," Shizuru laughed. "Goats! Well, I prefer to think of it in terms of water and rock."

"How?"

"Water seems weaker than the rock, at first. Yet flowing water eventually weathers down a rock through sheer persistence."

Natsuki seemed amused again: "You weather me down?"

"More properly, I *penetrate* ."

She released a peal of laughter at Natsuki's red face, which was scowling away from her. She jerked one of her thighs to startle the young woman into looking at her again as well as into placing two alarmed hands on her shoulders.

"Bad child," she said mischievously while prodding the tip of the small nose with a finger. "Very bad. Of what interpretations were you thinking? I meant in terms of your character, of course."

The boiling head turned away once more. Shizuru smiled and nudged her again until she finally deigned to turn back, giving the older woman a jaundiced glare.

"I was only teasing you," Shizuru coaxed. "Excuse me for that, please. You know it is one of my vices. Excuse this inadequate, goat-like person this once and humour her. I promise I shall not emulate my fellow satyrs, and abduct you to kiss in the forests like a stolen nymph." She paused, seeming to think better of it after remembering the positions in which they presently were. "Well, not at this exact moment, anyhow. Maybe later."

The younger woman, entertained by the thought of Shizuru playing satyr, acquiesced. Her face was already recovering as she reached for another lock of the Himean's hair. She did not start a new braid with it, however, but simply held it in her hand, turning it this way and that. Shizuru realised she was watching the play of its colour in the light. She cupped the young woman's cheek fondly, running the pad of her thumb over its smoothness, and then reminded Natsuki of their earlier topic.

"You meant to ask me about something, earlier," she prompted. "Interrogate me as you wish."

Natsuki, in being reminded of that, seemed to have been reminded

of her bashfulness too. She let the hair escape from her hand.

"What is it?"

"Well, uh," Natsuki began, her face looking almost as though her hands would come together at any moment and she would begin twiddling her thumbs. "About your friends."

"My friends?"

"Your friends in, um, back home."

"Yes, what of them?" Shizuru stopped and proposed a guess at what the girl desired. "Oh, perhaps you want me to tell you what they are like?"

Natsuki nodded, seeming relieved that she need no longer speak out.

"Friend," the older woman said.

Natsuki replied with a word from her own language, which Shizuru repeated. The girl smiled with approbation.

"Yes, that is good," she told Shizuru.

This was an exercise that they did every now and then. It amused Shizuru to have the girl teach her little bits of the language at random times of the day. Whenever a particular word caught her attention, she would put it to Natsuki and let the younger woman give her the equivalent in her people's language. Often it was a word, but sometimes it was a full phrase. Hence Shizuru's Otomeian vocabulary expanded each day, although it was rather an eclectic bunch of words she ended up gathering as a result of the method of collection.

"Thank you," she said now, giving the other woman a peck on the mouth. "I shall tell you about them. Though you have already met some, Natsuki."

"Your officers?" Natsuki asked.



"Yes. So I suppose we may talk about the ones you have not met yet."

She paused for a second, whereupon Natsuki suggested a name.

"Chi-ka-ne?"

"Chikane?" Shizuru echoed curiously. "You wish me to tell you about her?"

A nod, the younger woman adding: "Interesting."

Shizuru smiled.

"From what you hear, I suppose she might be," she told the Otomeian. "Do you think so? Interesting, hm? Yes, one could certainly call her that."

"What would you?"

"What would I...?"

"Call her."

The Himean's response was accompanied by a small grin.

"You do have a fine way of putting things, Natsuki," she said, seeming to think on it. "What *would* I call her, indeed? A very impressive woman. A good friend, of course. A rival, too."

The green eyes bored into hers.

" *Rival?* " Natsuki echoed.

"Yes. A rival." Shizuru brought a hand up, tapping her own cheek thoughtfully. "Not in a bad way. It may even be a facet of our friendship, that rivalry. She makes an excellent adversary in that sense, really."

Her companion was confused. She moved, shifting her weight back onto her rear and closer to Shizuru's knees.

"But, Shizuru," she started. "You two are friends?"

"Yes."

Natsuki shook her head: "I do not see."

Shizuru laughed, comprehending how it could be difficult for the Otomeian to understand what she meant by the term 'rival'. The notion of rivalry that she was applying at the moment was a distinctly Himean concept, one some scholars even said to be singular to their culture. She began to explain it to Natsuki.

"You see, in our society, we have the concepts of *dignitas* and *auctoritas*," she started. "I have spoken of them before, so I shall dispose of their definitions quickly by saying that *dignitas* is roughly one's personal worth and public standing, whereas *auctoritas* may be generally understood as one's personal ability to influence public events with his clout. The two are not the same, but they do weave together into the total value or pre-eminence one may have as a Himean citizen. Do you understand that?"

The black hair curtained as Natsuki tipped her head meditatively.

"I remember this," she ventured, after some seconds. "It is similar to-umm-prestige?"

"Indeed. For now we can use that word to indicate the sum total of one's *dignitas* and *auctoritas*. All right?"

"Yes."

"Going on with the explanation, then," Shizuru continued. "That prestige is, for Himeans, something to be constantly enriched, as far and as much as possible. Each Himean with the ability and opportunity to do so strives to enrich his or her personal prestige, measuring it always, of course, against those of his peers. Think of us as climbers all striving to reach the peak of a mountain. Some go quickly, some crawl upwards, and some try to rise only to lose foothold and fall."

A glimmer of humour passed over the other's face.

"Like mountain goats," she supplied.

"I am starting to think," Shizuru replied wryly, "that your favourite animal is the goat after all."

Natsuki tried to hold in her grin.

"You try to go up," she cued the older woman. "You compete? Like a race?"

"Something like that." Shizuru turned her head a little to the side, as though pondering something. "But it is a race that never really ends. When someone actually does reach the top or, to use our simile with the race, puts an indisputably good distance between him and the one closest to his tail, he cannot simply stop at the finish line and rest on his laurels. He must keep going, trying to maintain that distance that puts him at the head of the pack."

Natsuki asked how this was different from the competition she herself understood, which was that of royals and rulers.

"Let me put it this way, my dear: kings and queens tend to dispose of their competitors to the throne, do they not?"

Natsuki nodded.

"Royals, to secure their position, would either cast their opponents down from the mountain or cripple them to ensure they never rise up, so to speak," Shizuru continued. "Their equivalent in Himean culture, however, does not do so. What the Himean seeks is not the kingship. In Hime, what one seeks is the institution of First Citizen. That is the position of being head of the pack in our society, where the rest of the pack is not crippled or prevented from trying to overtake him but is constantly running as well, always seeking to wrest the title of First Citizen from his grip. The height of prestige for us, Natsuki, is to be *primus inter pares*. "

"First among equals."

"First among equals," Shizuru repeated with approval. "That is what I want, what Chikane wants, what every other person in the pack wants. And the one who shall have this, the one to be acknowledged First Citizen, shall encourage the ones running behind him to try and

catch up. Himeans do not do away with challenges to their position. Rather, they cultivate them. Why do you think so? Think on the words 'to be first among equals'."

A brief silence ensued, during which Shizuru watched the girl's face arrange itself into a portrait of concentration. She amused herself while waiting with studying the densely-curling fringe of Natsuki's lashes. How preposterously black they were! She wanted to brush them with the tip of a finger.

"To keep beating them?" Natsuki finally answered.

She shifted her attention from the dark lashes to the equally dark pupils at the centres of the green eyes.

"Why, yes," she said. "Exactly, Natsuki."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"I wonder." Natsuki hesitated. "That is tiring."

Shizuru chuckled: "True, it is."

"Then why?"

The older woman inhaled, then released a soft but long hiss of breath.

"Because that is the only way one can truly deserve the title of First Citizen," she answered firmly. "No one can possibly be the most prominent, most respected and honourable member of a nation like Hime without having to work constantly to own that title. And no one can possibly find any prestige in having gained that position by dint of having merely eliminated all others who could gain it as well. Where is the contest in that? Only by keeping one's rivals can one seek to keep going further, pushing and being pushed by them, increasing his prestige far more than any royal leader because of the right to this claim: *All my rivals are present, all of them my peers and equals, and yet I am still the one who is acknowledged first of them all.*"

Natsuki gave her a long look, fine dark brows drawn together. She understood the concept, Shizuru realised, but only on a purely intellectual level. Her cultural attitude, however, was still wrestling against it. Not that Shizuru had expected her to accept the notion further than intellectual curiosity would permit, of course: Natsuki had been brought up in an entirely different milieu. Still, the mere ability to accept the logic of such a foreign idea was already more than she could ever have hoped for from most people.

She listened to the girl.

"That is why Chikane is a rival," Natsuki was saying. "Your... peers or friends. Also your rivals."

"Yes, since nearly all of us are striving for the top."

"And who is at the top? Now?"

"No one, in fact. There is not, at present, one who may claim to be Hime's First Citizen." Shizuru made a dismissive movement of her head with casual grace. "The position is vacant. It often happens to be. Rarely does a person ever achieve the title, especially because you cannot even claim it for yourself. For it to matter, it has to be a title used by your peers to talk about you-it is granted by others, and not even formally but popularly."

"Oh. And who is close, Shizuru?"

Shizuru sighed a little wistfully.

"Who knows who really is coming close?" she said, half to herself. "The only certainty is when one actually achieves it. Otherwise, you might say fortunes come and go, they rise and fall. Fortuna can be fickle."

"Even for you too?" Natsuki put in impishly. They exchanged a smile, knowing the joke about that goddess favouring Shizuru so often.

"Perhaps even for me," Shizuru answered. "Though I shall admit that, for the most part, Fortuna has been good to me of late. She has even granted me you."

Natsuki turned her head away shyly, but Shizuru could still see the red splotch forming on her cheek, softening the hauteur of her face. She cooed to the young woman.

"Kiss me," she requested. Natsuki did so, slanting hot lips over hers. She opened her mouth immediately and caught the tip of the girl's tongue with her own, circling it gently. After some moments, they parted.

"Yes," Shizuru breathed, conscious of a rising heat in her body. "Fortuna has been good to me."

The tip of Natsuki's nose brushed hers, nuzzling before moving away.

"And Chikane?" the younger woman said abruptly, with a solemnity too sudden to be real. "She is close too?"

Shizuru blinked, surprised by the question.

"I should say so, not least because she is most likely consul-elect already, at this time," she admitted, guessing this to be so because the new year had already begun. "Only, we have not the news of it yet. But I expect it shall come to find us soon, whether by the Senate's formal missive or by her own letter."

"Her letters. It is the blue wax always, no?"

"The one with the seal of an eagle encircled by thorns, yes." Shizuru's mouth quirked; she had an idea of what had caused Natsuki to mention it. "You like the design, don't you?"

Natsuki smiled reluctantly, like someone caught out.

"Pretty," she admitted.

Shizuru returned the word to her in Otomeian without being taught, and she laughed with pleasure.

"I think so too, though. Do you think it prettier than mine?" Shizuru teased.

Natsuki chuckled tolerantly while answering in the negative. Shizuru thanked her for the indulgence.

"Like mine, hers is a composite of two families' seals," she said. "The thorns are from her mother's side. The eagle is from her father's. I believe the latter design is partly allusive to the family heirloom, The Himemiya Bow."

"Ah." The limpid eyes lit with interest. "An archer?"

"A very good one," Shizuru said. "Though she is very skilled with the sword too. The Himemiya tend to favour it."

"Like Suou Himemiya?"

"Like Chikane's sister, yes."

"Hm. And Chikane?"

"Very good with the sword too, as I said."

"No," Natsuki said, shaking her head. "No, Shizuru. Chikane Himemiya. How is she?"

A few seconds passed, but Shizuru understood better after them.

"Well, since you have no doubt overheard much of her prior to this as regards her public activities, I suppose you are asking me about her personality. Am I correct?"

"Yes."

"How is Chikane indeed? This may be a little complicated." She frowned as she tried to express her thoughts. "In speaking of her, methinks it necessary to understand, first, that Chikane is a very attractive woman. Of the kind that cannot even be served any further by exaggeration..."

She stopped here, feeling something touch one of her eyebrows. Natsuki met her sparkling red look with a cool green one.

"You have much the same colouring, actually," she murmured while

following the sensation of the finger skimming her brow. "From hair to skin. It would not be wrong of me to say you are terribly alike in that regard."

A small wrinkle appeared on the Otomeian's forehead.

"We are alike?" she asked.

"In some aspects. As I said, especially in colour. But the rest of it is different. Think of my legatè, Suou-chan. As regards the face and body structure, they are greatly similar. Just not in colouring. You may gather from this that Chikane's looks are very elegant. And this makes up any severity that might otherwise have been given to her appearance due to her character. You see, Chikane tends to be quite sombre. Or should I say, rather, that she has a tendency to reserve herself so much that it leads her into being sombre?"

"Sombre? How?"

"Well now," Shizuru said. "I suppose you could just say she can be serious. More so than I am."

She was startled by the throaty laughter from her companion.

"What did I say?" she enquired of Natsuki, who finally reined in her mirth enough to reply.

The young woman practically twinkled at her.

"More serious," she repeated, "*than you?*"

Shizuru's mouth twitched.

"Now I have to wonder if that means you think me too serious or not at all," she said to Natsuki, who produced her sexy laugh again, much to Shizuru's enjoyment. "To be clear, Chikane is actually terrifically witty, so she is not sombre in the usual sense. If you compare the two of us, however, I think her humour tends to be drier than mine. Unless in the presence of a few, select persons, her laughter is rare as well. She usually smiles instead of laughing. She has a kind heart, too, and intense strength of conviction." She hesitated. "The latter trait is especially patent in the incidents leading



to her marriage."

Natsuki moved against her.

"The, um, poor wife? Low birth," she said.

"You know of Himeko-chan?" Shizuru asked with wonder. "You have overheard it, I suppose? Well, I suppose it would not be surprising. It is still the talk of many of our peers and even some of the rankers, because it happened only some months ago, their marriage. You know what happened?"

A nod.

"I see."

There was a passing silence.

"Did it hurt her, Shizuru?"

Shizuru asked to whom she was referring.

"Chikane Himemiya."

Shizuru stared at her again and Natsuki tried to make her enquiry clearer.

"In the climb," she started, hands curling about Shizuru's waist. "Like the competition. With her peers and rivals."

"Ah! That competition." Shizuru smiled a little distractedly, moving her gaze to the young woman's bare neck. "You mean if it hurt her prospects of becoming First Citizen."

"Yes. That."

Shizuru threw her a sharp look and said: "Well, perhaps. Perhaps, though it does not really matter if it did. Chikane has sufficient prestige in her own right to overcome any censure she might have gained from it."

"Censure?" came the echo.

"Yes."

"So they criticised her? Many persons, Shizuru?"

"Yes. And yes, of course they did," Shizuru answered shortly. She shot another quick glance at Natsuki, then ducked swiftly to place a kiss on the girl's exposed clavicle.

"Neck."

Natsuki gave her the Otomeian word for it, but went on to say: "So it did hurt her."

"What matters it if it did? As I said, she can weather it," Shizuru returned, aware of her own increasing discomfort with the subject. It seemed to call up those little niggling worries she had at the back of her mind, and this was not supposed to be the time for her to think about them. Right now, this moment, this hour, this day, she merely wanted to enjoy living with Natsuki. She wanted to enjoy Natsuki herself.

She shook her head and ran her hands over the girl's back, kneading the leanness of it under the cloth.

"Robe," she said.

Again came an Otomeian word.

"But still," Natsuki said huskily afterwards. "It was bad."

Shizuru's head came up, her hair tumbling over her shoulders in a loose profusion of blonde waves, threaded with the handful of thin braids Natsuki had finished. The light from the window behind her struck up the gold in her hair and that, with the fierceness of her face, made her seem a gilded portrait of Venus merged with Mars.

Or at least that was what the young woman facing her thought and what made that young woman catch her breath. Shizuru only noted the reaction dimly, though, as she was occupied with saying something.

"No, it was not bad," she declared. "It could not have been bad, for

she gained something from it that was worth all the trouble it cost. She is happier now than she has ever been before, and if the philosophers are to be believed on this, that is all to the greatest good. I believe that. How can it possibly have been bad?"

The big, liquid eyes only looked at her softly in response and Shizuru caught herself. She bent forward for a quick peck on Natsuki's mouth. Their lower lips stuck together for a half-second at the end, as though unwilling to separate.

"In any case, what made you ask about Chikane, Natsuki?" she asked, partly out of a genuine desire to know and partly out of a desire to change the topic. "Or, rather, what made you hesitate earlier when you were about to task that I tell you about her-or about my other friends, for that matter? There must have been a reason."

She received a slow smile in answer.

"Because, I thought," Natsuki began quietly. "I thought it may be... you do not want to tell."

That surprised her.

"You thought I would not want to speak of them?" she said in amazement, looking confusedly at the younger woman. "But I have spoken of them before, many times, with you. I'm certain I have-"

"You talk of things that happen with them," the other interrupted. "But. You do not often, hmm, describe?"

"Describe?" Shizuru repeated. She shook her head again. "I have, I know I have. I do describe them to you as I perceive them, all the time. I have described so many people to you already, Natsuki."

"Yes. No."

"What do you mean?"

Natsuki cocked her head, looking artlessly at her. There was something earnest in that artlessness, however; Shizuru could feel it.

"You describe others, Shizuru," she said simply. "You talk about many."

Shizuru nodded, urging her to go on.

"But you do not describe your friends or your-uh, people close to you," the girl continued. "You do not describe people like that so much."

She lifted her brows and added: "The people you say who know you really. Like a secret. Your secret."

Shizuru stared in astonishment at the serious young woman, suddenly at a loss for words as she began to see what Natsuki was getting at. What lesson was being taught to her and why.

Natsuki smiled just a little at it, though her voice seemed solemn when she spoke once more.

"You do not tell me," she said again, "so I thought I would ask first, Shizuru."

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"Don't tell me you're going to do it. Surely you can't!"

Mauve eyes regarded him apologetically in response. The Princeps Senatus of Hime sighed.

"Then it's so, Mai-san?" he pursued, his forehead gathering only the faintest cloud of disapproval. It passed quickly, as did all clouds on this serene brow. "You're really not going to change your mind?"

The red-haired woman in front of him sighed too.

"I'm sorry, Reito-san," she said. "But I don't see why I shouldn't go ahead with it."

"It seems too early."

She smiled doubtfully at this.

"Like things have been decided in less time," was her answer.

"But without such mitigating factors as this has."

"What mitigating factors does this have?"

Up went the corners of Reito's lips, his handsome face taking on a rakish look as he assumed a smirk. Mai Tokiha flushed at the suggestiveness of the expression.

"Really, Reito-san," she began hesitantly, watching his smile soften at the plea in her voice. "Please! Do try to understand."

"Does Tate?"

"Reito-san," she said again.

He looked at her for a long moment before shutting away his amber gaze, a breath making its way out of his lips in a whistle. Even while emitting such a rueful sound, the woman opposite him mused, his lips did not lose their slightly smiling expression, nor did they lose the lovely crease they had at the corners. The *Principes Senatus* had lips shaped as memorably as the words they produced, folded and sensual in form. They were different from Tate's lips, which were more harshly-cut, browner compared to this wonderfully alive red.

*They're beautiful lips*, she admitted to herself while studying their colour. *Just beautiful...*

"Of course I'm trying to understand," he said then, and her eyes went up to find that his gaze was fixed on her once more. She felt her cheeks warm a little and hoped he had not noticed where she had directed her attention for an instant. "But I hope you shall forgive me for my opposition. As your friend, it is only right to expect that I should be happy and congratulate you. Excuse me for not being so much that. Because as someone who is more than your friend, it is also only right to expect that I should be dismayed on the occasion of your engagement to another man."

He was only a little amused to see that she did not even attempt to restrain her wince.

"Reito-san," she said again in admonition.

He lifted a thick, black eyebrow at the familiar refrain.

"For all that my name seems to be all you have on your lips, it seems you're still intent on doing this," he joked lightly. "In any event, when do you plan to marry Tate? Mind you, this does not mean I've accepted defeat. Though I suppose that makes you wary now. You're probably worried I will play saboteur at the occasion itself."

She chuckled reluctantly.

"No, no," she told him. "I'm sure you wouldn't do that, Reito-san."

"Which is your way of saying *Please don't do that, Reito-san*."

They laughed at each other. It was rather short laughter.

"We were thinking sometime in February or March," she told him afterwards.

The amber eyes stared at her again.

"Next month!" he cried. "As early as that?"

"Yes."

"Have you been planning long before this, then?" he asked suspiciously, putting a touch of faultless hurt into his voice. He knew it would discomfit her. "Ah, I *am* dismayed!"

She jerked a little forward in her seat at this exclamation from him, her hands going up from their death-grip on the arms of the chair to clutch instead at empty air, then coming back down. A wild embarrassment was suffusing her face and rushed all the way up to the roots of her red hair. He leaned forward too, lifting his back from its relaxed slouch.

"No, not at all!" she was saying to him now, practically babbling out her explanation. "We really did just decide on it recently, Reito-san, it's just that Yuuichi and I thought-well, there's no point to dragging it

out."

"Trying to be merciful in applying the sword swiftly?" he teased, gratified to see her discomfort rise another notch with his words. His lips assumed a frown. "Rather, you make me wonder again with that. If you are going to wed so soon and have only decided upon it recently, as you claim, that means few preparations have been made. Do you intend it to be a small celebration?"

She nodded.

"Something private. With only our most intimate friends," she murmured diffidently, before sweeping red-gold lashes upwards. He smiled gently at her uncertain expression, understanding what would come next. "Naturally, we were hoping that you would come to the banquet afterwards."

He said nothing to that, and she burst into more stammers and flutters of her hands, which had been exactly his intention. For being the person on the losing side of this conversation, he reflected with a degree of malice, he was far and away the more composed one. That gave him a measure of gratification: one had to be thankful for the small victories, after all.

Not that that meant he acknowledged Tate's definite victory over him, of course. Nor hers, for that matter.

"Mai-san," he said firmly, cutting off her babble. "Of course I would come, if that is what you want of me. Is that what you want of me?"

She coloured again at his tone.

"I am still-no matter what happens-your friend," he continued. "As I am Tate's mentor and friend as well. If my cheerful albeit slightly tattered presence at your wedding is something that would please you, I would be only too glad to grant it. For *your* pleasure."

If she noted the emphasis he had placed on that particular word, she said nothing. Instead, she merely began to thank him profusely until he finally cut her off once again, waving away her diffidence with his own and thus causing another outbreak of discomfiture. How good

to know that he could still embarrass her so easily, at least! That meant he still had a chance, his pride told him, to even the scales. And he would-oh, he would, sooner or later! He had not become *Princeps Senatus* of the greatest country in the world by simply surrendering a battle once circumstances foiled him. A woman he himself had been pursuing might be getting married to someone many viewed as his young dependant, true, but that petty circumstance was nothing. Marriages were nothing, easily-dissolved things in this day and age! And one did not even need to dissolve them to get what one wanted, sometimes.

*I hope you don't think you've overtaken me already, Tate*, he told his rival and protégé silently, even while maintaining his smile to the woman in front of him. *You've a few things to learn yet!*

"Anyway, Reito-san, I wanted to talk about something," she was saying. "Something else."

"And that would be?"

"About the plan."

There was no need to ask which plan. He understood.

"I see."

She nodded, tossing a few fiery locks forward on her brow: "I brought it up because I've been hearing some rumours about the Mentulaean suit being retracted."

He took the measure of her with one of his clear-eyed sweeps, noting that her usual easy confidence was returning now that they had moved away from personal matters. How like her that was, he thought, and how it amused him to think about it. It would amuse him more to discomfit her by refusing to cede the choice of their topic and pressing the personal issue they had been discussing, but he supposed that would be considered spiteful of him. He did not want to look spiteful, as much as he wanted to see her squirm.

That was not part of *his* plan.

"I hear that their ambassadorial party is thinking of leaving soon,



given the difficulty they've found in their attempts to procure a treaty," she went on, sensing by his expression that he was willing her to continue. And he was, for his logical mind had already shelved away whatever feelings or thoughts he might have regarding their earlier conversation and concerning her marriage. He could deal with all of that later, when it suited him.

"Have you heard anything about that?" she asked him. "About the Mentulaean party leaving?"

Here he smiled. She knew he had been meeting with the head of the ambassadorial party, the Mentulaean Prince Nagi, quite often in the past few weeks. Of course he would know if there was a departure in the wind.

"Yes, I did hear something of the kind," he allowed, folding one leg carefully over the other. The fabric of his tunic slipped a little to one side in a soft swish of material.

"Although it's only talk of yet," he went on. "That is what I hear."

"Oh." Disappointment was patent in her voice. "I was hoping you'd know more than I do."

"I'm afraid not." He angled his head to her in apology before attacking her suspicions head on. "Though I may appear quite thick with Nagi-san and the other Mentulaean officers, I fear that's just an illusion. The only reason they stick to me is because I am the Princeps Senatus, and it would be good for their cause were they to win me over to their side. As such, they would hardly tell me something that doesn't put them in the best light. They tell me no more than what gets around from the rumour mill."

Out came his perfectly white smile.

"Shady bunch," he told her. "That."

She made a noncommittal sound in response. After all, she thought he could be shady too.

"I *will* say this much for them: they know how to throw a fine party," he continued.

"That's nice for you, I suppose," she said with a small grin. "At least you get entertained."

"If anything," he pursued. "Though I doubt they're offering the same type of entertainment to our friends up north."

"No," she said. "I doubt it, too."

He nodded: "To that end, one could say that their ideas of withdrawal from their suit could bode ill."

The reply was swift.

"Do you have any suspicions, Reito-san?" she asked.

"Some, but that's only normal," he said, showing a grin. "I'm a politician, after all."

She produced a sound of amusement.

"Then, as one of our best politicians, would you listen to me if I suggested something?" she asked, not all timidly.

"I would be happy to listen to you at any time," he said, provoking a smile. "But, yes, I think I already know what you want to say, Mai-san. You're thinking we should keep them here a bit longer, yes?"

She agreed.

"For safety, I think," she said. "It would serve our-and Shizuru-san's-cause far better. Don't you think it would be better for us to keep them here as long as we can?"

"Most definitely," he said.

"Can you find a way to do it?"

"My dear, I am the Princeps Senatus," he said with some grandness. "If there is anyone who can delay a person's departure from this city through the entangling snares of legality, well..."

Out came his hand in a gesture obviously drawing notice to himself,

and she laughed.

"That's wonderful, Reito-san," she approved. "I suppose we'll be counting on you for that."

"Of course," he replied, deep-set eyes peering at her slyly. "I can't say I'm not going to be gaining anything from it, you know, since I do expect the Mentulae to ply me with gifts galore in an effort to bribe me into whatever they want, be it for fostering approval of their proposed treaty or for their release from the bonds in which I will put them, whether by fair means or foul. I think I'll actually be enjoying myself a little too much with this project."

Her eyes were dancing. "So long as you can put up with the glorious prince a little longer, then."

"Ah, Nagi-san." He was mindful of the sarcasm she put in the adjective. "You don't like him."

"No, I don't."

"I admit he can be somewhat malicious," he said. "But he's not actually too bad. As company, I mean."

Her tone was evasive: "I wouldn't really know."

"Mikoto dislikes him immensely, did I tell you?"

Her eyebrows rose. They were a lighter ginger at the moment, he noticed, as she had not darkened them today. He knew that she sometimes took to deepening their shade with stibium for social occasions so that they would show better. Had she been truly blonde, she might have let it be as did the others, but since the hair on her scalp was actually several shades of ginger darker than that on her brows, the disparity seemed to bother her enough to merit that cosmetic touch. It was probably the reason too why she let them grow thicker than other women, who took to plucking theirs in order to slim the line.

Personally, he did not mind it either way. Her face had enough character in it, he thought, to overshadow any trifling effect decided by overlight brows or otherwise.

"Mikoto's met him?" she was asking now, her orangey-gold brows still high. "How?"

"Just once, in passing," he answered. "She told me later that he reminded her of an overgrown white rat."

Both of them laughed.

"Oh dear," she said through her laughter. "Mikoto and her imagination."

"I told her she should have liked him, then, since he probably seemed tasty to her," he added, invoking their joke about his younger sister being part-feline. She released another giggle of amusement and he went on. "But Mikoto maintained that she didn't like him."

She pulled in her lips for a second.

"Generally," she submitted, "Mikoto is a good judge of character."

He released a guffaw of hilarity and she stared at him curiously.

"You do know," he snorted out, "that Mikoto doesn't like Tate, right?"

Her face was priceless; he laughed even harder.

"Excuse me, Mai-san," he said unrepentantly later, once his amusement had dwindled to an occasion chuckle in between breaths. He dug into the sinus of his toga for the handkerchief he always kept on his person and pressed it to the corners of his eyes. "I'm afraid I've enjoyed myself a little too much with that joke and somewhat at your expense."

She was too much of a good sport not to giggle back.

"It was a bad slip I made there, wasn't it?" she allowed, looking a tad embarrassed. "I guess that wasn't very cautious of me."

*If you really were serious about him, you wouldn't need caution at all,* was what he thought. But he kept that to himself, like a warm secret in his breast.

"Anyway, about the plan," she resumed, a trifle awkward in her shift of topic again. "Have you spoken to Chikane-san lately?"

The answer was yes.

"She says the general purpose remains as it is." He shrugged lightly, recalling that stately woman's cool expression when they had had their meeting. "Not that I expected anything else. Once that woman has made up her mind to achieve something, she stays firm on it. In her own words, *A slight delay means little to the end if you modify the means in the proper way.* Thus says our senior consul elect and archplotter, Chikane Himemiya."

He said this with easily discernible admiration, and Mai smiled as well. She asked another question.

"I guess she's already started modifying, then?"

"I would think so. Rest easy, Mai-san," he assured her. "Chikane has a genius for organisation. She will see to it all on her end."

"Yes. Yes, of course." She stopped and looked thoughtful. "And when does the Senate intend to discuss the matter of a successor?"

"For the present mission up north?" he said, quite rhetorically. "Oh, I expect it to be brought up tomorrow. It should make for some interesting discussion. Would you like to wager that it shall be one of the less-known, glory-seeking upstarts who shall try to replace our well-known, already-glorious upstart?"

She grinned and said, "I wonder what Shizuru-san would say if she heard your description of her."

"I daresay she'd simply laugh," he said good-humouredly. "Though the real point to ponder, I think, is how all of these developments will be received by her."

"Oh!" She did not even attempt to hide it. "Yes. I was worrying about that, too."

He repeated the word delicately: "Worrying."

"Yes."

"Might I ask why you feel that you should worry?"

She tilted her head in a manner that suggested she would be scratching her hair now, had she been a little younger.

"It seems awkward to me," she answered with a wistful smile. "I know it can't be helped, given the circumstances, but I can't stop thinking that most of the actual blood-toil will be on her part, and we're just preparing the stage for her."

He frowned lightly. "Which *is* our task in this project."

"Yes, but she isn't aware of how exactly we're doing that!" she returned. "Oh, we can send letters to her every now and then, but they will all get to her long after events have been finished and we've probably moved on to taking action on another thing. And Shizuru-san will just have to deal with the fallout."

He inclined his head in confirmation.

"Yes," he said. "It may very well turn out that way."

She groaned softly, indicating her discomfort further.

"I don't know," she told him. "We're deciding things without her, Reito-san, even though we're deciding them *for her*. Even if we ask her opinion on something through courier, time constraints mean we often just presume her accord with us even before she replies. And it bothers me! Because I imagine what it would be like for me in her situation and how comfortable I would be with something like this. I knew this would be the case, too, when Chikane-san first asked me for support on this endeavour, but I guess I can't help but worry for Shizuru-san's sake now that we're in the thick of it. Oh, but I shouldn't be troubling you with my-"

"I understand," he said gently, interrupting her. "But, as you say, we have no other choice. And besides, I believe our judgments of Shizuru-san's possible responses are sound, especially given that the person directing the judgments is the one who knows her best in this city, if not the entire world. Chikane would know, more than any

of us, if our friend would be in accord with something or not. That is the way it's been ever since they were younger. If anyone can understand and predict anything about each other, it would be those two."

She nodded, obviously eager to accept his assurance. He went on.

"Besides, I believe Shizuru-san is doing the same thing we are, at this moment. Since most of our actions are unrevealed to her, she is probably left with the same doubts we entertain, you know."

She sighed.

"You're probably right," she told him. " But but I can't help but still feel as though I'm being so big-headed, to think that she'd just agree with whatever we decide. It's Shizuru-san, after all!"

He laughed at that, understanding exactly what she meant.

"But I know you're right too," she went on. "Excuse me, Reito-san-I know I'm being a worrywart."

He bestowed a large smile upon her.

"Not at all. I suppose," he proposed, "that for reassurance we can simply rely on that wonderful human quality we now call 'trust'. Even Shizuru-san, I think, has nothing to go on regarding our concern for her save that great human quality of faith."

The red-haired woman regarded him gently, with a look in her eyes he could not quite decipher. Just as he was about to ask her what it meant, however, she began to speak again.

"Of course, Reito-san," she said. "It's beyond me to be worrying about things I can't help, after all. I was just a little anxious, you know. I'm sorry for troubling you so much."

"No, please," he said quickly, ever so smoothly. "You know it's my pleasure to help if anything ever troubles you. You need only ask."

"Then do you mind if I ask one last thing? Related to our present subject?"

"Please do, Mai-san."

"Do you really think Shizuru-san would be willing to leave her present mission in someone else's hands for a while? Again I'm invoking the refrain: it's Shizuru-san, after all! Do you think she would really give it up without any misgivings?"

He exhaled confident laughter.

"Of course she would," he ruled boldly. "It would only be sensible for her to return to Hime. She would actually be quite glad to do so, I imagine. There is nothing she stands to lose at this moment if she leaves the cold fastnesses of the dreary northlands to come back to our fair city."



# Chapter 33

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Ala** (s.), **alae** (pl.) - Cavalry unit. The estimates for it vary, but for this story, the fixed number of troopers per ala shall be 500.
2. **Lorica segmentata** - A type of segmented armour, often made of iron strips.
3. **Triumph** – Also known as a triumphal parade, one that a returning and victorious general could hold in Rome after having been given the accolade of being hailed "Imperator!" by his troops after battle. He had to petition the Senate for permission to hold this parade before actually doing it, of course, as the whole city generally turned out for these grand spectacles-which not only involved feasting but also a display of the spoils, captives, and defeated enemy commanders from the campaign.

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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In the billet of the chief centurion of Shizuru Fujino's Ninth Legion, a figure shuffled quietly in one of the rooms. The room was near-black, for it was late afternoon in the winter, and the slatted window shutters meant to keep out the wind did the same for the light. The figure moved carefully in this semi-darkness, feeling its way to a small corner table and pausing there. An instant later, a lamp was lit, and the room recast in the sharpness of the flame's chiaroscuro.

The light revealed some effects tangled together in a heap upon the table, and these were picked up as the figure began to dress. She moved briskly, efficiently, and though she felt the cold stiffening her joints and urging her to return to the comfortable immobility from

which she had just risen, she ignored it. Her hands were chilled, every inch of her body marked with gooseflesh, but she ignored that too. She did not even pause to run her palms across her sides and indulge in a shiver. That would have wasted a few precious seconds she could spend more efficiently.

Just as she was about to finish dressing, other sounds were heard in the room. First was a soft exhalation. This was followed by a shuffle of cloth, and then the faint creak of the bed against the wall as another figure, this one melting into the cream-coloured sheets, slowly sat up.

"Nina," came the tentative call. "Are you going already?" There followed a pause, a stifled yawn. "Nao-senpai won't be back yet."

Nina was finished dressing, and drew out a stool from beneath the table. The wood scraped curtly on the floor and she seated herself.

"I know," she told the other girl. Her arms bent down, reaching for the boots she had left on the floor. "But I have to go back soon."

"Are you doing exercises again today?"

"Yes."

"You always go in early, don't you?"

"Of course, Ers." She stopped, searching for the words in the other's language. "Good discipline is important."

Erstin smiled as though at a private joke. Her short, pale hair glowed agreeably in the yellow lamplight as she ran her hands through it to work out any tangles. Nina spared a second to watch before turning her attention to her boots and pulling them on. She knew Erstin would not find any tangles. Erstin's hair was too short, too soft for them. She knew that because she had worked her fingers into it earlier, tried to tangle her hands in it, only to find the flaxen strands slipping teasingly away.

Her fingers faltered as she was lacing up the straps. She irritably began the knot again.

Meanwhile, the other girl got out of bed, dressing hurriedly but with a great deal of unnecessary movement, in Nina's opinion. That might have been because her clothes were scattered all over the floor near the bed, whereas Nina's had been carefully deposited in one place.

"Do you want to eat something before you go, Nina-chan? I can fix you up something."

Her voice quivered a little and Nina realised she sounded breathless, but that was probably the cold.

"No. Thank you."

"Are you sure? It's no trouble."

"I'm sure."

"Uh... a drink? I'll get you something to drink, at least."

It was on the tip of her tongue to decline again, but then she looked up.

"Yes, please," she conceded, inadvertently producing a smile when the other girl did. "Thank you."

"What would you like to drink?" Erstin asked her. "We have wine and water... and I think I still have some milk from this morning."

"Why do you have milk?" Nina asked, aware that Himeans did not treat it as a beverage and considered Otomeians odd for favouring it even after passing infancy.

"Used it to cook something. So would you like some milk? I can warm it up for you."

"Milk is fine. And it's fine if you don't warm it."

"But it's so cold," Erstin protested. "And you're going out. I don't want you to get a chill."

A thin laugh passed Nina's lips.

"Where I live, this is not cold," she explained to the other girl. "The winter of the lowlands is still autumn for Otomeia."

"It must be freezing up there right now," she remarked. "I keep forgetting you're used to it, Nina-chan."

Nina nodded.

"Then, if you're sure, I'll just go get the milk." The blonde took a wrap hanging from a hook on the wall and opened the door, then paused to ask. "You're really sure?"

Nina was finishing with the other boot.

"Yes," she said.

"I'll be back really quick."

She had dashed out of the room too fast to hear Nina mumble her reply: "I know."

While Erstin was away, the other girl worked on gathering up and putting on the rest of her military impedimenta. She remained on the stool once finished, sitting very still as was her wont. A moment later, she relaxed her rigid posture and curved a little, sighed out. That was unusual for her.

This other of the last surviving noble Ortygians was not a terribly introspective person-or, at least, not the kind of introspective person who thought of such things as would induce sighs. Her thoughts were often more concerned with the stuff of duty and execution, things that had to be done and how to do them effectively. Not good material for sighing at all. And that suited her just fine.

This was because Nina's mind was as ramrod straight as her back, unflinching in its determination to remain consistently rational according to the reason that dictated it. As with most people of truly consistent reason, this meant she herself did not wholly appreciate the effects of this trait. If there was anyone who knew her well enough to appreciate it on her behalf, it was perhaps her elder cousin, who understood more than anyone else how Nina's steadfast mind was both her strength and her weakness. But given

that the same cousin was also the kind of person who hesitated to take such liberties as advising another absent solicitation, it was unlikely that her insight would ever be imparted to Nina. Thus, Nina simply went about life and contemplations of it in what she thought was her own coldly rational way. For example, she now attempted to reason out to herself what she was still doing here, waiting in a Himean girl's room when she could be on her way to the barracks for morning duty.

*I'm frittering away time needlessly, she was telling herself. I should have said I had to leave immediately, but that would have made Ers sad, and that would not do. One doesn't treat people who treat one well with shabby conduct in return. Still, I should drink the milk quickly and go.*

That was what she told herself, thinking that she would rather have left as soon as possible and with minimum fuss. It was, she thought, much more economical. In this she was both right and wrong. It *would* have been more economical in that it would have permitted her to arrive early for the morning muster of her division. That meant more time to see to her duties and tasks. However, the question of economy was always one of measured gains, and she had to admit that a little more time spent with Erstin was not without gain either.

But then, there was always that feeling to consider.

*I wonder why I always feel like this afterwards, she thought to herself. Every time it starts, I just feel like I have to get away or be stuck in it. I don't understand it at all. The morning after, I always feel so strange.*

Strange-or perhaps a better word was "awkward". She was unable to explain it, but she could certainly feel it each time: a kind of dislocation or vertigo alien to her, and it bothered her very much. What was it and why did it always seem to come to her after she woke up next to the girl even now returning from her errand?

"Here you are," said the Himean, coming in and handing over the promised cup of milk. It was warm, and Nina was a little surprised by that. Erstin had warmed it after all. "I'm sorry I took so long. I got you some bread too."

Amber eyes took in the hunk of bread, the dark crust broken by a white fissure. Erstin spoke again.

"I put some butter in it," she explained, almost as though in apology. "I thought you'd like it."

Nina stared at the items in her hands, her head inclined so that a few locks of hair fall over her face. That was a calculated move; her cheeks felt warm.

"Yes, I like it," she said slowly. "Thank you, Ers."

"You're welcome."

"I will eat the bread on the way."

"Sure."

She raised the cup to her lips while the other girl pulled up another stool. She observed the blonde as the latter rubbed at her eyes sleepily. Another hand came up to cover a yawn.

"Go back to the bed," Nina told the other girl, grinning at the succession of eye-rubs and yawns that proceeded from the first set. "You're sleepy still!"

The soft and pale eyes came up.

"Oh, no, I'm fine," Erstin protested gently. "But you're amazing, Nina-chan, so awake so quickly. Did you sleep fine?"

"Yes."

"But you never seem sleepy."

"I wake quickly, like you said."

Erstin nodded, a couple of flaxen locks falling over her brow. Nina's fingers twitched on the cup.

"Oh!" Erstin's exclamation surprised the quiet of the room. "I just remembered! Fujino-san's new armour."

She sprang up from the chair, one palm against the table.

"I think I'll walk out with you after all, Nina-chan," she said, smiling ruefully. "I just remembered that one of the local armourers-some really popular blacksmith, I think-he met Nao-senpai yesterday. He left a cuirass Fujino-san commissioned from him, and asked Nao-senpai if she could give it to the general. I think he had to go somewhere so he couldn't do that himself-I forgot it yesterday! Nao-senpai will scold me if I don't do it this day."

"No," Nina interrupted with surprising firmness. "No, she will not scold you, Ers. I will take it to Fujino-san myself. I'm passing by the governor's mansion. I will bring it to her."

"Oh, no, I couldn't make-"

"Give it to me, it's fine." Nina smiled. "You should sleep. Rest."

"I'm sorry for the trouble, Nina, really."

"It's fine, I said." She put the cup to her mouth again and finished the rest of the milk, feeling its warmth settle pleasantly in her stomach. "Where is it?"

Erstin went to fetch it with her. It was wrapped up in a sturdy stitched-leather sack. Nina shouldered it, hiding the slight strain it put on her back and arms. She knew such an object would encumber her were she wearing it in battle, so she could not help but wonder how the Himean general would fare with it. All the same, she gathered from Erstin's idle banter as they walked through the house that the primipilus, upon handling the object yesterday, had pronounced it wonderfully light. *Wonderfully light?* She herself could not fight properly with a millstone like this around her neck. A miracle if she did not lose balance and tip over onto some waiting spear!

*But I'm part of the light cavalry,* she allowed to herself. She had never been used to fighting with heavy armour, and this was why she had joined that particular unit of the Otomeian army. Aside from her preferences in combat, she had her own body type to consider. She had much the same build as her cousin, a woman slender as a

stalk. The only difference was that, whereas Natsuki was quite tall, Nina herself fell only to average height for women-and with respect to handling added weight, that could very well matter. Still, she doubted that her taller cousin would be willing to wear such a cumbersome thing for going into battle. Just like her, the older Otomeian prized mobility very highly when fighting, and that meant as little extra weight as possible.

She shifted the object against her back as she trudged through the streets, having said farewell to Erstin with a press of their lips. It had made her mouth tingle earlier, but the biting wind had soon replaced that strange tingle with a more familiar one. That was preferable; it lessened her discomfort. Familiarity, to Nina, was always comforting. Having thus imposed a familiar feeling on her body with the help of the winter cold, she then went about imposing familiar thoughts on her mind. She began by listing the things she needed to do this day, and the way she would go about them. That was finished quickly, however, as she had no particular duties today that were out of the routine. Except for the delivery of the package on her back, of course.

Well, that brought a new subject to mind. She set her lights immediately on that new topic, seizing on it with the swiftness of a hound finding fresh game. Even if the immediate subject was unfamiliar, it nonetheless involved something that she did know and care about: her cousin. Hence her enthusiasm in pondering the immediate subject, which was the Himean named Shizuru Fujino.

*Shizuru Fujino-even the name is unusual*, she thought, being familiar enough with Himean designations to understand that there were few Fujinos among those people, and possibly even fewer Shizurus. Being from a society where name choice was handled reverently, she appreciated that sense of uniqueness. It was only fitting, anyway, that such a woman should have a distinctive name.

Nina thought the Himean general especially distinctive for a particular reason. To be sure, she acknowledged that the foreign woman's distinction arose from many traits: she had distinctive good looks; she was a distinctive warrior and an even more distinctive commander; she came from distinctive stock; she had those distinctive eyes. So many distinctions, on the whole! But, impressive



as all of these were, Nina's impression of the Himean was based primarily on one particular merit, one that touched directly on one of the constants in Nina's life: the achievement of having broken through the fortified walls of her cousin's mind and heart. There indeed was a great distinction!

*I myself can't lay claim to it*, she confessed. Whatever Nina's relationship was with her cousin, she knew it could not possibly compare to the relationship her cousin and the Himean seemed to have forged in their short time together, a relationship of strange depth and baffling sincerity. To say it baffled Nina would be an understatement. To her, Natsuki had always been Natsuki: cool, enigmatic, and methodical. Dark of temper occasionally yet almost blindingly just. Learned and logical. Worthy of having been the heir apparent to the throne of Ortygia.

It would be fair to say that Nina came close to idolising her cousin: how could one not idolise one so remarkable? Yet, perhaps because of her admiration, she had failed to perceive several things about Natsuki too all this time. Some might even ask if she had chosen to disregard them. There was a difference between the two kinds of ignorance, certainly. Even so, to one of Nina's ilk, it was all the same. Asking how she had not known something before was neither here nor there after the lack of knowledge had already been discovered. She had been ignorant of some things about her cousin; that was all.

Weeks now into the revelation of these things, she still could not quite come to grips with them though. One of the things of which she had been ignorant was integral to her cousin's relationship with the Himean. Simply, it was that Nina had never thought of her cousin as a sexual being before this affair. That aspect of the association-or the only aspect of the association, if some were to be believed-had struck her like a kick in the teeth. Her teeth were still rattling. Who would have thought it before this? The Princess Natsuki, a sexual creature?

*But if she knew of Erstin, Natsuki might say the same of me.*

No, it was a bad idea to think about that. If the kick from the revelation of that side of her cousin was still rattling her teeth, the

one having to do with hers had not yet ceased stomping. Better to think of her cousin's situation instead. Better to think on what it could bring.

But what *could* it bring, she wondered anxiously.

"A delivery for General Shizuru Fujino," she said to the guards of the gubernatorial mansion, holding up the sack she had on her back.

They waved her through and she followed a slave who had been corralled into acting as her guide through the huge residence. Soon she was in a corridor leading to a room with her target. She declined to have the slave announce her presence for her and he left her to walk down the corridor alone.

She could see the Himean already as she approached, the woman's height and fair hair making her easy to spot even from a distance. Nina's cousin was with her, of course: they sat together, hands clasped.

*Odd to see her in that pose*, she thought with the unease of a person seeing a former acquaintance as a sudden stranger. Despite the brief misstep this caused, she quickly returned to her usual gait. She was using it as a way of announcing herself to her cousin, who had probably already detected her approach. Had she? Yes, Natsuki *had* detected it, if that slight tip of her head was any indication. And the fact that she did not bother looking in Nina's direction surely meant she had identified the younger woman by her walk now.

In the back of Nina's mind, in a recess where all those odd but familiar things were stored away, some part of her wondered at that ability of Natsuki's for the thousandth time. In the back of her heart too, in a similarly-assigned recess, a part of her warmed at the thought that her cousin should know her so well as to be able to identify her merely by the sound of her walk... for there were occasions when the elder Otomeian would profess to being unable to recognise the pattern of the steps nearby, but never when it came to hers. While this was a fine thought, it was just as well that she never enquired further from Natsuki herself. Had she done so, the other's answer might have diminished some of the romance of her secret comfort, for the reason was actually quite straightforward: it

was in Nina's walk itself.

What Nina did not apprehend-and which Natsuki had long noted-was that she was a very distinctive walker. Her distinction was in the fact that she had absolutely no affect. She had no swagger, no sway to her hips, no strut and no swing. Nina did not mince her steps or extend them; she had absolutely none of the drama of her cousin, who either glided in the sun or prowled in the shade. Indeed, that difference extended even to their characters: both being generally perceived as solemn, the elder had a sombreness that encouraged high drama, while the other had one that encouraged only a straightforward, uncomplicated gravity. So Natsuki could easily tell when it was Nina approaching, for the latter's gait mirrored her character. It was of the rare rhythm that suggested nothing in its intention save the most practical one: to simply, perhaps even boringly walk .

Thus moving along in her steady fashion, the young Otomeian finally reached the pair. They were no longer hand-clasped when she stood before them and returned their greetings, explaining her purpose and offering the leather pack she had been labouring over for the past half-hour. She offered it to both of them, unsure of who should relieve her of it. The Himean took it before Nina's cousin could do so, squeezing a warm hand on Nina's arm fleetingly in thanks for her trouble.

*Look at that,* Nina thought when the woman lifted the sack. *She handles it like it weighs nothing. Yet her touch on my arm was featherlight.*

"I thank you, Nina-han, and am sorry you had to come all this way," the Himean apologised. "This is quite heavy, and I fear I have troubled you somewhat."

The girl shook her head, ignoring the twinge in her shoulder that agreed with the words.

"No, I was glad to do it, General Fujino," she assured in her most official manner.

Her eyes darted to the side, towards her cousin, and she nodded

deferentially to that other woman present.

"Natsuki," she said.

Natsuki nodded back.

"I go to morning duty," she went on. The unspoken question trailed after her words like foggy breath. *Do you have any orders, Cousin?*

Natsuki delivered in her customary fashion: "Kyo. Report to me. After three hours."

Nina was about to confirm the message when she heard a long exhalation from the other person present. She turned to the Himean general, whose smile was wry.

"I thought I was concise," that woman muttered, lifting a brow at Natsuki. "You do not have to restrict yourself to such curt syntax, Natsuki. If the subject of your message is clandestine, you could simply use your language. Gods know I am not able to understand much of it yet."

A healthy crimson spot appeared on each of Natsuki's cheeks.

"No," Nina's cousin said after a swallowing pause. "It is not that."

Nina looked from one woman to the other, noting the mischievous glint in the foreigner's red eyes. Deciding to simplify things for her apparently beleaguered cousin, she took it upon herself to explain and save Natsuki some trouble.

"We speak like this often, General," she said, changing what should have been 'she' into 'we'. "It's clear for us."

Shizuru smiled at her. Yet when Nina glanced at her cousin, she saw that she did not look too pleased, although Natsuki did not exactly scowl either. Why, what was the matter with what she had just said? Had she not said it for Natsuki's sake?

"Oh, I see," the Himean before her said, intruding on her doubts. "Forgive me for the accusatory tone of my suggestion then, Nina-han."

Nina stopped her scowl before it could come as a result of her confusion. Why was the woman apologising to her? It did not sound sarcastic, yet the woman had no need to apologise, being supreme commander of the Himean-Otomeian army on this expedition and thus technically superior to both herself and her cousin. Truly this person was a unique character! Hard to understand. In spite of the articulacy for which the Himean was much-lauded, she could also be surprisingly incomprehensible.

Just like the Princess Natsuki, come to it.

Straightening from her bow, she took in the pair before her with swift estimation. That chance review let her see something she had failed to notice before.

*The same eyes*, she noted with amazement, while struggling not to betray it. *The same eyes in them*. How to describe it? It was apparent only when you contrasted it to their manner, after all: both cool, generally unruffled. Stoic impressions. And yet their eyes spoke differently. Oh, not that they betrayed exactly what they were thinking-far from it! Those eyes were too complex in their expressions to read easily. But the way those eyes-one pair red and the other, green-looked out showed something of what was hiding inside. Something volatile, something of far greater energy than what the rest of the demeanour betrayed.

*They're still on the outside*, she mused, trying to grasp the flash of insight threatening to slip away. *They're still but not within*. *They're hiding something else within*. Damn it all, what was the word for what she was thinking of here? What did one call that? "Energy", perhaps, or "power"? Could it even be "danger"?

The best word would actually have been "passion", but Nina's vocabulary did not admit of it, alas!

"Have you taken your midday meal already, perchance? There is a goodly spread set in the mansion's dining tables at the moment, and I think they would not be at all bothered to have another diner over."

The silky invitation cut in on her thoughts again and she snapped quickly to attention, berating herself for being drawn into such

convoluted evaluations of the two women before her. A silly thing to do, after all, and with little likelihood of proving productive in the future.

"Yes, General," she answered, remembering the bread she had in her pouch. "I've eaten."

The beautiful face before her-one of them, anyway-tilted to one side, lips curving into another smile.

"That is well," the woman said.

Nina nodded, feeling more and more self-conscious by the second. The scrutiny of those bloody eyes did not escape her and she knew that for as long as she stayed, she would not escape them in turn.

"I will excuse myself now, General," she said, striving to make it sound as businesslike as possible. "To go to duty, if you would allow me to go."

"Oh, of course," the fair-haired woman said. "Excuse me for having not only obliged you to detour for this-" she lifted the pack containing the cuirass, and again Nina noted how easily she did it "-but for also having detained you this long. Please do not let me keep you any longer."

"I was glad to bring it to you, General," Nina reassured, all crispness and official manner now.

The young woman went off, leaving Shizuru watching her as she walked away. Nina's cousin turned to the Himean then and offered to take the bag with the cuirass from her. The older woman declined.

"No, but thank you anyway, *meum mel*," she said. "I can carry it myself. Let us go to our room? I would like to unwrap it there."

Natsuki agreed, so they turned and began to head towards their quarters. As they began navigating the passageway returning to the main hall, from where they could more swiftly access the corridor leading to their actual destination, Shizuru began to talk.

"I think that your cousin..." she commenced and trailed off, to

Natsuki's curiosity. "Well, now. How do I put this?"

A few seconds passed.

"Nina?" the low voice finally prompted, obviously wanting her to continue.

"Yes. Nina."

"What of Nina?"

This time, it was Shizuru who looked curiously at her. The look was assessing, and its silence confused the younger woman enough to try again.

"What-what of Nina?" she asked, dropping her voice to its lowest register after her stutter. It only served to make it huskier, and that was an effect that made the other woman smile.

"What of Nina indeed?" she said, quite enjoying too the attention the green eyes were giving her. "I was thinking that-"

*She is quite different from you, after all.*

"That she seems a brisk young woman," she finished, at which Natsuki's expression eased only a little. It was clear the younger woman was still curious about what she had meant to say and suspected rightly that it had been something different from what she eventually said. "How old is she again, Natsuki? Two years younger than you, correct?"

"Yes."

"Her demeanour is that of someone further on in years, it seems to me."

"Oh."

"You disagree?"

There was the slightest pause before Natsuki answered: "No."

"No?" Shizuru repeated dubiously. "Yet there was hesitation just now."

This time, the pause was decidedly longer.

"No reason," came the reply, a gentle evasion. "I was thinking. Shizuru."

Shizuru grinned. Why was it that the girl seemed to use her name as punctuation whenever she wished to stress something and when had it begun? Well, no matter. Two could play the same game.

"Is that so? I see. *Natsuki*," she said, tacking on the name after a long pause at the end. Judging from Natsuki's dry peek, the girl took her jest completely. "I was simply wondering. You hardly tell me about her and she does intrigue me too, you know."

"Uhm."

"And besides, I think it only fair that you should tell me about her now, in exchange for all the things I have been telling you about my friends, the entirety of last week."

The younger woman frowned and pursed her lips. It was true that Shizuru had responded gamely to her jibe over a week ago about that particular topic. So now she felt the onus of producing an equal reaction weighing on her and, as Shizuru knew, would submit to it. That was the beauty of dealing with Natsuki, she thought: if you phrased a request to her as one that she had to satisfy in order to be just or honourable, she would grant it absent hesitation.

"Nina," the girl eventually said, "is young."

Shizuru was glad she was able to suppress her smile just in time.

"You think so?" she prodded the creature whom she often called "child".

"Mmhm. She seems old?"

"Older than her years, yes."



"Hm. May be."

"May I hear the objection?"

"I do not, um, object."

"But I thought you just asserted the opposite of my own assertion earlier." Shizuru lifted an eyebrow. "I said she seemed older than her years, to which you replied by saying she was young. That seems an objection to me, Natsuki."

She watched as the girl scowled again, the pretty features twisting in a way that expressed more thoughtfulness than annoyance. Her gaze fixed on the Otomeian's beautifully slim and dark brows, admiring their slant on the icy contours of skin.

"I do not say an objection," Natsuki said slowly, apparently giving great thought to her words. "I mean 'young' in a different way that—that is to say she has still many things to know."

"Oh, young in that sense," Shizuru answered. "Might I ask what 'things' you were thinking of when you said that, then? Surely there is something in particular?"

An affirmative sound.

"I do not—I know not how you say it," Natsuki replied. "I must think, you will pardon me, Shizuru. I think she is not, hmm..."

She spoke an Otomeian word here, which Shizuru repeated by rote.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

Natsuki frowned before suddenly producing a triumphant smile.

"I remember it now," she replied. "It is 'flexible', in your language."

"Ah, I see." Shizuru mumbled the foreign word yet again to remember it. "So, you are saying that Nina-han is *inflexible*?"

Natsuki agreed.

"Now, I mean that she is that now, still," she went on conversationally, unwittingly provoking a dumbfounded look from a slave they were passing, his jaw actually falling open as he looked up from his stoop. Shizuru grinned. She knew that many people still found ludicrous the notion of her near-mute attendant holding conversation that actually went beyond a mumble or two-until they saw and heard the girl conversing with her.

"She sees things one way," Natsuki was saying, still talking freely. "She thinks it is easier like that. To see like that."

"Well, it is, actually," Shizuru admitted.

"But it is not really seeing," Natsuki retorted. "No, Shizuru?"

This time, Shizuru showed the girl her brightest smile.

"No. You are right, it is not," she said.

"That is why, sometimes, she does not like to see me," Natsuki said grimly. "I think, sometimes."

"Forgive me, My Dear," Shizuru said carefully, having judged that the younger woman's usage of 'see' as a literal one. "But what do you mean by that? Why would she not like to see you? I thought that you got along?"

The emerald eyes darted to her, giving the answer even before the girl spoke.

"Yes, we do," Natsuki revealed, brow puckering a little. "But I think, Shizuru-this is what *I think*."

"Yes, go on," Shizuru prompted, indicating she accepted the girl's disclaimer.

"I think because she sees, um, old things," said the Otomeian.

"Old things?"

"I mean what is past. The past." She paused unexpectedly, and there was a depth in that pause that caught Shizuru's attention. "In

me."

The older woman's steps slowed a beat, and though the girl noticed, she did not comment. She simply adjusted her own pace to match it.

"Is that so?" Shizuru said very softly.

She shifted the sack she was carrying from one shoulder to the other, and reached out for the girl's hand. They intertwined fingers easily, and she squeezed the smaller digits with her own. Natsuki squeezed back, shaking her head as a way of diffusing the other's concern. Her hair shimmered: it looked like dark water rippling after it had suffered a cast stone.

"Does she remember much of it too or not?" Shizuru asked, not needing to name what 'it' was.

Again Natsuki shook her head.

"She was," she said, "very young."

*So were you, Natsuki.* She did not actually say that, of course. She simply said something standard and noncommittal. She also remembered hearing that they had found Nina hidden in a different place, relatively far from the worst spots of the massacre.

"She is young now," Natsuki told her. "So she thinks to see so narrow is still good. To see only the present, instead of the past and possibilities. But things change. Could be, one day, she will see more. And learn to change too."

"Then she will learn to remedy that failing, you hope?"

"Yes. She must learn. It is important, flexibility."

Shizuru emitted a small laugh: "That is what I keep telling my opponents back home, myself."

"That is why you always win, Shizuru."

That got Shizuru's attention again.

"Do I?" she said.

"Over such opponents, it is natural," the girl replied. "You break them."

"Because they are inflexible?"

A nod.

"Life," the Otomeian said sagely, provoking a chuckle from her, "is about flexibility."

"Spoken like a true philosopher. And would you say you are flexible, Natsuki?"

The young woman actually considered it seriously.

"I try," she said at length.

Shizuru chuckled again, the sound wafting delicately between the two of them.

"From the mouths of the babes," she murmured, before asking Natsuki if she had ever spoken about her own cousin.

"Your cousin?" Natsuki's curiosity was patent. "What cousin?"

"Or *which* cousin, I suppose, since I do have several," Shizuru answered reflectively. "Well, the one who has been writing me regularly ever since I came here, asking for my reconsideration and return. She does it with admirable regularity, actually. Perhaps the only thing worthy of admiration in that one, even. Her name is Tomoe Marguerite."

"To-mo-e."

She said it slowly, as though the syllables taxed her. *How odd that she should say it so*, Shizuru thought, before another thought suddenly intruded: was it because she had mentioned that Tomoe had been pleading for her to leave this mission and come home? Could it be that which had sown that seed in Natsuki's voice?

A little self-consciously, she hoped it was.

"This is her full name?" the young woman asked her, getting a nod. "I do not recognise it."

"We do not share any names in common. She is not actually related to me by blood, but as a consequence of her father wedding my aunt after he was widowed. My aunt on the maternal side. So our cousinship is not 'natural', you might say."

"Ahh."

"She is my junior by less than a year," she continued. "And, I think, sees me more as a sister than a cousin. Or should it be 'idol'? I daresay she is very fond of me."

A vague sound from the Otomeian, who saw the slight sourness in Shizuru's expression as she said this.

"I mention her now because I was comparing you and your cousin's demeanours with each other to ours," she continued nonchalantly. "And was noting the differences. I was thinking, you see, that it is obvious that your cousin thinks very highly of you, and yet does not manifest it in the ways that mine does."

"How."

"How does she manifest her affection to me?"

"Yes."

She took a deep breath before answering, and waited until they rounded the corner.

"Different ways, I would say-more outspoken ones," she said. "But I suppose the difference between them now would be a consequence of the differences in character. We may put it this way: your cousin respects you very much, does she not? It seems to be so to me."

Natsuki looked pensive, but nodded anyway.

"Would you say she would hate to disappoint you?" Seeing the

protest on the other's face, Shizuru added swiftly: "I am asking about how you think *she* would feel, Child. This has nothing to do with your actual expectations and demands-or lack thereof-of her. Do you think she would hate the possibility of not being deemed satisfactory by you? Be honest."

A pause, and then another nod.

"Well, I think that is how my cousin feels about the matter too, with respect to me," Shizuru pursued. "But the difference-this is only my opinion, of course, so feel free to counter-the difference is that, whereas I think your cousin would always strive to meet your approval in whatever she does, my cousin would only do so insofar as she thinks that I shall perceive her actions."

The slender black brows arched upwards as Natsuki threw a glance at her.

"Yes," Shizuru said. "My cousin lies to me, Natsuki. She is sweet, kind, a bastion of all the primary virtues when I am present. Yet she is an entirely different person when she thinks I am not looking. She has no scruples about acting in a way that would displease me so long as I am not there to see it."

"Of course, I can hardly take her to task for that," she continued almost tiredly. "Or, at least, I have no reason to do so just yet. I myself am hardly a person of great consistency, and I am aware that I change my attitude to suit the occasion too. Still, it is quite unsettling to know that there is so great a disparity between her various attitudes that they may already be considered malicious deceit, especially when the attitude she turns so often to me seems to be mimicry of one of my own."

"Mimicry. She copies you, Shizuru?"

"Yes, in a way."

"Huhm." Natsuki rumbled the sound softly. "Is she like you?"

" No ."

"Ah."

They exchanged a swift glance, red striking upon green.

"You are wondering about the swiftness of my answer, I suppose?" Shizuru surmised. "Did you know her, you would have no cause to wonder. She and I are still different enough from each other to warrant a discernible variation on the same theme."

She stopped here and frowned, gilded brows drawing together. Natsuki waited, stroking her hand with a thumb.

"Then again, that my only be my conceit," Shizuru finally admitted. "Since I actually wish to think us different from each other, and wishes tend to soil one's assessments. Is she like me, really? It is hard to tell. I do not know, and perhaps exactly because I am the supposed pattern, may never know. Self-perception is always reflective, and there has yet to be found a mirror that is not aberrational."

She took a look at Natsuki's amused face and smiled in apology.

"Forgive me, here I am going in circles again when all you needed was a simple 'yes' or 'no'. You know how I fall into these games of mine," she said to the young woman. "If I had to answer simply, Natsuki, I would say tha-"

"Do not," Natsuki interrupted. "Do not answer simply."

Shizuru threw her a bemused look, and the young woman's eyes came alight.

*Oh, it always starts from her eyes,* Shizuru thought, feeling an airy flutter in her midsection. *I love that her smile always starts from her eyes.*

"I like it," Natsuki confessed with some humour. "When you-you are very vague and complicated in your answer. I like that you are complicated."

The older woman had to laugh: "I am complicated, eh?"

Natsuki's eyes were laughing too.

"Yes," she said. "It is true."

"And here I thought the truth was simple . "

"Oh, no," Natsuki disagreed. "Truth, it is complicated."

"Do you think so?" the other answered, intrigued by their conversation. "So lies are not complicated?"

"No, lies are simple," the girl said. "They are many but simple."

"Many but simple." She lifted a golden eyebrow at the girl, who looked unshakeably certain. "If so, how is it that so many deceptions end up becoming so complex that they take years, even centuries to unravel? What say you to that, Little Philosopher?"

They were at the door to their room now. Natsuki passed through first and held it open for her. The girl was shutting it when she gave her answer.

"Not *little*," the Otomeian said mock-proudly, provoking a giggle. "And because many lies are mixed with some truth, I think. And sometimes, the lies, they become truth. It is all simple and also complicated."

Having slid the bolts on the door, she turned around to be surprised by the Himean kissing her forehead very tenderly. She looked up at the older woman with a question.

"Because you pleased me with your paradoxical philosophies," Shizuru explained. "Now, then, I am afraid we must set this aside for now and replace philosophy with fashion for a moment-as so often happens with philosophy these days, it seems." Her eyes were on the cuirass she had set on one of the chairs. "Do assist me in trying it on, would you?"

With Natsuki's help, they were soon able to fit the cuirass properly over her body and tie the straps to hold it there. It was comfortable, Shizuru thought, and yet the maker had managed to stay true to her form, keeping her outline trim without diminishing the piece's functionality. The whole was fashioned out of several smaller plates skilfully attached to each other, arranged in such a way as to permit



movement normally hampered by a standard corselet. The joints were tailored very specifically for the wearer, in this case, so it permitted even more flexibility than usual. Shizuru turned this way and that, testing it to see if the comfort would keep even when she bent.

"He made it well," she exhaled in satisfaction as Natsuki watched her. "I doubt even the smiths at Sosia could produce a *lorica segmentata* of such magnificence! The man does merit his reputation after all."

Natsuki, standing by the bed, agreed.

"Would you like to try it, Natsuki?"

Natsuki's eyes registered surprise.

"No," the young woman said. "No, thank you."

"Ah. A pity. I think this would look very good on you."

"But heavy," Natsuki countered. "And too big for me."

Shizuru considered the girl's form for a second.

*Well, that is true, it is too large for her,* she decided, imposing the image of the armour on the Otomeian's. Natsuki was extremely slender, even if she was tall as well. She was also unaccustomed to the weight of a metal cuirass. A pity: she would have looked so handsome in it, thought Shizuru.

"Are you certain? I really do think you should try it on first."

Natsuki declined again.

"Too big, too heavy," the girl insisted. "For me."

Up shot Shizuru's eyebrows.

"Are you trying to imply that I am too big and heavy for your taste?" she demanded in false offence. "You should be punished for that."

"No-ooohf!"

Shizuru grinned at the woman she had shoved onto the bed and sat on. Natsuki tried to scowl from beneath her, though with no success.

"You see?" the older woman teased. "I told you this would look very good *on you*."

"Mmph."

There was muffled laughter as they struggled, ending with the positions reversed and Natsuki on top. She smiled mischievously at Shizuru and whispered in a voice pregnant with humour: "Too big and heavy."

Shizuru laughed.

"Heavy, am I?" she asked, taking revenge by using both arms to push Natsuki's hips upwards easily, lifting the younger woman's midsection in the process. She laughed when the legs atop her bent swiftly with panic, knees touching the bed, and tried to brace Natsuki's body as part of it was held in the air. "Then you are weightless."

The dark brows above her scowled, the Otomeian's lips pouting until Shizuru finally released her hold. They looked at each other as their lower bodies came together again.

"I think you really should eat more, Natsuki," Shizuru said, closing her eyes. "I feel you still weigh too little for your height. You're skinny!"

There was no answer from the young woman above her and she shot a quick glance at the girl's face. Natsuki looked discomfited, she realised, and she decided to change tack. She remembered that she had been mentioning the idea quite often and now worried that the younger woman felt she was nagging. But it was only natural to be concerned, was it not? The girl was so lean, after all, to the point of barely escaping boyishness: while it lent something to her strange and willow-formed appeal, Shizuru knew the girl could stand a little more on her bones. It could not bode well for the girl's future health

either that her appetite was so meagre. Natsuki was not a great eater, nor someone who seemed to regard eating as anything other than a necessity for her daily function. Shizuru suspected the girl might even forget to eat on occasion, were she not accompanying her at mealtimes.

"It is not that I find anything displeasing about your body, of course," she said gently. "It is merely that I worry for your vigour in this brutal weather, which comes wretchedly harsh to those of sparing build. I did not mean to be bothersome, Natsuki."

Natsuki shook her head.

"I know," she told Shizuru, getting up on hands and knees so that she put space between their bodies. Shizuru wondered what she was doing, and worried for a second that she intended to get to her feet already. She saw that the Otomeian had other intentions soon enough. A hand went to her chest, fingers tracing the finely-tooled ornamentation of the cuirass. Natsuki was fascinated by it, judging from her countenance.

"Your seal," the young woman said, her fingers on the embossed design at the centre of the breastplate. "This."

"Yes."

"Made for you?"

"Yes."

"You commanded-asked for it? This way?"

"Yes, I ordered it."

"Ohh."

Shizuru smiled at the sigh of wonder, letting the other continue her investigations as she wished. She asked Natsuki if she had ever seen similarly ornate cuirasses before.

"Mm," was the answer. "But different styles. And I have not touched."

"This is your first time to truly inspect one, then?"

"Mm."

"What do you think?"

The travelling fingers paused, deep green eyes coming to her. There was laughter in their depths.

"Heavy," Natsuki said, dropping her head on the metal breast. It shook with the older woman's mirth at the conclusion.

"Oh now, if you keep saying that I shall start to feel like some beached whale," Shizuru said amidst her giggles. "Lumpy and blubber-filled. Ugh. How horrid!"

"Beached whale," Natsuki repeated, before saying suddenly: "I have heard of whales."

That was an odd way to put it.

" *Heard of*, Natsuki?" she said.

"Sailors talk of them often."

"They do. But you have never seen one?"

The young woman emitted a soft laugh: "Under me, now."

"Be serious," Shizuru said, rapping her with a featherlike tap on the head. Her hand remained on the black locks afterwards. "Although I suppose that I may be called that, in a figurative sense. But about the whales! Do you mean to tell me you have never seen one?"

Natsuki stretched out, crawling upwards to face her.

"No," she said, serious again. "I have."

"Where?"

"Paintings."

"Where else?"

"Only paintings."

"I see." Shizuru thought for a moment. "I suppose it is only natural, since you live away from the open sea. Do you know how to swim?"

"Yes."

"Do you like it?"

The nod was brisk: "Yes."

"Perhaps we should go swimming sometime."

Natsuki was incredulous.

"Not now," she cautioned the older woman. "You will get cold. And sink under the water."

"Only I?" was the teasing answer. "What about you?"

The girl smirked.

"Me?" she said roguishly. "I am not heavy."

"Brat."

The laughed.

"Ah, come," Shizuru said, indicating that she wanted to rise. "Why do we have these sheets of metal between us when we could hold each other better and with fewer obstacles-or better yet, no obstacles at all, save in a few intransigent angles?"

There was a chuckle from the other woman and she continued, "Though I believe that, with a little flexibility, those gaps can be bridged too."

She winked outrageously at the Otomeian, who actually dissolved into red-cheeked and muffled laughter. Her mouth nearly broke from the broadness of a grin, too, at the sight of her often-stoic companion so wracked by hilarity. It was such a delight to see her this way, she thought, acting more like the girl she should have been

if not for the contrary machinations of fate.

"Come up and help me take this off, please," she said anyway, laughing too. "You imp, stop it already and help me. Did I look so ridiculous earlier?"

Natsuki paused long enough to affirm it, grinning at her hugely. Shizuru winced in good humour.

"And here I thought I was being irresistible," she muttered, setting them both on a fresh bout of mirth.

Later, they finally paused in their antics long enough to sit up and set about the task. They removed the cuirass carefully, handling it with the reverence of people who appreciated not merely its beauty but its purpose as well. Natsuki set to work draping it over the back of one of the chairs afterwards, and Shizuru watched her from the bed.

"Yes-just so. That should be fine. My thanks, Natsuki," she said, before admiring the object yet again. "I truly am pleased by how well it turned out. I can hardly wait to use that now for one of the parades. Or doff it for a triumph. It is glorious enough to wear at a triumph."

Natsuki was still fussing over the arrangement of the cuirass.

"You will have one," she said, head bent over the chair. "Yes?"

"A triumph Well, yes, but that is still far into the future," Shizuru replied. "I shall not hold the triumph for a while."

It was Natsuki who actually said it for her: "Until you go back home."

Shizuru's head came up.

"Yes, I will have it then," she said in response. "However, that shall not be for a very long time."

Natsuki gave no reply and she continued.

"This campaign shall go on for a good while longer, as you know. So

I shall be deferring my triumph for my return. It will be a very long time indeed."

She was not sure if Natsuki's head nodded or it was merely the girl's present task that had conceived the gesture. She was about to call her name when the dusky voice finally spoke.

"It is good."

She stared at her after that, trying to catch the girl's attention but failing as the latter kept her head hanging over the already well-arranged cuirass, to which all her interest seemed to have been directed.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"It is good," the young woman repeated. "This cuirass is good for your triumph."

"Indeed," Shizuru replied almost impatiently. "As I said, earlier."

"Yes."

"It would suit a triumphing general, I said."

Natsuki's lips, she saw, held a very small smile.

"Very pretty," they told her. "You will be magnificent, Shizuru."

For some reason, the faint sadness in the tone got the Himean to blurt out the words she had been trying to hold back.

"You wish to see it?" she demanded, only slightly horrified by her own temerity. "Natsuki? Would you like to see?"

Natsuki stilled, then raised her head slowly to meet the anxious crimson eyes. Her own eyes seemed to echo their emotion before suddenly glazing over with casual amusement, her lips turning up into a relaxed smile. Shizuru watched the shift with astonishment. It astonished her so much that she quickly forgot that she was astonished by her own question, in fact.

Still, she was not one of Hime's greatest politicians for nothing. Her countenance went bland instead of bothered. A second later, she looked perfectly composed again, having recovered enough to school her face. But Natsuki's expression had set her thoughts in turmoil.

*Since when, she was asking, has Natsuki ever needed to put up a mask so earnestly around me?*

"I already have seen it," the younger woman was saying in her cool voice and with surprising insensitivity. "Just now, remember? I liked it."

"Yes," Shizuru said.

"I told you it was good," the girl continued. "I already said this. Shizuru, you forget."

They stared at each other. The emerald eyes, still glazed over with that strange, light expression, suddenly twitched, and she knew they would rip away any moment. *No, no, do not look away from me.* She chanted that in her mind, willing the thoughts to somehow impose on the reality. Despite that, she said nothing until Natsuki had turned around and already started to walk away. It was then that she sprang from her seat and caught the girl's hand, killing off her escape.

Again they stared at each other.

"I do not forget, Natsuki," she said, holding the pale hand firmly, expression saying that she would not let her leave yet. "Is that *really* what you think?"

A beat, a flicker of fear on Natsuki's face. Shizuru unlocked her hand at the sight.

"Where are you going?" she asked when the girl turned and walked off again. "What is it, Natsuki?"

It was uncharacteristic of her to quiz someone so rapidly, to follow a question so quickly with another. She was aware of that. At the moment, however, she decided she did not care. All her cares had



been condensed instead to a single focal point, which was the girl still walking away.

"Natsuki, I asked you a-

She would have gone on had Natsuki not cut her off.

*And that, she decided, is out of character too.*

"A drink, Shizuru," the younger woman replied, acting strangely calm. "I was to get you a drink."

Shizuru's eyes went to the closet at the other end of the room. That was where the cups and liquor were kept, and that *was* where Natsuki had been headed.

"You drink always, after we walk," Natsuki was telling her, slipping loose from her slackened hold. Parting from the younger woman's touch felt like tearing off her own skin. "You will not take a drink now?"

"A drink?"

"A drink."

Shizuru looked at her and saw the calmness of her face, the unnatural lack of emotion in those large green eyes. Too much strangeness, and far too quickly. What to do? Shizuru weighed the matter in a series of near-instantaneous calculations, trying to figure out what would be best to do in this situation. Eventually, she sighed to herself and judged it was better to let it pass for now, at least until she understood better what was going on here and what Natsuki was feeling. Or hiding, for that matter.

"Yes," she said. "Of course. I shall drink, if you would be kind enough to get something for me."

"Wine? Water?"

Shizuru's eyes went to the closet nearby, where they kept the wine. There was an excellent Falernian there, and a jug of Chian so fine it would have made an Epicure weep. The decision seemed easy.

"Wine, if you please."

Natsuki mumbled agreement.

"The Chian one, Natsuki."

"I will get."

"Thank you."

Shizuru watched her step away, conscious of a sense of anticlimax. She had finally broached a topic, after all, that had caused her so much conflicted introspection for so long. It was only natural she should expect something more dramatic! The situation had seemed to lead to that, right before Natsuki veered it away and into duller channels.

*Could Natsuki be afraid of it too*, she asked silently, stepping backwards in order to perch on the bed. It was understandable if that was the case, and perhaps even expected. It was such a frightening topic! Yet she had not really given a thought to Natsuki's uncertainties about it before now, so saddled had she been by her own doubts. Now she saw just how far they had ridden her, for she was surprised by her selfishness. How could she have forgotten that Natsuki too would have her own opinions on the matter?

"Pour yourself a drink as well, Natsuki, if you want one," she said aloud, while pondering. "I know wine is not really your preferred beverage, especially not unwatered wine, so you should feel free to take what you wish."

The girl went on with her task. She was pouring wine from a decanter to the ornate cup she had set on the table. Shizuru watched the stream of blood-like fluid as it rushed out, steadier but also slower than her own racing thoughts.

*If she is avoiding the topic, that may mean several things*, she decided, unable to get out of her mind the image of the girl slipping on a facade. It had been so unexpected! She had seen Natsuki put on the mask of sombreness before and the mask of indifference, too-but never the mask of ignorance. Not like the girl to dodge a hit

without countering, but she had done that this time, and had even run away after it! What could be the reason for that? What did that indicate and what did it possibly mean?

A sigh.

Getting ahead of herself again, was she not? She should actually be thankful that Natsuki had stopped her earlier. Otherwise, a supposed resolution to that problem might have been forced without having been given sufficient thought-and this needed a good deal of thought indeed. This was something that required great insight, much planning. It was a decision that would require a person's full conviction, and when the time came for her to make it, she would give it all of hers. But not now, when she knew so little about what Natsuki felt still.

*Now is not yet the time*, she judged, accepting the cup being offered to her. *Now* was far too early, when there was still so much to be done and so much left to run its course. Better to take the reprieve Natsuki had granted so kindly and deal with the things that had to take place first. It was necessary to do so before she could rule on how to handle that other, later problem. And she would. Gods bear witness, she would handle it.

"I am sorry."

The word pushed her gently out of her considerations, and she looked up to find Natsuki's head before her, the long curtain of dark hair hiding most of her face.

"Natsuki?"

"I am sorry I was slow," Natsuki repeated. "With your wine."

"Oh, not at all," Shizuru said, reaching up with her other hand and brushing the fall of black hair. It was comforting that Natsuki did not flinch at the touch. "Forgive me, Natsuki, I was thinking about some tasks and my mind wandered. You were not slow at all, so please look up. I need no such obeisance from you, you know. Never from you."

The next second showed her the rosiness of the girl's skin. She made Natsuki sit next to her.

"Excuse my lapse," she said. "You shall not drink?"

The other shook her head.

"I see. If you would like a sip of my wine, however, simply tell me."

A nod this time. Unexpectedly, a few raps on the door intruded on the silence, and she looked that way with a little irritation. Natsuki was already on her feet, however, indicating she would see who it was.

"Thank you, Natsuki," she said. Suddenly she smiled. "Oh, I think it may be the map I ordered made. I asked the legates to have it sent to me today."

She was right. Natsuki returned with the map, the two of them alone again, and they spread it out on the table to peruse. Shizuru stared at it intently, inscribing a faithful rendition of the relative distances and locations in her memory for future reference.

Lucent green eyes fringed by charcoal lashes studied her as she did this. As far as those green eyes were concerned, the change in the woman was patent. Gone was the uncertain, subtly disquieted Shizuru of before, replaced by the woman of unshakeable assurance. She was back to being The General, which still sat more comfortably with her experience than being The Lover.

"Have you been to these areas or near them, Natsuki?" asked the Himean. Her forefinger traced the map where a river delineated the beginning of Mentulaean territory. When Natsuki answered affirmatively, she went on. "How wide is the river? Would it require only a simple bridge or a grand one?"

Natsuki opted for the latter.

"But," she added, "there is a near bridge. Further up, Shizuru."

"Yes, I see that," Shizuru answered. "This is merely a provision, in the event that I should need to cross here."

The girl blinked at the spot the finger was tapping.

"Near the mountain?" she said. "It is bad land for marches. Rugged and ridged."

"Yes, I know. Even so."

"But why?"

"Because no one shall be expecting it."

There was an instant during which it was apparent that Natsuki was thinking on it, debating the merit of the notion. Another instant and she was smiling at Shizuru, who actually had to grip one hand above a knee to dispel the intense urge it produced in her. The Otomeian was not a person who smiled often, at least not in the sense of smiling with her teeth shown. She smiled close-lipped smiles, secretive and enigmatic ones, so when she actually did flash her teeth as others would, it often knocked the breath out of whoever was facing her. Shizuru could attest to that, as could several others fortunate enough to have seen it. Little did the smitten Himean general know, but at least one legate and a couple of centurions had been dreaming about her companion for the past few weeks. It was a result of having accidentally witnessed one of these rare smiles-which had actually been directed to the general herself.

"You do things like that," the young woman was telling her. "Really like a snake."

Shizuru inhaled luxuriously: "Striking with surprise, you mean?"

"Yes. And very fast."

"Well, those are indispensable to good generalship," came the response. "Swiftness and surprise. Many a battle have I won with them."

"Good."

"You approve?" Shizuru asked, amused.

"You win." She lifted a brow. "Hard not to approve."

They laughed.

"True enough." Shizuru returned to the map. "Well, I have this down by now. I think I shall call a muster for my personal inspection soon, to check that my centurions have not been idle. Although, from our frequent trips to the barracks, I should think they have been following my orders."

"To drill and to drill," Natsuki recited, remembering Shizuru's directives.

"And after that, to drill even more," Shizuru finished, chuckling. "Oh, they should be tough as nails! Most of them are veterans, but some of them are serving under me for the first time, so I wish them to be accustomed to it as early as now. My soldiers have to wear out the drill field before they even step on the battleground."

She threw the dark-haired woman an inquisitive glance.

"Your troopers seem to be well-drilled too, Natsuki," she said, tipping her head. "Do you drill them yourself? I think I have failed to ask you this before, but I have always been curious about it. You have a second-in-command, yes?"

"Kyo, yes."

"The man you instructed Nina to tell to report today."

"Yes." A lock of hair fell over Natsuki's right eye and she brushed it away. "Kyo is second. But there are more. Like your centurions."

"Ah! I expected as much. How many subordinate officers do you have in your division?"

"Ten."

"Since you have about an *ala* and a half in your division, would that mean each one is assigned seventy warriors? Are they divided equally among the commanders?"

"Yes. One officer for seventy troopers."

"Very neat. And they all report to you?"

"Yes. Or to Kyo, when I am not present."

"And he reports to you. I see." A curious glint came to the rusty eyes. "Do you ever find insubordination to be a problem? Or failure to carry out orders to satisfaction?"

Natsuki actually laughed.

"No," she said, eyes dancing with mirth.

*Interesting reaction,* thought the older woman. *Now what could be behind it?*

"You have penalties for it," she guessed. "Severe ones?"

"Severe, yes," the other confirmed.

"How severe?"

"You die."

Up came her chin.

"Do you mean," she asked, "that it is always death, Natsuki? Regardless of the relative weight of the infraction?"

Natsuki shook her head.

"No, not always death," she said. "But very often death. If the leader-me, for example-if I want to kill the one who is insubordinate or a disappointment, I can. My choice if I want to kill, and the troopers' choices to support me."

Shizuru's eyes narrowed.

"And have you?" she asked. "Killed someone for those things?"

"Yes."

There was a short, though not awkward silence.

"I see," Shizuru said.

And she quickly returned their conversation to other matters.

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"Ah, Chikane-chan, there you are!"

Chikane Himemiya whipped her head around to find her wife sprinting at a dangerous clip down the east corridor leading to their atrium-in which room she herself presently was. Her eyes flicked down even as the woman charged forth, her gaze noting the step that Himeko would be sure to miss at the rate she was going. Sparing no time for second thoughts, Chikane strode forwards and held out her arms just as the other woman fulfilled the prediction and made the misstep, her momentum propelling her into the tall woman's arms. Chikane was just able to see the purple eyes widen in surprise before blonde tresses covered her sight, her body absorbing the impact of the other woman's landing.

She herself was laughing.

"Oh, Himeko," she said afterwards, only half-chidingly. "I do wish we would meet in less exciting ways."

Her wife, now quite stable standing on her own, produced a sheepish giggle. They stepped away from each other and exchanged grins, one mischievous and the other embarrassed.

"I'm so sorry," Himeko said, somewhat red in the cheeks for all that this was a common occurrence. "Did I hurt you? I'm just so clumsy, Chikane-chan."

"As long as it causes you to fall into my arms, I have no complaints," the other replied playfully, her mind going to the one time that condition had not been met. It was when she had failed to catch the other woman after another misstep, despite all efforts to the achievement. That had been during their trip to her seaside villa, when Himeko had made another kind of trip while descending a staircase. Chikane had also tried to catch the other woman that time, but Himeko had somehow managed to alter trajectory mid-fall,



just enough to propel her to the space by Chikane's side instead of Chikane's arms. It had been a spectacular miss, she had to admit. Who would have thought someone could change direction mid-fall, like that?

*A good thing she was only a couple of steps away from the bottom,* Chikane reflected. Had it been otherwise, her wife might have gained more than a few nasty bruises from that strange accident. Chikane herself had sustained a small bruise to her ego afterwards, although it was a bruise she laughed at even now. She had looked such a fool with her hands held out that way and so uselessly! Remembrance of it always made her laugh. Although she supposed it would be a little harder to laugh had there actually been someone else there to see them. But then, that was a secondary consideration. What came first was that Himeko was fine.

"What is it you are holding there?" she asked, looking at the very woman in her thoughts. "You did not even let go of it during your fall, so I profess myself immensely curious as to what could be so important."

"Oh!" Himeko lifted the scrolls she had in hand, and Chikane found herself having to hold back a smile again as she thanked the gods that one of them had not poked her in the eye. "It's why I was looking for you, Chikane-chan."

"Letters for me?"

"Yes," and then a little breathlessly: "From Argus."

That was news indeed! The fine, coal-black brows shot up.

"My, my," she said calmly, offering her palm. "Arrived just now?"

"Yes. I ran as soon as they got here."

"Indeed you did, Himeko. Thank you for that, though you need not make such haste next time."

Himeko handed them to her and they turned in unison, heading for one of the well-padded couches nearby.

"One of them is from Suou-chan," the fair-haired woman explained to her while taking a seat. "And the other one has Shi-chan's seal."

Chikane had already noted the seals before, so she had no need for Himeko to tell her that. Still, she thanked her wife for the observations and bade her take a seat on the same couch, drawing her close by placing a hand on the woman's waist.

"Then let us see what they contain," she said, holding both scrolls in one long-fingered hand. Himeko watched her as she set one aside and began opening the other. She stopped abruptly when Himeko emitted a small squeak of surprise.

"What is it?" she asked, pausing from completely breaking the seal. "Are you all right, Himeko?"

Himeko stared at her guiltily.

"I'm sorry, Chikane-chan," she said, lifting her head from where it had been resting against Chikane's shoulder. "I just thought you'd open Shizuru-chan's first."

Blue eyes regarded her.

"Is that what you would like me to do?" Chikane asked, beginning to put away the scroll she had been about to open, to replace it with the other one. Himeko shook her head agitatedly, stopping the dark-haired woman's hand with her own.

"No, no, Chikane-chan," she said, looking her wife in the eye. "No, it's just-I thought that was what you'd do. I was surprised, that's all. I really don't mind which one goes first."

Chikane released a breath.

"How well you know me!" she said, her smile widening. "I would normally have wanted to open Shizuru's first, I admit it. But I decided to open Suou's, this time, since it is shorter. And there is another thing."

"What is it?"

"I expect to find a description of Shizuru herself in Suou's latest letter," she said. "I did ask for one, after all, in my last missive to Suou. So one serves as a prelude to the other."

Himeko laughed: "An opener, Chikane-chan?"

The patrician smiled back.

"Yes, well," she said. "It does enhance the flavour of the following act."

"Is it a tragedy or a comedy?"

The deep blue eyes lit up.

"Oh, that is such an accurate metaphor! Well done, Love!"

Her wife blushed furiously from the compliment. Raised in an unmentionable social class, Himeko had never been trained in rhetoric or been given proper tuition in the usual subjects. Yet, Chikane had noticed, she had a natural feel for verbal imagery, perhaps because she was a painter or creator of images too. As such, the patrician had been encouraging her to apply this talent not only to her paintings but also to her speech, persuading her to employ metaphors freely whenever they came. While reluctant at first, Himeko had eventually warmed to the practice-which was only to be expected. After all, if you lived with one generally acknowledged to be among the best rhetoricians alive, it was impossible not to slide into a love for rhetorical devices too at some point.

The amateur rhetorician now dropped her eyes, fair lashes sweeping over a prism of violet.

"You're worried too, Chikane-chan," she remarked gently. "About that thing with Shi-chan, right?"

The raven-haired woman pinned her wife with a gaze.

"Are you, Himeko?" she asked.

A nod.

"You should not be."

The heliotrope stare asked the question.

"Whatever grains have been insinuating themselves into the mechanisms of our plan will only ever be that," Chikane answered coolly, her words ringing with the constancy of her own confidence. "They may irritate for a second, but they are still only grains. Shizuru and I are perfectly capable of grinding them down in our mill."

She opened her eyes to find her wife's staring at her with fierce admiration and had to smile at it. It was always nice to know that your spouse thought so highly of you.

"Go on, Chikane-chan," her wife urged, smiling too. "Read your letter."

Chikane complied and broke the seal completely, unfurling the scroll that had come from her sister. Her eyes darted over the lines so quickly it seemed she was not actually reading it; yet, the woman resting against her shoulder knew she was taking in all the contents. It would not be long, the fair-haired woman knew, for Chikane Himemiya was another prodigiously swift reader-nearly as swift a reader as Shizuru Fujino, in fact. And indeed, hardly any time seemed to have passed before the scroll was rolled up again.

Himeko looked at her wife.

"How is it, Chikane-chan?" she asked, knowing the expression on her spouse's face very well. "What's going on now?"

Chikane smiled and it was a complex smile.

"What is going on, Himeko," she sighed, "is that the lady Tomoe Marguerite has been riding for a fall."

# Chapter 34

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Auctoritas** - *Very roughly defined, one's public standing and clout.*

2. **Calends** - *The first of the three fixed points of a Roman (Himean) month. The days of the month were not named or given numbers, save for these three points. The Calends is always the first day of each month (e.g. the Calends of January = January 1). Along with the other two fixed points (the **Nones** and the **Ides**), it was considered a sacred day. Note that dates were reckoned backwards from the three fixed points.*

3. **Domina** - *"Mistress" or "Madam".*

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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Twelve days before the Calends of January, Chikane Himemiya was apprised of her best friend's alleged contestation in the elections. Before the midnight drip of the chronometer fell on that day, Chikane had sent off an urgent letter to that friend. She entrusted it to one of her best men, whom she also entrusted with one of her best steeds. Her directions were short but specific: *ride hard, change your mount as soon as necessary, eat on the saddle if you must, but stop for nothing or no one*. The man, upon receiving these orders, nodded firmly to show he understood. He knew that were his mistress not too genteel for such language, she might even have told him to simply shoot from the saddle to urinate. As it was, she had no need to tell him such a thing. Those serious blue eyes spoke for themselves.

Impressed with the gravity of his task, the man carried out the orders to the letter. He rode hard, then rode even harder. He changed his mount as soon as he felt it flag in stride, asked only for the best and fastest horses when making the trade. He even ate on the saddle sometimes-although he still did stop to relieve himself properly. Thus, even with the trouble of the snow on the passes, he still managed to reach his destination an exact month after his departure, twelve days before the Calends of February. Very good time indeed. His mistress would be pleased.

He was welcomed very warmly, for he bore letters of importance not merely for the general of the northern army but also for many of her officers. Chikane, in a gesture of thoughtfulness, had sent out couriers to the correspondents or relatives of some of the other officers, thinking that they might wish to send (short and hastily-scribbled) letters as well. Hence her courier bore somewhere around twenty scrolls in his bags, aside from the two meant for Shizuru, to be duly sent to their respective destinations. Most of the scrolls were not overlong given the circumstances in which they had been produced, so they did not trouble the courier with their weight. Of this the courier assured the senior legate of Shizuru Fujino's army, handing over his burden to the woman.

"You have one too, Harada-san," he said, pointing to a thick scroll sealed sloppily with wax.

She smiled, knowing the reason for that sloppiness, and thanked him.

"You're winded, I'd think," she told him, still grinning at the man from across the table. A letter from Aoi! As far as she was concerned, this man deserved all the good treatment they could give. "And your steed too. Have some more wine."

She refilled his cup, and he thanked her before draining it swiftly.

"Thanks very much, Legate, and sorry for the quickness in putting it away," he said, bowing his head with deference. He had impeccable manners for a mere slave, Chie thought, before smiling to herself at the thought. Of course he would have impeccable manners: he was of Himemiya's household. "It's the journey that's taken its toll. I was

about parched."

"I understand. Come, have some more then."

He stopped her before she could refill it again: "No, please. I'm thankful for your kindness. But I should be going."

She stared. "Why, you can't be getting back on the saddle already!"

"Oh, no. I meant I should be going to lie down a bit, actually, Legate- I haven't slept more than four hours in two days." He grinned at her shock. "And that poor horse! Got to see if it's not dead yet."

"We'll replace it for you, if it's still too worn out when you have to leave."

"Domina said I should wait for the general's reply, Legate."

"Ah!" A pleased look. "Then that means I can send back too, if I finish in time."

"If you'll not take longer than a day after the general is finished, Legate, I'll wait," he offered, to her delight. She reached into her pouch to slip a couple of *denarii* into his hand, whereupon he beamed with pleasure.

"I'll try not to make you wait at all, My Good Man," she said, rising from her desk.

He followed suit and they went to the door. She called out to someone.

"Find him a decent place to stay," she directed to the aide who answered her summons, looking over her shoulder and at the bags on her table. "Don't forget to tend to his horse, eh, if he's not ridden it to death yet? Send Akiko to me, too."

"Right away, Legate."

"Do you know where the general is, by any chance?"

"I heard one of the passing soldiers say they saw her near the

cavalry camp, I think."

"Right. I think I'll go there myself, then." She nodded to both men.  
"Go on, please, and don't let me keep you."

She returned to the table, eager to open her letter. She knew she could not do so, however, until she had delivered that of her general's. She just had to think of the interval as a way of sweetening her pleasure in that letter later, honing her eagerness for it now. She was not always opposed to delayed gratification .

"You sent for me, Harada-san?"

It was Akiko, another of her aides.

"Yes," she said, looking up from the scrolls on the table. "Get someone to help you, Akiko, and deliver these letters to wherever they're headed. I'll take these, though." She picked up the letters for Shizuru, both sealed properly and very neatly. "And I'll bring them to the general myself. Do you know where she is?"

"They said she was headed to the cavalry camp."

"Sure about that?"

"I'm sure I heard the tribunes say it, Harada-san." The brown-haired young woman frowned thoughtfully. "I can send someone to check."

"No, it's fine." She picked up her scroll, resolving to read it the very second she had handed over the ones meant for Shizuru. "Get a horse ready for me, will you? I'll ride out to the cavalry camp."

"Right away. You'll be going unattended?"

"Unattended." Her face lit up further as a piece of flowery imagery found its way to her tongue. "I think I can find the golden girl and her sultry shadow myself."

She did find them herself, and as easily as she had expected. The general was known by all of the auxiliaries, and the same was true of the general's bodyguard. Hard not to spot that golden, smiling individual even from a distance, with the black-haired, ice-white



personality prowling next to it. All one had to do was look or ask those who had looked: when the first method failed, Chie took recourse in the latter. Since so many were always looking at the pair in question, she was not short of sources.

It was in the stables set aside for the Otomeian officers that she discovered them. The pair was in discussion about one of the horses there: an enormous white beast with a handsomely roman face and subtly dappled lower legs. The dapples were stipples of palest grey starting from the hooves and fading gradually near the knee, so that the horse's legs actually looked bluish at the bottom before turning a pure white in a gradient rising to the top. Chie sized up the unusually coloured animal with an appreciative mumble.

"Gorgeous, of course," she remarked, peering over the stall: the other two women were inside. "I've never seen that kind of colouring before-or, at least, not with such smoothness. The dapples are so small they're almost invisible. The blending of the coat colours is superb."

"That is exactly what I was telling her," Shizuru said. "Do you not think it makes him seem like something born straight out of a glacier, Chie-han?"

"That's a good way to describe it," the legate answered, still marvelling at the beast's strange colour. "A pure white horse is showy enough, but this one is even more eye-catching. He does look like he's made of ice. Is he yours, Natsuki-san?"

The young woman she had addressed looked up, being in a crouch so as to inspect the horse's enormous hoof. She rose to her feet at Chie's query and shook her head.

Shizuru made a sound of surprise.

"But you said that it was one of your horses," she accused the girl, to Chie's bemusement. "Why are you saying otherwise now, Natsuki? Did I misunderstand you earlier?"

The girl placed a hand gently on the horse's muscled neck and stroked it. It nickered with obvious enjoyment, and then whinnied to

her.

"It was mine," she said to Shizuru in her dusky, mellifluous tones. "Now, I give to you."

Chie brought up a hand to cover her smile as their general stared at the Otomeian.

"You give-but why, Natsuki?" Shizuru asked, seeming puzzled by the girl's largesse. Aware of how rude her words might have sounded, she amended them the next second. "I am grateful for the thought, of course. Immensely so. But this is such a handsome steed, and I feel you would surely have more need of it than I, being not only head of a cavalry division but part of a horse people. You cannot truly mean to give away such an animal, Child. He is worth a small fortune, I can see it myself. Would it not be better for you to keep him, especially as you are also in a better position to make good use of him?"

Natsuki's head moved. It was not a great movement. How she managed it, Chie did not know, but all of a sudden her eyes were woeful though the rest of her face was still as stone.

"No?" she said, seeming-but not actually sounding-crestfallen. "Shizuru, you... do not want?"

Again Chie had to cover her mouth, but this time to stop a full-blown cackle: Shizuru- *Note the lack of an honorific!* -looked stricken.

"I do, of course I want him," the stricken one exclaimed, suddenly all too eager to accept the gift. "I merely hesitated because I was embarrassed to accept something so beautiful, and part of me did want him so much that it rather compounded my embarrassment. Forgive me, Natsuki, for my awkwardness. If you truly wish to make a present of him to me, I promise to treasure him from now on."

The green eyes were no longer mournful, just like that. Chie, suppressing another laugh, had to wonder if the girl understood just what she had done and how she had done it. Did the mysterious Natsuki know how to control Shizuru Fujino now, or had that been executed unconsciously? Oh, yes, one just had to wonder.

"I give you, then," the Otomeian said, to settle the matter. "His name is Albinus . But you can change."

Both Himeans smiled.

"Whitish," Chie said, interpreting the name's meaning. "It suits him, all right. I'd keep the name, wouldn't you, Shizuru-san?"

"Absolutely. Albinus it is."

Natsuki nodded, the very slight curl of her lips showing immediately that she was pleased. She said nothing to further express her pleasure, though. The senior legate thought that was very like her.

"Albinus, eh?"

Chie breathed in deeply, inhaling the odours of horse and hay, the scent of dung like a low whisper beneath them. She did not wince at the smells; her nasal apparatus was familiar with such scents on campaign by now, and she actually liked horses enough to consider the odours pleasantly fragrant in a way. Besides which, she had always believed that if you could put up with that dreadfully malodorous military article called the *sagum* -the leathery wool cape used by all Himean legionaries during wet weather-then you could put up with any other stink and consider it sweet-smelling by comparison. A good, well-used *sagum* had all the bouquet of the vilest odours gone wrong, with the added improvement of having been left to rot and ripen a few days in the sun.

*Which makes one wonder how this one can put up with it*, she thought slyly, looking at the woman she suspected of buying a new *sagum* for every campaign and coating each one in fragrances when not in use, to keep the odours down. *Jupiter knows Shizuru-san has an obsession about smelling sweet and clean all the time.*

"I agree, though," she said, after an exhalation that misted her sight for a second. "That's a lovely horse you've just given away there, Natsuki-san. He really is worth a fortune, isn't he?"

The young woman looked proud. This time, she also answered verbally.

"Yes, he is," she said to the senior legate. "Thank you."

"Your horses really are so big. I still can't get over the size of them." Chie's gaze went to the next stall, where Natsuki's familiar black stallion stood, its arrogant dark head over the stall and leaning yearningly towards its owner. "Handsome stock you have, your division's troopers and the cataphracts. I'll bet the Mentulaean horsemen slaver after your animals."

The Otomeian smirked.

"Their horses are small," she told the two. "Nothing but nags."

"Especially compared to ones like this," Shizuru put in, now stroking the mane of her new horse. She held out a palm to let the horse sniff at it, its nostrils flaring. "Compared to Albinus. Here, Albinus."

She offered the beast a carrot, which had been passed to her by her bodyguard. Albinus took it and chomped happily. The black horse in the next stall regarded him with dark-eyed envy and pushed its head further over the stall wall. Natsuki gave the animal a carrot too, to propitiate it.

"I know troopers regularly have two horses, Natsuki-san, but I admit I was beginning to think you had only one," said Chie, frowning as she watched the animals chew on their treats. "I thought it was only that black one."

"I have more," Natsuki replied. "But Niger I ride most."

"Albinus looks like a regular war horse too, though."

"Yes. Sometimes, I use him." She looked at Shizuru. "Now, you can use him. He is right for you."

Shizuru was about to reply when Chie interrupted.

"Right for her?" she said curiously, repeating the young woman's words. "How do you mean, right? Do you mean the colour?"

Natsuki looked at her as though the answer should be obvious.

"Yes, and, too," she replied. "For Shizuru, it must be a great horse."

Both Himeans felt their mouths twitch. Shizuru was the one to speak first.

"One wonders how I manage to merit the majesty of 'a great horse'," she said with a self-deprecating smile.

Natsuki looked pointedly at her.

"Your legs," the Otomeian said. "Very long. Not for you, little horses or nags. Or donkeys. Not good to have long legs and ride little donkeys."

The listening Chie paused to imagine it: Shizuru astride a donkey . Shizuru, with her very long legs dangling down the sides of the animal like paddles . Absurd!

She brought up her cloak quickly to muffle the guffaw. All that did was to dampen its clarity, though, for she continued convulsing in the folds of the material, oblivious to the dry glare Shizuru was giving her. The fair-haired woman turned to Natsuki, whose mouth was trembling from the heroic effort of preserving her gravity.

"I thank you for being so protective of my image, *meum mel*," she said dryly. "And in front of this one too, no less."

Chie waved a hand in the air as though trying to bat her amusement away. Truth be told, she was brushing away the outrageous image that had come to her mind just moments earlier.

"I'm sorry for that, Shizuru-san," she said to her friend, who did not really look offended. "You'll have to admit you'd look a sight, though. That's what you call a smashing mismatch."

"One might imagine the same of you. You are not short yourself."

"No, actually, it's my torso that's long, so my legs wouldn't look as odd then." She shrugged charmingly, as though that imperfection mattered not a whit to her. "Besides, why would I ride a donkey?"

"For the experience, I suppose?" Shizuru offered. "Might I ask what

brings you riding over here, by the way? I assume you wanted something more than to talk about horses and mules."

"Oh, Jupiter! Now I've just about forgotten the reason I came to find you. What a fool..." Chie reached into her pouch as the other two made their way out of Albinus' stall. They shut and locked it behind them. "Here you go, Shizuru-san. Fresh from the saddle."

The crimson eyes grew wide.

"Why, finally!" she cried, taking the two scrolls meant for her. "Dated?"

"Twelve days before the Calends of January. An exact month past."

"Still faster than expected, especially given that it is winter. I gather from your remark, of course, that this travelled overland?"

"Yes. The gales are still blowing stiff, so no ships coming up from the south yet." Chie scuffed her boot on a bit of hay scattered over the ground, and showed Shizuru her own scroll with a wide grin. The younger woman returned the expression. "I have you to thank for this, you know. And Himemiya, of course."

The hint fell into place immediately: "Do you mean to say that this mail is not from the usual couriers?"

"Yes. It was carried by Himemiya's man. He was blown, just like his horse," Chie replied. "A good fellow. He got here in less time than even Himemiya would have expected, I think. A good thing, since he said she did give him instructions to be quick about getting those letters to you here."

The lean, more-handsome-than-beautiful face took on a pensive expression and Chie nodded at the scrolls in Shizuru's hand: "Something important there, Shizuru-san. I think you'd best read it now and think on your answer."

"Ahh," Shizuru said comprehendingly. "It requires an answer."

"The courier's been tasked to wait for you." Chie looked at her with humour. "Try not to be too quick about it, would you, or at least let it

stand a day? I think that man could use some rest, and there's my own return letter to consider."

She half-turned, ready to go. Shizuru's lilting voice stopped her.

"Forgive me, but I meant to trouble you for a few more moments, Chie-han," the fair woman said. "So in this sense, I actually consider it fortuitous that you should have sought me out."

Chie stiffened. Anyone could guess that the coming conversation had to be something serious to be given priority over a matter as urgent as that letter in Shizuru's hands-and Chie already knew exactly how serious the coming topic was.

Which still did not make her ready for it.

Shizuru, sensing the other woman's apprehension, cut to the quick.

"Yes," she said gently, in answer to the unspoken question. "I have heard of it."

Chie raked a hand through her short and waving hair.

"I think it's best discussed with prudence," the legate finally said.

Shizuru angled her head slightly. Chie responded with a helpless gesture-though she did not go so far as to flick her eyes towards the young woman behind her friend; that would have been too obvious. Then again, perhaps it was her very avoidance of such an act that made the hint obvious too.

"Shall it be long?" Shizuru asked.

"Maybe and maybe not."

"Depending on?"

The soft brown eyes gleamed.

"I suppose on how *you* take it," came the reply.

"Natsuki."

The girl looked their way; she had been engrossed in playing with the two horses, both of whom still nudged their huge heads at her and tried to get the upper hand in her attentions. She had a hand in either beast's mane, being the sort of master who often strove to be fair. She released both of them in answering Shizuru's call, and the two animals blew through their nostrils, fussing at being abandoned.

"Would you be amenable to letting me take Albinus for a canter round the pen?" She was referring to the fenced-in area some of the other troopers used to practise or sometimes break in young horses. She offered the girl a smile. "I would like to try him out now, if you would allow it."

A short while later, Chie found herself back on her horse and clopping along to Albinus' long-legged gait as they moved easily around the pen. Privately, she thought it a wonder that there was no one else there. It was a fine winter morning, clear of sky and fresh of air. The sea-scented breeze stirred their hair into ribbons, just as it did their horse's manes .

"I don't mind this at all," she said, looking up at the other woman's profile. Albinus was so large that he had a huge advantage over Chie's own mount, and so it showed in the heads of the riders, all the more as Shizuru was already the much taller woman. "But I have to say I expected you to simply take me aside or send her a way off, while we talked in the stables."

She pointed her chin at the open ground before them, which was interrupted by the far-off fence. That was where the general's bodyguard was perched, watching them.

"This is a pretty interesting ruse," she said.

"Not entirely a ruse," the other replied, body swaying effortlessly to the rhythm of the horse's movements. "I did want to try out Albinus, Chie-han."

"And how is he?"

"As expected, splendid. The Otomeians breed and train their horses with great care, and the same may be said of Natsuki."



"She *is* one of 'the Otomeians', after all," Chie reminded smoothly.

"Yes. Of course." The rusty eyes, lids half-lowered because of the angle, slanted downwards to look at Chie. "Might I learn now for what you deemed it necessary to remove Natsuki's presence?"

"Because it has something to do with her."

"Ah!" The softly uttered exclamation was accompanied by two uplifted brows. "Natsuki?"

"Yes."

"We *are* talking about the same matter, are we not?"

Chie permitted a small smile.

"I'd like to think so, General," she said, using the title to indicate her deference to the younger woman in this matter. "But we can't be too sure unless one of us says it."

There was an acquiescent nod.

"Then, permit me to be the one to do so," the fairer woman said, still guiding her horse quietly around the track in a canter. "What is this I hear about one of the rankers being flogged?"

Chie sighed, conscious of both a sense of reprieve and a sinking feeling, like someone who had just made it to the shore from a shipwreck only to contend with the possibility of pools of quicksand littering the beach. She had known from the moment Shizuru had detained her earlier that this was the matter on both their minds. Nonetheless, she could not help having wished that she was wrong, that Shizuru had other things about which to talk. Anything other than this, perhaps, was preferable.

*But it would have led back to it eventually, right?*

Of course it had been wishful thinking on her part, to hope that the general would not catch wind of it. What was that Nao said to her, once? That the woman could detect even the puff from an ant breaking wind when the wind encroached on her territory? But then

this was no mere insect expelling gases from one end of its alimentary canal. This was a serious thing, a Himean being put under the lash. Flogging, while accepted as part of the military's punitive code, was always a grave matter. It was telling of their culture's perspective on flogging that only slaves, among non-military members of Himean society, could be flogged. Regular citizens not presently under military service could not actually be put under the whip.

"Yes, it's true," she finally admitted to her friend, who knew all these things too. "One of them was flogged by order of a centurion."

"Flogged."

"Yes."

An interval of silence. Chie knew her friend was still weighing the idea-and impressing its weight on her, too, through that silent consideration. The younger woman had always been proud of her army's discipline: Shizuru Fujino, everyone knew, ran a very tight army. There had never been a need for her to flog any of her soldiers, never before any infraction so grave that it necessitated such humiliation. For it was humiliation, a flaying not merely of a man's back but also of his *dignitas*. This was a first for Shizuru's people, and hence something to be considered.

"In *my* army."

Chie did not cringe, although she knew someone lesser would be doing that by now. She merely said "yes" again in her most collected tone.

"At whose behest?" Shizuru demanded lightly.

"Nao's."

"Nao-han?" The bright eyes bled surprise. "She ordered it?"

"Yes."

"Was it from her century?"

"No, but from her legion." As superior primipilus of the legion, the red-haired woman had the right to claim seniority over the other centurions and their centuries. "She had the man's centurion execute the punishment, though."

"For?"

"Unbecoming conduct."

Shizuru sighed.

"Oh, Chie-han," she said almost resignedly. "Tell me already, do."

Chie sucked in her breath.

"Unbecoming conduct and speech touching on the person of a superior officer," she stated, obeying the order to reveal what she knew. She slid her eyes reluctantly up to Shizuru. "Specifically, the most superior officer."

The younger woman looked stunned. *Oh*, thought Chie, *I see what she's thinking*.

"No, no-it was not disaffection to you," she soothed immediately, watching the alarm in the red eyes subside slowly and with great reprieve. Shizuru had always enjoyed the unquestionable loyalty of her soldiers, so disaffection was anathema to her. "I wouldn't credit that ever happening to your army, Shizuru-san! But. It's complicated."

"How so?"

"As I said, it has to do with Natsuki-san."

The tawny-haired woman produced a mirthless smile.

"I am all ears," Shizuru invited. "To hear about this *complication*."

Chie removed a hand from the reins and brought it up to rub her aching neck. As expected, Shizuru's guard started to rise once it came to Natsuki. Best to do this carefully, as she had planned.

"Let me see," she said. "I think I'd better start from the beginning."

"That is generally a fine place from which to begin," Shizuru replied mildly, though with a less ironic smile than before.

"Nao caught the man declaiming, er, improper things to the others in the barracks," she commenced. "Mind you, she said that if it had only been a small gathering, she might've let him go with a few slaps. As it turned out, there were quite a few people present there, and she found that aggravating the breach. One saboteur or demagogue is all it takes, she said."

Shizuru inclined her head, indicating that she should go on.

"What Nao found objectionable in the soldier's declamations were some remarks," Chie continued cautiously. "Which he made about your relationship with Natsuki-san."

The angle of the head changed; Shizuru was staring keenly at her now. It made one wonder, Chie thought fitfully, whether it had been the mention of her own involvement or the one about her paramour's to provoke such undivided attention. Chie was more than willing to wager that it was the latter.

"What of my relationship with Natsuki?" Shizuru enquired. "He saw it in a negative light, I suppose?"

The senior legate grimaced and answered positively. On the other hand, the other woman's serene expression could have been carved by Praxiteles himself. More and more unnerving!

"What was said?"

Another grimace. Chie had been dreading this part the most-although, to be honest, an intrigue-loving part of her had been looking forward to it too, and for the same reason that the greater part of her felt dread. How would Shizuru react to this? One never knew with such a woman, and perhaps that was what bred curiosity there.

*Let us hope that trait does not kill the cat today,* Chie told herself before answering the query.

"It was argued that your liaison with her was a disgraceful dalliance," she admitted reluctantly. "That it was not becoming... for a woman of your station and position. To carry on with the likes of her."

Her eyes were forward, her mouth drawn tight after she finished. There was a long silence after her statement that she dared not break, thinking Shizuru would do it. Shizuru did not. After the weight had become too heavy to bear, Chie finally risked a glance at the younger woman. And was surprised.

Shizuru was smiling.

"Well, Chie-han," she said. "That is a point of view, certainly."

Chie stared at her from beneath drawn brows. She was too amazed to say anything just yet.

Shizuru went on.

"Disgraceful dalliance," she murmured. "Not bad rhetoric, for a ranker, and surprisingly good vocabulary."

Chie took a deep breath.

"Hum." A cough. "I rephrased what he said, actually."

"So I thought. It is typical of them to express themselves in more vinegary language, after all."

"Yes." She hoped that Shizuru would not ask her to repeat the more accurate, *more vinegary* version. She did not think she had the gall for it yet. "Well, that's so. I can't remember what it was, though."

"The ranker's name?"

Another hurdle: "Haruki Shiro."

Shizuru narrowed her eyes, and Chie knew that she had assigned the name to a face in what was, most likely, a correct assignment. Shizuru fraternised so easily and so frequently with her own soldiers that it was inevitable she would remember some of them-or in her case, given that prodigious memory, most of them. She looked at

Chie now with faintly troubled eyes, although the uptilt remained at the corners of her lips.

*At least*, Chie thought with a niggling sense of disappointment, *that one produced some sort of reaction.*

"One of my veterans," the commander said with wonder.

"Yes."

"He served with me in the campaign prior to this one."

"That's so."

"Unfortunate."

An abrupt blast of wind set the wheat-coloured hair astir. She did not make a move to brush them aside, and the locks that dangled or had worked free from the ponytail streamed across Shizuru's face like ribbons of bronze-brushed flax.

"Was the flogging truly necessary, in your opinion?" she asked Chie, who was caught off-guard by the question.

"I think so," the legate answered.

"Nao-han does, obviously."

"And you?"

"I?"

"Do you think it was necessary?"

The thoughtful face, aloof in the lift of its chin, grew even more thoughtful.

"My senior legate should know the answer to that," was all she said.

Chie accepted the subtle admonition with a winning smile.

"Sorry. I should, that's true," she said.

Shizuru said nothing, still keeping that frightfully serene smile on her face. Was there nothing that could truly upset it?

"I should be more careful about the things I ask," Chie told her. "By the way, Nao made it clear that you knew nothing of the flogging and that, were it only up to her, you would know nothing about it, so as not to trouble you."

"I see." A meaningful look. "Should it trouble me?"

"Aah." There was the question. "I have to admit I don't know. I think it depends."

"It seems many things are conditional this day. I suppose it depends now on whether or not I should let it?"

Chie shrugged and released a breath of patent ruefulness. Shizuru sighed as well.

"How far has it gone, Chie-han?" she asked.

"Just some murmurs. Nothing to really worry about."

"Perhaps not. But murmuring turns into muttering, which may well develop into full-blown rumbling." Her eyes came alive unexpectedly as she whipped her head towards Chie. "Do you think they would approach her?"

*Oho!* Chie crowed to herself, even while feeling pinned by that glare. *When it comes to that, the smile vanishes, eh?*

"Not a chance of it, as far as I'm concerned-and Natsuki-san has her own inviolability, besides," she said confidently, calming the burn in Shizuru's stare. How those red eyes could blaze when it came to her lover! Were Chie not a friend and were it not for the wintry air, she might be sweating under that fierce look right now. "They're good, disciplined boys and girls, our soldiers. I think, too, that they're smart enough to know anything that far would directly pain you, and they love you too much for that, even with the resentment considered. But that's where this comes from. We have to remember."

"What do you mean?" Shizuru was bemused. "This comes from

resentment? Have I ever given them cause to resent me?"

"It's not you, but their feelings, their admiration of you," Chie answered. "Haruki Shiro is one of those soldiers who've always admired you and, in the sense applicable only to a soldier and his general, is probably one of those legionaries who is *in love with you*. You have to understand that your relationship with your legions has always been one great love affair, militarily speaking."

The younger woman's brow creased for a moment.

"Is that love affair so jealous, then?" she asked. "Does that imply I should be wary of even my most loyal legionaries, from now on?"

"No, I wouldn't go that far, Shizuru-san. I think that all it implies is that there will be others who feel like Haruki Shiro." The legate squinted while saying it. "It doesn't mean that every one of them will feel this way. Most of them are amused by it, of course, and highly entertained. Love affairs delight most of the rankers, especially a love affair like yours."

She pushed on swiftly before Shizuru could ask her what she meant by that.

"But for some people, it won't be reconcilable to their ideas and ideals," she followed. "For instance, some people put you on a pedestal that's built partly out of your elevated ancestry, your blood. You know how Himeans love the notion of an idol! They'd like to see that idol's pedestal kept pure as it is in their minds."

The reply was soft, but with enough of a drawl to signify the younger woman's displeasure: "Meaning to say Natsuki's blood and ancestry is an impurity?"

"I don't say it," Chie answered, to douse the conflagration threatening to break out in the other's gaze. "Please excuse me if my tongue's too clumsy to make it sound better. Some people will, and that's all I'm trying to say."

She looked intently at the other woman.

"Shizuru-san," she said. "Some people *do*."



A few taut seconds passed, after which Shizuru's chin lifted again. She exhaled a short, irritated breath of air through her nose.

"It comes back to that," she then remarked. "As ever."

"Pardon me?"

"Natsuki," said Shizuru matter-of-factly. "Is not Himean."

"No," Chie replied, wondering where this was going. "She isn't."

"That *is* from where most of this comes, yes? If it were only a matter of ancestry, she could near outstrip even me."

"Well, I think you're right that it's chiefly a matter of her not being Himean." She deliberately avoided commenting on the second part of her friend's statement, as she disagreed strongly with it. Then a thought came to mind. "Shades of Himemiya and her wife, though Himeko-san is still a Himean citizen. And there we can see the big difference, I'm afraid."

"A big difference indeed."

They clopped on quietly after that remark, which Shizuru followed with another.

"Well, then."

A puzzled glance from Chie. "Well?"

" *Well*, I can remedy that."

"What do you mea-" She broke off as she realised what the younger woman was saying, back snapping rigid as she gaped. Her horse felt the action and quivered up its sides, its muscles stiffening for a second. Chie's own tension was not so curt in duration. " *Ecastor!* What are you planning?"

The barely concealed twinkle in those crimson eyes gave her the answer.

"But-but-but that's insane!" Chie sputtered, not even trying to hide

her shock.

"Is it?"

"You couldn't give her the Extended Rights just on a whim, Shizuru-san, it's sheer insanity! The censors would never stand for it, especially if they know it's for you," Chie babbled, forgetting even to be politic in assuming-and, both of them knew, probably assuming rightly-that the current censors would oppose a recommendation not only *from* but also personally beneficial *to* the ever-controversial Fujino. The present censors were firmly entrenched in Traditionalist ranks, after all. "Besides, you know how jealous people get about bestowing those privileges! The Extended Rights are *touchy*!"

"True," Shizuru replied, knowing full well that she could not gainsay that much about her friend's pronouncement. The Extended Rights were a set of privileges packaged as a special citizenship granted by Hime to some of its oldest and closest allies. These allies were generally native Fuukans who had rendered great service to Hime. There were entire colonies of such citizens near the city of Hime proper, called Extended Rights townships. To understand the concept of the Extended Rights as distinguished from the Himean citizenship as well as from the Fuukan citizenship, one had to understand the geography and history of Hime as distinct from that of Fuuka itself.

Fuuka was the larger mass of land, the name for the great sprawl of territory that held Hime near the middle of its leg-like length. Fuuka was divided into several other territories or provinces, and for some time, the many inhabitants of these territories existed as settlements independent of each other, without a united sense of identity. Then, a hilly little city cradled in Fuuka's centre began to expand, grow increasingly sophisticated, and assert itself with greater and greater power. Its people spread out, populating and dominating other territories through various means, its armies conquering more and more tracts of land and wealth. Beginning as a monarchy, it assimilated the aristocracies of annexed regions into its own, and later evolved into a republic. Eventually, it grew so powerful that it became the most important city not only in Fuuka but also-a good many said and believed-in the civilised world. The inhabitants of that hilly little city had grown into the nation of Hime.

Hime, therefore, had the greatest clout in Fuuka. Certainly the other peoples in the region were let remain, but only after centuries of discord and subjugation, ended when a mass of treaties were struck. These treaties forged a bond of alliance between Hime and the various Fuukan tribes and nations, which were thereafter referred to by Himeans as though a single entity: the Fuukan Allies.

Hime, having the better bargaining position of the stronger party, was naturally the superior in the treaties that had been made. Nonetheless, the Fuukan peoples gained something too, not least of which was a prospective benefit dangled before their noses: the informal promise of eventual enfranchisement. No matter that it was only informal, no matter that "eventual" promised little, and no matter that promises could be broken; the esteem of having a Himean citizenship had grown so high by then that all those contentions could be ignored for the possibility of fulfilment. To be a Himean citizen, to be part of a people who could and *had* sent unarmed and unguarded persons to stop armies at a mere word! Yes, the possible gains far outweighed the losses-or, at least, that was the prevailing opinion.

The geniuses of the concept of peaceful subjugation, Hime's politicians saw the utility of that opinion. To sustain it over the centuries, they came up with something that would keep appetites whetted without granting complete satiation: the Extended Rights. These were presented as an intermediate step to the final goal of attaining Himean citizenship, a kind of secondary-citizen status that granted most of the liberties of full citizens save such ones as the right of suffrage and the right of candidature. Possession of the Extended Rights, therefore, simplified relations with Hime by legitimising most contracts the possessor might possibly enact with Hime or Himeans. A valuable thing indeed, given that almost everything in the world now touched on Hime's interests and was touched by it in return.

Thus Hime's allies clamoured for the Extended Rights when they were first introduced. However, the status was bestowed only to certain Fuukan allies that had been "excellent" in the service they had rendered Hime-and, as the more astute commentators put it, occupied areas of great strategic importance. For the Extended

Rights had been born as a political tool, and were used in the most practical sense, or very politically.

This cold practicality did not alter the fact that those receiving it were mindful of its privileges and special nature. Which is to say that they made much of it. Why should they not? It separated them from the other Fuukans and from the rest of the barbarian world. It made them only one step away from Hime, and if it did not exactly make them best, it did make them *better*.

And here was the point of Chie's argument, Shizuru knew. Himeans, Extended Rights citizens, and all other Fuukans who cherished dreams of their promised elevation in status, would likely oppose the notion of some odd foreigner being accorded the Extended Rights simply because of her patrician lover. People loved exclusivity, after all, which meant they would guard whatever little they had very jealously. Yes, she could see the repercussion already. She could even see the capital her opponents would make of it, aggravating an already vexing situation.

Oh, the pettiness of people with position! She believed that only those who were small enough in themselves would object to a worthy person receiving such a signal honour. And Natsuki *was* worthy! Had she not dashed fearlessly into battle for Hime's sake, an ally actually worth her salt? Had she not led the cavalry crashing into the rear of the Mentulaean army at Argentum, even making the personal decision to use a part of them to cleave the enemy mass in half besides assaulting the sides? That tactical choice had only augmented Shizuru's directions to her for the good. Why, were she only Himean, she should have received one of the highest military decorations for it!

People would have to be told about that, she decided. They would be reminded of it, and that would go some way to stemming opposition on this matter. Besides which, she had her own considerable *dignitas* and *auctoritas* too to aid her in this venture. These were no small things either!

"Yes, I do foresee the opposition you are fearing," she said. "But I find it trifling and simple enough to overcome. It should be fine."

"Next to impossible, you mean!"

"You say it yourself," the younger woman retorted easily. "Next to impossible . Not impossible itself."

"Still!"

"Still?"

"Shizuru-san, it's just not that simple." Chie shook her head vigorously in bewilderment. "Even if you get her the Extended Rights citizenship, it wouldn't make much of a difference. Everyone would still know."

"What would they know, pray tell?"

Chie gave out an exasperated breath.

"First, they would still know that she only gained it through your assistance," she said.

Shizuru cast her a humorous glance.

"That seems as though my assistance actually reduces the credibility of any proposition," she jested, at which Chie shook her head.

"No, that's not what I mean. Maybe for some people, though, that's so," she retorted, referring to the younger politician's many opponents. "I meant that the apparent, er, relationship between you two wouldn't really be good for the credibility, as you say. It would persuade many to think that you recommended her because of your personal interests in the matter, and not simply because of her noteworthy service to Hime as an ally in battle."

"I suppose some might think of it that way," was the noncommittal reply.

"They would still see her just as a bar-a foreigner," Chie amended swiftly, going on. "I don't think it would change anything for the better and could even make things worse. It could prove a bad move for your career and a futile one for her sake."

"Oh?"

"She'd be a foreigner with the papers of an Extended Rights citizen, sure, but at heart and by blood a foreigner," Chie persisted. "To everyone, she would always be only that."

"Not only that, and not to everyone . "

"No, no, of course not. But people wouldn't like it! They like the snobbery of the Himean citizenship, and the Extended Rights citizens like theirs too. You know that."

"Yes, I do know that. But surely the backlash shall not be too great, Chie-han. She is only one woman."

"But she'd be *your* woman!"

"So she would!" Shizuru almost- *almost!* -snapped back. The fine, fair brows were arched proudly, for she was finally goaded. "Even so, what can that be to them and, more importantly, what can that be to me?"

Chie cast a pleading look towards her young friend, whose eyes were ablaze again. She suddenly regretted having said anything leading to this conversation at all: friendship and respect aside, Shizuru really did intimidate her.

"Shizuru-san," she said beseechingly. "I'm not saying this to displease you, so please excuse me if it seems that way. But please do think about it."

Silence fell after this sincere appeal. They had both stopped their mounts and were now at the very centre of the pen, their horses facing each other. Which one had swung her animal ahead and in front of the other's was unclear; they were too occupied by their conversation to note such things.

"I do."

It was Shizuru who spoke.

"I am thinking about it, Chie-han," she said, voice gentle again but

huskier than usual. Chie had to manoeuvre her horse back to the white horse's side to properly hear it. "And it is only for that reason that I am even considering that concession, mind you. At the very least, she would be better-treated by Himean law then, and it is the acknowledgement of the law that matters in certain ways for her convenience, I should think-not the inane slurs of gossips and rabble. I beg to differ from your opinion by thinking that it does matter too, to some extent."

She stopped here. Chie felt her heart go out to the younger woman at the flash of uncertainty that passed over the latter's face. That face had never been anything but unassailably confident, proudly certain in all enterprises. But now uncertainty flashed over it, and though it was for no more than an instant, Chie felt herself grieved by the sight.

*It seems, she thought, wrong.*

"Yes," she finally acquiesced, tempering her oppositions for now and for her friend's sake. "Yes, maybe you're right. It would add a little more acceptability to it, at least officially."

She trailed off as yet another thing struck her about this conversation. Again she stared at Shizuru, who was only the slightest touch puzzled by the abrupt and intense study.

"Shizuru-san, given the way you're talking about this," the legate began slowly, as though measuring each word on her tongue, "does it mean you're keeping her?"

*Now what does she mean, Chie wondered after her question, by looking the way I feel?*

Again a short silence passed between them, pregnant with all the implications of the question. Neither woman seemed willing to birth them, as though afraid of producing a monstrosity. When the silence was finally breached, the break actually seemed more of a prolongation than a conclusion of the labour pains.

"Oh, right," was what the younger woman sighed. "That."

"That?"

"Indeed. That."

Chie eyed her friend curiously. The patrician's face had gone entirely blank, and the effect of such vacuity on those beautiful, elegantly-sculptured features was disturbing. It seemed to objectify her, render her almost inanimate, such that Shizuru looked no more alive than a marble statue.

*Let's breathe some life into it!*

"Indeed?" Chie said, repeating the vague utterance. "You mean, 'Indeed, I'm keeping her'?"

A quiver seemed to pass over the blank countenance, but it vanished quickly, seeping into the stone.

"I suppose," Shizuru began. "I confess I have yet to ask, and yet..."

She spoke slowly, though with halting stops. Chie watched and said nothing, fascinated by the spectacle of a Shizuru not just speaking haltingly but also trailing away as though lost for words. Thus she was all the more surprised by the metamorphosis that took place the next second, as Shizuru's face set abruptly into an expression best described as resolute. It was not an expression that settled onto her face like a sheet being thrown on as a cover, but one that rose up from within and leaked out of her, moulding the cover to its inner surge. Chie knew the surge for what it was, knew that riding it was an unbreakable and unexpectedly iron-crushing will. Frightening thing, always! She had seen it sufficient times by now to recognise that it meant her friend was out to crush the odds until they evened or swung to her favour. And she knew-now she knew-that she truly had to be careful.

She did not doubt, looking into that face, that if she was found to be one of the odds, she would be crushed as well.

"Yes," Shizuru pronounced, looking Chie steadily in the eye. " *Of course* I shall keep her . "

She just had to make sure she had heard it: "You shall bring her to



Hime in the future, you mean? After the campaign?"

"Yes. I shall take her with me."

Both of them drew sharp breaths. Finally! There it was, out in the open. Chie had to admit she felt no small measure of satisfaction from the positivity of the statement. So many months of having wondered, so many days of conjecture! There was a certain relief to finally uncovering a decision. But that same relief came attached to a sour and heady whiff of trepidation, and with good reason.

*I would tell her that, she told herself, no longer looking at Shizuru now. Her eyes had gone to the cause of this conversation, as had the other woman's. I would tell her that, if it not for the fact that I know she knows it already. I would tell her that it's nearly impossible to carry out her decision, if not for the fact that I've already done so in a way and if not for the fact that she surely feels the impossibility herself.*

A sudden flash of doubt insinuated itself into her thoughts.

*Or does she?*

She slid her eyes sideways, looking at red eyes fixed on far-off green ones and gazing at them with a fierceness and solidifying resolve that made her wonder how much those eyes could see, how far they could look. What was the breadth of Shizuru's perceptions? What were the limitations of that outlook? Why, in god's name, did it seem so all-consuming?

Did Shizuru even feel impossibility?

Chie shivered. Perhaps that was what her friend's essence was, she reflected. Shizuru was not governed by normal humours but by blood that held a drop of divinity in it, a drop distilled throughout the ages from her forbears and spilled, originally, from the veins of Venus. And another drop added to that, from Mars. It was well-known and acknowledged: her divine ancestry, her god-spawned heritage. Great-granddaughter to the gods thirty-eight-or-something generations later.

Perhaps that was the crux of her indomitability. Shizuru had always done things people said could not be done, headed for places people said could not be reached. She had transgressed boundary after boundary, accelerating so quickly in a direct road to her own assured and inevitable greatness that all her opponents actually risked being run over in crossing her path. What was it that sped her on? The terrible infinity of her will? The ruthless immensity of her desire? Or, fuelling all of these and being the root cause of them, the divinity from the drop of godly ichor in her veins? The woman seemed to acknowledge no barricades, seemed to know no limits. She dreamt, she desired, she dared, she *did*.

Which told Chie she just might dare this again. It was clear she wanted it, wanted that girl a great deal. But would she actually be able to do it? Common sense said no, it was impossible. Yet something-some indefinable spirit-part of Chie-said yes, the woman would do it. Her reason wrestled with that judgment of her spirit, though, and argued strongly against it. How could it even be done? How could Shizuru do it suffering a crippling blow to herself and her aims? It was impossible!

*But didn't I just wonder earlier if she has regard for the impossible?*

That brought on another shiver. Almost as though the other woman had felt it, she spoke at once.

"Chie-han," Shizuru called. "Shall you not voice any more objections? You were thinking just then that I finally said it, no?"

"Does it seem like that, Shizuru-san?"

"Yes."

"Then, yes. I confess. It makes me feel a little rude now, having goaded you into admitting it."

"I thank you for prodding me into voicing it, at any rate," Shizuru went on amiably. She was even more herself than ever, Chie realised: wholly self-assured, confidently golden in grandeur. "Now that I have, you shall be free to voice all opinions you may hold about the idea."

Chie rubbed the rough cord of the reins between thumb and forefinger with subdued anxiety.

"Do you really want me to?" she asked, eliciting a smile. She smiled too as she went on. "Anyway, it doesn't seem like it would make much of a difference even if I did. As many opinions as I can possibly produce concerning this matter, I'm sure you can double the number with the ones you can imagine, yourself. I know you're the type of person who thinks of everything, so there's hardly a contention I can make you haven't already thought of. And probably planned for. Ye gods: knowing you, you're already listing them and working it all out now! I'm not fool enough to patronise you, Shizuru-san. Especially not to your face."

They released brief chuckles of laughter at the tacked-on qualifier. Chie shifted the reins in her hand, glad at least for the smile on the younger woman's countenance. Shizuru would be facing opposition for the decision she was about to make, anyway, and in no small measure. She would be facing enough of it without Chie having to add to that. Chie's own apprehensions would have to be put away. What would it benefit her friend if she voiced them? The only benefit would be to her self-satisfaction in having expressed them-and even that was uncertain.

A pox on self-satisfaction! She could keep her concerns to herself, she could be quiet. She could be a friend.

"Right, so that's that," she said, shrugging her shoulders with all the heaviness of Atlas tossing away the world. "I just hope you'll succeed, whatever you decide, whether you change your mind or not in the future."

"I doubt I shall," Shizuru volunteered with a smile.

"I see. Anyway, *Eecastor!*" Chie exclaimed, putting all the shock of the past half-hour into the cry. "You're going to cause another ruckus, you know that, right? What's with all these scandals-note that I use the word without condemnation-being started by the scions of the oldest families these days? First there was Himemiya, and then Hyde-san with his abdication of the citizenship-oh, and not to forget that scandal with the Ogasawara. And now there's you! Oh,

you exalted patricians! You're all running amuck, it's all that old blood going stale!"

Shizuru was laughing.

"I know about the first two of your examples, and certainly about the last one," she said jokingly. "But what of the Ogasawara? Does it have anything to do with Sachiko?"

Chie baulked at her, immensely glad for the change of topic.

"You don't know?" she cried incredulously. "Why, I'd have thought you would!"

"I am hardly as well-informed as Chie-han when it comes to social upheavals."

"Yes, that's true: you just make them. She didn't write about it to you?" Seeing the look on Shizuru's face, she answered her own question. "No, that's stupid, she's not the writing type about things like that. Anyway, I thought someone would have told you, even if it's only that banker of yours, since it's so juicy a piece of news. Gods know Himemiya wouldn't, since she's scrupulous with her courtesy even in private letters. I once had a letter from her talking about Armitage screaming at one of the senators to stuff his bill up his arse, and she wrote it as Armitage telling him to 'please put it up his primary posterior orifice'. Loved the alliteration and the implication that there might be another posterior orifice in development-you know how often Armitage threatens to tear people new assholes-though the insult became rather too witty to convey a sense of Armitage, who's not witty at all."

Shizuru nearly howled at the tale, trying to imagine her old nemesis putting her threats in such delicate language.

"Would it be all right to tell me about Sachiko, then?" she asked.

"Definitely! You'd have heard about it eventually, anyway." Chie giggled huskily. "Actually, I've been waiting for the latest instalment in that story. It reminds me so much of a good Greek play done in parts. Shades of incest and tragedy!"

"Incest?" Now Shizuru looked surprised. "Heavens!"

"Aoi's been telling me about it through her letters, you see. Oh! I bet there's something new in the letter. Want me to check?"

She waved the scroll at Shizuru, who noted the slapdash application of the seal. The younger woman nodded.

"Why, of course, Chie-han," she said, knowing the other was eager to open the letter for reasons other than finding additional news about the Ogasawara controversy. She looked on approvingly as Chie broke the seal and began to unfurl the scroll. "About what is the scandal, at any rate?"

Chie was busily darting her eyes over the script.

"It's to do with this girl her family's adopted from one of their less-illustrious and financially-struggling relatives," she mumbled, before letting slip a chuckle. "Why does it seem like so many of the old patrician families' female heirs are turning to other females, by the way? Now, now, I'm not complaining! I just wonder if that's a way of keeping the madness from continuing through the blood, by preventing direct procreation."

Shizuru chuckled too, though she frowned in confusion at the giveaway remarks.

"Do you mean that Sachiko is with this girl you mentioned? You did mention incest, after all."

"Yes. So not really blood incest, I suppose."

"She is engaged to Suguru-han."

"Not anymore." Chie peeked from her perusal of the letter and grinned wickedly at her friend's expression. "Boggles the mind, doesn't it? I never really thought her inclined any other way, either, so you can imagine my enjoyment of all this."

"Imagine? My dear Chie-han, it is painted all over your face. I need not imagine anything."

"All right, I'm guilty. But really, did you ever think of Ogasawara going for girls? Much less for such a girl!?"

"I confess I never *imagined* Sachiko to be a secret Sapphic either."

Chie nearly fell from her horse with laughter.

"That's a wicked way of putting it," she chortled, barely managing to hold on to the letter as well as the reins. "Really, you aren't helping much. You know I'm a slower reader than you, so you'll have to forgive me if I'm so slow in producing the news."

Shizuru shook her head, apologising and telling her to go on.

"But do seat yourself aright, please," she provided. "If you keep twisting about like that, you shall make me fear for your safety, Chie-han."

"Well, stop making jokes, then. It's your wit that's responsible for my disequilibrium, anyway."

"That would be a great compliment to me, indeed, if the level of witticism I have is enough to unseat Chie-han from her own high horse."

"See what I mean? It's ridiculous, that's what it is. Ridiculous."

They had been laughing throughout this conversation, but the laughter stopped when Chie's face was suddenly wiped clean of all mirth, taking on a blank expression for a moment before giving way finally to a look of bewilderment.

Shizuru stared at her friend, worried.

"Chie-han," she said. "What is it? What's the matter?"

Still Chie did not answer for the space of a few seconds, gazing fixedly on the scroll in her hand as would a person at a grotesque and new creature made manifest, a creature that had yet to be named and categorised. Shizuru called again, even more anxiously.

"Chie-han, are you all right?" she asked, so worried for her friend

that she actually inched closer, ready to grasp the reins or catch Chie if she should fall from the saddle. Yet, she allowed, the woman did not have the look of someone struck dumb by grief or an emotion. Chie was not pale, not seized by a passion as far as Shizuru could see. No, she merely looked what she truly was-which was utterly stupefied.

"Chie-han?"

At the third call, the senior legate finally wrested her gaze from the scroll, looking up at her commander with uncomprehending eyes. What was it they found incomprehensible? And why, Shizuru wondered, did the assessment seem to be directed her way?

"Shizuru-san, I'm surprised you didn't tell me," Chie said, slowly. "I don't... I know it's not my place to ask. But I don't understand the secrecy."

Shizuru met her eyes, confused.

"Secrecy?" she said. "What do you mean? What do you not understand?"

An awkward pause.

"It says here that you're running for praetor," came the response. "Shizuru-san, why didn't you tell me you were running for the praetorship?"

Chie had to wonder why, for the second time in the day, it was Shizuru who looked as disturbed as she felt.

# Chapter 35

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **A Sign to Ward Off the Evil Eye** - *The belief in the evil eye (generally associated with hexes powered by envy) was more or less widely accepted in ancient times. One way to deflect its ill effects was to simply make the sign described in the chapter below, using one hand.*
2. **Garum** - *A fishy sauce or essence very popular among the ancients; it stank remarkably, but was nevertheless used and apparently enjoyed by Romans.*
3. **Hymettan Honey** - *The renowned honey from the apiarists of Mt. Hymettos; universally celebrated for its taste, especially since the apiarists making it did not smoke the beehives prior to harvesting.*
4. **Praetor** - *An office in the Cursus Honorum (Way of Honour, the path of a Roman politician), second only to the office of consul. There were around eight praetors per year in Roman times and most were granted governorship of a province following their term. There were often a good number of praetorian hopefuls in the elections, and the top eight praetorian candidates with the most votes would be the ones voted into the office.*
5. **Strigil** - *A curved, knife-like instrument-though not as sharp as a knife, of course-that was used by Romans for bathing. Oils (scented, for those who could afford it) would be placed on the skin in lieu of today's soap and the strigil would be used for scraping off the oil and dirt afterwards.*

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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"Wait now, wait! Shizuru, be calm!"

The recipient of this barked advice lifted an eyebrow, looking singularly tranquil.

"Midori-han," she said blandly, in her softest voice. "I *am* calm."

Crimson eyes flicked down at the table.

"And you have spilled your wine," came the dry addition.

Midori darted a glance at the red puddle-mockingly similar to the eyes regarding her with faint amusement-that was spilling on her priceless citrus wood table. She cursed and snapped a finger for the attending servant to wipe it.

"Hmph!" she sniffed. "But this is something! You're really serious that you didn't know a thing about this?"

Shizuru released a wistful sigh. This was the second time Midori had asked the question.

"I would scarce pretend ignorance where the pretence would gain me nothing," she stated colourlessly.

"No? It seems to me you do have something to gain from all this, at any rate," Midori countered. "Praetorship *is* the right step towards the consulship, after all."

"Put that cleanly, yes. But there are nuances to everything and this seems no exception," Shizuru retorted. "Even so, we were talking about the pretence of ignorance just now, and not the possible fruit of this development. That much, I confess I truly do not see gainful to me."

"Well, fine, so I'll stay within the parameters," said the governor of Argus, shaking her fiery head at the other's almost legalistic approach to the conversation. "So it's clear, the topic tabled for discussion is the pretence of ignorance, for now. Agreed, Advocate? Good."

The golden head tilted: Shizuru was obviously unruffled by her

mockery. She continued anyway with her presentation.

"Let's see, what have you to gain from pretending innocence here? A solid alibi, perhaps? An unbroken excuse of unawareness about such a plot?" Midori brushed her fringe from her forehead. "You have to admit it, Shizuru. If this comes through, you can end up being an elected praetor where your opponents had thought to bury you, *and* claim innocence of the sly-note that 'sly' is often read as negative!-associations of political manoeuvring necessary to have brought you to that victorious end. You can simply claim you had no idea and it was your 'concerned cousin's doing' all the way. It'll be a fine coup for your career!"

"A pitiful one. And not that anyone would credit that concoction of propaganda," Shizuru interrupted, looking as though she found the Argus governor's words distasteful.

"Oh, really! Some would."

"Who? Rabble? Those who know me only by name or false repute?"

"Yes, yes, and more." Midori sighed breezily. "Well, let's look at the bright side, at any rate. It's a good thing many people know your cousin's obsession with you. If the reputation your cousin has been building up for her, er... *methods* is half as popular as that, they'd not put it past her to stir things up like this without your approval. They'd be more inclined to believe you were just-so to speak-forced to ride the waves. That would make it a little more palatable, I think. Though it does strengthen the argument I am making too, in a way. You're the type who would be intelligent enough to count on people knowing this of your cousin, after all, and could thus capitalise better on a pretending ignorance after the fact."

"In truth, this matters not to me," the younger woman said with a touch of weariness. "Were I to be honest, Midori-han, I care little for such appearances of innocence at the moment. You have been in politics longer than I have. You must be aware as well by now that in politics we all believe the worst deceits of each other. If it would do my opponents good to believe me *sly* -and I do note the negative connotations here-then they shall believe me sly. If it shall fit their preconceived notions of me as cunning-I note the negative

connotations of the word as well!-then they shall believe me cunning. Assignations of culpability have always been part of political manoeuvring. If it is to their advantage to make the shoe fit, they shall force it on me. I doubt my cousin's reputation would disabuse them of their desire to taint mine."

A flash of darkness brewed in the reddish eyes as she finished: "And as for that remark earlier on victories where my enemies had expected surrender, I cannot imagine you would think I would take any pleasure in informing them that any success I have is not of my own making. If you believe so, then you have been attempting to force an ill-fitted shoe on me, as well."

Midori met her stare squarely.

"That's true, that's not exactly your style," admitted the older woman, trying to ignore the sparks of warning glinting at the edges of the other's eyes. How ironic that they should be speaking about a pretence of ignorance right now! "I'll give you that much."

"Thank you."

"So-for the last time, I promise you!-you knew absolutely nothing of this?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll take your word for it."

"Again, thank you."

"You're welcome," Midori said with a frown, knowing the younger woman was now being just a little bit sarcastic in her expressions of gratitude. "But setting that aside, what are you going to do now?"

The glittering crimson embers before her settled into a more mellow glow and turned away. Midori knew where they were going, or rather, to whom.

"Setting *that* aside," Shizuru told her, eyes now focused on the Otomean who was sitting with them, supposedly as guarantor of her safety. "I am going to wait."

Midori made a moue of surprise and gave Shizuru a droll face of astonishment.

"Well! That's all?" she asked, looking at their raven-haired companion too. A corner of her mouth turned up when the girl just looked back at her with big eyes, arms still wrapped around the other dark-haired creature in the room: her tame panther cub. "You're going to *wait* ? You didn't sound too pleased about this matter just now, so I expected something much more exciting than 'to wait', I have to say."

Shizuru nodded.

"I have sent letters of inquiry," Shizuru revealed. "And I fear there is little to be done but to wait for the answers to the questions I posed in them. There is, too, the matter of waiting for the fallout of my cousin's action. Conditions as well as caution contrive against my producing uninformed, direct response-if there is even any to be made right now. I can do little else with that matter at the moment, Midori-han, so I repeat: I am going to wait."

"Do you mean by the fallout, whether you have been elected or not?"

"Yes." Shizuru clucked gently, and the two silent, black-clothed creatures in the room looked her way. She smiled at them, and Midori saw an amazing thing: every vestige of irritation seemed to drain out of the young general. "The elections should have been finished by now. Now if in case I have been elected-"

A harsh laugh interrupted her. "Of course you have! Don't pretend modesty now!"

"I am not, I assure you," came the reply with another smile, one for Midori this time. "I am simply subscribing to accurate language, given the multiplicity of variable factors and figures in this formula. I say if because the occurrence of the precise event is still an if . "

"I'm a historian, Shizuru-chan, not one of those accursed Greek mathematicians you seem to have overread! Either that, or you've been talking to the Himemiya bunch again," Midori snorted, knowing

the members of that clan's proclivity for speaking in theoretical riddles, which for some inexplicable reason they thought perfectly clear and equivalent to good old plain speech! That might be because they were such old-blooded patricians. Everyone knew the old-blooded patrician families tended to eccentricity.

Witness the young woman she was addressing at the moment.

"But if you want to put it that way, fine," she said in surrender. "I'm glad you're at least honest enough to admit considering what to do *if* the sum of the formula is that you're elected."

"Only because the probabilities tend to it," came the answer. "As I told you, I am not succumbing to modesty quite yet. I am aware of my own popularity and of the fact that my recent accomplishments are yet bolstering my fame among the electors. As such, even with the disadvantage of being unable to campaign for votes in the city, I am of the opinion that there is a very strong possibility of garnering enough votes to at least make it among the praetors-elect."

"Well, you're right about the probability, though I still think you're being modest," said the governor of Argus. With a name and fame like Shizuru's, it was statistically impossible not to be voted into the praetorian roster. "Now going from the assumption of that probability, how about we work on the hypothesis of that 'if'?"

A smile. "That was what I was about to do earlier, Midori-han."

"*Ecastor* !" The older woman fluttered her hands in exasperation. "All right, already! I'm sorry for interrupting you. You've made your point, though it's not the one I've been asking for!"

There was a light shimmer of laughter.

"If I am elected as one of the praetors, I believe I shall nonetheless continue working here in the north," Shizuru told her, looking confident. "It is in my interests at the moment, since my mission is not really concluded. Of course, since the mission is more or less the preservation of our territories, you could say it would be in Hime's interests as well to have me stay on for a while longer."

Through this speech, she cast two fleeting glances at her bodyguard. Whether that young woman saw them or not was uncertain.

"I can understand why you'd feel that way, especially given that recent problem we had with the Mentulaean Murders," Midori answered, opening her eyes at her young friend. "But those buggers over the border've been pretty quiet for a while now, to be honest. Do you really think they'll be venturing into our or allied territory again soon?"

"It is not impossible. Their king strikes me as fiercely ambitious. A ruthless hothead with more than his fair share of victories against his enemies. Setbacks do not last to this king. Another invasive attempt I would not put past the man."

The older woman shrugged, sucking in her lips thoughtfully before giving judgement: "If you think so, Shizuru, I'd rather stay on the safe side and agree with you. Your predictions are usually spot-on. I haven't met the man, myself, but he does seem impetuous, going from all I've heard thus far."

She frowned reflectively.

"Just as a professional opinion," she said, "do you think I should start sprucing up defences even more?"

"Yes."

"Preparing for what?"

"The worst."

"As early as this?"

"It is never too early and it is most assuredly not too early now." Shizuru gave Midori a look that said she was deadly earnest. "I may be wrong. But I am very likely not."

"I'll talk to my people."

The mood had changed; the two women were now all-business,

grave and illumined by the aura of their respective offices and authorities.

"This isn't a joke, is it?" The redheaded governor's elbows found the table and rested there, the fingers of her hands forming a cradle for her chin. Her ginger brows interrogated her senatorial colleague. "You really think Obsidian's not given up his plans for expansion towards our territories, Shizuru."

The other woman nodded.

"And how soon do you think it will be, his next strike?"

"Possibly next year. More probably the year after that."

Midori stared.

"Those are serious probabilities you're giving," she said, receiving nothing but a grim nod in response. " *F uck*. That's soon, that estimate!"

"You see why I need more time here," Shizuru replied, thinking of the other, for-now-secret reason she needed it, politically: the scheme she and her allies had to overrun the Mentulae before the Mentulae overran them. "If I indeed collect enough votes to be among the top eight candidates, I shall try to use a bit of political planning to get the lot for a northern province. I believe it is easily manageable."

"Yes, Himemiya will be helping you, of course. She'll have won, no If's there."

"Indeed."

"Anyone else we can count on? People in good positions?"

"Several, even here." After a smile for Midori, she added: "At least, that would be the plan."

One red brow cocked at her.

"Looking to replace someone in particular, Shizuru?" Midori

guessed.

"Well, I did discover something unsavoury about one of the Himean governors in the north recently."

"That better not be me," Midori said with a grin. "I know who. You mean that tubby old wart in Sosia."

The other giggled, shooting a funny face at the listening Natsuki.

"Tubby old wart?" she repeated for the girl's benefit.

"He is, and you know you agree with me-you and Natsuki-chan," Midori answered, looking to the girl as well and throwing a wink. The sight of the colour rising on the white cheeks urged her to do more for some inexplicable reason, and she picked up something from the dish on the table. It was a sticky snack, squares of sesame seed pastry glued together with honey.

"Here, My Dear, have a nip," Midori told the Otomeian. "You've been listening to us talk for a while now and haven't taken anything to eat yet. Here we've been stuffing ourselves the whole time, so uncourtously. Surely you're famished! Go on, it's good."

Shizuru urged her on as well.

"Yes, please take it, Natsuki," she said. "I know you said that you are not hungry yet, but you should be at this time. That should tide you over until we have our dinner soon. Besides, methinks you would enjoy that. It is made with Hymettan honey, is it not?"

"Yes, it is," Midori replied cheerfully. "Natsuki-chan likes honey?"

"Yes."

"Then go on, Girl. Take it, do!"

The Otomeian took the treat with a nod of thanks, although she was conscientious enough to ask first to wash her hands in the basin they were using for that purpose on the table. Midori waited for her to take a nibble before addressing Shizuru again. Who, she noted, had an evanescent wistfulness in her eyes that said she regretted



not having been the one to give Natsuki that treat. The governor sniggered to herself: *Oh, young love!*

"Back to our topic, Sosia would do much better in your hands indeed," she affirmed, drawing back the younger Himean's attention. "Gods know I've heard so many things about that incompetent fool running it right now! It would be perfect if you're elected and inaugurated the next governor of that province, Shizuru-chan. I'd feel much better both for Sosia's sake and mine."

"Your vote of confidence warms my heart," Shizuru replied. "It would be excellent if it could turn out that way. It would be, and yet..."

"And yet?"

"And yet I cannot shake off the feeling that I am missing something in my reckoning here."

"What do you mean? Is something wrong?"

The immediate answer was a frown, and the governor felt her own forehead wrinkle at the faint disturbance in the golden brows.

"So far, you can't deny this development seems likely to turn out a blessing for your career instead of a curse for it, despite the falsity behind the matter," Midori followed. "So why the 'and yet', Shizuru? Looking a gift horse in the mouth?"

"When it comes to this particular gift-giver, Midori-han, I am likely to subject the horse even to an anal inspection."

The governor laughed uproariously, and even Natsuki chuckled. Once the mood had settled down again, Shizuru answered the question.

"I do not know. Yes, perhaps, though the clear answer seems to be no," the blonde woman confessed, looking mildly discomfited. "I know not what I mean, to be honest, other than that I have an unsettled feeling about all of this. As though something is warning me that there is something else going on beneath it."

The olive-green eyes, youthful despite the many little crow's feet at

the corners, considered her. Midori sat back in her well-padded couch and exhaled.

"Perhaps you shall tell me now that I am being paranoid?" Shizuru said, smiling a little.

The older woman denied it.

"Actually, I'm inclined to agree with you," she admitted. "Like I said earlier, Shizuru-chan, you've always had the gift of prediction. Or maybe the better word is foresight. If something's bothering you about this, then there's probably a good reason for that bother."

She reached for her cup on the table and took a long drink from it, licking the drops of wine left on her upper lip afterwards.

"You know, since you didn't know about this," she went on to say, "that probably means someone else may be planning something. Besides your cousin, I mean. I'm going with my opinion that your cousin did this in an effort to try to get you to come back to Hime or be closer to it, if you do win and get assigned a nearby province. But there's something off about it, like you said. I know your cousin has her fair share of resources too, but it's not nearly enough to pull off a successful lobby for your *in absentia* candidature, especially given how many envious enemies you have. There's something else, most likely."

"Or someone."

Midori felt a tremor creep up her spine, cold and feathery as a spider crawling. She held up a hand with the fingers curled into the palm save the index and little finger: the ritual gesture made to ward off the evil eye. Shizuru looked at it solemnly.

"Just this once, Shizuru, I hope your foresight proves wrong," she said, shaking her head. "I don't like the sound of that."

"It does not exactly amuse me either."

"You have too many enemies. Sometimes I just worry about you. I can't help it! Don't tell me I shouldn't."

A soft look was given to her.

"I am sorry that I should worry you so, Midori-han," the younger woman told her. "But I am also grateful for that worry you take."

The governor returned the smile.

"You should be," she joked, throwing a quick glance to the girl at her friend's side. She noted the concern in their spectator's green eyes. "Now enough of that! We're worrying Natsuki-chan too, and that just won't do, eh? Cheer up, Natsuki-chan, and don't let us glum birds worry you. Smile for your domina now and lift her spirits a little. Look at her, Shizuru."

Natsuki, flustered by the abrupt shift in interest towards her once again, underwent a series of facial twitches, unaware of whether or not to humour the request and produce a smile for the two expectant-looking Himeans. Finally, she settled for sending a wordless cry for assistance to Shizuru, her black-rimmed eyes big and blinking.

Midori produced a restrained groan.

"Oh, Jupiter," she moaned, clutching at empty air. "You're adorable! How can you stand it, Shizuru? Look at those eyes-just look at that, I say!"

Shizuru was amused by both Natsuki's expression and Midori's response to it; she laughed freely.

"The answer to your question, Midori-han," she said with a wink, "is that I do not."

And reaching for her young lover's hand, she caught it up and brought it to the water basin again, washing it meticulously and with tenderness. Midori had to grin. That was *bold* !

"It seems to me we have troubled you long enough," Shizuru told the governor, glancing at the open window. "See how dark it is outside! When we began, it was only dusky. No doubt you have other things to do, Midori-han, and should not have to suffer our presence any longer. We shall excuse ourselves now, for our dinner."

A twinkle animated the brown-flecked green eyes.

"Given that exclusionary note, I'm almost worried what you intend to have for dinner, Shizuru-or whom!" she chuckled out. It caused another vicious blush on Natsuki's face, which she watched with great interest. She rose from the couch and the other two followed suit. "Go on, then, Children, and do whatever you do at this time! Call it dinner, if you want. There's much more fun you can have there than talking with this old biddy, anyway."

The pair allowed the elder woman to herd them to the door, which a servant held open. The governor bade the servant keep holding it open as she stood at the doorway.

"Oh, wait, don't go yet, Natsuki-chan," she called out merrily as they walked out. She showed her cheek to them and pointed at it. "Come back here and give me a kiss first."

Shizuru shot a smirk at her friend, ignoring the incredulous look from the girl at her side.

"She shall have to decline that request, I fear," she informed the governor. "The only cheek she kisses is mine."

Midori chuckled, eyebrows wiggling frantically: "Are you sure?"

The only answer she elicited was another smile.

"Isn't someone being her usual confident self," she said to the younger woman, who flashed even teeth at her. "That's good. I have to say, Shizuru-chan, I'm glad to see you're taking this so well, threat of hidden conspiracy and all."

"I am pleased to hear that you think so."

"Well, I'd be going crazy right now if it had happened to me," Midori responded. "But then, that's the difference between us. I'm-most of the time, anyway-already crazy."

Shizuru laughed.

"Whereas I am what?" she enquired.

"Crazy too!" Midori called out with a wave, turning to go back to the room. "But crazily *calm*, Shizuru-chan. You're the master of being just a little too calm."

A little too calm . Shizuru pondered it afterwards: had she been that? At any rate, she preferred to seem like it to the world: tranquil and unruffled, generally a portrait of exceptional-perhaps even crazy-calm. Though it was a calm that actually evaporated as soon as she was left alone with her bodyguard, the two of them in the bath she had ordered drawn by servants encountered on the way to their room.

"The cheek!" she complained loudly to her lover, who was disrobing out of the water. She herself was already immersed in it, and it splashed as she lifted a hand to gesture angrily. "Even if she is my cousin, the sheer cheek of it! She had no right to enter my name without my consent, Natsuki."

Natsuki murmured an answer.

"No, Shizuru?

"No! Tomoe, " the elder woman ground out, sounding unusually irritated, "has nothing over me. Neither legally nor morally. None at all."

The girl was facing the mosaic-covered wall of their bath, and she glanced at Shizuru over her now-bare shoulder.

"It vexes you," she said. "It does so much, no?"

" Yes ."

"Yes, I thought. With the governor, too."

The deep-set red eyes had been trained until now on the shimmering reflection of the torches on the water. Now they looked up to see a girl's pale back, the thin blades of the shoulders sharper in the yellow light. Natsuki bent to remove her trousers: the play of muscle and bone-under-skin nearly made Shizuru forget her vexation for a second.

"Do you mean that you could tell?" she asked the other woman, admiring the sight of a small but firm, nicely rounded backside. "Earlier, when I was talking to Midori-han?"

The trousers and loincloth were draped on a stand.

"Mm-hm."

"Was it so apparent then?"

"No." The other turned around and approached her. "A little vexed, you looked. But not so much, like this."

"But you knew I was vexed like-as much as this?"

"Mmm."

"How?"

The answer was a shrug. She tracked Natsuki as the younger woman went to sit on the edge of the pool behind her, sitting with bare legs loosely crossed so that Shizuru could use them as a pillow. Once she had placed the back of her head there, she felt hands run through the wet-darkened locks of her hair. She purred against the motions, taking a few moments to enjoy the attention without words.

"It simply makes me so angry that she should resort to such a thing," she complained quietly a little later, still letting the girl massage her scalp. She produced a few guttural sounds deep in her throat in pleasure from the extended, stroking touches. "It is so inelegant, for one thing. A maladroit scheme not improved by the suggestion that there is something even more galling beneath it. Like a tumour beneath a tumour."

An exasperated sigh, followed by an exclamation.

"Oh, Tomoe!" she cried. "Does she actually think she can get what she wants this way?"

Natsuki took a few seconds to reply.

"What she wants?" she enquired.

"Yes." A pause. "You know, Natsuki. You heard earlier."

A sound of affirmation.

"That fool," the older woman murmured again a second later. "Fool and faker, troublemaker! Aaah."

The hands holding her head tilted it gently back, and she found a smile being thrown to her by the girl. Fingers smoothed out the crumple of her brow and her lashes fluttered in response.

"It hurts, no?" said Natsuki.

The Himean let her countenance express puzzlement at the unexpected question and the younger woman clarified it for her: "The pride, Shizuru?"

Up went both Shizuru's eyebrows in authentic surprise.

"I-yes," Shizuru answered, expression softening. "Yes, Natsuki. How did you know that?"

"I do not know," Natsuki replied seriously. "It just seems so. I thought."

There was a thinking pause. Shizuru waited.

"Is it because she tried tuh-to make what she wants happen with you?" came the guess, with the girl frowning at the difficulty of expressing herself. "I mean she tried to maybe force you? In that scheme?"

"Do you mean that she tried to manoeuvre or manipulate me for her own purposes?"

A firm nod.

"Exactly that!" Raising her brows, Shizuru sneered at the far wall. "I am no one's puppet."

A smooth chuckle tilted her head back again. She found Natsuki smiling, eyes glimmering with what seemed to be barely concealed amusement. After a moment, she smiled too.

"Forgive me, do I sound so insufferable already?" she enquired in a whisper, sounding like a conspirator asking about a scheme. "You should not even have to listen to this sour rant."

Natsuki shook her head.

"I listen and it is not unpleasant," she said. "For me, it is good to listen. And, too, I like when you are so insufferable and proud."

A laugh. "Is that so?"

Natsuki nodded, eyes laughing back.

"So I may talk and be as insufferable and proud as I wish?"

"Yes. It is good for you to talk."

And later, the girl added: "Because you do not talk very much, Shizuru."

" *You* should talk!"

They laughed together, and Natsuki explained herself. Or rather, she explained her statement by explaining Shizuru.

"You do not talk very much about such things that vex you," she told the older woman. "So it is good that you talk about them sometimes. If it is to me, it is good. I do not tell others. And I promise to listen. I will try do it well."

Shizuru turned around to face her.

"I am sure I can vouch for your success in the last assertion, at the very least," she agreed. "If all the rest of it is so, I thank you again."

"So," the Otomeian said. "Talk now."

"No. Kiss first."



There was a chortle.

"Oh," Natsuki said with a frown, pretending to chide her. "You."

"Me, yes."

"Always that."

"Oh, yes."

As their lips moved against each other, opening and closing, the Himean lifted a hand to touch the other's throat. The first stroke of her finger down that smooth skin caused a sigh. Her fingers went to the pearl dangling from the necklace around the girl's neck. She slicked its surface with the drops of water on her thumb.

"So," she teased, once it was over and Natsuki regarded her with darkened eyes. "Talk now?"

"Uhhh."

"Would you fetch the oils first, though? Let me bathe you, Your Highness."

Once Natsuki had complied with her request-sparing a sniff for the 'Your Highness' remark, of course-and she herself set about her task, she found herself calming swiftly, soothed by the simple act of being able to touch her lover in so natural a way. The oil she chose to smooth over the girl's body tonight was scented lightly and was fresh and floral: a little different from the scents she herself often used, which were generally of a stronger fragrance. She felt the more lightly-scented oils suited her companion better, though, and that judgement met Natsuki's approval.

"I am sorry for sounding so cantankerous, though," she apologised again. "It is simply that, as you observed, it offends me so much. There is my pride to consider, for one thing, but even without that, there is the matter of my plans. It is as though someone else is imposing what they want on what I want for the future-and can I really take that absent complaint?"

Natsuki's head inclined to one side, a few black tendrils brushing her

face. Her hair was drawn up into a simple knot, as was Shizuru's.

"What you want?" she echoed.

"Yes."

"It is what? What you want."

Shizuru nearly blurted out, *I want you*. Taking a moment to breathe deeply instead, she eventually answered: "Many things, Child . I am a greedy person. I want many things."

Her companion made a thoughtful sound.

"But because of this, is what I intend to say," the girl said. "What of those things are affected? Because of this?"

"Where do my desires conflict with her trickery, you mean?"

"Yes, that."

The older woman did not answer for a while, choosing to finish smoothing oil over two coral-tipped breasts first. She lingered in running her cupped hand over their curves, pausing over the gentle swell of the left one. She could feel the steady throb of Natsuki's heart as it sped in reaction. She marvelled at the thought of that fragile, mysterious organ responding so quickly to her merest touch, that organ many of the Grecian doctors claimed to be the seat of both feeling and life. She had seen it before-from autopsies, surgeries, battle, and the like-and had found nothing particularly remarkable about it. A fist-sized lump of flesh, surprisingly small for its importance. Easy to cut apart and tear open. She wondered if Natsuki's heart was only that tiny as well. She wondered if it was that easily torn.

Finishing her work, she gathered the younger woman in and wrapped her arms about the slender waist, slippery now with the oil, and kissed one pink-shelled ear.

"I suppose the conflict comes from many points, Natsuki," she whispered into that ear, the girl shivering in her arms and holding on to her shoulders. "Too many to say, or perhaps even few but too

complex. Besides, there is what I told Midori-han earlier: the suspicion my instincts insist on having against this scheme. That, added to all these things, is more trouble than I consider permissible for even my cousin. All these things represent perhaps a little too much risk, even for me."

She sighed ruefully and gave the ear another kiss.

"I am sorry it is hard for me to explain at this moment, Darling," she said. "But I am so vexed!"

Natsuki turned her head and nuzzled the side of Shizuru's face in response to the utterance. The older woman felt a smile growing on her lips, knowing the girl was trying to comfort her. She knew too that it was working.

"Come, Natsuki," she said while facing the younger woman. "Stand over there and I shall fetch the strigil."

The Otomeian did as demanded but also had her own request to make.

"Ah! Shizuru," she said. "I will, ah, I may put the oil too, please? On you?"

A smile. "Of course. I was about to ask."

"Then... you will come here?"

After such a look and from such beautiful eyes, she thought, who could possibly do otherwise? Later, once Natsuki was well under way with her work, she touched the split triangle of muscle on the younger woman's abdomen. Her finger traced the groove down the middle, coming to rest on Natsuki's navel. She smiled at the way her finger seemed tempted to glide down the oil-slick surface and straight between Natsuki's legs.

"How silly we are!" she cried, splaying her hand then on the taut stomach once more. "I should have finished scraping off the oil from you first before letting you apply mine. Now we are both slippery as eels."

To illustrate her point, she attempted to pull the girl to her by taking hold of one lean limb, which slipped from her grasp almost immediately. Natsuki laughed with her as she continued trying to find purchase on the girl's arms and sides, her fingers failing from lack of traction.

"Everything simply slides."

Natsuki shrugged.

"Slippery and wet, hm? Why Natsuki, did you plan this?"

"Hmm? No!"

"No?" Shaking her head in mirth, Shizuru patted the girl's shoulder. Her hand slipped off after the first pat, of course. "You do not even know what I am suggesting. Defensive, are we not?"

The exquisitely white brow creased as Natsuki moved away and returned with the strigil.

"I know," Natsuki muttered. "What you suggest, Shizuru."

"Indeed?"

She put the flat of its tip to the girl's chin and lifted it, the girl acquiescing to this handling with a touch of laid-back defiance.

"Forgive me for teasing," Shizuru apologised, kissing her on the nose. "Forgive this horrid, inadequate person for her incessantly lecherous thoughts about you, because you are so beautiful it is hard to avoid thoughts of dragging you to the floor and having you right there. Now may I finish bathing you before the temptation becomes too much?"

A smile, slow to spread but sincere in fulfilment, was her answer.

As she scraped the strigil against the firm skin of Natsuki's arm, the girl put to her a remark disguised as a question.

"Shizuru," that young woman said. "You like very much to tease, no?"

"Dear me," Shizuru grinned. "Is it so apparent?"

Natsuki scoffed.

"Yes, I suppose I do like it-with certain people," Shizuru admitted, pouring water over the just-scraped arm. The long muscles underneath came alive, tightening for an instant at the shock of the water. "But so you know, my teasing is special when it comes to you. I only ever tease you this way."

"Lecherously?"

She laughed and flicked the girl lightly on the temple with a finger. Natsuki flinched, one green eye shutting as she slanted her head away from the tap.

"That is one way of putting it! Sometimes, you see, you simply make me feel so licentious," Shizuru joked, now applying the strigil very carefully on the unblemished curves of the other's backside. "It becomes so that I worry on occasion that it is, as I jested earlier, Natsuki's plan. You are not trying to turn me dissipated, are you?"

Natsuki loosed a husky giggle, one that remained in her eyes long after the sound.

"Dissipated?" she echoed. "You?"

"Yes. That sounds like sarcasm, Natsuki. Is it?"

"Dissipated," the girl said again. "You only wuh-wuh-want it five times, each day."

Shizuru was hugely amused that even now, the girl could stutter.

"You, dissipated?" Natsuki finished, gaining confidence again since Shizuru did not tease her for the stammer. "Hmm. No. Not possible."

The other woman laughed into her lover's black hair.

"So it was sarcasm," she said, snapping her teeth in a loud click near the girl's ear. As expected, Natsuki flinched. "Since when did you get sarcastic, *meum mel* ? From where did you get that?"

Another chuckle, after which the girl pushed away from her to deliver an incredulous glance more accusatory than a pointing finger.

"Oh, well, all right then," Shizuru conceded, going back to scraping her with the strigil. "At least you learned from a master."

Natsuki smirked.

"But," she said. "You admit it, Shizuru?"

"Admit what?"

"You are dissipated."

"Oh, you like it."

That earned her a smack of the palm on her shoulder.

"You," said the girl, trying to look angry, "are terrible."

"No, I," Shizuru retorted merrily while rinsing the strigil, "am hungry. Come, let us finish this bath quickly so that we can have dinner."

She held out the strigil to the other woman.

"Would you be so kind as to help me with this, Natsuki?"

Natsuki complied and worked quickly on her with the implement, after which both of them rushed through the rest of their ablutions and out of the water. Drying each other off, they dressed in their night clothes and moved to their room, talking all the way to the dinner table. It had been set by the governor's servants during their bath, as per Shizuru's instructions, so that the couple would not have to suffer other presences in what they had both begun to consider their little nook away from the world.

"I saw Yuuki-han speaking to you earlier," Shizuru was telling the younger woman as she pulled out a chair at the table, all the while ruffling the ends of her hair to remove excess moisture. "What was that? Did she want anything?"

Natsuki paused in doing the same thing to her own hair, which

cascaded in black tangles over her shoulders and was wetting her nightdress. Shizuru noticed it and stopped in the act of seating herself. She went to place a cloth towel over the Otomeian's shoulders first in order to absorb the moisture from the girl's mane. She ruffled the black hair fondly before returning to her own seat.

"The primipilus wanted to borrow some of mine," Natsuki murmured quietly after thanking her in the same low voice. It seemed as though the warm, rather mellow atmosphere was more suited to subdued tones. "My troopers."

"For what?"

"Practice. Joint exercise."

"Oh, I see. When did she want this?"

"Two days from now."

"I see. You agreed, I suppose."

"Yes." The leaf-green eyes darted towards her, and she realised they were seeking approval. *Silly girl*, Shizuru thought. "I said it was fine."

"That is good." She rearranged the cloth towel on her own shoulders. "I hope she was nice in asking you for that?"

"Um, yes."

"Um, really? You need not hold back for me, you know. And do not worry, Nao-han will not get in trouble even if she was unkind in addressing you," she lied to the girl's face. "I am merely curious."

"Yes. She was nice."

Shizuru regarded the girl attentively, searching the cool green eyes for any indication of dissembling. She was glad to find none, although, truth be told, that was just what she had expected. Her favourite primipilus might tend to abrasiveness sometimes, but was not actually malicious-at least, that was what she thought. If anything, Shizuru even suspected that the primipilus rather liked the

girl.

*Though not too much, I hope*, she tacked on mentally, with a nod when Natsuki restated her answer. She cast her glance at the dishes on their table.

"Enough of that. Let us eat! Let me see, what do we have here?" she began, running her eyes over the food that had been prepared for them by the governor's kitchen staff. A smile came to her as she recognised the kinds of dishes she and Natsuki liked best, a compromise between two culinary tastes that Midori's cooks had learned by now due to the regularity of pointers sent to them by Shizuru through her own servants. Shizuru was conscious that her foreign companion was used to food that might be anywhere from fairly close to shockingly distant to her own cuisine, and had thus set out to find what sort of food Natsuki liked best. Or least, as it were.

It was not as easily accomplished as one might have imagined: Natsuki being Natsuki, the girl generally accepted whatever was put on her plate with practical and courteous grace. She would not carp on it if she disliked it and often held her face so still that the older woman was often hard put to tell if she actually approved of it or not. By this time, however, Shizuru had more or less learned how to interpret the slightest motions or changes in the girl's expression. It was thus that she painstakingly catalogued what Natsuki liked and disliked, modifying her own diet-since they often shared the same food-for the sake of the younger woman's palate.

The food before them now was cognisant of those changes, being devoid of strongly-flavoured items but cooked excellently, tasty with the undisguised natural flavours of meat, spices and fruit. That Himean staple, *garum*, was completely absent now, Shizuru having given it up after apprehending that Natsuki's dislike for it was such that her nostrils would pinch at the least trace. Instead of that fishy essence, the roast bird before them was redolent with the aroma of cooked garlic in olive oil, stuffed with fresh herbs and sweet onion. There were two different salads of lettuces, celery, cucumbers and other fresh vegetables, each one dashed over with a different oil-and-vinegar dressing. There was even a serving of goose liver for each of them, something Shizuru knew Natsuki would enjoy since she had noticed the younger woman's fondness for that little



delicacy. Rolls of the freshest bread, fig-filled pastries and at least three local cheeses completed the meal. Shizuru approved of it and, looking at Natsuki, knew the girl did too.

"How is the salad, Natsuki?" she asked as the other took a bite of lettuce and cucumber from one of the bowls. "Not bad?"

Natsuki looked sincerely pleased by her mouthful and swallowed first before answering.

"Good," she said. "You try it too?"

"Yes, I shall." She decided to finish the bread in her hands first, though, and dipped another morsel of it in the saucer of olive oil for that purpose. She put it in her mouth and chewed, savouring the delicacy of the flavour; the oil was obviously of the first press. "Oh, this tastes so good. I *have* been hungry!"

"But you ate before, too. Earlier."

"The treat with Midori-han? Oh, that was a snack, Darling. An actual meal is still different. The body recognises that."

"You eat much."

"Actually, Natsuki, I am merely a moderate eater." She smiled at the younger woman. "It is only that your appetite is so scanty that, by relativity, I seem to be quite the epicure."

"Oh."

"Well, it is fine if you eat a little less, I suppose. You are built smaller than me, after all." She darted a meaningful glance at her dining partner. "Just not too little, hm? Especially in this climate and this season. Winter is the time for building up resistance to the cold."

Natsuki reached for some roast fowl.

"Winter will finish soon," the girl observed. "Spring comes."

"True. The thaw should start in a few more weeks." She took Natsuki's cup and hovered her other hand over the jug on the table.

"What do you want, Natsuki? There is wine and water, and I had them bring in some fresh cow's milk tonight, too. I suppose you would like the milk, child that you are?"

The girl smiled sheepishly at her guess and the tease. When the cup was filled, Shizuru put it by Natsuki's plate.

"You really do like it, don't you?" she remarked, as Natsuki put the cup to her lips and drank deeply, eyes bright with pleasure. "I should remember to have them bring some each night for you. Or whenever you want it. Simply tell me."

"Mm. Thuh-thank you."

Natsuki was confused by the older woman's reaction, however, which was to start laughing. Shizuru extended a hand to her and held her chin.

"Silly Natsuki," the older woman said, swiping a thumb at the white moustache of milk that had been left on the Otomeian's upper lip. "Do not move. There."

She sucked on her thumb afterwards and grinned at her pink-cheeked companion.

"Sweet," she announced humorously. "Now I can say that Natsuki is truly milk-skinned."

Natsuki made a face. They continued conversing easily this way as they ate, having grown comfortable enough with each other to talk about simple matters in a manner that made both of them feel, secretly, that these simple and little things were of great weight after all. Now and then one of them would hand-feed the other with a tiny morsel, a crumb of bread, a piece of fowl, or even an olive round and shiny of skin. The one being fed would often lean forward after taking the food, catching the tips of the other's fingers with the slightest of kisses or the barest nip of the teeth. Once, after a particularly sudden tease, the younger woman even threw an olive at the blonde, who laughingly caught it and popped it into her mouth. They were simple, casual interactions between two women who had only ever been able to be this way with each other.

*Tiny things*, pondered Shizuru while offering the other a bite of her dessert: an exquisite pastry envelope of syrupy figs suspended between layers. The younger woman accepted and she fed the girl from her fingers. *A tiny bite, another tiny thing. All of these are such tiny things, little events that shall never be recorded by the great historians nor memorised by the scholars of the next generation. They pale in size and significance to the grand pageant that is history. Possibly no one will ever know that they took place, aside from the two of us. And that only demonstrates yet again how little they touch, how little they are.*

Natsuki swallowed the bite she had taken; lucent green eyes came to life.

*They are all so tiny.*

"Um, thank you, Shizuru. It is good."

*And that is unbearable because they feel like all that matters to me.*

"With you, Natsuki, the infinitesimal becomes the infinite. Did you know that?"

The girl was halfway through offering her a piece of cheese and paused at the statement, looking confused.

"I am sorry, what?" she said gently, hand-and cheese-hovering near the older woman's mouth. "Shizuru, what is it?"

Shizuru waved it off and took the cheese in front of her with her teeth. She sat back and smiled at the girl, who produced another confused look before turning back to her own plate.

"Natsuki?"

"Hm?"

"Thank you."

The space of a heartbeat. And then another smile, another tiny but infinitely powerful thing.

"Mm-hm," hummed Natsuki.

After that, they fell to their food again in companionable silence, busy with the motions of picking and chewing and swallowing. It did not escape Shizuru that Natsuki cast a few glances her way, as though intending to say something but nervous about it. She knew that if she left the girl alone for long enough, the latter would eventually say what was on her mind. Or so she hoped, at least.

Her hopes were justified when Natsuki called her.

"Shizuru?" As the elder woman looked up from a mouthful of salad, the girl went on. "What you said? To the governor?"

Shizuru chewed swiftly to clear her mouth.

"Yes, Natsuki, what of it?"

Natsuki took a while to answer.

"You... no, *she* said it may be there is someone?" she eventually said, looking right at the curious, golden-lashed red eyes. "Earlier, she said this?"

"Someone?"

"Someone else behind your nomination?" Natsuki elucidated. "You worry about it?"

For the briefest second, Shizuru wondered at Natsuki's countenance, which should have had concern painted over it given the tone in which her enquiry had been made. Instead of that, it had a curious disparity of expression between the eyes and the rest of the young woman's visage, which was frozenly neutral. The discrepancy arose here, because in contrast to the almost innocent set of lips, cheek, and brow, the eyes were disturbingly animate, a turbulent and tempestuous green.

*Oh*, she thought, studying the girl. *I see.*

She reached for Natsuki's hand and brought it to her lips, kissing it.

"Yes, I worry about it, Natsuki," she said. "I admitted that earlier and I admit it now. Truth be told, I do not think it shall cease to worry me for a while, until I finally know what has happened and have taken suitable measures to address it. It cannot be helped because I do not know yet . "

She gazed deep into the emerald eyes before going on.

"I do not know who this someone else is, Natsuki, nor do I have any definite suspicions at this point. Did I have any, I would take action on them myself. But that is not the case, and so I can do nothing but be patient. Worry may be present, but I fear it must be only that, for a good while, until we know how to nip it at the root. We must be patient."

Natsuki gave her that look, the one that transfixed her afresh each time. It was a strange way of looking that she had yet to see from any other set of eyes: a way of looking that seemed to teeter on the edge of forever.

"We can... yes. We will be patient," said the author of that look, softening instead of breaking the spell. "But we will be alert, too."

Black brows drew close and she added: " / will be alert, too."

Shizuru understood the message in the husky words. For an instant, she was caught between the urge to kiss her devoted protector and the urge to remain as she was, basking in the ferociously determined gaze of those large eyes. She would have liked to do the former, but then Natsuki would shut her eyes, and Shizuru did not want that because she wanted to keep looking at them for a little while longer-an eternity, even. That left her with the latter choice. But to have someone look at you that way and not touch them was simply insupportable. So she wavered, saying nothing, until she finally remembered the thin hand that was still in her own. She brought it to her mouth again and kissed it once more, this time slipping two of the finely-shaped, many-scarred fingers past her lips.

"Thank you, Natsuki," she said after pulling them from her lips with a wet sound. "Thank you again. That takes at least half of my worries away, you know, to know you are looking out for me."

The other woman nodded, blood swarming onto her cheeks. After a short silence, she reclaimed her fingers reluctantly from the Himean's hand. Her eyes were downcast.

She was looking at her fingers, which Shizuru had sucked.

"I have never feared much on that score," the elder woman spoke up. "And I know I could not ask for anyone better than you beside me, to see me through my days safely."

Natsuki nodded.

"Given that position," Shizuru continued, before stopping abruptly and seeming to consider her words. "That importance you have to me, I would also caution wariness from-"

She stopped before finishing and her companion wondered at it because it was so unlike her. The crimson eyes widened the slightest fraction for a second, as though she were just now coming to see something important. The next instant, she had Natsuki's hand back in hers and was staring intensely at the younger woman.

"Natsuki, " Shizuru said, her voice soft as always but obviously hardened underneath, the backbone of steel it held on the most urgent occasions showing under the lilting cover. "Be wary too. You must be wary too."

Natsuki stared.

"You *must* be careful. Not only for me, but for yourself as well," Shizuru continued. "It is true that I am one of your concerns when it comes to safety-but your first concern must still be for yourself. Look out for yourself first, Natsuki. Promise me."

The girl was too astounded to reply.

"I am not saying I do not want your protection-I am not so ungrateful," Shizuru pressed on, face rendered fiercer by the lamplight. "But I am not so ungrateful either to consider you even remotely expendable . Remember that I would always prefer to weather an injury myself rather than have you weather it, especially if the damage to you would be greater than the potential damage to

me. Do not jump in front of me to take arrows if it is possible for me to simply hold my shield against them. *Do you understand me?* Never place yourself in jeopardy, not even for my sake. All right?"

Her hand was tight on the other's now, almost crushing the slender fingers together with her own though she did not realise it. Still Natsuki made no move to take her hand away, and simply sat there looking-what was the word? Dumbfounded, perhaps?

A short while later, the girl finally spoke.

"Shizuru," she said quietly, sounding both explanatory and argumentative. "I am *your bodyguard*."

As though that were the key to the lock of her fingers, Shizuru released her hand. And though the younger woman did not understand it, the Himean actually seemed disturbed by that answer. Her red eyes were hooded, but the faint line that had gouged itself between both eyebrows betrayed the turmoil in her.

And then she answered: "Perhaps."

Natsuki angled her head, a scowl on her face now as well.

"Perhaps?" she repeated questioningly. "I am your bodyguard 'perhaps', Shizuru?"

Shizuru said nothing, her eyelids now pressed tight together. Natsuki persisted, voice becoming even throatier with her disturbance.

"Shizuru, that is not so," she insisted. "What is it that you mean? Do you say I am no longer-"

"I *said* perhaps," Shizuru interrupted, silencing her with a burning stare.

The young woman's jaw snapped shut, full of resentment at what she perceived to have been a disowning of her official position.

"My bodyguard," Shizuru continued nevertheless, seeing the passion in the exquisitely pale, twitching face. "Yes, perhaps you

were. Once."

Natsuki said nothing, a heartbreaking spasm flickering over her countenance at fear of being cast off. Still the older woman went on, her next words dispelling the girl's fear.

"Not now, Natsuki," Shizuru told her. "Not any longer. Now you are just so much more."



## Chapter 36

*Greeting and thanks to all the readers. I daresay this chapter had my fingers aching: it was typed in one sitting. It makes one appreciate the work typists and secretaries do, and even then only marginally. I imagine my typist found me terribly irritating back then, as I used to ask someone to type for me-mostly when my carpal tunnel seizes me. Imagine having someone say, while pacing restlessly before you, "Quote it is a most difficult thing comma end quote she said full stop. She looked at the other woman and winced because her friend had again drifted off to sleep full stop. Edit - omit 'because' and replace it with a colon, would you?"*

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### **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Contubernalis** (L.) - A military cadet. Most (wealthy or prominent) Romans sent their children to fill this position come time for their requisite military service. The contubernalis was expected to serve his superior, whether legate or general, in the capacity of an attendant, gaining experience from observation and exposure.
2. **Dann and Dagda** - Ancient gods; part of Celtic lore.
3. **Dis** , **"To Dis with it!"** - Dis being Pluto, this would be something similar to the modern expression, "To hell with it!"
4. **"Gerrae!"** (L.) - "Rubbish!" or "Nonsense!"
5. **Insulae** (pl. L.), **i nsula** (s. L.) - T he ancient equivalent of our modern apartment buildings.
6. **Meum mel** (L.) - Literally "my honey"; a Latin endearment.
7. **Octet** - Yet another division for the Roman military. The men of a century were divided into groups of eight or octets, with each octet having its own leader.

8. **Pilum** (s.), **pila** (pl.) - The name of the Roman military spear.

9. **Pilus prior**, **primipilus** - Names for the highest-ranking centurions in the legion. There were actually many grades of centurions, from first-spear centurions to second-spear centurions, and even now there is much ambiguity about the number of ranks. The **primipilus** can also be called the **primus pilus**.

10. **Praefectus** (specifically **praefectus fabrum**) - The official supplier of the army; in this story, the role is occupied by Tokiha Takumi.

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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Winter sunlight crept into an otherwise dark room, differentiated into slanting rays by fretted shutters. They crept across the room and over a rumpled bed-sheet, painting the body on the bed with bars of light. Glittering under one of those stripes was an eye that would have been unmistakable to anyone from Hime's Ninth Legion: an eye of the tangiest, most acerbic green. It was the eye of their most decorated (and probably most redheaded) **primipilus** centurion .

This very eye was now moving, rolling from centre to corner, for the **primipilus** was watching the other person in the room. This other person moved to the window, and the rays of light striping the **primipilus**'s body were interrupted.

"I'll open the window, Nao?" floated the voice of the person blocking the light. It was followed by the sound of sheets being pulled. "Or light a lamp?"

"No, not a lamp. Unless you've some better quality wicks since last I visited. The one you lit last time smoked like a fucking furnace." A self-directed giggle. "Quality wicks, here? Who am I kidding?"

"The window, then."

"Open it, but pull the curtains. It's cold."

The shutters were removed; light flooded the formerly dim room.

"I can get another blanket," came the suggestion. "Something thicker."

"No. To Dis with it! I'll be going out later anyway, and it'll be worse then. This'll do."

"Wine?"

"Always."

The other woman laughed, and her grey eyes turned sideways were full of brightness from the window.

"You Himeans," she said, the laughter lingering in her high and clear voice. "You and your wine."

"You talk as if you don't drink either, Pollonia. Hurry it up." Nao propped herself up on an elbow. "Hey. You do drink, right?"

Pollonia went to the table, drawing from under it an earthen jug and using that to pour the requested wine.

"Sometimes," she said.

"Sometimes!"

"I like water better."

"That's the barbarian in you." Nao laughed in taking the cup from the other woman's hand, downing a large gulp of the beverage immediately. " *Shit* wine."

The other regarded her unapologetically.

"This is a shit establishment," the woman said. "Our customers don't come here for wine."

"Don't come here to be poisoned by shit wine, I bet."

She made a face at her cup but drank again anyway. Pollonia smiled.

"They don't come here for language lessons either," she told the red-haired woman. "But some customers expect too much."

Yellowish-green eyes met grey ones. They smiled at each other in understanding: *primipilus* and prostitute.

The room they occupied was part of the sleeping quarters owned by the establishment that owned Pollonia: a respectable, middle-class whorehouse of Argus. It was not the best whorehouse in the city, nor was it the most reasonably priced; but it did turn a fair trade, and had enough uniquely pretty girls to keep on turning.

The reason Nao herself patronised this instead of other, cheaper whorehouses nearer the inn she had been billeted was for one of those uniquely pretty girls: Pollonia, to be precise. Each time Nao visited this brothel, she requested Pollonia. Not once did she waver in the constancy of this choice, and the manager had long learned to stop asking which girl the *primipilus* wanted when she stopped by.

The reason for choosing Pollonia, however, was not on the merits of prettiness-although Nao had to admit Pollonia had a good deal of value in that aspect. She was dark, *so very dark*, with bronzed skin that caught your eye immediately in a brothel line-up where the standard was for fairness. Her hair was a rich deep brown, and her eyes an unexpectedly light grey for so dark a woman. She was not beautiful in the classical sense. She was clean and looked it, and her features were intriguingly sharp. Sharpest of all was her great hooked nose, which was Semitic in shape and protruded from her face like a large beak. For all its largeness, it was not unattractive. In fact, it pleased Nao in the way it invoked a bird of prey. Nao thought that Pollonia looked like a hawk-though perhaps not an eagle.

This was all very well, of course. But Nao did not really patronise her for these physical traits, likeable as they were. Nor did the Himean centurion choose Pollonia out of any reputation Pollonia might have for legendary skills in bed-although she was, Nao thought, *not bad at all*. There was another, far more important reason for visiting Pollonia and it was Pollonia's history and heritage. The Argus

prostitute was a Mentulæan born and bred.

Properly speaking, she was a half-breed: part-Mentulæan and part-Jew. Pollonia's mother had been Mentulæan, while her father was an itinerant who happened to pass into Obsidian's empire during his mercantile travels. Shortly after the romance that sired Pollonia, he had left on another of his commercial trips and was never heard from again. Her mother being a slave in a minor noble's household, Pollonia served there as well until she reached the age of fourteen, when yet another misfortune changed her life. The household for which they worked was dissolved, their noble master falling into ruin, and Pollonia found herself with the rest of the former slaves on the auction block.

This was where she was separated from her mother, who went to one bidder while she went to another-one who happened to be a travelling merchant, not unlike the father who had vanished from her life early on. If Pollonia had expected to serve this new owner as a life-servant, however, she turned out mistaken: for the man took her to Argus, whereupon he sold her yet again to the recruiter of a local whorehouse. This was the establishment in which she and Nao currently were.

Pollonia had divulged bits and parts of this to Nao once the latter began frequenting the brothel as a regular client, but Nao actually knew it all before that. Long on the lookout for someone with a history like the prostitute's, she had been delighted to find her first candidate as tailor-made to her needs as possible. Pollonia was shrewd yet tractable, not wanting in courage, and possessed of a detestation for Mentulæans that made her agree to Nao's demands-which she very well knew might aid in the killing of Mentulæans.

Pollonia had lived in Obsidian's lands half her life thus far, which put her in an excellent position to satisfy the centurion's requests on various things. She was able to provide various pieces of information the centurion required, from local customs to cartography in the lands across the border. At present, she was helping Nao perfect her grasp of the Mentulæan version of the Himean tongue. This was the language spoken between the many Mentulæan peoples. It was a bastardised version of the original, spoken in a broad and slangy accent full of what native Himeans

would perceive as syncope. It was thus in this version of Himean that the primipilus and Pollonia conversed now, as they often did with each other.

"One of my usual customers passed by earlier," Pollonia was telling her most loyal customer. "He's one of the local centurions. I think he was at the general muster too, actually."

Nao's accent was just right: "That's why it's called a general muster."

"He met your commander." An uncertain pause. "He wasn't too happy."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"He didn't like her."

Up shot one of the ridiculously red eyebrows.

"Ho! Now that's unusual!"

Pollonia threw her hair over one shoulder.

"He said she was snooty," she told the centurion. "Was it snooty? Or snotty?"

"They mean the same damn thing," Nao interrupted with a snooty snort of her own. "Back to the topic! You said he's a centurion?"

"Yes."

"They're letting just anyone become a centurion these days, seems like," the decorated centurion said. "I can't believe it. The general's never snooty. Unless it's to people she dislikes, anyway, and even that rarely. Did she dislike him on first contact or something? That's even rarer."

"I wouldn't know," Pollonia said. "He called her 'one of those stuck up nobles who think their shit don't stink', I think was what he said." She frowned and tapped the fingers of her right hand on her temple. "I'm pretty sure I got that part down right. He said she was one of those who looked down and liked to do it-look down on people, I

mean."

" *Gerrae!* "

"He said it." Pollonia suddenly giggled, drawing closer to Nao like a gossip schoolgirl. "It was funny, you know. I know the real reason he didn't like her. He said it himself."

"You're supposed to tell me that first!"

Pollonia was coquette enough to pretend hurt: Nao was sceptic enough to ignore it.

"Tell me," she demanded, effectively clearing the stung expression on the other woman's face. Pollonia recognised an order when she heard it, and Nao was not someone whose orders you could take lightly.

*Unlike some of my other customers*, she thought before checking herself. Nao was definitely unlike all of her other customers.

"I think it was when he went with the other centurions-our lads, that is," she clarified, meaning the local officers. "They went to see her after the parade thing. You don't know?"

"I know she talked to the local officers, but I wasn't with her when this thing you're talking about happened, obviously. I wouldn't be asking otherwise."

"Fine. So, I was saying, this centurion who didn't like your general-"

"What's his name?"

Pollonia stopped, mouth still slightly parted. Nao raised her brows, mutely repeating the question. When that did not work, she decided to speak.

"Well, who's he?" she asked.

The other woman licked her lips.

"I don't suppose you want it for a reason, do you?" she said slowly

and with great circumspection. "I mean, well, you won't go after him, will you?"

The redhead laughed: "Is he more than a customer after all?"

"No. He's not even one of the customers I like." The other shook her head. "I'd just not like to have his death hanging over my head for something so little. Though you could find out his name easy enough from others even without me, I guess."

"True, I could, so you can save your noble act. And I agree it's 'little', so don't be an idiot. I'm not about to go killing people just because they don't like the general," Nao said dryly, finishing with a mutter: "Was in that business, I would've assassinated half the Senate by now."

"So why do you want to know his name?"

"Plenty of reasons, but here's the basic one: random information can someday come in handy."

Pollonia smiled at that.

"You and your handy information," she said, before divulging the intelligence. "His name is Itou. Kentaro Itou."

"Another Taro. That explains it."

"What?"

"Nothing," Nao sniggered. "Go on with your story."

Pollonia sighed.

"I was saying some of them met with your general," she began. "And Itou-san was with them. He said she was talking to the others when he suddenly got an itch in his throat. The really bad kind, he said, so he had to hawk and spit it out, because it was so bad. And then-

"No, don't tell me, let me guess!" Nao interjected, shaking with laughter. "He looked up to find the general staring him down so coolly he got the uncontrollable urge to piss in his pants?"



"I think so, though he didn't say it that way," Pollonia laughed merrily with her. "Does she do that often?"

"No! Or, maybe," she said, pausing to think about it. "Huh. I think it depends."

She harrumphed and went on: "But it's not often some fool has the bumped-up balls to spit in front of her, you know. It's rude in front of a general, especially during inspection. And it doesn't help his stupidity that the general herself has spotless manners."

"He didn't think so."

"What would he know about manners? He practically spat in her face."

The grey-eyed woman smiled.

"Not couth, is it?" she asked.

"Damned right it isn't. Even I can behave pretty when I know it's needed, and I'm as bloody couth as the most vulgar ranker to ever cuss his con-steepay-ted way to a latrine pit," she cooed.

Pollonia whooped with laughter and fell in a swoop onto the sheets.

"Oh, you're uncouth, all right," she giggled, rolling over. "Uncouth centurion who spends her time in a whorehouse instead of the barracks."

"And having a very productive time of it, so bugger off." Nao took a few seconds to sneer at nothing in particular, reaching out to drag her fingers through the other woman's hair. It was surprisingly well-kept.

Later, she murmured: "Happens often, that. Stupid."

"Who's stupid? What're you muttering about?"

The centurion shifted on the bed, changing her seat so that she could look at the other woman's face as she talked.

"What that idiot centurion did," she explained, staring straight into the light grey eyes, which seemed more intense because they were so deep-set. "More people than you'd expect make that kind of mistake, sort of, the first time they meet the general. She's so daunting it's hard not to get your guard up, you know."

"Daunting?"

"Crisp, like," Nao uttered. "Incredibly crisp with, I don't know, *poise*, and just oozing all kinds of power and confidence that it threatens you sometimes-especially when you think you're full of piss and vinegar yourself, just like your customer probably did. Standing in front of the general is like standing in front of a lion and suddenly realising all you are is a scrappy alley cat with an attitude too big for your claws, Poll. She shows up everyone just by being herself." Her shoulders lifted ever so slightly. "You build yourself up, trying to fight that. People like this Itou go overboard."

The brunette next to her frowned.

"I'm not sure I understand," she said.

"Just think of confidence and how building it up defensively can turn it into arrogance," Nao returned. "That's just a step away from disrespect."

"Oh. That's a little easier to understand." She looked at Nao a little more closely. "You know her well, your general."

But Shizuru's veteran centurion laughed.

"Know her?" she said with incredulity. "Now there's an arrogant thought, all right! No one really *knows* that woman, Poll. Or if someone does, it's surely not me."

Her eyes narrowed into slanted, piercing slits of green.

"But I'll tell you something," she continued. "All you need to know about Shizuru Fujino is in her eyes."

As Pollonia uttered an exclamation about those selfsame eyes, Nao found herself being visited by a corresponding image of crimson cut

with scarlet: circular shards cut from a bloodied mirror. It was all reflected there, she thought with a grimace, realising the memory was from the first time she had seen Shizuru up close. Everything had been in the woman's eyes then, and still was now. Hungry eyes, keen and ravenous as a fire. They put to mind a tiny world up in flames, entire globes eaten up by a carnal flare that could never be doused. Many thought of them as representing blood, and that was why they thought them terrible. But Nao had always thought that was a mistaken attribution. The terror was in the blaze, not the blood.

*Everything's blood, she thought, but not everything's fire.*

This was because Nao had the fear of fire ingrained into her. She had it from living in the big cauldron that hosted the stews of Hime: the section of the city known as the Subura. She had her own place in the province, and it was a freer, more open space than the one in the city by far. But ever since her entry into the spying-and later, military-elite, she had come to spend less and less time in her provincial home and more in the urban one. The latter was a set of rooms in one of the better Suburan *insulae*. It was here that she lived when not away on campaign.

As far as rooms in the Subura went, hers were fairly good ones. They were clean and well-furbished, structurally-sound. The only problem, perhaps, was the one that every tenant of the Subura suffered and eventually learned to overlook: the suffocating lack of space in general. Subura-dwellers lacked aural space, having to put up with endless cacophonies of gossip being shouted from one building to another, shrieking babies, and wailing drunkards. They lacked social space, having to endure the curiosity of others thrusting their private miseries out before the whole world as well as having others' privations thrust on them.

Most of all, however, they lacked physical space. As with all other slums in large cities, the Subura was packed so full that, as the joke went, you could barely stretch your hand out of your window without touching your neighbour's arse. As with all other slums in large cities too, this necessitated a communal awareness and terror of the worst possible blight that could come upon so densely-packed a physical community: something that would hurt the Subura, buildings and

residents alike, worse than an actual war, storm, or earthquake.

This great, supremely destructive terror was fire .

To residents of the Subura-or residents of Hime, for that matter-the mere hint of an unruly spark was enough to set about general panic. Fire was destruction of the house and home; fire was destruction of livelihood and life; fire was, simply put, destruction in its purest form . Nao, a long-time city dweller, understood this. Thus she understood what was so disturbing to those who found her general's eyes eerie: they hinted at a fire that was utterly rapacious in its ambition.

"Fire," she murmured now, to her companion. "It's the way they look afire."

"Itou said that they're bloody, actually," said Pollonia, twisting a lock of her long brown hair. "Said that was a bad omen, it was."

"Doubt that. She's famous for her luck." Nao suddenly smiled. "Well, maybe it's bad only for the people who cross her."

"He really didn't like her."

"I'm sure she's not in love with him either. Imagine spitting your fucking phlegm in front of Shizuru Fujino and then having the balls to say she's snooty and has bad manners. Hollow balls. Bollocks!"

"That's what *he* thinks of her, though."

"Pah! What d'you think of her?"

The dark lashes fluttered in a dreamy sigh.

"Oh, I think she's just wonderful!" Pollonia said.

Nao laughed good-naturedly.

"I expected that," she sniggered, placing her back against the pillows. Her arms crossed behind her head. "Dames love a woman in uniform. Met her yet?"

"No! How can I?" The grey eyes were wide with scandal. "She comes to whorehouses?"

"No. Juno's cunt, that'd be something if she did." Nao laughed at the ludicrous thought. "But she walks around a lot and talks to a lot of people, so there's always a chance. Not uppity, the general. Shit, she's so *up* she can afford to get as low-brow as she wants. It's pretty easy to talk to her."

"I'd like to. Can I?"

"We'll see," Nao replied, snuggling into the pillows. "Don't get your hopes up though, Sweetheart. She's a girl of her own already."

Pollonia's gaze turned dreamy again.

"The Otomeian Natsuki-san," she identified, to which Nao nodded. Again she released a wistful sigh. "Oh, she's wonderful too!"

Nao smirked.

"Guess I expected that too. And her, you've met her yet, Poll?" She caught herself abruptly and cackled out a laugh at her own question. "Who am I kidding? It's even less likely you've met her!"

Pollonia looked at her with great interest.

"Why, is she more unreachable than even your general?" she asked.

"Sure," Nao said. "Because she's blessed unsociable."

"Really?" Pollonia wrinkled her nose. "Now that you say, she does seem awful cold. Aloof, like."

"She is."

The other woman winced. "So she's hard to talk to, after all?"

"Pretty much. She's not rude-hard, or really rude at all. Just... she's a surly wretch, I'll say that." The white, brown-scarred hands came together and the sound of knuckles popping crackled in the room.

"That doesn't matter, though. She's her own points working in her favour. By god, I'd love to get my hands on her."

Pollonia looked positively giddy at that little confession-until Nao went on to explain it.

"Make a perfect assassin and intelligencer. She'd be a trainer's wet dream."

"Oh, not that!" the other woman exclaimed, startling the centurion a little. "I didn't think for that!"

Nao made a funny face.

"Well, for what then?" she said. "Jupiter! You thought I meant to fuck her?"

"Why not? You mean you wouldn't want to?" Pollonia retorted with a wide grin.

"What for? I already fuck you."

The other woman hit her lightly but continued to smile anyway.

"She's beautiful," she said with feeling.

Nao snorted in response.

"Of course she is," she said, with a parody of sweetness on her face. "And of course the general thinks so, because every time she looks at the girl, all she'd need is a wash-basin and a plate to eat the kid up on the spot. Aaah, forgo the plate. She always looks as though she'd eat her up without setting her down."

"But not," Pollonia chuckled out, "the wash-basin?"

"Trust me, the general'd wash her hands first."

"She's a clean person then, your general." Pollonia looked thoughtful. "I guess nobles are like that."

The reply was contemptuous: "No, some of there are right dirty, I'd

say."

"But not Shizuru Fujino?"

"No, not her." The light green eyes gleamed. "She doesn't like to get her hands dirty, in some ways."

"Does she like to get your hands dirty?"

Nao laughed. She liked Pollonia's intelligent sense of humour.

"You know, or you don't-in which case you'll know soon," she answered. "Depends on what I decide to do too, 'course. Then we'll find out if *you* like to get your hands dirty."

Her apprentice conspirator nodded at that, understanding what the centurion meant. She wondered what Nao would eventually decide here. She was anxious about it! The exchange for all the information and services she had given and would continue to give Nao was significant: the centurion had promised to buy her from this brothel and take Pollonia into her household, as a loyal and well-treated slave to eventually be freed after the usual years of servitude had been finished. Whether that meant she would be shipped overseas to Hime by the centurion as soon as their lessons had been concluded or perhaps kept here in Argus until the end of the centurion's military duties in the region, she did not yet know.

A good, practical part of her preferred to be shipped overseas, as she desired very much to see the greatest city on earth and begin life anew as someone not a prostitute. Yet a smaller, still insistent part of her was starting to make its desire known: it wanted to stay with the woman who would be her new mistress and serve said woman here, in the about-to-erupt-north.

"Hey. What's the matter?"

She snapped out of her contemplation to find lime-green eyes turned her way.

"Sorry," she apologised. "Did you say something?"

The centurion's pretty face- *Surprisingly pretty for a soldier*, thought

Pollonia-frowned a little.

"Asked if you could get me more wine. You all right, then?"

Pollonia sprang from the bed and took the cup.

"Yes, I'm sorry. I just didn't hear you," she said, sparing a smile for the redhead. "I'll get it now. Should I refill the cup or get the whole jug?"

The Himean laughed: "You're catching on."

Pollonia laughed back. She liked hearing the centurion laugh. There was something infectious about it.

"For someone who thinks it's shit wine, you down it like a fish," she told her.

"It doesn't change the fact that I think it's shit wine. And whoever said fish down wine? Never seen a drinking fish yet. Never seen a fish swimming drunk yet, either."

"I don't know, it's something people say. Besides, how can you tell if a fish is swimming drunk?"

The centurion offered: "Maybe it swims backwards."

"That's stupid."

They laughed together.

"Anyway, I don't think fish can drink wine," Nao insisted light-heartedly. "They can eat shit, though."

That made Pollonia pause.

"What?" she said to the odd statement.

"In Hime, there's this thing we call the licker-fish. Delicacy for the rich. It gets fat on shit from the sewers. And I mean shit, Poll: what comes out of an arse and gets chucked down the sewage system every day . "



"And the rich *eat* it?"

"They love it."

"But why, if it eats shit?! What's it like?"

"About this big..."

Pollonia listened to the centurion, and while listening, found her anxieties slowly slipping away. To think of a place where rich people fell over themselves to dine on a fish that ate shit-why, what place could possibly be more interesting? If Hime was a place where shit-eating fish could turn into delicacies, then it was surely also where a former prostitute could turn into a respectable household servant. Or maybe a respectable assistant intelligencer, even. What possibilities! She really should not be worrying.

*I'd be stupid to let my fright get to me*, she thought with newfound resolve, handing over the centurion's wine. She laughed and smiled when the other woman made a joke, not doing it entirely out of mere play-acting-even though both of them knew she could play-act very well. Twelve years as a whore taught you tricks, and Pollonia knew all of them by heart. How else could she have lasted this long?

She knew men and she knew women. She knew how to act according to their express desires, how to tap into and model herself after their private fetishes. She knew too how they perceived her as exactly that, no more and no less than an approximate concretisation or outlet of their fantasies. Not quite human.

That was why she liked Nao, really, even beyond the bargain between them. The centurion might be using Pollonia too, but at least she used her beyond the sexual respect. All her other custom treated her well-Pollonia was good at charming people that way-but always held a subtle derision for her at the back of it, the silent appreciation many prostitutes were given. It said, *"Poor you who aren't good for anything else."*

For some reason she could not fathom, however, Pollonia never sensed this underestimation from the Ninth's primipilus. She was not silly enough to think it due to some infatuation or love from the other

woman, knowing both things well enough to recognise this situation had neither. She could not attribute it to the culture of Himeans from the mainland, since she had serviced enough of them to know it was not that. Nor could she attribute it to the manner of soldiers, since she had known enough of them the same way. Could it be a point of education? Or even nature?

Ah, who knew? Perhaps one day she would understand, when she was no longer in this blighted brothel. Perhaps she would get to know the primipilus more and understand why, beneath all the bluff and bluster, the centurion was actually quite nice to her.

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At the very same time this was happening, a letter a little over two months old was reaching its destination in the land of the Mentulaeans. It had been sent with specific instructions for speed, but human instructions were not proof against the constraints of nature. Most of the passes were blocked and the letter had had a long route to go before reaching the Mentulaean king's winter palace. At least the missive bore the seal of the ruling house, and that was enough for the party carrying it to be sped through most of the man-made constraints along the way: the checkpoints and guard stations throughout the empire. Once past the final point, it found its way to none other than the king's chief advisor, Lysander. He delivered it to the king.

*Who is crusty today*, Lysander thought during his task. Indeed, the king had been crusty the whole winter. The best way to tell the king's temperament was by the number of executions he ordered in a season, and this season had been a veritable winter harvest of heads. Unfortunate, especially to the former owners of those heads. Unfortunate too to those put in charge of the bodies, since winter meant everything was either too waterlogged or iced up to facilitate proper disposal: burning was impossible with damp wood; burial, difficult with icy ground. The only ones who seemed to find anything fortunate in the number of headless, gutted bodies seemed to be the great fish in the empire's rivers. Those aquatic animals had learned to rise gobbling to the surface whenever the king's executioners stood poised at the banks, the only ones to grow fat this wicked winter. Then again, perhaps they were not the only ones to grow fat

off the accounts of the beheaded. After all, more dead courtiers meant more openings to be filled, and there was no shortage of social climbers ready to jump into the latest vacancy.

*Though they'll be jumping out of it soon enough-headless into the nearest river,* Lysander thought, well-aware of the king's continuing bad temper. He would know it best, being near the king at all times and privy to the continuing throb of the royal pride-a throb caused by a galling thorn in the empire's paw .

Or put in the words of the king himself, by the thieves in the empire's backyard.

Now, seeing that the letter he had just handed to His Majesty was from the heart of those foreign thieves' lands, Lysander prepared himself for whatever spurt of rage might issue from his lord's mouth. One good thing about being the virtual sounding board of the king, he thought, was that he could immediately tell what was in royal missives simply by listening to his lord's outbursts. He took position now next to the great gold and jewel-encrusted throne, watching the purple-clad figure break the seal.

The first outburst came even before the king began reading.

"He certainly took long enough to write me!" said the king, frowning as he looked over the thick roll of paper. Lysander knew, however, that it was not merely because of the delay in correspondence that the king looked so disturbed: the King of the Mentulae was a slow, difficult reader. Long letters were the bane of his existence.

"Accursed boy. He's become lax."

"Your Majesty."

"He better not have been taking it easy over there. What's he been up to that he's forgotten to write to me?"

"Majesty."

"Nagi's my smartest boy, Lysander. But he'd better not be getting too smart for his own good."

Again the mindless repetition: "Your Highest Majesty."

And so on. When finally the king resolved to read the letter, it was all Lysander could do not to breathe a sigh of relief. One could only get by with "Majesty " so many times, after all.

As the king mumbled his way through the perfectly lined, even writing of his son's scribe, Lysander waited patiently, hoping that the prince had kept the pleasantries to a minimum this time. Prince Nagi was, as his father had observed, possibly the smartest of the royal princes as well as the most polished. Where most of the royal family waded through court, he *glided*. He had perfect courtly manners, did the prince. This meant he greeted everyone with the usual and expected pleasantries, went the carefully circuitous way with his speech, and was mindful of the usual courtesies in even the most trifling occasion or letter. Unfortunately, the king hated having to slog through what he considered meaningless courtesies. Which was a problem, since the king also found all courtesies meaningless. A coarse old cynic, was the king.

Not that Lysander would ever say that aloud. He rather liked his head and thought it looked best on this current perch.

Listening to his king mumble and mutter over the letter, he knew his hopes had been dashed. The king was taking a long time dissecting the first part of the letter and seemed to grow crustier after each deciphered line. That could only mean he was slogging yet again through the prince's pleasantries. Oh, his feet! Lysander had to stand to attention while waiting for the king to finish reading, for he had been given permission neither to sit nor to go. A lifetime seemed to pass before the grumbles turned into articulate words again. And Lysander's poor feet already felt like stone.

"Tchah! Keep on marshalling-it's for the best, he says, as though I couldn't think of it myself!"

He made a murmur of agreement, careful to keep a look of studied faithfulness on his countenance. If his feet could be stone, so could his face.

"I know well enough they're a damned problem, by Dagda! He might be there currying favour with their politicians but I'm here trying not to butt heads with their generals."

Yet another murmur of agreement from the chief advisor.

"Of course they should be told to keep to their territories and leave the North to us-I'm not the one expected to tell them that, am I? He's the one all the way there, fool of a boy."

Lysander could not stand it anymore: he shifted his weight and walked one step backwards, just to ease some feeling back into his heels. The king did not seem to notice.

"Ah!"

Lysander jumped.

"Uh." He looked at the ostentatiously dressed figure on the throne. "Your Majesty?"

The king did not look up from the letter. A few more seconds later, however, Lysander received his answer.

"He's leaving."

*Who's leaving? The prince? Leaving where? For what?* Seeing that the king's response begged more questions than it answered, Lysander felt a little tingle of irritation. Nonetheless, he hid it and waited for any clarifications, which he hoped were soon to come.

They came shortly, though in rather pared-down form.

"He's coming back."

That piqued his interest.

"Prince Nagi, Your Majesty?" he ventured.

"Hrm!"

That was the most he could get to clarify that particular statement. The king continued to read for what seemed to be an age, the only balm to Lysander's aching feet being that his lord looked progressively better-humoured as time went on. What could that mean?

Lysander mulled it over, thinking deeply on the matter. He had expected the prince to return sometime soon from his ambassadorial mission to the detested Himeans' city, of course, but he had not expected it to be this soon. Sometime after spring, had been his estimate. But this letter was dated two months ago, which meant the prince would most likely be returning around the commencement of spring itself. Was the reception to their suit among the foreign city's powers so bad, then? Or, even-somehow Lysander could not imagine this-had it been so good?

It was so hard to guess. And now the king was smiling.

When he had finally gone through the entirety of the letter, the man on the throne addressed Lysander again, even if only as a conduit for speaking to himself.

"Well, well, there's something," said Obsidian, reclining deeper against the royal cushions. "There's something indeed. That's a fine thing, I must say."

Lysander bowed, consumed by curiosity.

"Your Highness?" he said.

"It's not a bad winter, after all." The sound of paper being rolled up. "Continue preparations for the army, Lysander. And... and summon Calchis from his post to return here with his own army in time to greet spring. Yes, that would be perfect."

"Your Majesty, if I may: the raids against the lands under Prince Calchis's position-

"Tell him to leave a contingent on guard duty there. It's not as though he's only a handful of men in his command."

"Of course, Sire."

"Have Faris send the summons to him. She'll know what to tell her brother."

"Straightaway, Sire."

"Make sure to send a missive to Hanu too, who's in Gorgo. Summon him as well."

"Yes, Sire."

The king said no more after that, and Lysander was left wondering if he should leave already to carry out the orders. Just as he was invoking permission to go, though, the king's voice rose again-this time more pensive and a little softer than usual.

"Nagi's a smart boy, eh, Lysander?"

Lysander hesitated only the briefest instant, weighing his choices for a correct answer.

"As you say, My Most Beloved King," he replied.

*Thank Dann!* The king seemed satisfied with that. And then he said something Lysander, deep in his courtier's heart, had been expecting.

"When he returns, have him watched very carefully."

Lysander bowed. Oh, the menace of kings! Satisfied with your machinations on their behalf one second, suspecting you of machination against them the next!

"But this is something." The king waved the scroll at his advisor, who watched it like a well-trained dog. "This letter is something, Lysander."

He smiled hugely as he said that, his great horse teeth flashing in the light, and Lysander saw that he was no longer as crusty as before. What in the world was that 'something' he kept talking about?

Despite the curiosity, all he said was: "I am glad you are pleased, Sire."

The hairs on his arms rose: the King of the Mentulaeans laughed.

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Back in the Himean province of Argus, a sizeable carriage was rolling its way down the road, its occupants jolted and jiggled unmercifully. Uneven roads were the curse of wheeled transport. There was nothing to absorb the shock of each troublesome little jag the wheels encountered, which meant a most disturbing-and, for the sensitive, nauseating-conveyance for those within it. Most people preferred to walk. But there were also occasions when the wheeled carriage was necessary, as for instance when speed was a consideration or the size of the party being transported in a hurry was considerable, as was the case with this particular carriage's inhabitants. Certainly the consideration could not currently be *comfort*.

"It's only when you take a nice carriage-ride down a road that you really see if it's in tip-top condition or not," exclaimed one of the persons in the coach. "And by all the gods, this is not! Oh, Midori-san needs to fix her roads!"

The woman sitting across her smiled tolerantly.

"My apologies for the discomfort, Chie-han," she said, turning twinkling red eyes to the window and the man poking his head out of it to vomit. "It seems Aisuka-han is faring no better, either."

Chie looked at the hapless Aisuka, just another of the motley scribes Shizuru employed for her purposes. She herself might be the official, personal secretary taking down notes for Senate's edification in this campaign, but the scribal duties she handled were few and particular-the composition of the official dispatches, for instance. For nearly everything else, Shizuru used the large gang she often had tagging along with her: a crew of as many as a dozen personal scribes per campaign, ceaselessly taking notes whenever she wanted and wherever she went.

At present, two of them were in the carriage: Aisuka and Imari. These two were among the best of her scribes and were paid very well for their work, but they were also worked in proportion to their pay. During instances such as this, for example, they were expected to keep up with Shizuru's flow of speech while jolted to sickening vertigo by the carriage. Each had to struggle not to vomit in tandem with the other so that at least one would be on hand to continue



note-taking. Already Chie could see the still-working scribe, Imari, slowly turning pale as Aisuka continued to decorate Argus' icy streets with the contents of his gut. And still a relentless Shizuru ploughed on.

"As regards, however, the matter of directing units, one cannot deny the utility of universal familiarity with the essentials of the plan. This translates, naturally, to the importance of general addresses carried out by the commander to the entire army. It is each *octet* leader's task to remind his men of the fundamental scheme; the centurion's task to remind each octet leader; the *pilus prior* and *primipilus* centurions to remind the other centurions; the legates to remind each primipilus; and, of necessity, the commander's task to inform and update the whole."

Chie took deep breaths to stave off her own nausea. She was amazed that her friend could continue untroubled, speaking with that fascinating ability to distil words immediately from the mind into coherent and stylised speech. Out of the corner of an eye, the senior legate could see Imari scrabbling to keep up. Out of the corner of her other eye was Aisuka, wiping his mouth and still greenish of face. Shizuru was sitting across Chie herself, and next to Shizuru was the only silent member of the party: Shizuru's Otomeian.

*Who looks her usual cool self*, Chie thought, considering the girl's expression. Cool as ever-which meant she was not experiencing the same discomfort every other person in the carriage except Shizuru was having. Chie guessed she was likely to have good sea-legs. Which should please Shizuru, come to think of it, come time to go through with what the patrician seemed to be planning for the two of them.

Said patrician was still talking: "Moving on, the recent alterations."

Shizuru stopped a moment to cast a brief smile at her bodyguard.

"One alteration concerns our traditional military-issue spear, the *pilum*," she continued, unconsciously softening her voice when Natsuki smiled shyly back. "I had my weapon-designers working on alterations I requested in the first part of this campaign, and they have now produced a final, test-validated product in accord with my

instructions. Modification of the army's other *pila* shall be undertaken as soon as possible, ideally within another week."

Chie tapped the tiny travelling table to get her attention.

"Sometimes your changes make me believe you're mad," the senior legate told Shizuru. "I heard, but was of half a mind to disbelieve it. Altering the *pilum* ? Good gods!"

Shizuru was unrepentant: "Oh, I daresay you shall fancy the changes to the design an improvement, Chie-han, if I do say so myself."

"So long as the changes aren't just for decoration."

"To what, strike the enemy dead with a superior sense of fashion?" Shizuru asked, making Chie forget the conveyance's clunking enough to laugh. "No, I assure you I have very practical reasons. Although I do think the spear looks better too. I shall show it to you tomorrow."

"Good. I'm dying to see it."

"For now, however..."

The general's words trailed off as she regarded the two scribes on both sides of Chie, both of them visibly changing colour again. She ordered the carriage to be stopped, to general relief. Turning an amused eye to Aisuka and Imari, she relieved them for the day and invited them to step out of the carriage, which offer they took up immediately.

"I shall have someone bring your implements to your offices later. Take care then, and until tomorrow," she said to the pair walking down the road, her head out of the car. "Mind the ice, the road is slip-ah. Tsk. Well, there you go."

Chie's head appeared beside hers.

"I feel sorry for them, you know," she told Shizuru, as the two of them watched the pair on the street pick themselves up, tottering on unsteady legs. "You're a tyrant."

"I am not," Shizuru retorted, eyes twinkling. "I merely expect efficiency from my employees."

"Unfortunately, you also expect iron stomachs to go with it. Even I'm feeling a little ill with all that jolting and jarring, so don't you dare tell the coachman to start on yet."

"How queer that you should suffer so! Why, I never feel anything."

"That's because you never feel anything, has always gone the common talk about you. Well, unless it's those passionately, disturbingly, devastatingly amorous feelings for-ow!" Chie glared at her commander. "My foot!"

Shizuru smiled: "Is still attached to your ankle. For now."

"Tyrant."

"Tattler."

"Huh. Oh, look at Aisuka go."

"That is certainly an efficient way to travel. Look at the distance he covered."

"I guess-oh! Seems the stopping's a problem. Your scribe might have the makings of an Egyptian dancer yet, Shizuru-san."

"Hmm. The arrangement hints more at the Syrian to me."

"That's evil."

"Why? I happen to like Syrian dancers."

They were laughing so hard that they failed to mark the approach of their fellow senators, Suou and Kenji, until the latter hailed them in his gravelly voice.

"Didn't expect to catch up with you, General," he called, turning both of the heads poking out of the carriage. "Your group left the grounds before us."

It was Chie who answered him: "Detours, Kenji-san. Where are you two headed?"

"I'd like to go to my billet and hide under a nice woolly blanket."

"And I am trying to persuade him to seek comfort in a nice warm drink instead," said the young woman at his side. She had not been at the inspection of the local garrison earlier, and so she explained how she came to be walking with her fellow legate, who had been there.

"I ran into Kenji-san on my way back from my meeting with our *praefectus*. All is well with both accounts and supplies. Now the only supply with which I find difficulty is that of drinking companions. Perhaps you'd like to humour me in that regard, Shizuru-san, while I humour you by delivering a figure-by-figure report from my task? That is, if you're not too busy now."

Shizuru, who had pushed open the carriage drapes completely, leaned towards the opening and was already halfway into dismount. She spoke to her other friend first, however, who brushed away her apology as well as the invitation to join them. The senior legate was no fool, and only a fool would intrude on what was obviously intended to be a private invitation from the young Himemiya.

"I do think I'll take this rattle-trap on for a bit, though," she told Shizuru while gesturing at the carriage, which the other woman's bodyguard exited too. "If you don't mind. I think the road gets better soon, and it's really too cold for me too. I'll take Kenji-san along so needn't walk. That's if he doesn't mind having to endure a little rattling until we reach the better roads."

"Excellent," Shizuru replied, looking up at her friend. "It would set my mind at ease if I knew the two of you were safely warm and indoors as soon as possible. Kenji-han?"

Kenji mounted the car with a word of thanks and settled himself into the cushioned seats. After exchanging farewells, they ordered the driver to get on and the car began moving again, with Chie calling out a few final words to the women left behind.

"I'll send it back for you," she said, having been told by Suou the directions to their destination. "And try not to dance to a Syrian tune!"

Suou looked away from the carriage going down the street.

"Dance to what?" she asked Shizuru.

"Oh, nothing," the other woman laughed in return, following her as they started to walk. "That is merely Chie-han's way of saying we should try not to slip. Though I doubt it, for I am wearing my boots."

She trailed off and suddenly turned her head to look at the girl walking behind her.

"Natsuki, what about you?" she asked, stopping and thus halting her fellow Himean's steps as well. "Forgive me, I forgot to ask. Are you all right? If you are having trouble with ice, you can hold on to-"

She was cut off by a sharply upraised brow.

"Ice, Shizuru?" the girl said. "I was born of this."

Both Himeans in front of her took in the words, then broke out in smiles. Suou's smile was one of amusement with interest, while Shizuru's was one of amusement with surrendering affection. Natsuki tipped her head to indicate that they should keep walking and they set off again, the youngest female keeping slightly behind them.

"Fool that I am indeed," Shizuru murmured with self-mockery. "Of all the people for whom to be worried, I choose the one who would be most accustomed to the hazards of winter. I suppose it serves me right to be dismantled in one blow. What a retort!"

"She won that one," Suou agreed. "What could you say against that?"

"Nothing at all, which is why it would have been silly to try."

"It's so nice to see you lose a battle of words." The fairer, blue-eyed blonde grinned at Shizuru's wry glance. "See, it's so rare."

"Ah, I think not ill of it, especially if it is to Natsuki."

"Or more accurately, only then."

"Perhaps," Shizuru said with a shrug, refusing to argue it with a charming smile. "How about you, Suou-chan? You seem to be on steady footing as well."

Suou lifted her feet: she was wearing her army boots too.

"The advantage to wearing our boots," Shizuru observed while they walked. "It is difficult to lose footing on a fine set of hobnails."

"True-I'm glad I thought to wear mine as well," said Suou, before shooting a cursory glance at the other patrician's heavily-cloaked and armour-clad form. "Why are you in full parade gear, by the way? I have to admit I didn't think it was necessary for an inspection and it would be easier to get around without all of that on."

"Yes, it would be, and no, it is not necessary," Shizuru replied. "But it helps for inspirational purposes, especially during the muster. Besides which, the soldiers being inspected are compelled to go about with twenty pounds of mail-shirts and cuirasses on their backs while putting on a show. It would be quite poor of me to simply plead comfort to avoid doing the same."

"I see. I never thought of it that way." Suou's hand cuddled a fold of her own thick, heavy cloak. "Your new armour looks lovely on you, by the way."

Shizuru's pleasure gleamed in her eyes.

"Thank you," she said, obviously thinking the same. "The maker is, oh, a genius."

"A regular Vulcan of the forge. I might look him up too."

"I can recommend you."

"Thank you. Seeing you in it had me dreaming about my own, you know." She smiled pensively as she outlined the design she wanted in her mind. "Something similar in style, though with our crest, of

course. And silver instead of gold."

Shizuru nodded, breathing out a puff of air.

"Silver and midnight blue," she recited, referring to the fact that it was in Suou's family tradition to wear silver armour instead of standard brass and a blue-black cloak instead of the standard red. They retained the scarlet plumes of Hime on their helmets in battle, however-although she knew they also sometimes wore midnight blue ones for pure parade or display purposes.

"I wonder if your family began wearing blue and silver before the tendency for fair looks in the line was established or vice versa," she told her friend, who pondered the question.

"I'm not sure, to be honest," Suou answered. "Why?"

"Because it is such a nicely appropriate vanity," Shizuru sniggered. "The deep blues of your cloaks and gear look wonderful paired with blondes of your type, you know."

"How kind of you to say so." She looked up. "Here we are. This is a nice little tavern. Good wine, brought all the way across the sea and from the south."

"It fascinates me how well you navigate this city now," Shizuru said as the two of them entered the deserted shop and gave a terrible shock to the dozing-off owner. He blinked once, twice, and only then finally found the image behind him convincing enough to precipitate a skip towards the impressive-looking intruders of his cosy, amber-lit domain.

"Because I've been spending time with Sugiura-san," Suou returned, loosening the folds of her cloak but not removing the garment. She nodded and smiled to the barkeep as he bowed and scraped before them, using his hands to point out a table.

"Awfully educational, really, watching her handle the never-ending feuds between the minorities in the city," the Himemiya went on. "And, of course, she knows all the pubs with decent wine. We stopped at half a dozen in a day and-and I'm sorry, but what's she

doing, Shizuru-san?"

Having been on the verge of walking towards the table indicated by the owner of the pub, she had stopped short at the sight of Shizuru's bodyguard overtaking her to the destination and doing various peculiar things, all of which had the air of a most critical inspection. The two Himeans and the barkeep watched with puzzled reverence as the dark-haired girl went about her business, ending by nodding at what was to be her companions' table in apparent satisfaction. The two Himeans settled there afterwards, and Natsuki herself went to stand at the entrance to the tavern.

"My, my," Suou began, peering at her friend's bodyguard leaning against a side of the doorway. "Natsuki-san seems more thorough than usual."

"Natsuki." Shizuru was looking at the girl. "You may sit with us, you know. You need not position yourself there."

Natsuki shook her head at Shizuru, flicking a quick, curious glance at the other woman with them. It was only when Shizuru persisted in cajoling her to return that she answered with her regular succinct finality.

"Here is fine," she told them. "I like. Wind."

Suou kept her face composed, only a near-invisible lift of her pale brows letting on her surprise. The truth was that she had been hoping to talk to Shizuru without the girl listening to them. Part of her intended talk touched on matters related to the Otomeian, after all. Thus she had hoped but not actually expected to be granted a little time with Shizuru separate from the cavalry captain. She had been trying her wits for a way to bring this about during the brief walk here, but had not come up with a suitably polite solution. Now here it was being presented to her like a gift. Had the enigmatic Natsuki guessed it, or was this mere coincidence? For, by standing at the doorway, the young woman would not be able to make out their words inside the pub: whatever sounds she heard would be garbled by the strong wind blowing outdoors and gusting in instead of out.

*How perceptive of her*, Suou thought. It was charmingly civil too, of



course. She could not help but be impressed by the realisation that, even in this act of consideration, the dark-haired girl had kept in mind her primary duties: the distance from the doorway to the Himean pair's table was something one of her agility could easily cover in a few seconds. Oh, "The General's Girl" was a formidable one! Suou rather liked that.

"Some of your finest wine, if you please, and three cups," she told the hovering pub owner, who rushed off to fulfil the order. Suou redirected her sky-light gaze to Shizuru. "She's half-outside. The wine would help keep her warm, right?"

"Yes," said the other woman, still looking at the girl. "Yes, that is very good of you, Suou-chan. My thanks on her behalf."

"My pleasure. It's the least I can do for her thoughtfulness."

"Ah, yes." Shizuru finally tore away her attention from the doorway. "I gather you wished to speak to me alone, then?"

"Yes, if possible."

"Quite possible, as you see. You might have simply asked me, Suou-chan. Natsuki is most considerate in such things. She would not mind."

*No, but you would*, Suou thought. Instead she said, "Then forgive me for not thinking to do that. Natsuki-san is considerate, as you say. She's proven it now."

"Indeed." For a moment it seemed that Shizuru would turn again, but did not. "Would I be correct in thinking we shall be talking about recent developments back home? Your sister sent you a letter too in the packet we received nine days ago, I recall."

"She did. I meant to talk to you earlier about that, but haven't been able to find the right time until now, unfortunately. We've all been so busy getting the army primed in time for the spring thaw, plus helping with Midori-san's reinforcement of the province's military. Well, it's been a chore trying to get time alone."

"I understand."

"For my part, I understand that Midori-san believed the probability of foreign incursions into our territories even before this, but never with such conviction," Suou rejoined sombrely. "The way she's treating it now, most people are saying that she thinks it practically an inevitability. Of course, she's not saying anything specific about the direction from which the threat comes, but it's quite clear it's the Mentulaeans on her mind."

Shizuru answered the unspoken query: "I may have sown a seed of warning, but she knows nothing beyond it."

"When do you plan on telling her?"

"When Chikane obtains the affirmative from Senate."

"I see. That's nice and clear." Suou's eyes narrowed in thought. "I say, do you think this will cause a return in her problem with the Mentulaeen Murders?"

"I know not, unfortunately, since the peculiar nature of the city's mixed demographic makes its population's temperament unfamiliar to me," Shizuru replied. "So I hope not. I am certain Midori-han would know what to do, in any case. Despite certain opinions to the contrary, she and incompetence are not at all close relations."

The arrival of the pub owner stopped their conversation, and they paused long enough to thank him for the beverages as well as the plate of roast meats he placed before them. Shizuru poured some wine into a cup, diluted it with water, then handed it to him along with some pieces of meat-very carefully picked out from the plate-wrapped in a cloth napkin. He was directed to take it to the dark-haired girl by the door and tell her specifically that 'the general wished her to have them'. He bowed and carried out his errand.

"I suppose our lovely ice princess would not accept it otherwise?" Suou guessed.

The red eyes looked at her.

"Curious you should use that word," said the other woman, who was in the process of divesting herself of her cuirass.

"Which one? Do you need help with that?"

"Yes, please. And 'princess'. Not 'queen'."

"Is it curious to use one instead of the other?"

Suou rose to her feet and helped the other woman remove her shoulder-guards and body armour. These were followed by the *pteryges*, the skirt of burnt brown leather strips over the breeches. They settled the pieces on the other end of Shizuru's bench and returned to their seats.

"I suppose it may be because she is younger than me-or us. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be indirectly patronising about the age difference."

Shizuru shook her head, a few tawny and fetchingly curled locks waving at the action. Devoid of her armour, she was left wearing the padded black tunic whose sleeves reached her wrists, along with a pair of black breeches up to her knees. It was unconventional, thought Suou, since most generals wore the standard-issue red tunic and breeches under their armour. The woman had unwound her cloak earlier too before removing the cuirass, and now had the great bolt of red cloth over and around her shoulders.

"Not at all," she was saying. "I understand completely, Suou-chan. She looks so-how to put it? Eternally girlish?"

"In face and form, yes." Suou glanced at the ceiling with one of her slow smiles. "I daresay you're right about it being eternal. She will always look that way, I believe, with those bones."

She looked at Shizuru and added: "She will probably hate it one day, you know."

As she had expected, Shizuru's reaction was to produce an expression that was the visual equivalent of a scoff.

"To look so?" the darker blonde asked, her tone making it clear that she thought it ludicrous that anyone with such looks could hate them. "That would be strange indeed. What makes you think so?"

"Most girls and women who look like girls do," was the answer. "I've noticed. See, a girl child often dreams of the day she will mature or 'grow up' in the sense of growing *forward*, to speak of at least two specific places. The developed body, with its attendant curves. There is the patent maturity, the supposedly womanly face. An image that puts to mind the words 'woman' or 'queen', rather than the former words 'girl' and 'princess'. I suppose we all wish for it and look forward to that, inwardly, when we are children-partly because the adults themselves reinforce that stereotype of mature femininity. Thus it doesn't sit too well with some when they realise they'll never get past teetering on the border. I know quite a few other girlish-looking women who bemoan their misfortune of eternally adolescent appearance to me."

She filled her cup with wine from the jug and guided it to her lips.

"I couldn't speak for them specifically," she finished. "But I suppose it's because even just the façade of youth is a double-edged sword."

Shizuru took a moment to think on it.

"Perhaps so," she eventually ruled. "Still, I suppose it may be difficult for me to speak on it, as I appreciate the looks of youth myself. Besides, 'princess' *is* technically one of Natsuki's titles, so you are not far off in that much, at least."

"It would have to be," came the rejoinder, to which she replied with an inquisitive look. "From what I have seen and heard, Shizuru-san, it hardly describes her to be called a mere cavalry officer. Granted, their social structures may differ from ours, but no mere cavalry officer could, say, converse with all their high aristocrats and even their king in the most familiar of tones-or quote Juvenal at the drop of a hat. Both of which you assert she can in fact do."

"I suppose that is true," Shizuru averred. "Breeding and birthright tell powerfully in some people. I have been informed that most of their higher military officers are generally high in the social structure too, though. I suppose the easiest way to think of it would be in terms of similarity to your position instead of the centurion's, Suou-chan. A kind of legate. They are nearly all nobles, I gather."

"Ah, now I see. If it's that way, it makes you think of her guardianship of you as a form of apprenticeship, no? Similar to our *contubernalis*. " She smiled at her friend. "The king assigned her to you personally, right?"

"Yes."

"Awful smart of him. Not only did he get to put one of his nobles right up there in the midst of our command tent, but he'd also worked out a way to have her possibly getting an in-depth education in our ways and tactics from it."

"So I have often reflected, myself. Of course, I do not mind at all."

"No, of course not. She's excellent at her work, from what I see, and I for one find little to distrust in her or the arrangement. A warrior princess in training, eh? Well, her carriage speaks for itself. All the damnable arrogance of nobility."

The other, just-as-noble patrician had to smile.

"I wonder what your sister would say to that arraignment of nobility," she said, taking a piece of roast pork between thumb and forefinger. Suou did the same, squeezing the morsel first to test how yielding was the meat.

"Nil, since she's one of the most arrogant nobles and also one of the best at hiding it well," she said once satisfied that it was soft enough for her preferences: she popped it into her mouth, chewed, then swallowed. "As she does most things. In that sense, one could not wish for a better conspirator. I should know, being her sister."

"And I, to a lesser extent, being her friend."

"Not lesser, Shizuru-san. For heaven's sake, there's no need to be so modest-no one can arraign you for damnable arrogance if you admit to great familiarity with her." As the other woman smiled, she leaned forward and lifted one platinum-coloured brow. "We both received letters from her a few days ago, and both sent letters back. We talked then, but only fleetingly, of the content of her letters before writing our own replies."

Shizuru nodded at this recollection.

"Has anything changed since then, Suou-chan?" she enquired.

"I'm not sure. I do have something to confess, though, as well as something to ask."

"In that order?"

"The latter shall precede the former."

"Then ask away, please."

Suou thanked her for the allowance.

"This may be curt, but I hope you'll agree this weather is too cold for beating around the bush," she said, noticing how Shizuru's neck seemed to twitch again at that, as though striving mightily not to twist and turn again to the doorway. Truly the young woman there seemed to exert some form of magnetism! "I wanted to make sure of something. All your interests are against you taking time off from this campaign to go back home, right? That is to say, you'd rather not go just yet, even if only for a short while-as you'd be required to, say, if you were elected one of the praetors and thus had to go home to get your official assignment."

"Yes."

"That hypothetical situation would require, at best, a mere month or so away from here. Would that still be unacceptable? In terms of strict preferences, of course."

Shizuru's face was neutral but her voice was firm: "Yes."

"I see. If that's so, I'm very glad." At her friend's puzzled face, Suou smiled languorously. "I mentioned a confession."

"That you did."

"As well as my sister's missives and our replies to her."

"I'm assuming they are related?"

"You are and you would be correct to do so." A flare from one of the torches rendered the pale blue eyes opaque for a moment, covered by a film of pure light. "I stated in my letter something consistent with an earlier dispatch I sent Chikane, which she should have received by now given that it was sent over a month ago. As you can guess, part of that earlier letter concerned you, as did the later letter."

"And that concern was?"

"My intimation that, given certain circumstances, you might prefer to stay in the North without interruption for a while."

The fair brows moved up: Shizuru was regarding her with mild surprise. Suou merely looked back coolly. As if settling the matter, they both reached for their cups and lifted them to their lips. They lowered their cups to the table at the same time.

"Did you really say that in your letters?" Shizuru asked her.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Suou's eyes slid away and to a point behind her.

"Because I thought you enjoyed the local scenery," she said.

Shizuru smirked.

"You are beginning to evince a verbal equivocation that is highly reminiscent of your sibling," she pronounced, drawing a crooked smile from her friend. "And yes, I know, of me as well."

"I am relieved you admitted it."

"Only before you could point it out," Shizuru replied. "How strange that you should think it! It is true, of course. But was it apparent as early as a month ago?"

"I think so. Why should it be strange?"

"Because I came to a resolution only recently."

"Oh. Well, curious, that. Don't you mean 'realisation', then?"

"Was it *that* apparent?"

"Yes."

Shizuru sighed at her giggling friend, who seemed to be enjoying this mightily. Her eyebrow's ascent only served to further fuel the aforementioned friend's amusement.

"Care to know some of the reasons?" Suou asked with mischief.

Shizuru crossed her arms and lifted her shoulders.

"By all means," she said. "Do illuminate me."

"First and most obviously, you're never apart from each other."

"She *is* my bodyguard, you know."

"Yes, but then comes the second reason: you've exhausted the stocks of nearly half the shops in Argus that are selling anything remotely attractive to a young lady of her age. I daresay they all love you for the commerce you've been giving them ever since we arrived, as do the gossips for your gift of new material."

"And what is to say I have not been on this spending spree for myself?"

Suou rolled her eyes with a chuckle.

"I know you too well for that, so please spare me," she retorted, her lips forming yet another sly grin. "For instance, I happen to have heard that the latest such spree was with one of the province's most esteemed and expensive tailors. It was a large order for Himean nightdresses in all the latest and popular fashions."

"Himean." The other woman tapped a finger on her cheek coyly.

"That seems to support my contention, yes? I am Himean, after all."

"Pfft. Word has it too that the measurements given to the tailors seemed less characteristic of Shizuru Fujino's taller and more



endowed form than of her shorter, slimmer bodyguard." She sniggered cheerfully. "Oh, do give it up. Shall you wait for me to catch her wearing them instead of admitting it to me now? And with you calling her ' *meum mel* ' in the background?"

The other woman was not immune to her friend's comical threat: a laugh escaped.

"Oh god," she said at the mental image. "All right, I concede. Planning to pursue a career as an advocate, Suou-chan?"

Suou flicked her fringe away from her eyes. She had not had it trimmed, Shizuru noticed, and it had grown such that the other patrician could now easily tuck away all of it behind her ears, along with the rest of her long and flaxen hair.

"Maybe," she said now. "The witness examination suits my tastes. Anyway, would you care to tell me how that order for nightdresses came about? I'm awfully curious."

"Ah, you see, she suggested that she would like one," Shizuru answered with uncharacteristic hesitation. "And since I knew better than she from which tailors to place such an order, I thought I would save her the trouble by doing it."

"And having a hundred made."

"Merely thirty!" Shizuru corrected swiftly, drawing a series of muffled sounds from the other woman.

"Merely thirty! Good god, you said it: she wanted only one!"

Suou clutched her stomach in a desperate effort to stay the guffaws.

"Oh, you're wonderful. And don't," she said, seeing Shizuru's mouth open, "protest by claiming you were pressed to know what colour or style to get her. Simply, you wished to have as many kinds as possible, am I right? Oh, to where has your much-vaunted subtlety gone, Shizuru-san?"

Shizuru's mouth quirked.

"I suppose that when subtlety feels impossible," she answered with self-directed humour, "one might as well choose the glory of excess."

"In this case, it seems all to the good. As I said, it gives the locals business and you something to do with your scads of money." She looked at her cup, realised it was empty, and began to refill it. "And I daresay our princess likes it."

The note of anxiety in Shizuru's answer did not escape her: "I hope so."

"Of course she does," she told her friend feelingly. "Now, then, tell me something."

She refilled Shizuru's empty beaker as well before going on.

"How does it feel?" she asked. "I asked my sister this before, but you know Chikane-she thinks some things are too abstract for words. It's her personal drama."

"Thank you." Shizuru picked up her cup, as did Suou. She lifted it to her lips but hovered there long enough to ask a further clarifying question. "And how does what feel?"

Suou smiled at Shizuru as the latter drank, then lifted her own cup as well.

"Being in love," she said.

Shizuru choked.

"Oh dear." Suou leaned towards her friend, conscious of the pub owner scurrying towards them at the sound of Shizuru's violent coughs. Natsuki too had been alarmed by the hacks, and she approached as well. "Are you all right, Shizuru-san? Oh, I am sorry!"

One of Shizuru's hands was up, waving away the concern. The pub owner stopped halfway through the room on his trek towards them and returned behind the bar, seeming to look for something. That left Natsuki.

"Shizuru?"

The Otomeian hovered above her charge, who was pressing a cloth handkerchief to her mouth. The latter looked up at her.

"It's all right, Natsuki," she told the girl. "I am fine, really. I merely choked."

The green eyes bored into red ones. *As well they should*, the watching Suou thought. Shizuru Fujino was not someone who "merely choked".

""You may return to your post, Natsuki. Go on, I am fine."

"Umm."

"Go on."

The pub owner returned at that moment, bringing a new jug of cold water and another cup. They thanked him as Natsuki left to do as Shizuru had told her. One poured cup of water later, and the pub owner returned to his post too.

"Interesting," Suou ventured as Shizuru took the water. "You weren't so keen on having her go all the way there earlier."

Shizuru shot her a quick frown. Suou lifted her brows at the mute attack.

"I'm sorry, Shizuru-san," she reiterated. "I really didn't mean to-I don't know-surprise you that way, I suppose. Was it a surprise?"

Shizuru drank half the contents of the cup. She felt the stab of pain in her head that told her she had done it too quickly, for the water was very cold, but she ignored it and answered Suou instead.

"It was, rather," she admitted. "I should say so."

"May I ask why?"

Shizuru smiled drily.

"I suppose," she said.

"So why?"

Silence.

"Oh dear," Suou said. "I was right. You're just like Chikane."

The other woman shifted, looking slightly uncomfortable. Suou had a thought and said it.

"It's the word 'love', isn't it? Chikane always used to flinch in the early days when I spoke it."

Shizuru looked a little more uncomfortable.

"Does that mean you haven't told her yet?"

Now Shizuru looked extremely uncomfortable.

"Shizuru-san," Suou started, in the face of this stretch of silence from her companion. "I've always regarded you as something of a sister and often an *older* one, like my own. So I wouldn't presume to give you advice unless you permit me to say something to you. It's something I said to Chikane once that I would like to say now, something I told her at the time she went through a similar situation. Truth be told, I'm not sure this is what I should say politically. It might be rash of me."

A wide, charming grin spread on her face.

"But," she continued, "as I'm not like my older sister and I don't have the constraints she has as the head of our clan, I entertain the thought that I can be rash where she can't, most of the time. All the same, I shall keep my words to myself if you would rather not grant permission."

Shizuru shook her head slowly, trying to regain composure.

"You may say whatever you wish, Suou-chan," she invited.

The pale blue eyes lit up as Suou delivered her advice.

"Tell her, you fool."

That did it: Shizuru flinched.

"Oh dear."

# Chapter 37

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Actaeon** - A man who accidentally chanced upon Artemis bathing in a pool. The goddess struck him with drops of water from her hand, regardless of his innocence, and turned him into a stag for the offence. Actaeon had been hunting, his dogs were present, and the hounds pursued their own master and killed him.

2. **Athena** - See entry for "**Pallas Athena**".

3. **Calydon (in text: association with "swine")** - Site of the famous Calydonian Boar Hunt: King Oeneus offended the goddess Artemis and caused her to send a great boar to ravage his country in punishment. The Calydonian Boar Hunt is supposed to have taken place afterwards, with many legendary heroes participating in the attempts to kill the monster sent by Artemis.

4. **Client-patron relations** - In much the same way that Rome/Hime has client-states, politicians have client-persons. These are people who enrol themselves under the protection and welfare provided by a prominent and powerful politician, who then has them under his or her authority, more or less. In exchange for this power over them, the clients may seek the patron's help for such things as monetary aid, or for the protection of their interests in legislation.

5. **Cupid** - Also Eros (Gk.); God of Love; often presented as a beautiful youth bearing good gifts to men.

6. **Diana** - Also Artemis (Gk.), Selene (Gk.), Luna (L.); Goddess of The Hunt, Goddess of the Moon, Lady of Wild Things, protectress of youth. Often depicted with bow and arrows, her silver shafts are supposed to bring instant death.

7. **First** (specifically, **The First Century**) - A military term; the foremost and supposedly best century in a legion, here being Nao Yuuki's and thus the best century of the Ninth Legion in particular.

8. **Gorgon** - Creatures whose looks could turn men to stone.

9. **Nereid** - The nymphs of the sea, daughters of Nereus. There were supposedly fifty, and Achilles' mother, Thetis, is among them.

10. **Pallas Athena** - Also Minerva (L.); Goddess of Wisdom and War; favourite daughter of Zeus; called Brighteyes by the other gods and said to have grey eyes. The reference Shizuru mentions, in relation to Nao's Ulysses/Odysseus costume, is that Ulysses was one of Athena's favourites, and he was helped throughout the Odyssey by her as he made his way home.

11. **Porticus** - A building constructed around a central, open courtyard.

12. **Psyche** - An exceedingly beautiful woman supposed to have caught the eye of **Cupid** (s.v.). Venus was jealous of Psyche's beauty and hold over her son, and was thus her enemy. See the Latin writer Apuleius' account, for details.

13. **Ulysses** - Also Odysseus (Gk.); protagonist of the Odyssey and the genius of the wooden horse that led to Troy's downfall. He was supposed to have red hair.

14. **Venus Victrix** - Venus the Victorious; an aspect of Venus who can grant victories even in war.

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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Eight days later, the approaching death of winter was celebrated by Argus. For most people, it was a subdued celebration. Perhaps the lingering cold and still-to-thaw snow was responsible for that, or perhaps it was simply that they were saving up their celebratory energies for the actual fullness of spring, but the feasting was kept to a minimum, the noise more conversation than clatter. The rowdiest parties, among the common folk, were those in the taverns-

nothing out of the ordinary, given that tavern crowds were always rowdier.

The local elite too had a celebration all their own. It held great social as well as political meaning, for their gathering was traditionally a statement of unity from the persons considered to be the leaders of Argus. This included the owners of big economic concerns; the heads of the merchants' guilds; the representatives of racial or social factions; and even, when applicable, the commanders of wintering armies.

This year's celebration was deemed especially important. After the year's conflicts, announced the governor, this commemoration of provincial unity was more necessary than ever. It was a way of telling the citizens that they need not be concerned about the recent problems and unrest, that the province's leaders were still more or less willing to be civil to one another. This was no false propaganda: the practical purpose of the said event was truly for the leaders to discuss matters of cooperation and settle arguments in a more relaxed atmosphere than the typical board room. And this year, the governor had decided, there were "a bloody good lot" of matters of cooperation and argumentation that simply cried to be discussed.

"I think it a brilliant idea," Shizuru said, in response to another partygoer asking her what she thought of the event. Her interrogator was an influential grain merchant and a former Mentulaean citizen. "More than ever, the citizens of Argus need reassurance that the city is united in its interests and that mere distinctions of race are not sufficient to cause a break in the ranks."

The merchant was a pudgy man with hair the colour of sand. He now hummed pensively. Shizuru studied him covertly in the meantime, for she thought him in rather curious dress. He had come draped in the finest and most vivid yellow fabrics, which he informed everyone supposedly distinguished him as the Druidic equivalent of Apollo, Lugh. The governor had chosen to make this year's gala a costume event.

"Mere distinctions of race, Fujino-san?" he repeated after Shizuru, who was spectacularly decked out in golden and cream cloth as Venus Victrix-not so much out of conceit, everyone present knew,



but in order to honour her divine ancestress.

"It's well to say that," the merchant eventually said. "Yet it's only recently that someone was killing-no, *murdering* citizens of Argus in their sleep, for those 'mere distinctions'. And it's only recently too that the governor tightened her regulations on Mentulaeans coming into Argus. Distinctions, but not 'mere', I think."

Another person in the group responded to this before Shizuru could.

"It's not fair to bring up that spate of serial killings to Fujino-san," he said, speaking with a lighter hint of the same accent the other man had displayed. He was also an emigrant from Obsidian's empire, just like the former speaker. "In truth, this gathering is precisely to show that those of us who know better don't agree with such barbaric actions."

"That is so, Korel-han," Shizuru replied with a tip of the head to this other speaker. She tried not to look at the strange headpiece he wore, which had had people staring at him all night. Even Shizuru's companion, dressed as the Goddess of the Hunt, had been unable to resist murmuring a jest that it was very difficult to resist letting fly an arrow at the man. This was because Korel wore an enormous-and authentic, he assured all who enquired-set of branching stag's antlers on his head. Shizuru was fascinated by the thought of how heavy they probably were and had to agree with her girl: the ridiculous costume did tempt an arrow or two.

"This gathering is symbolic of everyone's desire to see no more of those horrors," she proceeded. "That such a reprehensible series of acts by some grossly mistaken people took place prior to this does not invalidate the sentiment of this meeting. Rather, it actually strengthens the resolve of those here who are determined not to see it happen again."

Sounds and replies came from the other people in the cluster of couches and sumptuous seats. Amidst them rose the voice of yet another influential Argus denizen, this time a very wealthy Greek transporter. Given her commercial concerns, everyone agreed that her chosen persona was appropriate in reference, though perhaps not in appearance: a Nereid.

"I agree with this," the Greek said with a toss of the head, causing ringlets like spun iron to pitch on her brow. She was already an old woman, no more than a withered old wisp in size and shape. Yet the sternness of her aura was such that everyone was intimidated into listening to her without daring interruption.

"This gathering is just what the province needs," said this oddly wizened and withered sea nymph. "I myself deal in trade over the waters and some of my usual commerce has been slowed by the governor's regulations. Yet I'm not Mentulaeen. I'm Greek. To claim that the increasingly stringent rules on incomers and-though to a slightly lesser extent-outgoers is applied only to Mentulaeen citizens or those of Mentulaeen origin is untrue. Everyone is affected by the regulations! This is, after all, a trade city. We all have to suffer with restrictions of this type. But if that's the price for our safety, then so be it! It has always been the province of government to regulate our activities and curb our flows, lest we become too *perilously* free."

Again several people voiced their agreement along with Shizuru, who was immensely thankful that the old woman had said this for her. After all, given that she was technically part of "the government", there was a greater chance of the same words coming from her being greeted with resentment by the economic elite that had to put up with the restraints. Coming from one of them, however, and a very influential one at that, it begged fewer accusations of state-run authoritarianism.

"I would concur with my good lady here," Shizuru followed with notable diffidence. "And this is, I assure you, a personal concurrence. I believe that Sugiura-han has considered everyone's best interests equally in whatever rules she has recently applied to the province and that her consideration is informed by a wealth of experience and familiarity-and, I should think, affection - gained from having governed and lived amongst the people of Argus for years. Of course, it may be bold of me, a mere outsider, to say this."

"Not at all!" came the exclamation from yet another guest, loudest in a chorus. "I don't know about my other colleagues here, but hearing that from you settles any doubts I had. You are after all an economic power in your own right, most of us know."

He ran his eyes around the group.

"It's good to be reminded, I think, of how fortunate we are in having Sugiura-san," stated the man. "Other provinces have problems. They've complaints of being raped by greedy governors, who happen to be incompetents aside from being selfish gluttons. We've all had our run-ins with the State, but have we ever found fault in her for that in particular?"

There was a ripple of thoughtful murmurs, followed by someone lifting his cup.

"There's a truth," he declared. "By Jupiter, let's drink to our governor, ladies and gentlemen! Lift your cups. Let's show them that, even if the province's leaders can differ in opinion, they do not differ in interest."

The rest lifted their cups in accord, cheering for both their province and their governor. It was in this moment of harmony that Shizuru's senior legate came up and asked to borrow her commanding officer for a moment, which request the others granted with regret. Many of them had been charmed thoroughly throughout the evening by the urbane patrician, and those of them less susceptible to charm had been won over from the start by knowledge of her other considerable assets. They were all plutocrats, after all, and nothing attracted a plutocrat nearly as much as money. And everyone was aware that money was one thing the young Fujino indubitably possessed.

"It looked to me like you were finished conquering them and needed extraction," Chie told Shizuru, who laughed. "As you requested earlier, I've come to save you from their clutches. So leave us go to a discreet spot where we can all get some well-deserved breathing space after hobnobbing with the local elite."

"Thank you, Chie-han," Shizuru replied as they walked in search of a private corner. She checked that her bodyguard was close behind them. "I hope it to be the last time you have to save me that way tonight."

Chie waved away a slave offering a tray of chilled, honey-glazed

fruit.

"You're welcome and it's fine," she said. "I know very well they'd try to keep you with them as long as possible, so I'm glad to do you the favour of providing an escape, no matter how many times you need it and how many little cliques you have to visit and bend to your will. Besides, I had to get you out of there quickly just now for another reason."

Here she leaned in close to whisper something into her friend's ear, making it harsh in order to be heard above the din of guests and music.

"It looked to me like glorious Diana was ready to perch a few shafts on their chests."

She cast a sideways look at the goddess being discussed and saw the immaculate face in the half-light, the slender brows closing again in irritation when someone accidentally brushed an arm. *She has reason to be irked*, Shizuru thought, a little irritated herself. She knew the accident might not be so accidental. It would have taken a blind man and a fool not to want to brush against the young woman, who had come in white dress and silver-draped garb. This was by Shizuru's own request. The Himean had wished to indulge her private fancies of the girl as Artemis, of course, but had also done it out of yet another, rather recent guilty pleasure: that of dressing up her lover.

She had recently discovered special happiness in swathing the Otomeian in the softest linens; she loved to adorn the younger woman with precious ornaments that complemented not only Natsuki's atmosphere but also matched her own. For instance, she had slipped a thick band of glittering silver on the girl's arm tonight and decorated the other arm's wrist with a bracelet of the same material ornamented with cabochons of jade. They had been yet more gifts in an endless procession and Natsuki had been bashfully loath to accept. That is, until the Himean revealed that she had a twin of the bracelet, this one made of gold and studded with lapis lazuli instead, which she then fastened around her own wrist. Even the dress she wore seemed complementary to the one she chose for the girl-not a twin but a foil.

Chie did not miss the effect. She had even indulged in a public giggle over it with some of the other Himeans present, and also in a private sigh to herself. Say what some might about such drolly romantic behaviour, she was nonetheless romantic enough herself to enjoy it. Besides, there was the fact too that the pair indulging in such behaviour were remarkably suited for it and each other. It was the contrast of a woman like the rising sun next to a woman of twilight. It was her friend's charm that was all brightness, of course: Shizuru was dazzle and daze, blinding in her attractions yet reassuringly warm. Whereas the Otomeian was just pure frost: it was an appeal so cold it burned, like a sultry, sexy something that had little reassurance and plenty of intimidation.

*Venus and Diana*, Chie decided, still trying to come up with the right words to describe the pair. *The former makes you think of giving everything up to touch her; the latter makes you think you just can't.*

They found the dim nook they had been seeking behind one of the many drapes placed over the immense atrium's archways and recesses. This one nook was just such a recess, a modest alcove set with two plush couches that filled its space with a small rectangular table. It was apparent that someone else had had the use of this alcove earlier, since there were a few empty plates and some used goblets. Chie thrust her head out of the curtain as the other two women settled themselves, while she beckoned a passing slave nearby. After a few seconds of consultation, the slave entered and cleared the table, promising to discreetly return with wine for the ladies in hiding.

"Wait."

All eyes turned to the Otomeian captain, who had risen from her place.

"I will go too."

Shizuru lifted an eyebrow.

"You do not need to, Natsuki," she said, realising that Natsuki meant to ensure the integrity of the drink to be delivered to them. The girl insisted, however, and it was with some reluctance that Shizuru

finally bent to her will. The two went off, and the pair of Himeans were left in the alcove.

"That's taken care of that," Chie said, making herself comfortable in her own long couch, which she occupied by herself. "I must compliment your costumes, since I've yet to do that. They're gorgeously appropriate. You both look lovely."

"Yours is very fine too, Chie-han, though you seem to be missing a blindfold."

Chie laughed.

"Ahh, I don't really believe that love is blind, you know," she said.

"Nonetheless, you make a handsome Cupid."

"Alas, I'm separated from my Psyche."

"But shall certainly reunite with her," Shizuru pointed out.

"True, that's how the tale goes. And if I remember, you're the one who was intent on keeping us apart, oh dearest mother. I hate you," she said in a perfect deadpan manner.

Shizuru laughed gently.

"To some extent, I fear it is true," she told her friend.

Chie grinned, looking rather rakish for a love-bringing deity. Shizuru reflected on how masculine her friend's beauty could be; the male garb tonight emphasised it.

"That's a joke, Shizuru-san, so please don't take it so grimly. Come now, we ladies of love must get along! Anyway, am I right in guessing your costumes were your idea?"

Shizuru confirmed it.

"Well done, then. The allusive significance is nice, too." She chuckled suddenly, her brown eyes alight. "Is it so that anyone tempted to undress her with their eyes thinks better of it, under

threat of being turned into a hapless deer?"

The other woman smirked.

"I am thrilled to see that at least one person took my meaning," she said with throaty warning.

Chie loosed another chuckle.

"Dear me," she said. "Take heed or be chased by the hounds, eh? Though, if I remember, *Actaeon* meant no harm and simply happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Quite," Shizuru nodded. "Still, poor fool. Such can only happen to one unloved by luck."

"You can say that only because you're beloved of Fortuna. Have you seen her walking around, by the way? The buxom, strapping woman with the scales?"

"Heavens." Faint amazement registered in the bloody eyes. "That really was a woman?"

"It got me too! She, though she looks like a she who is really a he, is really a she who just looks like a he dressed up as a she-and I can't believe I just said that without tripping!" Chie laughed boisterously with her friend, eyes darting around in an effort to spy the subject of their talk. "She's been made unofficial judge of all the wagers and petty contests the drunkards are getting into, which isn't fair since I've noticed her scales tend to tip in favour of the person who adds a sneaky coin or two to his scale's weight! Although that's probably only proper, come to think of it. Fortune really does love the rich, don't you think so?"

Shizuru laughed at the jab to her own fortunes.

"As usual, I do not really have a reply to that question, Chie-han," she said.

"You can *afford* not to answer, Shizuru-san," Chie replied with a small grin. "Anyway, have you seen the other officers in their costumes?"

"Oh, yes. Suou-han looks superb."

"She always does."

"And Nao-han suits her guise, methinks."

"Ulysses, yes, the red-headed trickster. She wanted to go around the party dragging a horse."

Shizuru barely stopped her shout of laughter.

"But," Chie went on, "since she couldn't find a wooden one on short notice, that fell through."

"I would have thought dragging that grey-eyed Pallas with her was sufficient reference."

"Ah, yes!" The senior legate expounded quite excitedly on the subject, actually sitting up from her relaxed slouch. "She's interesting, isn't she, that one our dear old primipilus has managed to find? Oh, she's not a beauty in the average sense-she wouldn't hold a candle to your girl, say, for sheer purity of the structure-but she's definitely something."

"I agree, she has her own appeal, unconventional as it is."

"Pure Minerva in the looks, at least in her garb tonight. And those eyes she has! So luminous and flashing and appropriately grey! Such cheekbones! Yuuki's one lucky woman."

Shizuru tapped a finger on her lower lip thoughtfully, a dire grin forming on her mouth.

"Dear me," she murmured. "Perhaps I ought to tell Psyche, after all."

Chie turned an alarmed look to her.

"It's nothing like that," she told her commander. "I'm merely appreciating the aptness of her beauty to her guise, Shizuru-san. No one here catches my eye that way and no one could, since *she's* not here."



"Of course," said the other woman, innocence in her eyes. "That was exactly what I meant to tell Psyche. Why, did you think it was something else?"

She found out that dear, kindly Cupid was capable of glowering after all.

"You've a streak of meanness in you that surfaces from time to time," Chie grumbled. "It was only remote praise, you know. I'd say the same of you, to other people, and I have. Or of Natsuki-san, since she does fit her guise quite spectacularly-which means I'm praising you, as it was your choice to put her in that costume. Anyway, it's all meant in true, unimpeachably innocent admiration."

"Then I thank you again, and assure you my own reply just now was made in unimpeachable innocence too," Shizuru smiled, drawing a disbelieving scoff. "At any rate, Natsuki was rather pleased with my choice too, you know."

"Oh, really? Did it tickle her fancy to come as the Goddess of the Hunt?"

"Perhaps. I do not know. What I meant was that she was pleased that the costume meant she could carry weapons on her person, being the Goddess of the Hunt."

Chie blinked, then smiled as she guessed at it: "She wanted to come in her uniform, didn't she?"

"Yes, and with her daos."

"Which she's traded for a bow, arrow, and daggers laced to each beautifully-shaped, ivory-skinned thigh." At Shizuru's expressionless glance, she hastened to explain. " *Not* that I have been staring at said thighs! Merely observing something I noted shortly earlier, in passing, by a perfunctory look."

Before Shizuru could say anything beyond a chuckle, the curtain parted yet again and the slave from earlier entered with the requested wine and goblets, followed into the alcove by the Goddess of the Hunt herself. The slave left, drawing the curtain

behind her-which action was followed by a puff of annoyance from Shizuru's chief legate.

Shizuru looked at Chie curiously, following the legate's gaze to the scene beyond the drape. The cloth was thin enough to see through, thanks to the blaze of the torches and lamps on the other side.

"Oh," Shizuru said, upon finding the person on whom Chie's eyes were. "Is that not..."

"Yes, the pompous arse."

Shizuru covered her mouth to stifle a giggle. The person in discussion was another of Hime's more popular authors-and someone Chie happened to abhor, doling out such personal descriptions of the woman as an "oily, bombastic word-spewer without a single grain of true wit".

"You dislike her, as I recall," the patrician mused, to provoke her friend a little.

"Have you read her latest work, Shizuru-san?"

"No, I am afraid not."

"Be more afraid of reading it than otherwise. For someone who claims to be one of the best rhetoric-teachers around-and who charges her pupils duly for that claim-she sure finds new ways to overuse 'therefore' to hyperextend her sentences, *therefore* causing the reader extreme anxiety over finally seeing the end of each point-*therefore* begging the question of whether she actually ends her points- *therefore* causing you to sink into such ennui from her tediousness that you *therefore* begin to ask yourself if she even has a bloody point."

Shizuru had dissolved into laughter by this time. It had already lapsed into soft giggling when she felt a light touch on her arm, accompanied by Chie's remark.

"Oh," said the legate. "I think Natsuki-san wants something."

Shizuru looked at Natsuki's grave face.

"What is it, Na-" She stopped. "Ahh. Is he here already?"

A nod.

"I see. In that case, we should go." Shizuru turned to Chie. "I am ever so sorry, but would you be so kind as to excuse us, Chie-han? There is someone with whom I must speak."

She spared a regretful glance for the mostly-untouched wine on the table.

"I promise I shall have another drink with you soon," she told her chief legate.

"Go on," Chie replied. "Is it that chap Nao told me about? The one who runs that agency?"

"Yes, that would be correct," her friend answered.

"Hope it goes well, and know it will, even if I hoped otherwise."

They left the legate. Natsuki led the way as they emerged from the alcove and went through the atrium and attached courtyard. This was the property not of the State but of one of Argus's wealthiest moguls. He was actually a Himean-of the loyalist tradition, the governor had remarked to Shizuru-and his manor had always been the chosen site for this particular celebration in the past. So long as he considered this signal honour meriting the opening of his fabulously stocked wine-cellars-something he always did to mark the occasion-it was highly unlikely that the governor would ever decline his offer to host the party in the future.

In any case, his manor was remarkably suited for hosting parties; rumour even had it that he had its architect build it with the express purpose of making a home that could host three parties at the same time. Whether or not this report was true was immaterial, for no-one seeing the sheer breadth of his estate, the height of the mural-covered walls, and the girth of the colonnades of his *porticus*, could possibly doubt the place's capacity for accommodation. Indeed, it accommodated the present event very comfortably.

*A sizeable domicile indeed*, Shizuru thought abstractedly, as she

followed her bodyguard's lead through their linked hands. She estimated at least a hundred guests tonight, with a slave dancing attendance on each one. Combined with the troupe of Greek actors brought in, the dancers and magicians, the mummers and musicians-well, it was a sizeable crowd, to say the least. And it further stressed the dimensions of the manor, since all these partygoers did not find themselves in a squeeze. In fact, they milled quite freely in and out of curtained archways and found more than enough lush couches on which to settle down with their food and drink. Factions tended to cluster together, of course, but the Argus officials and Shizuru's officers worked to ensure the constant circulation, so that all could truly mingle.

She snapped out of her ponderings when she realised that she was being led out of the courtyard and headed for one of the attached corridors.

"Natsuki," she called, stepping a little faster to bring her closer to her bodyguard. "Are we supposed to meet him somewhere in particular?"

The girl paused momentarily and looked back at her.

"Yes," she said. "There."

Shizuru nodded. Natsuki turned again to resume their walk, only to find herself face to face with one of the mummers, who was apparently impersonating a gigantic and drunken toad.

"Oh..."

The Himean watched the mummer, a little entertained, as he acted out ridiculous movements and contortions of his body in front of them, croaking terribly all the while. Then she felt the hand holding hers tighten, prompting her to look at Natsuki. The girl was staring down the performer, her nostrils flaring in incredulity, and then suddenly casting a look towards Shizuru that made the Himean chuckle.

*What manner of creature is this, that gloriously royal face seemed to say. What is this thing whose presence offends me?*

She squeezed the younger woman's hand to catch her attention.

"Mercy, Goddess," she whispered to her companion's ear. "Send no swine to ravage this Calydon."

Natsuki was quite unable to prevent a smile.

"Be nice," Shizuru went on. "I will try to get us out of this as soon as possible. All right?"

She received a squeeze of the hand in return.

"It is fine," Natsuki told her, getting up on her toes to speak into Shizuru's ear. "We go when you want."

"Soon. I promise."

With a wave of the hand, Shizuru banished the mummer and they went through the arch with Natsuki taking the lead once more. They strode the breadth of the hallway, its red-veined marble leading them to the edifice's heart. They turned a corner and entered a dimly-lighted sitting room. Here the sound of the party was but a murmur, and the room itself seemed empty save for a silhouette sitting in the dimness. There was only one small lamp for the entire room.

"Natsuki, you found me," the person in the sitting room said in a bland, unremarkable voice. "Good evening, Fujino-san. I'm pleased to finally meet you."

Shizuru took her place on the seat opposite his. Natsuki elected to lean against a nearby column, her spare figure almost completely swallowed up by the shadows. Shizuru only felt her move there, her own eyes being fixed on the stranger in front of her. He sat well back, presumably to keep to the shadows, but was nonetheless faintly discernible as a man in a Greek tunic, of modest figure and dark hair. A few more seconds, and her eyes had adjusted enough to the lighting to note other things: he had a quizzing glass on his lap, dark eyes, and was clean-shaven of face.

"Well-met," she said at last, whereupon he smiled. "Thank you for meeting me, Yamada-han."

The man who called himself Yamada tipped his head. It was appropriate, Shizuru would reflect later, that they met in such a shady location, for Yamada was an intensely shady character. It was even uncertain if his name was truly Yamada or not, as research had shown that though there were documents certifying it they might well have been counterfeited. Claiming to be of mixed Himean and Greek descent, he was listed in the census files as having one of the more privileged degrees of citizenship classed under the Extended Rights.

He had supposedly been living in the northern territories of Hime for nearly two decades. He had operated his trade within and without said territories for about the same length of time. His trade relied heavily on transport and navigation, being an agency catering to so many varied tastes that it ran the gamut of Argus for its clientele and served clients in a position only roughly and euphemistically called "specialised acquisitions". Shorn of the euphemisms, it was perhaps best described by the word "smuggling ". But then again, smuggling was not exactly all there was to it. After all, given the right fee and conditions, his agents had been known not to refuse other similarly special errands as they passed their routes- "errands" being yet another euphemism, of course.

It would occur to anyone of good sense that a person whose daily activities required an overload of euphemism was most probably not a clean character. And indeed, Shizuru was fully aware of Yamada's illegal activities when she decided to meet him. That was because he provided her with good reason to do so, especially insofar as her military interests were concerned. His agency had years of experience in working as far abroad as the lands of the Mentulae.

Yamada's agents had an overwhelming wealth of experience at navigating the byways and dirt tracks webbed haphazardly through Obsidian's empire, some of them even just as familiar with the popular pathways in those regions as they were with the little-known ones. To a soon-to-be invader like Shizuru, such navigational knowledge was invaluable. This was not only for the prospect of cartographic details and assigning guides, but also for the possibility of non-military assistance and reconnaissance networks. Thus, upon hearing from her primipilus-who had been doing investigations along

these same lines-of the existence of such an agency as the one run by this 'Yamada', Shizuru had been quick to see the opportunity.

The only problem had been the question of gaining a meeting with him, for Shizuru had insisted that she would meet only the man himself. The difficulty was that Yamada was notorious for avoiding exposure, often relying on his higher-ranked agents to make contact. It was rumoured that he only appeared himself when the client-to-be was of indubitable significance. There Nao had assured Shizuru she would qualify, and so the situation seemed to have been resolved, with the only remaining task the question of how to extend this invitation to Yamada. Just as they were debating this, however, help had come from a most unexpected corner.

"Natsuki asked me to do this meeting, Fujino-san," Yamada said to Shizuru, who nodded. "I couldn't very well refuse one of my most esteemed clients."

"I see," Shizuru said, making a mental note to ask her girl again about what business she had been giving Yamada. The first time she had asked, she had been given a vague and unrevealing answer that slipped from her mind quickly, given her eagerness to reward the girl for the favour. And now, here was Yamada saying that she was one of his most significant clients. What in the world could Natsuki have been doing with such a character? How had she met him? How long had they known each other? She had a nagging feeling, from the way he spoke of Natsuki, that their acquaintance was not a recent matter.

Yamada was talking again in his unmemorable, terribly prosaic voice.

"Your accent is more noticeable than I imagined, Fujino-san," he ventured, without any real attempt at making his tone charming. He was mindful of the sombre glint in those red eyes. It was his first time to see them so closely, and he discovered that the layers of red in them were flaked, overlapping crusts from shredded rubies. Uncanny! "Please don't interpret that as criticism. I think I could listen to you all day, if you don't mind my saying."

"Thank you. Rest assured that such compliments do not

inconvenience me."

"By the way, have you tried the fish stew they're serving tonight? It's good."

Shizuru looked at the bowl on the table, near his open hand. She could discern mussel shells and prawns aside from the chunks of fish, all of it drenched in what seemed to be an orange soup. It smelled strongly of shallots and garlic, and was fairly appetising.

"No, I have not yet done so," she said. "But I believe I may later, upon your recommendation."

He seemed amused.

"It's not a bad idea," he said. "My recommendations are valuable, you know."

"I doubt it not. I would like to ascertain how consistently they earn their value, however."

"They always do." It was no false claim: Shizuru had performed a check on him, and the results were in agreement. "I think you'd know that, Fujino-san, since you wouldn't even waste your time with me if my record had been bad."

She slanted her head to acknowledge that.

"You have checked, haven't you?" he said, eyes flicking to the person watching them. "And I suppose the princess has vouched for me?"

Shizuru did not answer that, choosing instead to look at Natsuki as well. The girl spared a short lift of the eyebrow in response.

She nodded.

"Then, can we start?" he asked. "I'm sure you've many things to do, being commander of a fortification force."

"I detect irony in the inflection," Shizuru noted.



He shrugged a shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Unless the irony is actually appropriate, General?"

"I am afraid I do not really consider myself a credible critic of rhetoric here," she returned. "I did see at least one *grammaticus* in the party, however, and an esteemed one at that. I daresay she is better qualified to tell you whether your use of irony is appropriate or not."

A small grin came to his mouth, and he dipped his head in acceptance of the subtle rebuke. When he looked up, he was quite serious again.

"As I was saying, I understand you've come to see me in your capacity as commander of the fortification of the Northern Territories," he resumed. "Since fortification means there's something to fortify against, am I right in thinking the first name in the list would be King Obsidian's?"

"Perhaps."

"Their proximity is something to be concerned about, I'd think."

"Not to mention their unrest," she replied. "Of course, any possible act or discussion of fortifying against incursions from them is merely in recognition of potential disagreements, and not operative on a certainty of conflict. Good security lies in recognition of eventualities."

"And our good security is your business, General." He smirked, privately enjoying her caution. She was careful, this one, and a smooth talker. The accent helped too, he felt. Well, all of it helped! Just look at her!

He said: "I take it our business has to do with that, then?"

"Yes."

"How may I be of service to you?"

Against his expectations, however, she repeated the query to him.

"Would you be so kind as to tell me?" she said. "After all, this is my first time as a potential customer in your shop, so to speak. I do hope you shall humour me a little by showing me around and suggesting something among your wares that would fit my taste."

Yamada's dark eyes were narrowing as he sat back: he was beginning to get the measure of her.

"Or, perhaps," she followed, "that was a little too much metaphor?"

He could not resist releasing a chuckle. Oh, was she ever careful! Even more so than he had thought before. That was good: he only did work for people who were careful.

He bent a little way forward, enough to show her his face. He kept his eyes locked with hers the entire time.

"If you want a pitch," he acquiesced. "My agency specialises in clandestine acquisitions and intelligence, as you already know, and runs as far afield these areas as the Mentulaean lands. Given your present interests, it strikes me that we could work out an advantageous deal on the premise of your need for reconnaissance work in our grumpy neighbour's empire, so we know when he's getting one of his fits. You need people that can scurry past his borders and all around them- *just* to keep an eye on things, of course, and keep you informed-and we have those people. We can pass through his borders and pass right out of them without detection, faster than pure, clean water through a net. And we can get you whatever you need while doing it. Our main service may be listed as acquisitions, but we can provide many other services just as expertly, from surveillance to scouting, according to your requirements."

She seemed neither impressed nor disappointed by the speech. He supposed that was to be expected: word had it that she had some of the best intelligence operatives from Hime's Sulpician Province actually embedded in her legions.

"Our requirements are flexible," she told him. "Are your services the same?"

"Yes, all the way to the extreme points of the spectrum."

"I see. Let it be understood that all intents thus far are strictly non-aggressive."

*And it's down to cold, hard business.* "It's understood."

"Manpower?"

"Over a hundred, with almost twice that number for secondary assets. Total varies according to tasks being performed, given constant passage through many borders. Sometimes there are fewer on hand, since some are abroad, but all stay in contact."

"How often in contact?"

"Constant updates, reasonable allowances given for distances and weather conditions. If the update cycle is disrupted, we send other agents for reconnaissance."

"And I presume these follow-up agents handle the situation if anything goes awry?"

"Yes, though that's hardly ever the case," he replied blandly. "And when it does happen, it's due to uncontrollable aspects of a situation, like a flood stranding an agent somewhere, without escape. Even so, we have a perfect record for resolving such cases."

"Has resolution ever dealt with issues of management? Such as, for example, defections?"

The beady eyes seemed to harden. Would he tell the truth, or would he not? The standard practice for business was to deny this, but the prospective client before him did not fit any conception of standard. *Watch what you say*, the twinkling red eyes seemed to murmur merrily to him. *Watch it, and watch me watching you.*

"Yes," he said after an infinitesimal pause. "Four times. They had unusual circumstances."

"I see. And were they resolved?"

For this he had no need of a pause: "Yes. All four situations were salvaged, and both the problems and the commissions *executed*. The actual integrity of the primary mission was not compromised."

"Ah."

"I hope you don't let this tarnish your opinion of us as business partners," he said with a thin and rather sombre smile. "Being a woman of authority yourself, Fujino-san, I imagine you know that each organisation has its occasional personnel problems."

She responded with an unexpectedly wide smile, folding gracefully slender and spidery hands over crossed legs. He watched the white fingers come together perfectly, as though each one was meeting its own reflection in a mirror. He realised suddenly that they were not actually as thin as they appeared. Simply, they gave the illusion of being thin only because they were so long. Much like the rest of her, they were in fact very large and powerful.

"It does not put me off, Yamada-han. Rather, it actually strengthens my faith in your enterprise," she laughed, confusing him a little though he did not let it show. "As you say, every organisation has its personnel problems. Had you told me you have never had one, that could only have meant three things. First, that someone has not been checking hard enough. Second, that someone is lying."

A grin spread his mouth. He did not fail to notice that instead of naming him specifically as the one at fault in those two situations, she had opted to say "someone".

"And the third possibility, General?"

She nodded gently.

"Third, you truly have yet to get your share of personnel problems and should be anticipating them in the future-in which case they would most likely fall upon your commission from me." She smiled, closing her eyes for a few seconds. "And since the first such experiences are always the most disturbing, given their break from what was previously a coherent and universal trust in the system, I would much rather not have my interests threatened for the sake of

your organisation's learning experiences with personnel problems. That charitable I fear I am not."

He was grinning fully now, his bland face endowed with unanticipated character by the expression. She opened her rust-red eyes and smiled at him.

"Now then, since we are talking about learning experiences," she said crisply. "Training?"

"Varied preliminary schools. Half come from the Sulpician Province," he said, naming Hime's famed breeding-ground of expert intelligencers and torture specialists.

"So at least half are Himeans?"

"Yes." He was confident in answering that, especially as it was advantageous to her. "And the other half is mixed. Syrians, mostly, who've grown up in our territories. Jews too. Practically Himean."

"How practically?"

"Under the Extended Rights citizenship."

"One wonders how those were procured."

"Most of them have mixed heritage," he replied. "I take on only those who feel a, shall we say, *kinship* with Hime. It's to keep them from going over to foreign concerns because of money." A flicker of deviousness passed over his eyes. "National elitism can be strong glue, I'm sure you know."

She unbent enough to smile.

"It can be that," she murmured. "And what about them? How is their training?"

"Conducted under much the same principles as those from the Sulpician schools." At her curious glance, he went on to explain: "I hire trainers who schooled there themselves."

"And how much of the Sulpician intelligencer's curriculum do your

agents take up?"

"The full range."

"Passing all of them?"

"They get booted out of training camp and sent home if they don't. We don't use machines with missing pegs."

"Very well, then."

She exhaled a sigh that gave nothing away except that she was meditating, and leaned back in the comfortable seat of her chair. The cushions accepted her weight carefully, resisting after she had sunken about an inch deep into the padding.

"Well, Yamada-han, it is a most impressive stock you have in store," she said, a little amusement in her voice. "Impressive, though still limited in supply. How many can you dedicate without conflict of other interests to me, if ever?"

"Half, if required."

"Is that figure negotiable?"

"Maybe. It depends on the price, General."

"What is the price?"

He laughed now, obviously cheered by the thought of money. At heart, Shizuru thought, he still was really just another plutocrat.

"It'll be expensive, Fujino-san, I can tell you that."

The word 'expensive' failed to register any sounds of alarm for someone of her means; she brushed it aside.

"Indeed. You may talk it over with my bankers, come to that," she replied with her usual nonchalance over money. "I have no wish to haggle with you at this moment. I am sure my bankers do that well enough for me, anyhow. What I wished to know was whether or not you would be willing to dedicate *all* your resources to our

enterprise's interests."

This time, Yamada let his surprise show.

"That's going to be even more expensive."

Again the rich woman's shrug over "expensive".

"As you say," she said. "What is the answer?"

He blinked, and then his eyes gleamed open: he saw the great, shining vista of chance yawning before him. If this woman was this rich, if she was indeed as immensely powerful as he could feel, then this was the time to bargain for that which he had always wanted. Yes, a perfect opportunity!

"If you add something to bargain, you can consider it sealed," he ventured.

She lifted an eyebrow in query. He came out with it.

"Full citizenship." At her blank face, he said it again. "If you get me- and any possible issue I might have in the future- full citizenship, I'll dedicate all our resources to you, Fujino-san. I won't take any other jobs after that unless the resources can be spared. But your tasks will constantly take precedence."

He repeated the qualifier for conclusion: " *Only if* you get me the full Himean citizenship."

It took a while before she replied, but when she did, he saw in her eyes that he had pleased her.

"Full citizenship?" she said.

He said nothing, knowing she was merely measuring the idea.

"That would mean you would become my client, " she said, suddenly. "I would be your patron."

He smiled grimly and nodded.

Again the pleased, somewhat feline smile from her. *Well, and with good reason*, he thought to himself. To have him as a client would be very useful to any patron.

Of course, he surmised, he could probably say the same of having a patron like her.

"Then we shall definitely talk again," she said, after a few seconds of smiling at nothing in particular. "To finalise arrangements."

He nodded.

"It's going to be a pleasure doing business with you, Fujino-san," he said.

"I should hope so." She looked at him in a way that indicated the interview was not over yet, and he took the hint. They stared at each other. "Permit me to ask you another question, first."

"That's what people do when they talk to me, General."

"What is in it for you?"

Even in the gloom, she thought she saw the glimmer that passed his eyes, as he smiled at her.

"Why, I thought I'd already answered that question earlier," he replied. "But since I'm assuming you're not the sort of person who'd ask the same thing expecting to hear the same answer, I'd say it's just the standard trifecta. Money, power, sex." He laughed colourlessly. "Though the last one's not as important as the first two. I could live without it."

"Money and, roughly speaking, the citizenship." Her eyes glimmered much like his; only, hers did not lose the flame after the initial spark. "Allow me to put it a little more clearly, then. Are you not concerned about what our probable continued presence-implied, quite clearly, by my preliminary terms in our bargain-can mean for your business? Surely you have considered the possibilities it may have on the environment for your trade, in the long term."

"What do you mean?" he asked, lifting his eyebrows in false



curiosity. "What can it mean for my business in the long term?"

Shizuru's smile was charm personified, though her eyes seemed to narrow at his answer. She rose from her seat.

"I see," she said. "Forgive me, but I have changed my mind."

He stood as well, stopping her with a gesture of his hands.

"No, please," he said with a touch of urgency, only receiving yet another charming smile in reply. "Please, Fujino-san. Please take your seat. I'm sorry-that was in bad taste."

She deigned to return, lowering herself with deliberate sloth into her seat. He had returned to his as well and watched her quietly, obviously calculating. It was only when she lifted an eyebrow at him that he finally spoke again.

"That was a stupid joke," he told her with a far more animated expression than he had shown her thus far, his mouth actually loosening enough into a small but sincere grin. He shook his head while talking. "I'm very sorry for that, Fujino-san. It was juvenile and I'm sorry for offending you. Please stay."

She said nothing, accepting his apology with an incline of the head.

"I should've spoken to a woman such as you directly and just answered the question," he continued. "So if you'll be good enough not to change your mind yet, I'm willing to answer you honestly."

"Then go on, Yamada-han," she replied evenly. "You may say your piece."

You may say your piece - you *may*, he mused afterwards, repeating her words in his mind. Well, he had asked for permission and been given it. But oh, she was a true aristocrat, this one! Yamada had known it all along, had known of her repute even before she had come to the North, but it was still something to meet the person behind the popularity. What he saw justified the esteem, and maybe more. Taller than he had thought, more intensely authoritative than he had imagined. Unbelievably good-looking, if a trifle eerie because of the eyes. He could almost feel a ton of weight behind her too, its

ponderous way smoothed by masses of glamour and charm. And beneath all that cultured charisma was what intrigued him most about the very patrician, famously courteous and elegant woman: Shizuru Fujino had a supreme and surprisingly unerring instinct for the jugular.

*I believe I'm going to enjoy working for her*, he thought contentedly while going about his explanation. A movement off to his side made his eyes flicker to the darkness for the briefest of moments, and he caught sight of two predatory green eyes eyeing him closely, cold assessment in their depths. He returned his gaze to the woman before him, feeling like a man caught between two predatory animals. For Shizuru Fujino was that too, was she not? He saw it now, if he had not seen it as clearly before: the Himean only seemed perfectly refined. She had an intense power of stillness that worked to her advantage, but the more perceptive would sniff something working under it, an evanescent but dangerous scent. It was the impression of a wild and untamed spirit in an exquisitely civilised body.

*Is that why you like her, Princess Natsuki?*

His eyes focused now on those before him, noting with fascination the way the crusts of those rubies actually bled into each other.

"Of course I'm aware that your presence in this region will be long-term," he was saying to her. "And-I'm speaking on my own conjectures and projections here-the long-term result will undoubtedly be favourable to *our* side, in which case I'll have acquired for myself a prime bargaining position in securing more benefits and commerce in the new, let's say, balance of power in these regions. Assuming, of course, that you would be willing to bargain with me for that, afterwards."

"Perhaps," she said with a smile. "Do go on. Since we are talking about conjectures, what if something should happen in the future of our association that would lead you to conjecture differently from what you had first thought?"

He smiled crookedly: "So long as I continue receiving my benefits from the bargain, my services wouldn't change, I promise you. Even

if I thought the North's power structure wouldn't ultimately end with the Himean side on top, I know it wouldn't inconvenience my continued commerce too much later since my assistance to you would be carried out in a clandestine capacity. They couldn't punish me then, because they wouldn't be able to target me. They wouldn't even know me."

He plucked at the soft cloth of his tunic to rearrange it.

"Of course, it would leave me with a lot of added costs, if we did lose the power struggle-in a manner of speaking," he told her.

"Relocating base of operations, setting up again in different locations, forming a new client base. Even with the profit I'll undoubtedly make from our arrangement, throughout its duration, I consider it frankly tiresome and unnecessary. The most benefit would come from me holding strictly and loyally to our partnership and using it to the fullest advantage," he concluded. "That, my esteemed general and soon-to-be patron, is why you can trust me. Besides, Natsuki's fondness for you would hold me in itself. I'm not fool enough to think even I can escape the princess if she wanted to revenge a betrayal on me. She's one of the few people I genuinely fear in these lands."

Shizuru's eyes went to the side: Natsuki was eyeing the man very darkly.

"I see."

She uncrossed her legs, and he knew the interview was over.

"You argue your point effectively," she remarked. "As I said earlier, we shall speak again soon. How shall I get in touch with you?"

He rose to his feet too, bowing to her.

"I'll send one of my agents around soon," he said. "But if we need to meet before that, I think Natsuki can tell you how. She would know."

"All right. Thank you again, Yamada-han. It was a pleasure meeting you."

"And you, General. This has been an advantageous evening for us

both," he said with a smile. "Now I'm even more glad I did Natsuki the favour of coming here."

Shizuru halted in the act of turning around, seeming to think on something. Suddenly, she asked the young woman near the archway to go a little ahead of her. The girl hesitated, but finally agreed when assured she could wait just outside the room.

"Is something wrong, Fujino-san?"

Once sure that Natsuki was out of hearing range, Shizuru faced Yamada and walked the few steps necessary to bring her a mere two feet away from him. She noticed his eyes widen a little upon her approach, his chin forced to tilt up for him to meet her eyes.

"Why *did* you do it?"

His mouth parted, but no sound came immediately. Instead, he took a second to take a slow, solicitous breath of air.

"Do what, Fujino-san?" he asked, perfectly calm.

She spoke just as calmly, and in an even more languid tone.

"Do Natsuki that favour. I have heard that you do not grant interviews with just anyone, that even the wealthiest, most influential plutocrats do not always get to sit with you. Yet it seems almost as though she has summoned you with a single request. It strikes me a touch interesting."

Yamada's dry face suddenly loosened, and she saw that the emotion on it was amusement.

"She didn't pay me anything for this meeting, if that's what you're thinking, Fujino-san," he said very simply. "And she won't be paying me anything for it. As I said, it was a business favour."

"Business," Shizuru repeated enquiringly.

"Good business," he replied, with a smirk. "To show you what I mean, I'll do you a business favour too, since you're now a significant customer as well as my future patron. Here's a hint to

something most people wouldn't know, because its so rarely spoken about with anything approaching a confirmation."

She looked at him intensely as he delivered his message.

"Perhaps I'm doing all of this just because I think it's smart business to get along with solitary, uncontested heiresses," he told her. "Even if some of them haven't cleared the cobwebs from their crypts ever since interment."

Having delivered this line, he stepped back and gave her another bow, leaving through a different archway from the one she and her bodyguard had used to enter. Shizuru watched him vanish behind the curtain, which swung gently in the stir of his departure.

She tapped her finger to her own thigh thoughtfully. Solitary heiresses, cobwebs and crypts. Even interment had been mentioned. The man must have enjoyed that little riddle. Unfortunately, she was unsure of feeling the same way. It was but a clue, after all, and not a confirmation: all she would be able to glean from it would be vague and in the manner of a signpost pointing her to the destination proper. It was clear that he had been talking in part about her. But he said it was something most people would not know, which effectively ruled herself out as the direct subject. Could he be talking, then, about Natsuki?

*This bears investigation, does it not? An inheritance of some kind, then, has survived from her family? Part of the Ortygian Treasures, I would guess. But his words might as well be indicating something more in the mode of the immaterial, some other form of wealth or power or influence destined for someone in her position and with her ancestry. It bears investigation.*

She shook her head as she walked, thinking quietly on what Yamada had told her. She shelved it away, however, upon seeing what was waiting for her on the other side of the curtain.

"Natsuki, my apologies," she said, approaching the Otomeian. "I merely had a final word with him."

The dark-haired girl looking at her keenly said nothing. A torch on

the wall nearby threw a shine on the girl's lean shoulders, the points above the muscle leading into the bars of her clavicles and ending in a deep hollow above the flat of her breast. Shizuru touched that hollow with a finger, feeling the small shiver that passed through Natsuki at her action, and seeing the swaying movement that seemed as though the girl would fall against her.

She would have caught her if that happened, but it was a hand that came out instead.

"I hope you were not too lonely waiting for me." She took the offered hand. "We can go now, if you wish."

Natsuki threw a speaking glance at her. " *You* want to go?"

"I suppose so. Let us see."

They went down the hallway they had passed earlier, stopping just at the archway leading to the courtyard. Like almost all the other curtains, the filmy cloth hung over it permitted Shizuru to spy the scene outside while the darkness in the corridor prevented the scene from spying on her. Through the diaphanous red cloth, she could see the governor of Argus no longer playing the part of her guise, acting more like a gracious-though still rather merry-host than a mad member of the Bacchanal, as went her attire. She could see her officers, from the senior legate to the greenest military tribune, mingling with the crowd and chattering with the locals. She saw that all was well.

She smiled down at her lover and said, "I think they can do very well without us. I have done my part, as have you. Let us leave them?"

Natsuki nodded.

They slunk away through the dimly-lit halls, passing a few other loitering guests and more than a few local soldiers on guard duty. At the entrance-or the exit, as the situation would be-the pair found one of the villa's three head slaves. It was the one who had received them earlier, ready to see them out gracefully as well. His would be the task of informing the guests, should it prove necessary, of who had departed from the party and why. He took the noble Himean's

excuse of being exhausted as well as her apologies, and promised to convey them to the host and the governor.

He and another servant had helped the two women with their cloaks by the time they heard the sounds of Shizuru's hired carriage coming up, along with the sound of what seemed to be many other horses.

"That may be your gig, general," he said, stepping back from her and her partner with obvious deference. "And the horses for the guards accompanying you. Will there be anything else?"

Shizuru felt the edges of her cloak flap in the wind as she turned to him.

"No, thank you," she said, and noticed the surprise he tried to hide at being thanked. "But you may leave us now, please."

He bowed even deeper this time, to her as well as to the icy-looking noble near her shoulder. His duty performed, he retired quietly as she had requested, musing on the strange courtesies of some aristocrats. Thanking a slave, of all things!

Shizuru and Natsuki were left alone in the outer courtyard of the great villa, their heavy dark cloaks tight around them.

"The guards tonight are to be from the local garrison," Shizuru told her companion quietly. "The measure was determined necessary by Sakaki-han and Midori-han, given recent points of unrest. Besides, it is well into the night-and what a dark night it is turning out to be! Perfect for bandits or ambushers."

Natsuki hummed in approbation, tilting her head up to look at the sky.

"Moonless," she murmured, the fine angle of her jaw inviting.

"Moonless," Shizuru agreed, her own eyes on the girl. "Perhaps because the moon has come down to the earth to stand next to me?"

The younger woman smirked at the blatant flattery.

"Could be," she said.

Their carriage finally drew up, as well as nine military steeds and their riders on them. Shizuru saw that yet another soldier was actually sitting next to the driver of the carriage, her red army cape wound well about her shoulders.

"Well now," she said, recognising the soldiers accompanying her. They were all veterans from her Ninth Legion's First Century. "Am I right in thinking Yuuki-han ordered the ten of you specifically to accompany me?"

They saluted in confirmation.

"Got to get you home right and proper, General," one said.

"I am sorry this takes you from the comfort of a warm bed," Shizuru sighed. "And I thank you kindly for taking the trouble to assure I get safely to mine."

The soldier sitting next to the driver answered her.

"It's our duty and we're proud to do it, General," she told her commander. "We're working with the Argus military tonight, but our officers get first priority. And you're the first of the first."

Another soldier, a rider, continued it: "Which means you get the first of The First."

Shizuru chuckled.

"Well-put, Hideki-han," she said with one of her more dashing grins, the one she reserved for her most precious rankers. "I thank you for doing your duty so zealously, then."

"Personally, the whole century would've been glad to accompany you tonight," came the answer. "But the centurion did say you'd rather there were less of us, I think."

"She knows me so well." Shizuru smiled winningly. "At any rate, I am sure the ten of you are worth another army's century, so I still dare to say I am overwatched for so short a trip through the countryside."



And, of course, you must consider that I have a goddess looking out for me too at my side. Do you know of any bandit silly enough to chance it?"

The others chortled quietly, seeing the colour on the face of their commander's lover. They went silent rapidly, however, when the so-called goddess tiptoed up to whisper something in her charge's ear. Whatever she said lifted the general's golden eyebrows.

"Oh, you too?" she said to the girl with a wondering expression. "How many?"

The Otomeian murmured to her again, and whatever it was seemed to heighten her wonder.

" *Thirty* ?"

The general pulled back to look her lover in the face.

"You mean you ordered thirty of your riders to escort us this evening?" she went on. "Good heavens, Natsuki, that is a lot!"

"No," was the low response. "It is just barely enough."

The legionaries exchanged glances, straining forward as unobtrusively as they could to catch more of this interesting dialogue.

"So they have been waiting for us all this time?" the general was asking the Otomeian, who nodded in answer. "Where?"

The Otomeian merely pointed her chin in the direction from which their carriage and riders had come. Before Shizuru could ask any more, one of the legionaries spoke.

"Beggin' your pardon, General," he said in a distinctively country brogue. "But if I can say, I think we know what the lady means. We were with them back in the stables."

Shizuru looked at the one who had spoken and thanked him for the information, saying his name to show she remembered it. Everyone knew she always did, but it warmed each one's heart every time.

"Easy to remember, those black uniforms," he continued. "There were thirty, a'right, and we could see they were waiting fer something. They were getting on-saddle when we lef'."

"I see." Shizuru nodded at him. She turned to look warmly at Natsuki. "Now I really do feel overwatched. But thank you so much for your concern, Natsuki. Believe me when I say I appreciate it, and I am sure these good legionaries probably feel a little better knowing they have cavalry reinforcements."

She turned her head to one of the men on horseback.

"Does this satisfy your concerns, Hideki-han? I know you had hoped for your entire century here, as you said earlier, but perhaps this shall do?" she asked. "The Lupine warriors are not feeble soldiers, you know."

"Sure aren't, General," he said, sparing generous praise. "They're right terrors, that's for sure. I'm proud to have them with us tonight."

Natsuki acknowledged his compliment for her troopers with a smile. Shizuru addressed the girl again, mist floating from her mouth with each word.

"I suppose they are waiting for us at the exit to these grounds?" she asked, gaze drifting over the young woman at her side, whose eyes were hooded against a gust of wind. She was pale as always, Shizuru thought, and with all that pallor wrapt about her, the black of her fine brows and lashes was a shock.

"Yes," the girl whispered. "They will join there."

"I see. Well then."

Shizuru put her hand on the handle of the gig as if to go in, but paused suddenly before doing so.

"Natsuki," she said, looking at the girl next to her.

The girl looked at her too.

"You are so beautiful," she said unashamedly. And then, without

missing a beat: "Come on. Let us go."

The pair of them entered the gig and let the heavy curtain fall back into place, sheltering them from ten highly-amused pairs of eyes. Natsuki's bow and arrow were placed on the unoccupied seat across theirs, within easy reach. After a signalling knock on the carriage's wall, the driver started off, the clatter of their guards' steeds audible around them.

"I hope you will excuse me for not waiting to get in the carriage first before saying that."

Shizuru smiled as she spoke, knowing the younger woman was looking at her without having to actually see it.

"I simply felt as though I had to say it then," she said.

Complacent in their privacy, the smaller female inched herself gradually closer to Shizuru's side, whereupon the Himean snaked an arm around her neck and held her close. They stayed silent this way for a while until they heard the sounds of more hooves: their Otomeian escort had joined them.

"Shizuru?"

"Yes?"

"Tired?" was Natsuki's enquiry.

"Not very, strangely enough. Are you?"

A sound of denial.

"Ah." Her fingers pinched the girl's ear. "Your ear is cold." She covered it with her palm, hoping her hand was warm. "Are you all right?"

"Mm."

"Really?"

A firm point of contact found her shoulder: Natsuki's cheek.

"Warm now," came the answer.

Shizuru was loath to alter their position after that, but nonetheless decided to ask the girl to move a little first, without explaining why. Her intentions were made clear anyway when she unfurled the cloak wrapped about her and draped one side of it over the other woman, taking the other side for herself. They snuggled under the burgundy cloth, close together.

"Better?"

Natsuki nodded.

"Why did you ask if I was tired?"

"You mounted so fast," Natsuki responded, flicking green eyes in the gloom to indicate the interior of their carriage. Suddenly she straightened. "Is there hurry? Something is wrong?"

Shizuru drew her back in. Again she felt the weight of the young woman's cheek resting on her shoulder.

"I'm fine, worry not. We are going directly to the gubernatorial mansion and then our quarters now," she said. She could smell the top of her companion's head: it smelled of the fragrances from their bath and-as always, which fascinated Shizuru to no end-of new pine. How did the Otomeian keep her hair smelling that way? It was almost as though she went prowling about the woods at dawn, each day. "We are done for the day, thank goodness. Do you want to go somewhere else, though?"

A sound of denial.

"All right, then."

A short silence passed.

"It was not unpleasant today," Shizuru eventually said, rubbing her cheek against the top of Natsuki's head. "My work, I mean. But everyone was full of talk and politics and talk yet again. And all I really wanted was to be with you. You are perhaps the one person here whose company makes me feel as though I am not at work

again."

She felt the warmth blossom on her shoulder and knew the other woman was blushing. A hand took hers and began to play with it, pulling and pinching at the fingers gently. She let her hand stay limp for the most part, but every now and then pinched back. Later, she pulled up the smaller hand and held it to her lips before returning it to her lap.

A few seconds later, she felt something tugging at the ribbons holding up her hair. She looked down. In the greyness, two big and liquid-green eyes regarded her mutely.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

Natsuki smiled.

"This tie," she said. "Your hair, maybe?"

She consented. The fingers continued their work until the cords gave way, and then her hair was released. It settled in rich golden waves over her shoulders and her back. She felt a hand gather and move it to the side, towards the shoulder where the younger woman's head rested. Then came the long, deep breath Natsuki took when the blonde locks were near her nose. It was a breath that spoke of a long day, a low and whispering desire to inhale something familiar and comforting. It sounded like a sigh of relief after so much raucous alienness, and it was then that the Himean felt a twinge of guilt.

" *Meum mel*, I am sorry I am always rushing around," she said, remembering the way Natsuki had been watching her today: watching everything and anything with electric fastidiousness that bordered paranoia. Some part of Shizuru had sensed it, in days earlier, but had almost forgotten. Ever since her avowal of suspicion about something dark shadowing her, a confession she made to the governor eight days past, Natsuki had been like this: eagle-eyed and as tautly alert as their adopted panther when it was scenting prey nearby.

The first few days, Shizuru had thanked her but cautioned that she

need not be so alarmed of surprise attacks, as they were highly unlikely to come in such a form; the older woman expected any trouble to come through less direct means, such as through politics. As the days wore on with no sign of relaxation from Natsuki, however, Shizuru had eventually grown to reconcile herself with it, choosing instead to regard her lover's efforts with amusement. Now she realised that she might have grown too contented in that amusement. How could she have failed to remember that, uniquely capable as her girl was, she was still capable too of exhaustion?

"Forgive me," she said again before Natsuki, now sitting straight, could protest. "I promise that tomorrow shall be better. I did promise it would be only the two of us, after all. Tomorrow we shall have the day all to ourselves."

She thought of the things she had planned for the promised tomorrow, which had taken her all of this past week to arrange. How much she had put into them! It was perhaps only natural that she should feel a pang of disappointment in her next words.

"But if you think you are too tired for our little outing tomorrow, it is fine if we postpone it," she said, keeping her voice level. "It is no matter if we put it off for a little while, and simply rest in our room."

The firmness of Natsuki's answer both worried and relieved her: "No."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Yes. Tomorrow." Then, as if figuring out what would be most reassuring to Shizuru: "Please. I wish to go."

Shizuru suppressed her sigh, releasing the breath of relief through her nose instead.

"I see." She pulled Natsuki close yet again. "Thank you. I promise to make it worth your while."

Once they had settled into their former positions, it became her turn to lift the other's hair with loose fingers. Because there was absolutely no curl to the girl's hair, however, the strands poured

down again almost as quickly as she had gathered them.

"So black," she said. "You know, I have always loved black hair."

Natsuki looked at her from the corner of an eye. Shizuru caught the flash of humour in the emerald depths before they slid away.

"One of the dancers earlier," said a voice Shizuru thought had all the depth of aged wine. "One of them, she had it too."

She had to smile.

"Really?" Again she took up the dark mane and let it spill from her clutch. "She had black hair?"

"Mm."

She paused when a thought came to her: Natsuki *had* seemed to be watching the performers very closely all night. What disturbed her about this was that many of those performers-the dancers, to be precise-had been quite good-looking, their beauty accentuated by exotically-made-up faces, and hair and skin sprinkled with golden dust. They had been cosmetically good-looking, in fact, in what Shizuru fancied to be close to the Otomeian fashion.

And Natsuki had been watching them all evening.

"Natsuki?" she began in a neutral tone, desperately trying not to scowl. "You were watching the performers?"

"Mm-hm."

*Of course she would-that is what you do with performers, Fool!*

"Did you see anything interesting?"

"Mm... ohh. Oh, yes."

"Well. Well, now." She tried to keep what she was feeling out of her voice. What was she feeling? Her stomach was restless and felt empty, as though it were sinking. "Which or who was it?"

She heard a brief purr of obviously lingering delight.

"The boy," Natsuki said.

Shizuru nearly leapt out of the carriage, ready to kill *the boy*.

Natsuki continued quite happily: "With the wolf? Ah, the wolf I liked very much."

The swelling murder in Shizuru's breast was suddenly arrested.

"Remember?" Natsuki was saying with a smile, looking up at her now. She seemed to have interpreted Shizuru's abrupt stiffening in quite a different way from the truth. "You saw too. The wolf was trained very well. It was interesting, no? The wolf was beautiful, Shizuru."

Shizuru stared at the girl, who seemed blissfully unaware she had almost perpetrated a violent homicide for the wolf's owner.

"Not the dancers then?" she said slowly. "The wolf with the tricks, was it?"

Natsuki nodded with unusual cheerfulness.

"That one. With the ring." She made a face. "The dancers I did not like so much. They came too close to us, too many times. Should stay in their dance area."

*So that was why she kept watching them so closely. Still, about that boy with the wolf.*

Shizuru narrowed her eyes, although her lips did produce a smile.

"Well, then, the wolf," she pressed. "You liked the wolf?"

She received a slightly puzzled look from Natsuki, who sounded affirmation. The puzzlement was due to the fact that she had been saying this for some time now, after all, and it was unlike Shizuru to press for confirmation of something already so firmly established and confessed.



"And the boy himself?" Shizuru said next.

This time, all the Himean received was a careless shrug. Not entirely sure she liked that answer, she followed as nonchalantly as she could with another query.

"Yes, I remember the wolf," she told Natsuki. "But dear me, I seem to have forgotten the boy! What did he look like again, My Dear?"

Natsuki turned her eyes upwards in an effort to remember.

"I think... long hair," the girl said eventually, twisting her lips into a slight frown. "And he was short."

"Indeed, indeed. What else?"

Natsuki frowned a few more seconds before finally turning a helpless grin to her.

"I am sorry, Shizuru," she uttered. "I do not remember well. I was looking at the wolf. I am very sorry. Why, it is important?"

The rusty eyes seemed to blink merrily at her as Shizuru shook her head, chuckling strangely to Natsuki's ears.

"No, I was merely curious," the Himean said. "Fool that I am. Do not worry about it."

Shizuru pulled at a lock of the younger woman's hair once more. A pair of emerald eyes turned to her and she wiggled her eyebrows, back to her old self.

Natsuki smiled.

"Black hair?" she said.

Shizuru smiled back: "Black hair."

They chuckled.

"So then," she started, recalling their interrupted conversation from earlier. "One of the dancers had black hair, did she?"

"Yes."

"But not like this, I suppose."

Natsuki stirred gently.

"Ah yes," murmured the young woman, not without playfulness. "A little like, I think."

Shizuru gave into a laugh and finally dipped her head, burying her nose into that wonderful dark hair smelling of frost and the dewy fragrance of The Hunt and of new-shed pine.

"Never like this," she insisted, speaking against the warm scalp. "There shall never be hair to compare to this."

She moved; her mouth drifted to one tellingly hot ear and spoke into it.

"Whenever I hear 'black' now, I think of this," she told her lover. "I said that I have always loved black hair..."

She gave the reddened ear a soft, suctioning kiss.

"But I have never loved black hair as much as I love this."

She was silenced after that by a pair of soft, very plump lips. She purred when they sucked on her underlip before letting go. She would have leaned in for one final press of their lips had Natsuki not beaten her to it, laying a softer, lighter kiss on her mouth before going back to nuzzling into the crook of her neck.

*How nice to have this*, Shizuru mused as she stroked her companion's back. *How nice, too, to have a little silence again*. She had told Natsuki she was not tired and it was true, but only insofar as her physical being went. Her spirit, however, was a little wearier. What she said earlier to her girl was true: she had been tired of all the talk, all the silly shop-chatter she had to perform simply because some fools had set the precedent only weeks ago for the province's first truly political genocides. The anxiety generated by the Mentulaean killings had been longer-lasting than the killings themselves. This did not mean that the direct effects of the murders

were temporary-those who were killed always stayed killed-but, rather, that the Mentulaeen killers did not stay Mentulaeen killers for long, having been dealt with by the governor.

The trouble was that the murders might have stopped, but the suspicion and doubt they sowed continued to take root. A fatal thing for such a many-peopled, multi-cultural province as Argus. Said province also happened to have an army in residence at the moment whose only disclosed goal had been announced as "safeguarding the northern provinces of Hime and her allies, against such threats as may prove imminent". In a situation of heightened paranoia and suspicion, unfortunately, nearly everything could be a threat-and nearly every threat could prove imminent.

*Which is why, of course, I have to smooth feathers yet again,* she thought with a wry smile, knowing that her presence had been required tonight. Not only was she the commander of the wintering army, she was also-and this was just as important, if not more so-Senator Shizuru Fujino. The same principle applied to many of her officers, in particular those with established names in Hime's political hierarchy, such as the also well-born and extremely wealthy Suou Himemiya.

*And there is yet another reason I am feeling nervous these days,* Shizuru admitted to herself, imagining two chilly blue eyes staring at her: Suou, or her last conversation with that woman. There had been a dialogue fraught with nerves! On her part entirely, of course. Her attention slid completely to their past conversation now, recalling what had happened from the time she first admitted her apprehensions about Suou's advice a week ago.

"It is hardly so simple and straightforward a matter," she had confessed to the Himemiya, her brows coming together in a frown. "Even if I do feel that way about her, I cannot simply come out and encumber her with such a declaration. I am unsure of her feelings about it, and I cannot possibly just-just launch such a surprise at her. I consider this, ah, love, a significant and weighty word-not something to be taken lightly-and I am certain-I am *most* certain-Natsuki considers it so too. She is a person of great gravity in her own way, Suou-chan."

The reply had been something unexpected.

"I'm sorry," Suou had said, "but could you repeat that?"

Apparently, Shizuru's voice had progressively lowered throughout her speech so gravely that by the time she ended, Suou had needed to lean a good way forward to hear anything at all.

"Pardon?" the younger patrician had repeated. "I didn't hear you very well."

Shizuru had leaned forward too and answered in a stage whisper.

"I said, what am I to do if she dislikes it?"

"That must be the silliest thing you've said yet," Suou whispered back. "Why would she?"

"It may be an imposition."

"Allow me to recant-now *that* is the silliest thing you've said yet."

The reply had been an exasperated intonation of her name, followed by a giggle from Suou.

"Pardon me," Suou had explained afterwards. "See, I was half expecting you to say another, even sillier thing to break your record. Instead, you said my name. Pity, that would have been perfect."

"I did break my record," Shizuru had hissed dryly. "That last thing I mentioned *is* the silliest thing yet."

"How mean. Anyway, do you really think that? That she might feel it an imposition for you to speak your affections?"

"Yes!"

"Hmm." Suou had paused and frowned lightly at her. "Incidentally, you do know we look like two amateur saboteurs planning something suspicious, right?"

That was when Shizuru realised that they had both half-risen from

their seats to lean towards each other over the table.

"I-yes, I know," had been her uncomfortable answer after a moment's pause. "But how else can we be sure no one overhears us?"

"Well, I could sit over there."

"On the same bench? Two people drinking at a table rarely sit on the same side. It would be strange!"

"More so than this?!"

Shizuru blinked.

"Shall we sit?" she then invited.

"Yes, let's."

And so they sat.

"Well," Shizuru had remarked, rubbing her thighs. "That was uncomfortable."

The other woman had been looking around when she said that, and suddenly emitted a stifled exclamation.

"Oh, there's a stool by the corner table! We might take that and place it by this side-" She indicated the end of the table perpendicular to Shizuru's. "-so I can sit closer to you."

"Yes, that sound good. I shall get-"

Suou cut her off, rising swiftly and motioning her to sit back down.

"No, sit, I will," she said.

Shizuru had taken her seat at Suou's wave, but nonetheless made to rise again.

"But you are doing it for my sake," she said, rear hovering over her bench. "So I should-"

"No, sit, sit. I'm going already."

And so Shizuru dropped into her seat once more. By the time other woman returned with the stool, she had a dry remark ready.

"I never realised," she noted. "How much of a toll secrecy takes on the thighs."

The two of them laughed; Suou dropped chuckling onto the stool she had just brought up.

"It's you," the fairer woman remarked with one of her gentler smiles. "You're being very silly today. I wish Chikane could see you. Actually, I wish all of Hime could see you."

"You seem to have little regard for my poor dignity, then."

"Oh, no. It's simply that you seem so human right now. It's actually quite disarming."

"Why, do I not seem human to you generally, Suou-chan?"

"Speaking for myself, I can't really say. I was trying to speak from the perspective of the common."

Shizuru found herself compelled to giggle at that.

"What a term," was her retort in a voice thick with humour. "The common."

"Yes, them. At any rate, shall we return to our topic?"

That returned Shizuru's apprehension in a flash.

"Oh, well, I suppose so," she murmured, lowering her voice yet again as she inched herself closer to the end of the bench and nearer Suou's side of the table. "What was it that we were saying?"

Suou placed an elbow on the table, propping up her chin with one hand.

"We were saying you should tell her," Suou replied with unmerciful

frankness. "I say it again now. Would it be the end of the world if you did so, Shizuru-san?"

The response was accompanied by a rueful sigh: "I doubt it, but under the minute possibility of such an outcome, would it be wise to hazard precipitating that event?"

The Himemiya grinned.

"People say the world will end eventually," she rejoined, her normally clear voice acquiring a slight husk from having been dropped to its lowest, still-audible register. "Nearly all the religions have it so, I should think, and accept it at some point. Delaying what's inevitable shall not help you escape. It's just cowardly postponement."

"Suou-chan," Shizuru replied with a strained voice, obviously envisioning such end-of-the-world scenarios for the venture they were discussing. "This is *not* helping me!"

"Oh. Right. Right, I'm sorry." The other woman cleared her throat. "Would it really be so bad, Shizuru-san? To just tell her?"

"Would it really be so bad not to?"

For that query, Shizuru received a stare that seemed to ask if she had lost her mind.

"What-you really don't want to tell her?" Suou demanded. "I believe I don't even need to answer your question, because I'm assuming you said it out of desperation; we both know that it makes a difference . So at least tell me if you don't want to let her know how you feel. Because if not, then all of this is pointless."

"I do want her to know, I would like to," Shizuru responded. "But it is simply that, well..."

She trailed off there, grimacing in silence when she found herself at a loss to express her meaning. The other woman seemed to sense her frustration and kept quiet.

" *Ecaster!*" she eventually burst out in irritation-not for her confidant,

but herself. "Oh, Suou-chan. It is such a-a thorny issue."

"Yes, I can see it is," Suou answered sympathetically. "But, I suppose we are nevertheless discussing it because the only way to pluck a true rose is to brave the hedging thorns."

The irritation disappeared from Shizuru's face at that, replaced by a thoughtful smile. Suou returned it with an even more languorous one of her own, her pale and well-formed lips curling knowingly. She had surely known that letting loose a clever and suitably romantic bit of witticism would appeal to her friend's literary sensibilities long enough to make Shizuru forget her momentary inarticulacy. One could trust a true rhetorician-or romantic!-to be disarmed that way.

"True enough," was Shizuru's answer. "And such thorns they are."

"Are they?"

"Mmm."

"May I say what most of it is, if you won't?"

"If-yes. Yes, if you wish."

"You're afraid that she might not feel the same way."

*Oh, the desolation in your eyes*, Suou's own amazed and apologetic gaze had seemed to say after that. For Shizuru responded with a reflexive rasp, like a person grasping for a breath in thin mountain air. She looked so helpless at this new challenge that she seemed suddenly like a child, and that was enough to make her friend almost regretful for saying what she had. Shizuru schooled her countenance too late as well-far too late to make the teetering apology in the other woman's eyes go away.

"It is rather upsetting," she finally managed to say later with classic understatement, praying her own expression did not belie the subtlety of her phrasing. "What then, Suou-chan? I cannot-that is, she has never said anything of the sort to me either. Had she expressed such a declaration as we are proposing now, before, this would be much easier. But it is not so. Why, indeed, now that I think on it, I cannot even be certain that she feels whatever it is she feels



for me with the purity I would ask of her. I cannot deny it makes me a little less optimistic than I would like to be."

"Now that is indeed the less optimistic way of looking at it," Suou returned, just as quietly. "In fact, it's sheer pessimism. See, your girl is not really the saying type. It seems to me she would find it easier to show it-until you actually find the gumption to prompt her by saying it first, that is."

A little of the dejection seemed to lift from Shizuru's face.

"Is it possible?" was her hopeful-and trying desperately not to be hopeful-whisper. "Do you think so, Suou-chan?"

"Yes. A reluctant one in the Word." Suou paused and opened her eyes at her friend. "Tell me, then, and truly: would you say it to her now if she said it to you? Do not object to the situation-it's hypothetical. Would you confess to all you feel for her?"

Shizuru exhaled a drawn-out sigh.

"If she said it, I suppose I would," she admitted. "I would. Yes."

"There you are. So, ultimately, the two of you are only waiting for each other. Unfortunately, Shizuru-san, I'd say we are in agreement that your famed Sphinx would likely hold out longer even than you, patient as you may be. Thus it falls upon you to take initiative."

Again another feelingly drawn-out sigh.

"I suppose so," was Shizuru's answer. "And yet-yet I cannot help but keep worrying, Suou-chan. I mean, even if she does say it, what if she does not feel it?"

That elicited a puzzled, obviously disagreeing look.

"Would she say such a thing if she didn't mean it?"

"Natsuki? No, I think not."

"There."

"But that is the root of all worries. *What if she does not feel it?*"

The misery rushed back into Shizuru's eyes, the powerlessness she felt before this dilemma clearer than ever. Had she not been herself, really and truly herself, she would have been tearing at her hair.

"I would like to be confident, Suou-chan. I truly would," she said in an impassioned whisper. "But I cannot. For all I know, it would translate to unfounded arrogance. I cannot arrogate her-her feelings for me to myself. She is such a riddle! Sometimes, when I begin to imagine I understand her already, I discover myself duped. There is no certainty at all, not even in myself-for indeed, how am I to be sure that I am true in thinking this is what I feel, this is what I would like to tell her? Even I must ask that of myself. I am aware you think me a weakling in this affair, but-but you cannot imagine how frightening it is! I have faced down whole armies with unfamiliar monsters on unfamiliar territory. But never have I faced anything this frightening."

She fell quiet after this fervent speech, dropping her gaze to the table. When she did raise her eyes again, she looked up to find the other woman regarding her with a soft expression that was unbearably close to pity.

"Oh, Shizuru-san," was the other patrician's answer. "I see, I really do see it must be frightening. I'm beginning to understand now that the first time always is, especially for people of your and my sister's ilk. But if you really need convincing, all you need do is look at her, I think."

"But I told you, Suou-chan-"

"Just do it now, if you have the courage. Just-look-at her."

The other blonde's pale blue eyes, so like the core of a glacier, seemed to melt then into a resolve that brought to mind the onrush of ice in an avalanche. Shizuru felt suddenly the willpower that often lay frozen, dormant in other woman. It took her by surprise, she had to admit later; she had forgotten, due to that façade of supreme indolence, just how strong her old friend could be. It was then that she remembered that Suou was someone who had had a lifetime's practice of standing beside and up to an awesome sister.

"Do that much, at least, if you can't work up enough common sense to see what I mean," the Himemiya persisted. "Look at her now and think on what you see, for god's sake."

And Shizuru felt herself compelled; she let herself be carried away by the magnetism of another, for once, and finally turned to the doorway .

*Look at her*, she unconsciously repeated in her thoughts, gaze riveted on the young woman waiting just outside and scratching her heels on the frozen sand near the door. She continued watching as that young woman moved, walking a few steps from one side of the doorway to the other but never disappearing from view. That called to mind a hundred memories, for some reason, that Shizuru had found herself replaying in her mind like a flickering tableau.

*She looks so young*, she thought at that precise moment of the girl's motion, *and she moves like a colt. She looks somewhat like a colt, in fact, with her long-legged, slightly adolescent appeal. I see that. I have seen her ride like she is part of one, too, and that is why it is even more remarkable that she does not walk with her legs curved, in the bowlegged manner of those living in the saddle. That is because she is only half colt and the other half is all cat. Oh, just look at her!*

She turned fully then, still in her seat and barely aware of her friend looking at her as she herself looked at Natsuki. She might have tried to tear her gaze away and acknowledge her friend again, resume their conversation, but she knew it would have only ever been a try, and a futile one at that. Her eyes, her head, her heart-everything in her insisted that she should, for just a little while longer, keep looking.

*So I look at you*, she uttered to her girl in the secret hush of her mind. *She told me to look at you but she did not know how dangerous that was-because I feel I could keep looking forever.*

Natsuki was so raw and beautifully animal, she thought. As though she could kick up her heels at any second and just run away forever and never be caught. But everything, even the wildest animal, had a match, and Shizuru liked to believe-she would like to become-the

girl's match. She wanted nothing more than to keep looking at the girl as the latter poised and ran. It was certain that she also wanted possession of her, but she did not want to cage her, she did not want to kill that free and untamed stride the girl had. She wanted to look at her in her freedom, knowing that the girl would only ever be running, ultimately, towards her.

And yet she found it to be painful to keep going, just to keep thinking all of that. Was it normal that doing merely that, just looking, should *hurt* ? But the situation and that young woman by the door were not even remotely close to normal, on second thought.

Vertigo was the word, perhaps . So many things, former fixities, she realised, seemed to be rearranging themselves.

She looked at her. And it seemed that she was looking not only at her then but at everything of the girl she had ever seen. It was in looking that she understood a great many things, really, or at least began to understand them. She saw, for instance, that the girl acted with great poise while undertaking a duty given to her because she was comfortable with what she was and what was expected of her during those times. But Shizuru had seen her move awkwardly too when placed in a situation where she could not hide in functions, as though something invisible under her skin embarrassed her. Shizuru would never agree that she had any possible reason to be embarrassed but could not fully protest against it either when the effect of the embarrassment was so charming. She had to admit to the enjoyment she felt whenever Natsuki looked like that, red-faced and mortified by something inside her; but she had to admit too to the grief of seeing the girl so pained by shame.

It was then that she had saw it in full: the variety of feelings the young woman evoked in her, the sheer range and novelty of them. It was confusing at times, for there were occasions when she was conscious of a great and overwhelming tenderness, a profound desire to care for her and protect her and render her safe from all ache. Yet and often at the same time, she would feel a craving for her so extreme that she would actually bite her, experience a need to take her between the teeth, crush her in the arms, and reduce her into a limp, broken-down piece of frailty. Sometimes the twin-yet-opposite needs showed, especially when they were alone, and she

would find herself trying almost frenziedly to impale the other woman into screaming from exquisite and painful ecstasy. Then, afterwards, she would hold her with a kindness she had never before known herself to possess, as though trying to atone for the earlier hurt. She, who had never even imagined holding anyone, much less so hurting them! Everything was in confusion.

And then came Suou's whisper, too soft to break the spell, yet clear enough to infiltrate it.

"Yes," said the other woman. "You see?"

And Shizuru saw. Oh, she saw and knew it; she knew she had been falling into that abyss all along. But knowing something did not mean you could stop it, especially when it was something that you had never faced before. She had never faced this before, so she had been unable to identify it honestly at the start. But when had it started? It could have been from the very first time they met! Even now, she could not think back on the first time she laid eyes on the girl without a quiver in her stomach, that empty-full sensation she had come to associate with Natsuki. Was it really so? Were her recollections accurate in telling her that, from the moment she saw that heartbreakingly sculpted face, and those lustrous, truly green eyes looking out at the world, she had been completely and hopelessly finished?

That was when she found her eyes beginning to sting-thinking, *Why, what is the matter with me?* -and knowing exactly what was the matter, which did nothing to lessen the astonishment from it. That too was when the young woman at the door turned to look at her-as indeed she had been doing regularly for some time, though Shizuru did not know it and Suou did. Their eyes met, and both, having been surprised, flushed brightly and looked away. Perhaps it was even Shizuru who had the greater shock at that instant. On the back of what she had been experiencing just then, that was only normal.

"Do you see?"

She found the sky-blue eyes again in front of her, a smile in their depths.

"Yes," she said.

"Will you tell her?"

Shizuru, emotions still boiling, thought: *How could I not tell her?* But her mouth whispered, instead: "How could I tell her?"

The other woman replied to that with sudden practicality.

"Well, that is a good question. Personally, I feel I would simply just up and say it," Suou answered her friend, who had only begun to recover from her turmoil. "That's rather straightforward, though perhaps not your style."

A few seconds elapsed before Shizuru got herself together to answer.

"No," she determined quietly. "No, I suppose not. Only, it would seem... insufficient. Somehow."

Suou nodded, a pleased smile on her face; she was obviously glad to have overcome the reluctance barrier and get to tackling the real task she had been pushing from the start.

"Then there's the option of preparing properly for it," she told Shizuru, who listened to her attentively. "You might ask Chie-san, since she would obviously have more experience at this sort of thing. From what I know, though, some people-my sister numbers among them-make rather grand productions of it, because they say it helps to better express their feelings if they put work into it. Although, yes, such people usually follow their confessions with a marriage proposal," she finished with a chuckle, only to be surprised when Shizuru gasped and stared at her, looking horrified.

"A marriage proposal?" Shizuru said with indignation. "Suou, she's a mere child!"

Suou started backwards from the forcefulness of this reply. Regaining herself quickly, she then delivered a quick retort.

"No, she's not, and you know it!" she told Shizuru. "She's past eighteen, if I recall what you once told me, and that means she's

already within the acceptable age for marriage. *You* simply forget that because you tend to treat her like a young pup still, to coddle and cosset."

Shizuru was stunned, properly chastised.

"I do?" she uttered wonderingly. "Do I?"

"Sometimes, I suppose." Noticing a twinge of regret flash over her friend's face, Suou hastened to qualify: "Not in a bad way. Not really patronisingly, don't worry."

"But..."

"I'm sure she enjoys it, Shizuru-san. And you do it very sweetly, in a most flattering way. Trust me, most girls like to be fussed over and pampered. More so for her, most likely, because she's probably not had the most pampered childhood, if she ever had one. These military nations!"

"Oh, yes. I see. I hope you are right."

They settled into silence after that, which was broken when Suou's head jerked upwards and she stared at Shizuru. Her oft-languid eyes were wide open and shocked.

"I say, Shizuru-san."

"Er, yes?" Shizuru said, puzzled by the other's face.

"What you said just now."

Another puzzled look from Shizuru.

"Yes, what of it?" she prompted.

"It's just-that's-" An abrupt pause, as though she was thinking on whether to say it or not. "When I mentioned marriage, Shizuru-san, it was just an offhand remark."

This time, even Shizuru's eyes widened until they were the same size as Suou's. The two of them stared mutely at each other, like

Gorgons turned to stone by their reflections.

They even opened their mouths at the same time.

"Did you jus-"

"Of course!"

Having successfully finished her remark first, Shizuru then ploughed on to a still round-eyed Suou.

"Of course, I knew that," she had said, with one of the shortest laughs she had ever delivered. "Now, let us continue speaking of the preparations, Suou-chan. I am still most anxious about them. What else can you suggest to me about it, from what you know?"

*And so on. What a holy imbecile I can be*, Shizuru told herself after that recollection, still so wholly mortified by the scene that she actually had to cover her face with one hand a week after the event. A good thing she was hidden in the dark of the carriage, with the only person who could possibly see her returning blush being unaware of it. Of all the stupid things to say! Why had she even reacted to Suou's little jest about marriage, anyway? Of course she knew that had merely been a joking aside and not something directly related to her situation. And of course her accursed, traitorous, thrice-damned cheeks would not stop blushing, even at this moment.

*I should think of my preparations now, really*, she decided, not even bothering with the fact that she had been going over them again and again for the past week. Her plans included sleeping in late the next morning, since she wanted both of them to be fully rested for the day. After which, she had arranged for a specially prepared lunch to be cooked by the governor's kitchen staff, to be delivered to their rooms after their bath. She would then present Natsuki with the new saddle she had commissioned for her: a beautiful, diamond-patterned affair decorated with patches of black and maroon leather stitched alternately together. That would give her the pretext of inviting the young woman to try it out, whereupon they would go for a ride. While it was still cool, it was no longer as cold as before, which meant they could enjoy their outing better than they would



have some weeks earlier. This also meant they could spend a little more time outside, which she knew Natsuki would like. The girl loved few things better than a good gallop on her steed.

Their path, as she had planned it, would take them up a small promontory outside the city from where they could see the sea and ports to full advantage. They would stop there for a moment of rest and replenishment-they would bring a few rations, of course-and then they would return to the mansion to change and get ready, just in time for a special performance of Euripides' Elektra by the same Greek actors they had seen today. After that, they would go back to their quarters for a private but lavish dinner, whereupon she would present the other gift she had prepared, along with the words she needed to say. All very thoroughly planned, all rather straightforward. All easy and simple.

So why did it feel as though she was about to put a sword to her gut?

A slender finger rose to her face and pulled on a lock of her hair. She woke from her musings and to a welcome sight: a tempting, ivory-skinned face peering curiously at her.

"Forgive me," she said, distracted from her anxiety by Natsuki's expression: verily, these days, nothing else could divert her as easily. "What is it, Natsuki?"

The soft fan of those black lashes, Shizuru thought, was poetry in itself.

"Hnn."

The girl's fingers released her hair; they smoothed the gentle swell of her lower lip instead. She went still for a second, and then smiled at the touch.

Natsuki smiled back.

"You smile," the girl observed.

"As do you." She carried on smiling, anyway, when the exploring fingers dropped to her lap. "What is it, Natsuki?"

Natsuki looked away.

"Your face was worried," she told the older woman.

"Oh. I had no idea." Shizuru frowned at herself. "Was it? Please excuse me for my bad manners."

A finger poked her cheek lightly, barely making the skin yield under its touch.

"Again, the worried face," Natsuki murmured. "You will smile again?"

Shizuru produced a small laugh-and did so while smiling.

"How would you know I was not smiling just then?" she asked jokingly. "You were looking over there, not here, Natsuki."

Natsuki said nothing, merely flicking an amused glance her way. Her hands had picked up one of the ribbons that had been in Shizuru's hair, and she was now playing with it, wrapping the bloodred cord around her fingers. The older woman watched, then began to play with the cord too, tugging at the free end while Natsuki tugged lightly back. They continued to do this absently for a while until Shizuru's ears picked up something that caught her attention: the sound of horses detaching from their group, then returning after a while, only to detach once more and start the cycle anew. Start and stop, come and go. At least half of the Otomeian riders, she realised, were moving in very strange and shifting formation.

"Natsuki," she called, eyes narrowing in thought. "Why is it that your warriors seem to be coming and going from our convoy? I can hear them moving away and then seeming to return, only to leave again."

"Oh, that," the younger woman answered. "To check the way we go, to look out for ambush."

Shizuru pondered it: "You mean several are scouting ahead regularly?"

Natsuki nodded.

"I said to check," she said self-assuredly, looking not at Shizuru but

at the cord with which they were still playing. "They will warn if something is ahead of or behind us."

"I see." Shizuru smiled generously at her. "That's very cautious of you, *meum mel*."

Shizuru lifted her hand, intending to touch the young woman's face with it, but was surprised by its sudden weight. She snapped her attention to it and saw something red coiled around one of her fingers.

"What is-oh."

A gurgle of laughter spilled from the younger woman. Shizuru saw it then: the weight of her hand was due to the cord they had been playing with, which was now wrapped around Natsuki's fingers as well. She blinked at the display of their tied digits, breath catching at the suggestion in the sight.

A memory from her childhood: an aunt telling her that a red ribbon joined the fingers of people meant for each other. A superstition she had long dismissed as a ridiculous piece of romanticism by those who knew no better.

"Shizuru?"

She looked at the girl, who was still grinning at her. Natsuki looked happy and amused. Innocent. As always, she looked innocent.

There was another pull on Shizuru's hand, which fell onto the one tied to it. Natsuki laughed again, seemingly entertained by this small bit of mischief.

*Oh, Natsuki*, Shizuru thought in awe, eyes drawn irresistibly back to their hands and the cord that joined them. *Dear, dear Natsuki*.

She returned the younger woman's smile with one of her own.

*You do not even know the significance of what you have done, do you?*

## Chapter 38

**Illustration:** From *IrisEnigma* . Please replace the X's with W's, the YYY with "com", and remove the spaces after the full stops in the URL.

XXX. deviantart. YYY/iris-enigma89/art/Inter-Nos-Red-Ribbon-124979932

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### **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Class distinctions in (Himean) society** - The model is the Latin one, with five economic classes, all told, of landed or income-earning citizens. The richest belong to the First Class, those of less means to the Second, those of still less means to the Third, and so on, until the poorest belonging to the Fifth. The actual bulk of citizens belonged to the lower classes, as well as to that division in which were lumped all of those citizens too poor to actually qualify in any of the five economic classes mentioned above: the Head Count or capite censi (the poorest of the poor, considered classless).

2. **Clivus (Orbius, Sacer)** - Meaning "a street on an incline"; hence Clivus Orbius would be Orbius Street, and Clivus Sacer, Sacer Street. Incidentally, both streets as well as some other places mentioned below (e.g. Curia Hostilia, Macellum Cuppedenis, Palatine, Porticus Margaritaria, Subura, and Sacra Via) actually existed in Ancient Rome, specifically in or around the area known as the Forum Romanum. It is possible to trace the progress of the two characters walking there in this chapter if one has a map of that area.

3. **Crossroads colleges** - Associations of men in districts with major crossroads. Each major crossroad had a shrine to the Lares (Roman gods said to be attracted to crossroads) and this shrine was tended by the crossroads college of that district. Each crossroad college often had a pub near the shrine as a meeting place, said pub being rent-free and under the care of a custodian-of whom one might think

as being the leader of the gang.

4. **Dis** - The Latin equivalent of Hades, Pluto, god of the underworld; also the name for the underworld itself.

5. **Elektra** - Sister of Orestes, daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra of legend. The tale has been written by both Greek authors mentioned below.

6. **Fellatores** (pl.) , **fellator** (s.) - A Latin obscenity meaning "one who sucks a penis".

7. **Plebeian vs. patrician** - A patrician is anyone descended from the original Roman nobility; everyone else who is not, regardless of wealth or power, is a plebeian. To understand the pronouncements made upon the ill regard for patricians, one must imagine a terribly birth-conscious society (not so very hard to do!) where the people both adore their aristocrats and detest them: the former because they are terribly birth-conscious; and the second for the same reason, since it is difficult not to resent those who have such an advantage over you without having had to do anything to gain it.

8. **Praetor urbanus** - See note for **urban praetor**.

9. **Quirites** - Literally "citizens".

10. **Tribunate** - Used here in the sense of "pertaining to one of the tribune offices or affairs". See following item for more.

11. **Tribune of the Plebs** - one of the most important offices in Ancient Rome, reserved exclusively for plebeians and purportedly existing in protection of plebeian rights; the prime lawmaking body of that time; the office bearing the power of the veto. If one was about to enter the Senate, the best way to make a name for oneself was to be a tribune of the plebs, since they garnered so much attention and had the opportunity to make a radical splash. Of course, since the office was reserved for plebeians, patricians often had to seek another way to make their names early on.

12. **Urban praetor** - If both consuls are absent, he would be the chief magistrate of the city. The urban praetor was also responsible

*for many things, primarily that of overseeing the city's civil litigation. The urban praetor was traditionally the praetor elected with the highest number of votes, and was not allowed to absent himself from the city for more than ten days at a time.*

*13. **Zalmoxis** - Main god of Dacians (and, here, Otomeians). Part of the associated teachings involve belief in an afterlife-a more nuanced and desirable afterlife than that of Ancient Romans-and this meant they believed in immortality, which often led to them performing daring acts of courage and heroism in battle.*

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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There were, Shizuru thought, far worse ways to greet a day like this. Today was the day. It was perhaps her day or, better even, Natsuki's day. Most accurately of all, however, might be to call it *their* day. Shizuru knew that it was most likely a day she would remember all her life because of what she planned to do, something she had planned for the first time. First times were always important and, as it often turned out later, legendary.

*Whether they end happily or in disaster.*

She winced at that, even while knowing it was still a possibility. But it was a bad thing to think of failure this early in the day, she cautioned herself, because she knew the power thinking could have on reality. She knew that thoughts-or expectations, rather-did not determine an outcome, but she also knew that they could help to shape it. So now she shook off that anxiety like a dog shakes off water from its back, willing herself to plan for the good because what she wanted to shape was a success. She smiled too, because it was always a good thing to smile from the beginning and it was her way.

And, because she was a person who constantly saw the humour in things, she made a little fun of herself while she was at it: *These are*

*the strange things people think to build up confidence before a confession.*

She sat up more squarely then, and the sheet over her fell to her waist, baring her firm and white breasts. So be it, she thought, if she was only trying to build up her confidence for the day ahead; based on prior experience, building up one's confidence at the outset usually worked out quite well. Today would be practically perfect, and the morning was already practically perfect. Although she did have to admit that there was one little thing about this practically perfect situation that she already wanted to alter.

She was trying to do that now.

"Really," she was telling the girl fidgeting under the blanket. "Do try to calm down. I know you are quite used to being up and dressed before me in the mornings, but I think the presence of the governor's servants is insufficient provocation for you to leap into your uniform."

She sighed, suppressing the instinct to roll her eyes when the one she was addressing merely huffed.

"I hardly think that two unarmed and middle-aged women can possibly threaten either of us, Natsuki, even if they were fully awake and the two of us half-asleep."

There was still no answer from the young woman next to her.

"And besides," she added kindly. "I do not doubt that you would still be able to dispose of them quite promptly in the unlikely event they do pose a danger to us, even if you are naked under this sheet."

The younger woman screwed her lips together, looking very sulky at that unnecessary reminder of her lack of clothing. It was the presence of the mansion's servants in the adjoining room, of course, that had her so uncomfortable. Shizuru had ordered them in to draw their daily bath, and they were there doing so at the moment, as indeed they did each day. The only irregularity here was the one that bothered her girl so much: neither she nor Natsuki was wearing the barest scrap of clothing.

*Which is what comes of having late-night romps in bed, Shizuru thought, happy with the memory of their doings last evening. I do not see why I should have woken her, anyway, when I sent for them to draw the bath. Not when she looked so small and sweet asleep, or so fragilely perfect.*

"Hmph," the fragilely perfect being grumbled, fidgeting again. "I should-"

"Stay as you are," the older woman finished for her. "It matters not a whit to them if you are dressed or not, you know."

She got another grumble, although Natsuki did choose to stay still and silent after that, at least.

Shizuru sighed after more than a couple of minutes had passed without a word, peering to the side to see her companion frowning with beetle-black brows. She knew that look: Natsuki had it whenever she fell in the grips of some deep meditation-which was really all too often. It was probably another reason the young woman had gained a reputation for being sulky. Whenever Natsuki fell deep into thought, her face tended to take on a terribly glum expression. Unfortunately for the prevailing opinion of observers, the actual tone of her thoughts was not always commensurate with the mood of her countenance. Sometimes, Shizuru would enquire what had so darkened her girl's brow, only to be told that the point up for consideration was something as light as whether or not the panther she kept for a pet should be given a treat before dinner.

"Why so quiet, Natsuki?"

The green eyes went to her.

"Thinking," Natsuki said.

"You think too much."

*At least*, she thought later, listening to the soft and merry sounds in the aftermath of her question, *at least that made her laugh.*

"You say that?" Natsuki said to her with a scoff, afterwards. "You?"



"It's quite true, though."

"Still."

"Yes, I see what you mean." She shrugged. "I suppose it is hard not to appreciate the irony."

"Hm, yes."

And, having said this, Natsuki again returned to her meditations.

Finally realising that the girl would not speak unless she controlled the conversation, the older woman cast about for something to use as a topic. She was looking down the foot of the bed at that moment, and so she saw the girl's exposed toes idly squirming. Pushing her own foot out of the blanket, she put it side-by-side with the other one.

"Your foot is smaller," she murmured, apropos of nothing. "Mine is bigger."

They considered their feet, side-by-side. From the half-open door leading to the bath, the sounds of water being poured came to them.

"Your foot," said the dark-haired girl a little later, "is very long."

Shizuru acknowledged it with a wry smile; the uncommon length of her feet had been one of her old despairs. When she had been younger, it had been a constant lament of hers how exaggerated in size her feet were-but that was before she discovered that she would shoot past six feet in height by mid-adolescence.

*Exaggerated height too, I suppose*, her mother had used to smirk at her, also a very tall woman but beaten by several inches by her daughter. In retrospect, Shizuru thought, she should have expected it: both familial sides had some of the tallest men and women in Hime. Which meant, of course, that both familial sides would also have some of the largest-footed men and women in Hime. Relative to their height, such large feet merely looked appropriate, and even normal.

"Yes, I know," she told Natsuki now, no longer put out by the remark as she might have been years ago. "As it should be. I *am* very long."

"But it is the same colour," the younger woman replied. "Our feet."

"Us."

"Yes."

"My skin may be a little less pale than yours."

"Hmm?"

Shizuru pointed downwards. "Look at our feet. I am a little less so."

It took a few seconds before Natsuki acknowledged the slight difference. While Shizuru's feet were still a little pinkish in some areas, especially around her well-shaped toes, the Otomeian's had nary an atom of colour. They were white as marble, white as chalk, and seeing them like this tempted Shizuru to reach down and hold them in her hands so that she could try to warm some pinkness into their pallor. Why had she never noticed it before? They were so white!

"Oh." Natsuki said it wonderingly, as though she had never seen her own feet before. "My feet."

"Yes."

A short pause ensued as they regarded the feet in question.

"They look dead." Natsuki said it. She was staring at her own feet now with mild distaste. "Shizuru, they look dead."

Shizuru was looking at her and put a finger under her chin, turning her head away from her insidious examination of her own feet.

"Do not say that, *meum mel*," the Himean rebuked, although privately agreeing. At the other end of the bed, her foot moved over Natsuki's, testing to ensure that it was not cold. It was not cold, only cool, and she rubbed it with her own to see if it could be warmer.

"They are pale, yes, but very pretty nonetheless, as feet carved in ivory. I love your marmoreal quality, so do not let it trouble you. And they are only white since it is cold."

There was still a small pout threatening the edges of those pink lips.

"I am not cold," came the contention.

"I meant from the general temperature of your homeland," Shizuru persisted softly. "This is as I told you earlier. The difference in climate. It shows especially in the feet and legs, as you can see."

"Um."

Shizuru went on: "And in the rear. Let us not forget the rear."

Natsuki's head whipped towards her, showing a look that implied she thought she had not heard aright.

"The posterior," Shizuru clarified.

"Posterior?"

"In common parlance, the arse, bum or butt . "

She smirked when Natsuki coloured a little.

"Buttock?" she tried again, trying very hard not to laugh.

"I-I know," Natsuki frowned, stopping her before she could say more.

"I know this word. These words. But I do not know what you say."

"Permit me to explain then. It shows in the posterior whether a person has lived in a cool, hot, or temperate climate," Shizuru said with the air of a pedagogue, before finishing: "In the shape, I mean."

That snared the girl's full attention. Shizuru nodded deliberately, endowing the action with all the theatrical wisdom she could summon-which was considerable, come to think of it. Natsuki still stared doubtfully at her for a few seconds before suddenly rumbling a dark chuckle, scowling with her brow at the same time.

The Himean lifted an eyebrow.

"You do not believe me?" she demanded of her companion, who had fallen silent again and now regarded her with the same disbelief

as before. "I am serious, Child."

Predictably, the answer was a scoff.

"No, Natsuki, really." She released a sigh and followed it with a shrug. "I suppose it is fine if you wish to disbelieve such a strange notion. After all, even I found it ridiculous the first time I heard of it. Although it does pain me a little to think you would disbelieve me so swiftly."

Predictably too, the answer was a look of guilty uncertainty.

"Nonetheless, I might as well tell you the difference," she ventured. "Even if you do not believe me. The rears of people from cooler climates are small but very compact, round and well-curved. The rears of those from warmer ones are larger but a little less round, slightly squarish due to the shape of the hip. Go on: take a look if you wish."

She lifted the hem of their blanket by two fingers' width, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively.

"What do you think, Natsuki? Perhaps you shall see and finally believe me?"

Natsuki seemed to wrestle with herself for a few seconds, not knowing whether to credit her lover's assertion by attempting to view the present evidence or contend that Shizuru's claim really did push the boundaries of credulity to breaking point. Frowning quietly at a wriggling lump under the sheet-which Shizuru guessed rightly to be the girl's fiddling hands-the Otomeian finally threw a pathetic look of conviction towards the Himean, who had to hold back a giggle.

"Um," Natsuki finally mumbled softly. "Not tuh-tuh-"

The Himean leaned closer after the unintelligible reply.

"I'm sorry," she said. "What was that?"

Natsuki looked uncomfortably at her.

"Hrm," she mumbled again, speaking only a little clearer. "You are..."

lying."

Shizuru smiled innocently, leaning back against the pillows.

"Is that how it is, Natsuki?" she spoke out. "My dearest, sweetest Natsuki, who thinks I am only trying to play another of my jokes on her?"

Now Natsuki looked truly guilty. Until Shizuru continued.

"I am, actually."

She withdrew her foot at the double, anticipating Natsuki's attempt to kick her before it could come. When the foot tried to follow hers, she retaliated by twisting deftly under the sheet and pinning the younger woman.

"Only with the remark about the rear, *meum mel*," she giggled, holding her down with only light difficulty. Slight as Natsuki might be, Shizuru was nevertheless aware that the young woman was extremely lithe and most probably versed in grappling. Her true advantage was actually not in her own stronger physique, but in her knowledge of the Otomeian's nature: Natsuki would not seriously struggle because Natsuki was truly loath to hurt her. Thus Shizuru knew, even as her bodyguard struggled, that she had already won.

*Not, of course, that she would win if she were not holding back*, the prouder part of her provided, before making an allowance: *But I do think she might still be able to do me a lot of damage then.*

"I meant the one about the feet," she disclosed, idly studying the tightly-knit muscle banding on the girl's lean shoulders. She loved that she could see them moving and forming little grooves and attractive hollows; it pleased her greatly to be with someone of an equally athletic composition. She did not know exactly why-a part of her argued for vanity-but she truly could not imagine enjoying a morning wrestle in bed with someone whose body was not this wonderfully spare of fat. The girl was a sculptural marvel!

"The observation about the difference in colouring of the feet is generally true," she told her lover. "And it is quite obviously

explained by the necessary difference in leg- and foot-wear. People from my climes do not often need to wear socks, boots, and trousers as you do, which means we get more skin-darkening sun. Since your feet are so rarely exposed to the sun, by comparison, your feet have a higher likelihood of being paler."

All the while, Natsuki had been trying to dislodge her.

"Shi-Shizuru!" the young woman choked, hissing quietly in scandal while she darted her eyes to the bathing room's entryway. Her face had gone from outrage from the jest Shizuru had worked moments earlier to desperation. "They-thuh-them!"

"Them?" came the answer, given with apparent unconcern. "Whom?"

"Shizuru!"

"Yes?"

She laughed when her bodyguard actually whined her name out a third time. She shook her head in amusement.

"You beautiful little innocent," she crooned, burying her face in the fresh-smelling dark hair and delighting in the silky skin rubbing hers. "They shall not care if they see us like this. Do you know that there are many slaves who are actually permitted to enter their masters' quarters even when said masters are abed and working out a passion? Sometimes, they are even made to stay! That way, they can provide services whenever required, such as a cup of water after the thirsty work is done. Trust me, My Dear, when I say that seeing us doing even more than this should be as nothing to them."

Natsuki still had her objections to that.

"Buh-buh-but, Shizuru, they are not yours," she choked out haltingly again, eyes still snapping back and forth from the bath's doorway to the red eyes studying her. "They are slaves of-"

Suddenly she stilled, eyes going round as she stared at the passageway again.

"What is it, Natsuki?"

"Finish-they finished!" the girl gasped, throwing a pleading look to her tormentor. "I hear! Oh, Shizuru, please?"

Her eyes communicated the plea more effectively than her mouth, however: pleading, begging, *praying* for the older woman to save her from what her strange and fastidious sense of modesty considered a fatal point of embarrassment, no matter the prevailing attitude of most others in like situations. Finally relenting at the dread in those green discs, Shizuru exhaled a last sigh and put her palms on either side of the girl's body to prop her up as she rolled back to her original position. She kept her eyes on Natsuki's as she did so, nonetheless, and thus saw the girl's short-lived expression of relief morph abruptly into something else: dread again, or panic, or perhaps even something like terror.

Apparently, the blanket over them had been slipping off to one side of the bed all this time. And Shizuru's motion was all it took for it to fall completely off.

"Nnh!"

Just as suddenly, she was on top of Natsuki again. After a squeak of horror, the younger woman herself had reached out and dragged Shizuru back over her as a last resort for a cover, the blanket having slipped too quickly out of reach. And, naturally, this was exactly when the slaves who had just filled their bath appeared at the doorway, where they went stock-still at the sight of the two naked women together on the bed.

Again, naturally, it was Shizuru who broke the silence.

"Well, now."

She did not bother looking at Natsuki, already feeling the heat that had erupted under her chin and the sudden rigidity of the arms around her waist. So she looked instead at the slaves standing by the doorway, both of whom had dropped their eyes respectfully to the floor. They seemed, she thought a little distractedly, very uncertain. It also seemed that they had a little more colour on their

cheeks than she remembered.

"The bath is filled, Fujino-san," said the elder of the two slaves, still not daring to look up. All of them were very aware of the Himean general's great adoration for her mistress, of course. How could they not, with the scent of sex spread all over the pair's sheets whenever they came in to change the bedding with fresh linens? But this blatant a display was not normal at all. So they kept their eyes down conspicuously, just to be safe and avoid any potential whippings for being too daring with their eyes.

"Will that be all, Fujino-san?" the slave continued.

"Yes," Shizuru replied, sounding faultlessly calm. Her eyes darted to a water clock on the nightstand, noting the hour. "Please inform the kitchen that I require our noontime meal to be ready by two hours' time. Send it up here as usual."

Bowing to show she had received the order, the slave enquired if there was anything more, to which Shizuru replied negatively. The two servants scurried out of the room swiftly after that, their departure sounded by the heavy clap of the door.

It was a low whine that broke the silence they left behind.

Shizuru looked at the young woman shaking underneath her, obviously so torn between anger and shame that she looked as though she would cry. She just had to smile at that purple face, even knowing it was ill-advised to do so. But Natsuki squeezed her eyes shut at that moment, and fortunately failed to see her.

"My poor Natsuki," she murmured, getting the girl's attention. "Poor Darling."

Bright green eyes opened.

"You too!" Natsuki cried, still distraught. "Poor Shizuru too."

Shizuru just had to laugh at the childish statement, which did not improve the Otomeian's humour. The green-eyed young woman looked stunned that she could laugh even now.



Shizuru explained.

"I never thought I would hear that said of me, you see. But it is sweet that you are thinking of my dignity too, even as you consider yours greatly injured." She was still laughing, her golden hair slipping further over her shoulders and tickling the other's neck. "My poor, poor Natsuki. You are much afflicted, are you not?"

There was a rumble from the warm body beneath her.

"Natsuki, I am so sorry," she said kindly while patting the girl's head. Even as she comforted her, however, she could not help but grin in amusement at the situation. "It's all right, really. Try not to think on it."

Quite by accident, however, another laugh escaped her lips. Natsuki stiffened and pushed her away so they could look at each other, the younger woman glaring dreadfully.

"Not funny, Shizuru," she snapped.

"No, of course not," Shizuru said with a dim sparkle in her eyes. "Not funny at all."

They stared at each other silently for a few tense seconds-until Shizuru ruined it and chuckled.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!" the Himean laughed, no longer attempting to rein in her mirth as she prevented a struggling Natsuki from leaping out of bed. She tightened her embrace so that the other woman could not slip out. Here her expectations of being the stronger of them were confirmed: try as Natsuki might, she could not escape the powerful lock, for Shizuru's slender arms had muscles that flexed into pure iron. But this was also velvety iron, silky even as it was strong, and the younger woman could not help but soon stop struggling against its embrace.

"It was quite amusing in its own way, you know, and I had to acknowledge that. Forgive me if that irks you, please. But I really am not laughing to irritate you."

Natsuki shot her a dirty look and mumbled something in Otomeian.

They were sitting up now, and the young woman was facing away from Shizuru, who grinned.

"Ah-ah, you cannot use that any more," the older woman said cheerfully, understanding the Otomeian word for "fool". "You taught me that, remember? I know what it means now."

Natsuki shot out another dark look, then muttered again in her native tongue.

"Well." Shizuru smiled winningly, still holding the girl immobile. "What does that one mean?"

Natsuki made a point of ignoring her.

"Very well. I suppose I deserved that," Shizuru acquiesced, easing her hold on the Otomeian. The latter had gone limp once more, most likely from revisiting the memory of her embarrassment. Raising either leg so that it was crooked at the knee and pressing a side of Natsuki, Shizuru lifted her embrace from the girl's arms and instead encircled the Otomeian's collar in a lighter hold. The lustrous dark head fell back against her shoulder and she cooed into a still-red ear.

"Do not worry, they are used to seeing such things and worse," she soothed the wilting girl. She could still feel the heat radiating from the Otomeian, and marvelled that a single person could produce so much of it so quickly. "At least they did not see much of you, if anything. All they should have seen is my back, since I was covering you."

Natsuki made a weak attempt at a growl, which ended up sounding more like a whimper. Shizuru cooed again, moving the girl away from her shoulder to fist the long black hair and lift it.

"Think no more of it," she advised, marvelling at the blush that had stained even the slim column of her lover's neck. The colour was so much and so high that it seemed tempted to spread even further down Natsuki's pale back, pooling around each meagrely padded knob of her spine. Shizuru blew on the back of the thin neck and felt as well as saw her shiver. "Let it be, for it does not matter, and it is

done."

Natsuki murmured something.

"What was that?"

"*Stoic*," the girl repeated in a condemning tone, which made her grin.

"Perhaps so," she admitted. "But in such a situation, there is naught else to be."

She bowed her head to kiss the smooth nape, the tail of long black hair having been moved aside and over one white shoulder. Her action produced another shiver, and yet one more faint whine.

"Hush, I said not to think any more of it," she murmured, stroking the tidy mane again. This time, she pulled back the black hair so that the bare patch of white behind one ear was exposed. She kissed that patch of skin and found it evoked an even stronger shiver. "Trust me when I say it is all right. And if it is not, I shall try to make it all right."

She spoke this behind a sensitive ear, and each word produced a tremor. Natsuki's body pushed closer to her until her breasts were crushed against Natsuki's back again and her hips gripped by Natsuki's hands.

"But Shizuru," Natsuki murmured with faint soreness, piquing her attention.

"Yes?"

"That-that, too."

"What, too?" she asked softly.

"They saw you too."

"Yes, but I already said it does not bother me, so it is well."

"But."

"But?"

"They-" Natsuki sounded displeased again. "They saw you."

"Well, then?"

Natsuki did not answer and she saw what the young woman might have been trying to say.

"Oh." She paused. "Oh."

Her arms closed in on the form against her chest, and she held the girl tightly.

"Does that bother you?" she asked.

Again there was no answer. Not that it mattered, however, for the prior words had already answered in advance. As did Natsuki's face now, half-turned away as it was.

"Silly girl," she said, moved by this petty jealousy. "You are the only one who ever sees me."

The big eyes looked up with uncertainty.

"Truly," she promised in earnest. "If you wish it, you shall be the only one who will ever see me."

Natsuki's glance at her was both shy and strange. Then she did something that melted Shizuru as no one or nothing had ever done, for she turned around and wrapped her legs around Shizuru's waist, cupping the older woman's face in both hands with a look as though she wanted to hold it to herself alone and would deny it to the rest of the world in this possession. And she kissed her. She kissed Shizuru on the ridge of her high, straight nose and slid her lips up to one of the golden brows. She kissed without sucking but with a tender, deep feeling that made Shizuru want to sigh and smile at the same time. The older woman eventually did both and shut her eyes when Natsuki finally rested the migrations of her mouth, her silky-dry lips pressing on the thin and hairless scar a Mentulaean blade had left on Shizuru's eyebrow in the Battle of Argentum. She kissed it once, twice, then another time and very gently.

Shizuru kept her eyes closed; Natsuki moved again and kissed each one too.

"All right?" Shizuru asked quietly. "All right now?"

She felt the lips turn to her temple, lingering hot and longingly there. And even though when she opened her eyes she could see that there was still some mortification in that pale face, she saw it being suffused by something else that told her it was fine now and it would be better soon. What complexity her Natsuki's emotions had! But it made her happy to know Natsuki was already beginning to recover, and at the moment, it was enough.

*All right now.*

She knew it was best for them to go into the bath already while the water was still hot; but then Natsuki pressed her back onto the sheets and moved on top of her. They did not kiss immediately, but simply put their cheeks together at first. The girl was warm, her breath sweet, and it made Shizuru turn her cheek so that their lips finally found each other.

*Such emotion*, Shizuru wondered, thoroughly seduced by the softly muscular lips on hers. *Such emotion in her mouth now, as though she can speak only this way and no other.* Even the recent shame seemed to be communicated through their meshing tongues, along with a medley of other, inextricably interwoven things that she could barely uncoil by the strand and identify by the colour. This young woman's embarrassment seemed to be so woven into all of her, she thought, like a bright and brittle weaving that ran through the rest of Natsuki's emotions and linked them in a fine mesh. Shizuru felt it always, low often and high on occasion, but always poignant, often childlike, and sometimes pitiful. It was part of the reason she felt always like protecting the young woman-even if it was from that odd and guilty shame written deep in Natsuki's self.

Shizuru liked being wrapped inside that convoluted feeling. She liked to be touched by it and she liked to touch it. This was the purest of pleasures she had ever discovered: to slide her hands up the girl's arms, feel under her palm the tense yet lissom flesh, and all the while wonder at how quickly the two of them could go from

laughter to mortification to this, yet immensely glad that they could. She was, to be precise, immensely glad that Natsuki could. For Shizuru had begun to realise about herself many things too, and one of these was her possession of a sharp hunger, a near-gluttonous passion that could twist her guts and wring them dry with desire when it struck. That Natsuki was not terrified by it was both blessing and irony: the former because it had the potential to stoke Natsuki's fragile shame; the latter, because the Himean could well guess that others with paradoxically less shame in their being would be terrified by it in a way Natsuki was not.

*As far as others in my class back in Hime are concerned, at any rate, for many near and of my station do not know real passion.*

This was no light evaluation she made, but a home truth. The reality of upper-class Himeans was that well-informed about matters sexual though they were, they were also often what the rest of the populace would call shocking prudes in the bedroom. Those scandalous orgies and indecencies bruited about as vagaries of the rich were in fact truly scandalous and indecent, as far as majority of the rich and noble were concerned. It was those in the strata below theirs that often indulged in such shocking sport, the middle classes composed of the less-than-noble, the rich-but-not-noble, and others of the same ilk. Shizuru herself had lived in the upper crust all her life, and knew better than most that it contained less decadence than did the actual filling in the pie.

There were reasons, of course. Part of it was because membership in the crust invoked expectations and not surprises, like the filling. It was expected for an upper-class Himean to behave "with modesty" in the bed-most especially the wedding bed!-and not writhe about in a haze of passion while screaming to the high heavens. No, such things were considered indecent and low behaviour. Which Shizuru, even inexperienced as she was when she had been younger, had found frankly bizarre. How exactly did logic relate class to bedroom manners? But they are related, people told her: such animal things were reserved for the lower classes and liaisons with courtesans or prostitutes or other worthless paramours. What an answer!

It was perhaps another reason why, before now, she had not even seriously considered taking anyone to bed. No having-up-a-wall for

most of those "proper" Himeans that might have stood a chance of being among her choices for lovers; no wild and bruising romps in hidden corners. Never mind, then. How dusty and boring the little bed-play might be!

*Something it never is with Natsuki*, she thought, *and something they may never know*. But then again, even Shizuru's fellows in her own culture's upper-class could display such ardour sometimes-or so she supposed, from her friends' confidences in her. Still, they often displayed it only with their affairs and rarely with the persons to whom they were bound by marriage later on. Their wedding beds were left in the dust, while those of their illicit affairs were kept moistly sex-sweet. One compounding reason for that might be that most of them still wedded people for reasons other than passion. They wedded for reasons Shizuru considered less moving than what moved her when she was with Natsuki, who could electrify her whole being with the touch of a finger. Anything less than that lightning-bolt shiver would be dusty and boring, without question.

She wondered if any of them enjoyed their affairs as much as this, wondered it when Natsuki traced her jaw with the thin, wet blade of a tongue. She herself would wither with anything less than this; she prayed Natsuki would wither with anything less than this.

She chuckled suddenly, mysteriously, with an indecipherable humour. Natsuki's tongue faltered, already halfway towards the deep hollow at the base of her throat. The girl moved to lapping at the blue vein near it instead, teasing the throbbing pulse under Shizuru's white skin as it thudded.

Shizuru sighed: "Tell me you want me, Natsuki."

Natsuki's head came up and her green eyes were very dark, the skin around them shaded with the smoky remnants of the stibium she used to line them each day. Shizuru repeated the demand to the girl, knowing she was making it out of a desire to have the other return the sheer Want she herself always felt. Her Himean fellows might content themselves with their short-lived affairs, which made them flare once and burn out a moment later, but she wanted none of that. She wanted her Want for this girl to throttle her with its flame far longer than a mere moment. She felt it could only happen if the

source and fuel of her fire flamed just as brightly for her, just as hotly as her own fire. She was Shizuru Fujino, after all, and Shizuru Fujino always aimed at perfection. And this Want, this desire-further now, this *love* ; and the word caused a good shiver-she had decided, would be the most perfect one ever.

But Natsuki was shy, she knew, and it would take some stoking. She slid up her hands, wrapping them around the little waist, and touched the groove above that shapely rear with the tip of a finger. She stroked the groove and Natsuki squirmed above her.

"Do you, Natsuki?"

Natsuki looked amazed that she could even ask, and that alone pleased her.

"I, um." The husky voice was quiet, disturbed. "I-yes."

Natsuki blushed while saying it, but her green eyes remained heavy. Shizuru spread her fingers to hold Natsuki's rear.

"Do tell," she teased, massaging it as her voice grew deeper. "Really?"

Natsuki finally apprehended what the older woman wanted her to say, and swallowed a few times before managing to say it.

"I-I want you. Shizuru."

"Again."

Natsuki's voice was disturbed, but Shizuru liked that.

"I want you, Shizuru," she said again. She paused and took a few quick, shallow breaths. "I *want* you."

Shizuru smiled fiercely.

"Show me," she said.

They grabbed each other's hair at the same time, crashing their mouths together frantically as Shizuru thought, *Yes, this is it, this is*



*Want.* Then there was only the softness of their breasts crushed, and the coolness of the sheets beneath them, and the tightly-held struggle between them as they tried to lie over each other. When that was over, Shizuru knew that all her life she would remember the way the girl yielded underneath her and the curve of the girl's throat when she threw back her head; the shaded whiteness of her shut eyes as they came together, finding perfect fulfilment in what she had believed to be an all-consuming, perfectly insatiable desire.

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Later, after the two of them had sated both hunger for each other and for a midday repast-with a freshening, if slightly lukewarm bath in between-they finally set off to tackle the next part of their schedule. Shizuru had presented her lover with the gift saddle she had ordered, which the girl received with deep gratitude. The gift pleased the girl so much that it had taken a few moments before she could say anything, conveying her gratitude instead with starry eyes and a bright smile. So happy had she been with the gift, in fact, that she had practically leapt at Shizuru's invitation to go for a ride with her. It was thus that they went to the Argus governor's stables, with Natsuki saddling her black stallion and Shizuru saddling the white one given by Natsuki, Albinus.

"We shall be riding on each other's presents," she smiled while seating herself atop her bluish-white steed. "I on my horse and you on your saddle."

Natsuki smiled at her.

"Shizuru, Shizuru," she called suddenly before Shizuru could urge Albinus to go, drawing her black horse near Shizuru's white one. She reached inside the pouch she had attached to the saddle and Shizuru watched her, making her mount stay quiet.

"Yes, Natsuki?" she asked curiously.

"Wait."

Finally, Natsuki found what she was looking for and showed it to her companion.

"Oh yes, excuse me."

Shizuru put out her face and let the young woman apply the smooth Otomeian balm on her lips, the one that she used every day to prevent them from cracking with the cold. She smiled to stretch her lips and get them used to the slightly thickened feeling.

"Thank you," she said. "Did you put some on already?"

"Mm."

"Lovely. Shall we go?"

"Mm."

Their heels tapped at their respective horses' sides, and they were soon out of the stables and under a cloudless grey sky. Their steeds ranged alongside each other as they rode, and the two of them talked.

"More people out today than usual," Shizuru noted casually after nodding at a salute from a passing quartet of legionaries. "I shall lead the way, all right? I know where to go. Unless you would have somewhere you wish to pass by?"

Natsuki shook her head.

"All right, then."

They kept a relatively quick pace as they went, though they did not permit their horses to gallop just yet. Both of them were excellent riders and perfectly at home in the saddle, so the time passed without difficulty for either woman, their bodies perpetually relaxed and swaying along to their horses' easy canters. Once they had gone a good way off and were in a quieter section of street, Shizuru enquired how the gift saddle felt.

"Very good," Natsuki said to her, green eyes joyful. "It is very good."

"I am so glad. I worried too about whether or not it would suit Niger," Shizuru replied, naming Natsuki's arrogant-looking black charger. The beast clearly knew its name, for it turned its head as if to look at

her after the statement, then turned back away with an air of dismissal: the only creature that ever seemed to hold its attention was its master, after all, and she was already seated on its back.

"It suits him," the young woman answered. "Thank you again, Shizuru."

"You are very welcome." She smoothed her hand over her own horse's hanging white mane. "Thank you again too for Albinus. He has a lovely gait and is most well-behaved. I noticed he did not even pay any heed to the squawkers at the stalls we passed just now."

"He is a good horse," Natsuki nodded. "It is good you like him."

"I like him immensely, probably more than any horse I have ever been given."

The smooth cheeks pulled into a smile at that, which Natsuki sought to hide by turning away. Shizuru could see part of her face though, and it told the tale before the girl could vanquish it completely.

"I like his former mistress better, though," Shizuru went on.

The Otomeian turned to face her, the smile still somewhat on her mouth.

"Shizuru," she said, as though berating her.

"Natsuki."

And, though they knew not why, that was enough to make both of them laugh. *Foolishness of lovers*, Shizuru thought, taking only faintly self-conscious delight in that explanation. Midway through their laughter, a few excited squeals reached their ears. Shizuru turned to look at the cause of the disturbance: a group of youths, adolescent girls and boys, were staring at them in awe and admiration. She spared a smile for the gawkers and was gratified when that started off another round of excited sounds as well as some blushes. That was nice; she liked being admired, if she had to be honest. But then she noticed Natsuki.

"Natsuki, what is it?" she asked cautiously, immediately identifying

the touch of bad humour on her girl's brow. She guessed what it was, of course, and answered her own query with a tone suspiciously like that of a woman trying to speak up for her own defence in a trial. "I merely smiled in greeting, *meum mel*. It was a mere greeting."

The other said nothing to that, however, and inched her horse a little ahead. The older woman spurred her own along to keep up.

Natsuki inched forward once more.

*Is she jealous*, she wondered, trying to peek at Natsuki as they continued their game of pulling away and catching up. *Could she possibly be jealous?* Yet again it was all so foolish, but the knowledge of its foolishness did not stop her heart from soaring. She had been feeling like a fool all this time anyway, so it was nice to know she was not alone.

She gasped when she heard a thunder of hooves erupt ahead of her: Natsuki had spurred Niger into a full-on gallop. She saw the young woman's face before that, however, and saw it smirk before the flying black hair shattered her view. At that, she finally gave rein to her feelings and laughed, joyously spurring Albinus after the black stallion too. They were in an empty street near the edge of the city now, and as they raced after each other, Shizuru felt suddenly that she understood what people said when they exclaimed they were glad to be alive.

"Turn left at that fork!" she called out to the girl as they reached a juncture.

Natsuki steered there and she did the same. Eventually Shizuru caught up with the other woman and took a swift peek to see that the latter was also smiling. They raced on a little more, neither now breaking away from the other, until Natsuki decided that they had had enough and reined Niger into a trot. Shizuru followed suit, her white teeth beaming at the girl.

"No one wins this race, then?" she said, lifting one hand to shake the tawny mane of her hair.

Natsuki flipped her own dark locks over one shoulder.

"No," she said in the arrogant, cocksure way she sometimes had. "I let you share victory, Shizuru, with me."

"Oh, really?" The Himean laughed breezily. "If you say so."

"Mm-hm."

She pointed to the way ahead of them then, and Shizuru understood why she had stopped their game.

"I see," she remarked. "There seems to be business going on there."

They proceeded more slowly, rubbing their horses' necks as payment for the beasts' earlier efforts. Shizuru kept an eye on both the road ahead and Natsuki as they went, and was about to say something when they passed some off-duty soldiers, who gave her yet more salutes.

She smiled, bidding them a fine afternoon.

"Well," she said, once they had passed the legionaries. "It seems a lot of others are off to enjoy today too."

Her smile broadened when she saw some townspeople cheering and clapping their hands at a puppet act being put on by itinerant performers some metres away.

"I am glad the soldiers and the people are happy. It is so nice to see them with smiles on their faces."

Natsuki replied in a way she did not expect: "You can make it like that, no?"

Shizuru turned her head, meeting Natsuki's gaze.

"What do you-I can make what like that, Natsuki?"

"Happy. The people."

"I can make people happy?"

"Yes."

"How?"

Natsuki seemed to ponder the matter of clarification seriously.

"My people would say your magic, maybe," the young woman told Shizuru, the slow cadence of her words making it apparent that she was choosing them carefully and with much thought. "Through that you can do it. They would say you were blessed with such magic."

"Magic?" Shizuru asked in confusion. "Magic, Natsuki?"

"That you can-can make others *so*," Natsuki answered. "Simply by looking at them. As if your look has magic, or you have something luh-luh-like a personal magic."

Shizuru frowned in thought.

"I am not certain exactly what you think my smile can do, Darling, but I would say what you are describing is *charm*," she suggested.

The other nodded.

"Yes," she said. "Charm."

Shooting an indecipherable look at Shizuru, she added: "People magic."

The Himean bowed her head as she grinned.

"You sound almost wary of it," she said. "Well, perhaps I do have this 'people magic'. I have to, to have gotten where I am at my age. Nonetheless, I would caution you that you have a heady share of the same dark powers yourself."

Natsuki stared at her as though she had lost her mind.

"No," the girl said matter-of-factly. "I do not."

Shizuru smiled-before she apprehended that Natsuki was deathly serious.

*Good heavens*, she uttered to herself, looking back into that sombrely honest face. Did the girl really think herself devoid of charm? She, who had so thoroughly ensorcelled half of Shizuru's army in the early days of this campaign that soldier after soldier had publicly declared despairing after her? Not to mention the effect she had on Shizuru herself! Was that possibly why she never seemed to notice any of the myriad dreamy eyes that were fixed on her? Certainly her charm was different from Shizuru's own, but even so! It was there and it was undeniably powerful.

"I tell you, you do have it," Shizuru insisted. "It is merely that you do not pay attention to its effects. No doubt you dismiss such swooning and sighing as beneath your notice, and do so instinctively."

Natsuki shook her head yet again, making a sceptical face. She even looked amused by the notion.

"I am telling you the truth," the older woman went on. She surveyed the area before them and had an idea. "Indeed, I shall prove it to you. One of the reasons you do not see the more obvious effects of your charm is that you tend to look so *serious* most of the time. It intimidates them into hiding the symptoms until you look away. But I believe that were you to smile, you would be better able to see it. People hide it less before someone who has an open smile."

Natsuki looked even more sceptical.

"Come, then, care for the wager?" Shizuru goaded. "Smile at the next person to pass by you, and see what happens. Try it, else I think you are afraid I would prove you wrong after all."

The younger woman sneered, adopting her haughtiest pose.

"I said to smile, Natsuki, not look disdainful," Shizuru said, recognising someone about to cave into a challenge when she saw one. "Well, *meum mel* ? Afraid you are wrong?"

"Huh!" Natsuki scoffed, lifting her chin and looking suddenly determined. "I am not afraid."

"Then shall we try it?"

Natsuki nodded, albeit a little reluctantly and with great hauteur.

"Only to show," she explained to a highly tickled Shizuru. "You are wrong."

Shizuru looped her reins around one hand.

"Wonderful," she said. "First, smile-no, not that way, Natsuki. It's quite, um, manufactured. Smile with your mouth open."

Natsuki sent her a look of disbelief.

"That will look silly," she said dryly. "If so, I will look like I catch flies with my mouth."

Shizuru nearly dropped the reins with laughter. Trying very hard to preserve her composure, she answered the too-serious young woman: "No, Natsuki, I meant to open your mouth only to show your teeth. To grin, Dear. I never mentioned anything about *gawping*."

Natsuki sniffed.

"Come, shall you not try it?"

It took a good deal of urging before the girl deigned to humour her.

"A touch stiff, still," Shizuru remarked, before shrugging. She manoeuvred Albinus around a misplaced wooden crate. They were already on the open roads of Argus province. This particular road was just close enough to the city to still be peppered with carts, merchants and tradesmen bringing stock in for the vendors and shop-owners. She and Natsuki had to navigate paths around them.

"On second thought, you need not smile yet. Smile later, Natsuki, once the person passes by."

Natsuki was already scowling by this time, which did not bode well for the enterprise. Then Shizuru had a thought.

"Pretend that you are smiling at me when you do it," she instructed the girl, whose eyebrows shot up in reply. "Just do it, please, and trust me. Here, there is a man approaching. Pretend you are smiling



at me. Pretend I am telling you more of the silliness you are always saying I spout from my mouth so easily. Now, then. Ready?"

The Otomeian was ready almost to the point of stiffness, and it made Shizuru worried. Still, she executed the smile better than Shizuru had expected, although she did bestow it to the man for no more than a few seconds. She kept her lips more closed than open, and Shizuru thought that was a pity, because if the girl had smiled with her teeth it would have been an instant kill. But then Natsuki was looking up again, pale cheeks splashed with colour.

The Otomeian eyed her older lover defiantly as their target simply kept on walking.

"You see, Shizuru?" she said a little harshly. "It was silly, too. I have no magic."

She spurred her horse to walk a little faster after that, Shizuru trailing after her. The older woman was looking backwards, after all, and observing the man to whom Natsuki had given that brief smile. Hence she saw what the girl missed, which was that the poor fellow jerked his head to look for her over his shoulder at least four times before finally meeting the expected mishap by tripping over one of the boxes Albinus had stepped around earlier.

"Right," Shizuru smirked to herself, watching bystanders pick up the still-dazed fellow. "No magic at all . "

Natsuki looked at her, but she just shook her head.

"Such a thing," the Otomeian then said, unexpectedly. "This thing, this charm . "

"What of it?"

"Do you not think it can be explained?"

"What do you mean, Darling?" Shizuru asked. "How do you mean, explained?"

Natsuki grimaced while seeking the words she wanted.

"Maybe studied-or learned-something," she murmured. "I mean that it is not so very like a-an unreasonable thing, as those who call it 'magic' say."

"I suppose so, yes, if you mean that the art of charm can be rationally honed and improved," Shizuru replied. "Although I still do think there is something magical about it, in the sense that a part of charm shall always defy logical categorisation."

Natsuki nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes," she said. "But many without charm, many who do not understand it logically in the part of it that is-is *logical*, they think it is all random, Shizuru. A random magic."

"Random in the sense of being entirely unexplainable?"

Natsuki answered positively.

"I think these people like to call it magic for a reason," she expounded. "The word, the choice of what to name the thing, it can be-um, how do you say-an explanation too, perhaps, of how much people understand a thing or want to understand it. I think it is so."

Shizuru smiled, perceiving the depth of her lover's perceptions in this argument. How delightful it was to have a lover who had a mind! She genuinely found it as enjoyable as Natsuki's more physical virtues.

"So what do you think it indicates, their choice of nomenclature in this case?" she asked.

"I think it indicates that they wish to keep its appeal even as they confess their-their-ah, *mystification* with it and how it is produced. Because what is magic is interesting and a mystery, no? A good mystery."

"Do you think so?" the older woman asked, thinking that Natsuki must be deemed a very magical object herself. How else could she make you tumble head over heels for her and keep you tumbling each second following the first, after all?

"Yes," the girl replied. "People like to say it is of magic when they do not know the answer to a question that is interesting."

Shizuru quizzed her for an example.

"An example is Niger," she said, indicating the horse upon which she was currently astride. They were out of the crowd again and Natsuki was talking more expansively now. "They say of Niger that he will let ride only me because he was made only for me. In the immortal world."

"What do you mean?" Shizuru smiled. "Like a sort of Pegasus, then?"

"Something like. And that he is magic because he keeps me safe, always, in battle. That he cannot die, because my other horsemen have had good horses too-bigger, sometimes, than Niger-and these good horses died." She licked her lips. "They say he is a divine horse, sent to me from the world that is after, by my kinsmen that are there."

"Oh." Shizuru watched her carefully after this revelation, relieved at least that the girl did not look at all saddened by what her own words: she was still smiling faintly. "That is a nice thought, though."

Against her expectations, Natsuki breathed out an attractive chuckle.

"It is nice but silly too," she told the Himean. "Niger is not divine, Shizuru. He bleeds if he is cut. He has such scars."

She pointed at several places on the horse's body and Shizuru noted them faithfully.

"Also," Natsuki continued, "he lets ride only me because no other stuck to his back for so long, when we-we-hmm. How do you say, Shizuru, to make tame a horse for riding? The expression, I forget."

"That would be 'breaking in'. You broke him in . "

Natsuki nodded and looked tickled.

"I remember it now," she said. "This expression. It is funny."

"Do you think so? Is it because of the word 'breaking'?"

The Otomeian shook her head.

"It is because of 'in'," she said with a smile. "I think, *In where* ? But you say no place and leave the 'in' alone... so I wait for nothing."

Shizuru laughed before she could stop herself.

"So I see," she said, still chuckling.

Natsuki chose to return to her earlier point: "I was the one who did not fall from Niger when we, um, broke Niger in. Everyone fell but me. Mino-you remember him?"

Shizuru said that she did. How could she not remember him? He was the one who had unlocked the secret of Natsuki's past for her.

"Mino, he fell too," Natsuki actually giggled. "He was very angry with Niger. Niger was so wild."

She patted the stallion's neck and it tossed its head, nickering with happiness at being paid special attention.

"He is very strong and fast," she clucked proudly.

The fair-haired woman smiled.

"So must you be if you were the only one able to cling to his back," she noted. "I suppose he bucked like a barmy bull?"

Natsuki was delighted by the alliteration. She had confessed to enjoying the sound of them, once before, and Shizuru tried to indulge her in that as with everything.

"Bucked a bar-mee bull," she mouthed to herself near-soundlessly. "Yes."

"And you never fell?"

Natsuki shook her head smugly.

"Well done, then. I wish I could have seen that. At least, however, I have seen you ride foes into the ground with him."

Natsuki face continued to look smug; Shizuru wanted to kiss it.

"And I have also seen you drag our captive prince in the dust while astride him."

They both chuckled, remembering the pitiful sight of Artaxi that day.

"Poor, silly man," Shizuru sighed all of a sudden, remembering the hapless prince's ceaseless moans and groans during their march to Argus. "If only he had not been so silly, so quick to dismiss his opponents. Although that might have been trouble for us, I admit. Only, it is a pity that such a large army had to pay the price for a single fool's incompetence."

Natsuki nodded, saying in condemnation, "Stupid."

The elder woman wiggled her eyebrows at the girl, who continued disgustedly: "Do not like stupid people."

The Himean grinned. "No?"

"No."

"Sometimes you might find you can like them a little better if you try to, well, *tolerate* the facet of stupidity amidst their other traits."

"No."

Shizuru smiled: "No?"

"No," the girl grinned back.

"How do you like me?"

Although that elicited the regular blush, it also had the perquisite of a laugh.

"You, Shizuru?" Natsuki said, eyes sparkling with amusement. "You are not stupid!"

Shizuru inclined her head: "I am relieved you think so, Natsuki."

"Yes," Natsuki said, before seeing the look on Shizuru's face.  
"Shizuru?"

"Oh, nothing." The Himean smiled, shaking her own head to clear it of the fog. "I suppose I was merely thinking about the first time we met. And what I thought of you."

Natsuki smiled too.

"Ohh," she breathed secretively, seeming reluctant to ask further.  
"Hmm. That."

Shizuru looked enquiringly at her.

"What did you think of me then?" she asked.

It took a while, as Natsuki seemed intent to brood on the memory first before answering. The reply, when it came, was an Otomeian word Shizuru translated easily.

"Impossible?" she said with puzzlement. "What do you mean, 'impossible'?"

Natsuki smirked.

"Impossible," she said again to her lover. "More so later. Argentum."

She suddenly chuckled, smiling cheekily at Shizuru as she added: "I thought, 'She is not right in the head.'"

The older woman let loose a string of laughter.

"What?" she said. "You thought I was mad?"

"Many times."

"No!"

"Yes!"

Shizuru grinned.

"Why, what could I have done to make you think such a thing of me?" she asked the young woman.

"Many things. More and more, I thought it."

"It's a wonder you managed to stay civil to such a worsening loon, then!"

"I was nice to you. You see how I tolerate?"

They laughed.

"Silly!" Shizuru said, extending a foot to nudge her leg where it lay against the horse's side. "But truly? What made you think I was mad?"

Natsuki took her time to reply, eyes always looking ahead as she hummed meditatively. Shizuru watched her as she thought about it, admiring the gentle sway of her body as it kept pace with the horse's steps. She looked almost like a centaur, the Himean thought, for she and her horse seemed to be just one animal.

Finally, she gave Shizuru an answer.

"The way you talked," the girl told her general. "And the things you said. Such strange things."

"Was it my teasing you even then?"

A pink smirk. "Could be."

"I'm sure it is so," Shizuru smirked back, fluttering her lashes a little. "Though I suppose that is not all there is to it?"

"No. Many things."

"Indeed. And you mentioned Argentum."

The mention of that name seemed to reanimate Natsuki, who threw her lover a queer look, black hair whipping to one side as she turned her head. Against the light grey skies, Shizuru saw it as a raven's wing in flight, fluttering up and vanishing phantom-wise.

"There, you were mad," the young woman said, speaking with a low, rumbling sort of excitement. "I thought then that you were really not right in the head. I was very much worried."

Shizuru stared back into the intense emerald gaze.

"You were worried?" she echoed musingly. "For your fellows' sakes, having to follow a mad general?"

Natsuki seemed to catch herself, and pinked again before looking away and straight ahead.

"That, yes," she said. "Yes, it was like that."

Shizuru made a non-committal sound, detecting something else the girl was leaving unsaid.

"That is perfectly understandable," she said, before adding gently: "Dare I hope you were you also worried for my sake, Natsuki? Because, perhaps, you were worried that I would be hurt?"

She said it as lightly as she could, feeling very silly for wanting Natsuki to say yes. Of precisely what, anyway, was it in affirmation?

"Yes," Natsuki told her. "Could be."

Shizuru tried very hard not to smile, almost blushing with gladness.

"Thank you," she said, leaning over towards the girl. She was met by Natsuki halfway, and she said something else before they kissed. "Though I hope that does not mean you have no faith in me."

Natsuki chuckled when they separated.

"You were so far front, you see," she said to the older woman. "It was worrying."

"I can understand why a fellow Himean - or a Greek - or even a Persian, for that matter - would find it unusual," she told the girl. "But I had thought you, of all people, would find it normal. After all, your barons and commanders are known for leading deadly charges into the enemy line as well. You yourself do it."



Natsuki nodded, a wisp of hair blown across her forehead by the wind. She allowed it to settle instead of brushing it away herself.

"Yes, but not always the head commanders of the entire army," she answered. "And, too, I read about you Himeans, Shizuru. You do not do such a thing."

"Ah, yes. Now I see."

"Do you do it always?"

The crimson eyes slid to her as Shizuru replied.

"No, not always," the older woman confessed. "I admit it was a terrible risk, but one I felt I had to take."

Natsuki looked very curious. She asked why.

"Because we were so heavily outnumbered," was the answer.

"Because I knew that, brave though my men were, some part of them would sink at the sight of those numbers facing them. Because they needed to see that I was confident enough of winning to fight with them, at the very front, so that they could be confident enough to win, themselves. It is one thing to have a commander tell you to go over here and fight over there; it is another to have that commander do those things with you herself. You are a commander too. You know what I mean here, yes?"

The girl nodded, looking very impressed.

"And also for the practical matter," Shizuru continued. "Since we were terrifically outnumbered, it meant every available soldier needed to pull more than double-weight, and that included me."

Natsuki said nothing to this. They remained silent for a while afterwards, neither looking at anything but the road ahead, which forked into two different paths. Shizuru chose the path to the right, and the girl followed her.

"I am still worrying," Natsuki said suddenly and gravely, some moments later. "You take such risks, Shizuru. But I see now. You walk the way to immortality."

Shizuru was intrigued by the statement.

"In a manner of speaking, yes," she said. "Is that a soldier of Zalmoxis speaking?"

"It could be it is a soldier of General Fujino."

Said general laughed.

"Oh, come," she said, with a few more chuckles. "You never call me 'General'."

The black brows arched at her, all innocence.

"I tried," Natsuki reminded. "At first, so I called you. But you said I should call you not that but 'Shizuru' instead."

"Yes, yes." Shizuru sighed. "So I recall. Yet I am surprised to realise how lovely the title sounds when you say it to me."

Natsuki threw a perplexed chuckle.

"It is all right. I still do want you to call me by my name, Natsuki."

A short interval of silence later, she tacked on the addendum: "But I do not mind if you call me 'General' sometimes too, just so it is clear. For a little variety of flavour."

A confused murmur: "Flavour?"

Shizuru did not respond, smiling straight ahead. Natsuki kept a quizzing look on her, but to no avail: the Himean simply carried on smiling. Finally seeing that she would get no further explanation, the younger woman made a droll face.

"Sometimes," she muttered, "you are so strange, Shizuru."

She did say, nevertheless, a few seconds after that: "But if you want, I shall also call you 'General'."

Even with only the fact that she said that, Shizuru already felt unbearably happy.

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"It's terrible, being born a patrician."

The words, straight out of a woman merging two of the oldest patrician ancestries in her truly blue veins, came with heartfelt woefulness. Those listening to her nodded wistfully too, convinced that she meant them with nothing less than complete honesty. How could they be convinced of it, given her situation? By her demeanour, perhaps, or her past actions as well as present. But even more than these at the time was perhaps the tone of her words. It was a tone that sang honesty. Not in a reeking, obviously affected way, but like something that was true and heretofore hidden: a secret boil, quietly inflaming until it broke and leaked a fine trickle of the most honest, most festering *pus* .

"It's a sad thing when people think you're not fit to associate with them, just because of it," the young woman continued, sulky voice showing the wound that still rankled. "One can't choose where one's born, they forget. So many of our good folk have shunned me a good while, just because they think me different. Well, maybe I am-I don't know. But aren't we all Himeans, great people of a great nation? Surely there's no call for them to treat me so shabbily, just because I was born into a different class from theirs? I don't treat them shabbily, my friends: never have, never will. I don't let the fact of where they're born affect the way I treat anyone, unless it's the fact that they've been born into Hime."

Her auditors murmured their apologies on behalf of those poor folk who had let their prejudices run away with them, who had surely not known any better: just like them, who had not known any better. But that had been before they met her.

"And the strange thing is, even those in my supposed class think me different!" she went on in lament. "Though in their case, they're right! Just yesterday, I had to put up with their bitching once more, simply because I asked for more funds for the crossroad colleges' upkeep. Jupiter as my witness, don't the colleges need it? And can't the bastards give it, when they have so much money to put in their bloody banks to fatten their already fat arses?"

There was a roar of laughter at that, which she joined.

"I suppose it's why I've always felt a little off with them, you know, the others. Like something wasn't quite there. Like they didn't understand me and I didn't understand them. It's now that I'm glad to see why."

She hushed, and again her voice was bitter.

"I really didn't understand them."

Now the verbal sympathies became louder, more emphatic in their agreement. This poor young patrician! To be born into such an uptight, hoity-toity class, when her heart was so much like theirs: so plain and honest, so true and common. Oh, but Fate could weave such cruel beginnings for the best people! And she was such a damned fine, smart girl too!

"I didn't understand them-and I mean the ones among them who're uppity, mind you! Not all of them are, and I'll mark them out for you soon enough. For starters, there's our urban praetor, and my cousins, of course. But the other ones, by god, I don't understand them!"

Her voice had risen now, and it acquired a husky tremble of agitation at the end. It was touching and it was emotional. It was *perfect*.

She sat up straight with a low growl and a wicked smile. They tensed. They knew something wonderful was coming.

"I'll make them understand us, *quirites* !" she howled, to the accompaniment of their pounding chairs. "Ye gods, I swear it! I'll force it down their soft mouths if I have to, and I'll make them understand that we're fed up with them and their stinking snobbery-them and their accursed arrogance-them and all their gods-fucked grubbing! We'll have justice if we have to fight tooth and nail for it, and once we do get it, there'll be no giving it back, so do I swear!"

That did it: every foot was stamping, every mouth howling support and admiration for this brave, selfless young woman, who was one of the rare few who truly understood and supported them: the numerically greatest denizens of the greatest city in the world, whose voices were hardly ever heard for all their greatness. Always

ignored, always pushed aside by the policy-makers and politicians. Until they found someone to plead their behalf, of course, which they had now. And she was no lightweight, mind! She was one of them, one of the uppers, but was also truly one of *them* at the same time, a member of the good folk, the disenfranchised and trodden.

One deeply-stirred pub-goer, his eyes reddening with unshed tears, lifted his glass and made the toast for all: to their new tribune of the plebs, the excellent Urumi Himemiya-Kanzaki Nemura!

The young woman in possession of one of the most awesome names in Hime nodded at that, accepting the cheers with an easy if slightly embarrassed grin. Her smile seemed the most likeable thing all of a sudden to those people clustered around her. It had always been so for this young woman: if she smiled that terrifically likeable smile, everyone smiled back. She had many other smiles, of course, and a good number of those were even less than likeable; but she also knew many ways to play the game and knew when to play what way. So she gave them her best and most affable smile now, because this particular game called for it.

"You cheer me up better than those farce-fuckers in Senate!" she laughed, using that contagion she handled so well to infect them with mirth. "I thought I'd have to drink myself to death tonight to get over their mule-headedness, but it turns out all I have to do is watch you do it instead!"

Again came boisterous, coarse laughter.

"Least we can do, Urumi-san," another of the men at the bar told her, his face rough with the scars of a dozen fights. A brash old brawler, no doubt. "You're not like them other haughty buggers-beggin' yer pardon."

"No need to, Todou-san, since you're right: most of them *are* haughty buggers. I've heard they even stick up their noses in buggery, though I'd like to know up what hole," she sniggered, setting them off a fresh round of hilarity from the bawdy jest. She took a final sip from her cup before mopping her mouth with that outrageously large and bulky handkerchief she always seemed to carry around, getting up from her stool. "Think they're about done

discussing their buggery by now, and I need my cousin-who's one of the decent ones among the lot, thank the gods."

They groaned, pleading with her to stay; to keep talking; to entertain them even more as she always did so incomparably. She shook her head with a chuckle, however, and pointed to the barkeep.

"Can't, but I'll thank you for cheering me up, you drunken lot," she said with crude affection, grinning at the swarthy man behind the counter. She threw him a small cloth pouch, which made everyone grin too when it clinked tellingly into his hands. "Here, Old Chap, and give them another round on me, will you? And if there's more left, give them some of that disgusting slop you make your patrons eat in place of honest fare!"

"It's disgustingly honest slop, Tribune," he said merrily above the cheering. "Admits it is, don't it?"

She laughed: "You speak true, Old Swindler."

Taking her leave with a hearty wave, Urumi made her way out of the wine-shop. She walked with a light step and a perky grin, extending a hand to pull playfully on the vines that drooped from the wooden lattice atop the entrance. Then she was out on the street and smack into the hubbub of the Subura.

The Subura was Hime's densest, most dismal address. Dank and reeking of foetor, walls mould-caked and peeling, the place was inscribed with poverty from top to bottom. Here was where the poorest inhabitants of the city converged, where the septic squawk of the sewers made itself heard in a rushing, bubbling torrent of urban squalor.

Like other slums in other cities, the district was perpetually bursting at the seams. It teemed with people from nearly every walk of life, the only exceptions being people from our present young woman's walk, naturally. Urumi was one of the most well-bred, well-connected members of Hime's First Class, and this showed in many ways. It was in her look, which was so evocative of those patricians of all patricians, the Himemiya. It was in her proud but graceful stride, too, as well as in her fine and fashionable clothes. Urumi was rich and

well-bred and looked it. By rights, she should not be here in this pit, and its dwellers should be snapping at her already for an intruder or mugging her blind. Not so, strangely. Instead, here were the denizens of the Subura hollering out greetings, waving, welcoming, just absolutely *loving* her. To any member of the First and Second Classes, people well used to being hated by all those beneath them, it was something that begged the shocked question: "Why?" And so deep was the amazement over this that it often merited a second iteration, yelled out of sheer incredulity: " *WHY?*"

Because Urumi Nemura, formerly under the family Himemiya-Kanzaki, was a true and *bona fide* genius.

Geniuses, some liked to say, were geniuses primarily of mischief. Urumi was a perfect a case in point for those who held to this aphorism: her own talents often manifested in what others would consider works of naughtiness. Her works were brilliantly mad-or madly brilliant-schemes built on a foundation of disregarded common precepts and values. One of the hallmarks of genius had always been unorthodoxy, and given that all unorthodoxy was considered mischief by the mainstream, it was only natural that the originators of it would be considered troublemakers.

Urumi was a great troublemaker. Her latest scheme in particular was something she was sure would further her reputation as one. Becoming a plebeian citizen from a patrician one had been the first step in this new opus, after which being elected a tribune of the plebs came next. But concomitant with this second step was another, which she had been in the process of undertaking just now and would continue undertaking throughout the entirety of her plan-indeed, perhaps throughout the entirety of her life, given how useful she was seeing it to be. This *other* second step was the romancing of the masses, their seduction by a woman who planned to use them to further her own aims and those of her friends.

It was technically the most difficult part, she thought. As she herself had remarked, it was terrible being born a patrician-and a rich patrician at that. Patricians were viewed with distrust by plebeians, even those plebeians with names so august and coffers so rich they were of the First Class themselves. Patricians were still different. Patricians came from the blood of kings and queens and the ancient

bluebloods, and that was enough to make wary a people who had forever sworn off kings and queens. As indeed Hime had, during the founding of the Republic.

It was no matter that Urumi had already switched over to the plebeian gentry; she was still viewed with that universal reverse-snobbery that characterised the lower classes when presented one higher up the social ladder: a tightly knit, guarded distrust against society's head, which always dictated motions to its mud-spattered feet. Urumi was aware of that powerful wariness, which was nevertheless also an attraction. She also knew of that suspicion of all things unlike and superior and different. More than most in her class, she knew it: for Urumi was, to almost everyone else, unlike and superior and different. Urumi set people on guard without trying, just by being what she was. Nonetheless, her plan required that she become a demagogue to end all other demagogues, and that meant she would have to overcome this Olympian obstacle.

She did it with aplomb worthy of both the Kanzaki and Himemiya.

It was a success built with tools that previous demagogues had never used as well as she: a conquest funded not primarily by hard cash and charity but by infinite resources of guile and magnetism instead. Oh, it had been a tortuous road! She had had to begin at the knotted roots, picking as her first battles those with the persons most opposed and wary to her kind.

She infiltrated first and most deeply the company of those shadier characters of each slum district: the thugs-for-hire, the brawlers, the directionless or work-weary men and women who whiled away time in dark taverns, talking about whatever it was commoners discussed. She began with their leaders, of course. She started by romancing two heads of a crude sodality and an infamous protection gang, raised the number by four, went on to eight, and so on, always adding to her network of 'new friends'. How did she do it? The answer was ludicrous in simplicity: talk and drink.

It would begin, usually but not always, through a talk with them for a potential commission or other business arrangement engaging their services. Then it would escalate to a visit to check up on the already-finalised job or to talk more about the potential of one. In this



wise, Urumi's familial connections actually aided her-for, at the time she began this project, her cousin was the urban praetor. Since the urban praetor was general magistrate of the city, anyone tempted at first to remedy Urumi's intrusive presence through rough means would think twice. Furthermore, given that one of the most important conquests she needed to achieve was that of the *crossroad college* sodalities, it predisposed the members of those particular associations to treat her nicely, since her cousin was the official of the city put in charge of all such colleges. A word from Urumi and it was quite possible that the colleges would be disbanded, their rent-free licences revoked, or even-and here was a collective shudder-their taverns and meeting places removed entirely. Such was the power of the urban praetor and, she being the urban praetor's cousin, the power of Urumi.

Her talk always began harmlessly enough. She spoke not of the high topics she was used to dissecting, but restricted herself to those matters the commoners would know. She would ask them for opinions, and when that had progressed, ask them for advice. She had a great sympathetic style to her listening, and she always seemed fascinated by their notions, constantly expressing her delight with their wisdom. To further warm them up, she would drink with them and pretend just enough tipsiness to be convincing. Later, once she had begun to gain their trust, she would go on to near-drunkenness, which set them enough at ease to do the same. Ah, Hime, where camaraderie was best founded on the spills of a wine flagon! But it was camaraderie based on an illusion that no one had yet uncovered. The illusion was that Urumi, even in her prodigious draining of cup after cup, never actually *drank* the wine in them.

*Handy little trick, too, and so simple*, she thought to herself as she walked, always amused by the fact that no one had noticed that petty deceit yet. *But, yes, all great plans are made of a handful of little tricks... just like every great tapestry is begun from a few simple threads.*

The reek of the Subura had waned; a little further on, it was followed by an infinitely preferable odour. The blonde tribune of the plebs was out of the cesspit, and had reached the Macellum Cuppedenis . Here were the spice and flower markets of the city, where the

concerted smells of peppercorn and incense and the spicy-sweet tang of the best cinnamon mingled with a thousand other fragrances. It was enough to send all of Hime, flower- and perfume-loving city that it was, into a veritable swoon. Urumi found herself nodding absently in approval, her nose finding reprieve after the shit-stink whence she had just come.

She rounded a corner and gazed about. Her eyes alit on a trash pile ready for burning. She strode up and casually dropped her handkerchief on top of the pile, taking care not to let the dark cloth unfold and disclose what was hidden inside: a very heavy sponge soaked with spat-out wine.

On she went in her trek, going down the incline of the Clivus Orbis and turning up the Sacra Via, never faltering in her relaxed amble nor in her equally tranquil smile. Even here people greeted her, both high-born and low, for she was now one of the most popular persons in the city. It amused her to be so, as she knew she could use it. Thus smiling and waving did she finally reach her destination of the Curia Hostilia . Seat of Hime's Powers. The Senate House itself.

*Seems that they have finished*, Urumi noted, her asymmetrically coloured eyes flashing as she surveyed the crowd at the front of the building. *Thank the gods-that means I don't have to wait any longer. Now it's just a matter of finding her in this crush.*

She walked up and through the crowd, as perfectly confident of her acceptance among these people as she had been among those of the Subura. They welcomed her and talked to her, of course, but she kept her words short, for she was saving her true thoughts for someone else in the mob. Someone who would most likely be at the centre of it, yet removed from the rest of it. A distanced nucleus was her destination.

*Still*, she thought, *this crowd may present a problem*. If the one she sought was indeed at the centre, it would mean more trouble in seeking her due to the bodies sea-walling around the woman. Nonetheless, Urumi was well-known enough to part that sea without having to resort to pushing and elbowing each person. *Just a little closer-and my god, what awful perfume is that one wearing? What a reek!*

Finally, she came within shouting distance of her purpose. Chikane of the Himemiya. Beautiful Chikane, who looked like a visitation of some lunar goddess, her face endowed with such relentless symmetry that it could not be human. Aloof, frosty-looking Chikane who was, in truth, one of the sweetest and kindest people in the world.

Which did not make her any less powerful, of course. Or any less dangerous.

Urumi went up on her toes, wondering if she should wave at her cousin to be noticed. But that might go unobserved even then, with so many moving around and flailing their arms at some political quarrel or another. She cursed her height, wondering why she had not been blessed with that same stature Chikane and Chikane's younger sister had. She barely made the average for Himean women whereas her cousins, the Himemiya Sisters, made it well above that mark. She would have to get Chikane's attention another way.

"Chikaneeee Himemiyaaa!"

She sang it out with a smirk. As predicted, her cousin's exquisitely sensitive ears picked up the call amidst the babble. Around swept that magnificent head, assuming an equally magnificent smile. As Urumi knew it would, that smile stupefied over much of the crowd into stillness. It permitted Chikane's stroll towards her to be that much easier. A giggle left her: what a wickedly useful thing it must be, to be able to do that!

The young tribune of the plebs had considerable charms herself, she knew, but she still had to admit they were not in the same league as her cousin's. *Which is no sad thing to admit*, she thought with good humour. How many people could stupefy people so effortlessly? Certainly her other cousin, the Princeps, had his own dazzling smile; and Chikane's friend, Shizuru Fujino, had a truly fabulous one that even her opponents talked about with admiration. So did a few others who made up the ranks of the city's most beautiful people. Each one slew with a smile and knew it, worked with it. Yet it was only Chikane who could slay so thoroughly and break your heart so swiftly without full knowledge of it taking place.

That was because of Chikane's strange lack, that thing that was both her triumph and her tragedy: her distinct isolation.

Chikane, even with all her kindness, was one of the last rare, really remote beings. She isolated herself without pretension and suited that isolation-far unlike all those other beautiful faces in Hime who traded with their looks. Those beauties understood others and the effect they had on others, and that was something Chikane did not, or not fully. Her natural introversion prevented her from understanding precisely how she was experienced by other people. She might be aware, for instance, that others thought her beautiful; but she did not know how devastatingly that beauty affected them. She did not know how those silences she caused were due to a dozen hearts rising to tight throats. Urumi thought that was a strange deficiency of knowledge for someone who generally knew everything all the time.

Urumi had long pondered it. *Maybe because her knowledge is often so cerebral?* It was a little too cold, just a little too clear. Chikane was perhaps too withdrawn a woman to have that particular depth of awareness rendered only by true and connected empathy. So she could not help but go on as she was doing: she smiled and slew and through it all had no idea how deep the slaying was. Which was only appropriate, in Urumi's opinion, because Chikane was an incarnate force of nature. Forces of nature hurt you in innocence, not knowing that their thorns sank into flesh instead of merely pricking out a bit of blood.

*I think, in fact, Urumi reflected with amusement, that may even be Chikane's greatest and only cruelty.*

"I'm so glad to see you," she told the taller woman now, meeting her. "I was going to call on you and Himeko-chan tonight, so this saves me the trouble."

"I match your gladness, if not surpass it," the other woman said at first, adding quietly as they embraced after: "Any news, Little Troublemaker?"

The shorter woman scoffed.

" *Great*, please, always *great*," Urumi declared humorously as they separated. "I strive for more instead of less."

Chikane smiled sweetly... and slew another dozen in the crowd about them.

"My apologies." She bowed her head lightly. "I shall be sure to remember it, Great One."

"It feels as though you're mocking me, for all the courtesy with which you deliver it." The pretty, impish face suddenly came alive; it lasted no more than a second before returning to its usual and faintly drowsy aspect. "I expect to be living up to the title soon, by the way."

"My, that sounds exciting."

The statuesque woman inclined her head to the road after that remark.

"Come, Cousin," she continued. "Shall we walk?"

"We shall walk," said Urumi, tipping her head at the persons lingering near them. "Your retinue?"

"They may follow."

Turning to give her attendants a few words of instruction, Chikane permitted her cousin to link an arm around hers and lead the way to her home. There she could talk to each client personally in her study while having the rest happily entertained and waiting in her parlour. For now, however, she felt in need of a short respite from their gabble. And hazardous as many thought Urumi could be, Chikane was fond enough of her cousin to consider time with her a respite.

Once they were a safe distance from the following crowd, she addressed the younger woman again.

"How then, Urumi, shall this affirmation of the title be achieved by you?"

Urumi looked elated.

"Why, through various happenings of bedlam, the likes of which would put to shame an Egyptian circus!" she grinned, angling her face upwards to bring her mouth nearer the far taller woman's ears. "It's related to our northern question, of course, have no fear."

Chikane slipped one small chuckle.

"Have no fear?" she echoed. "A strange assurance from one who often uses fear for her purposes, and with maximum efficiency. I hope that this bedlam of which you speak is actually secretly ordered towards the answer of aforementioned question."

"It is."

"How so?"

Urumi's eyes gleamed as she replied, not without enjoyment: "The answer to the question is wrapt within a riddle."

Chikane breathed out a little sigh.

"Oh," she said tonelessly. "Melodrama."

Urumi stared at her incredulously. "This, from the child of one of the greatest political thespians Senate ever saw?"

"Can you not yet tell me?"

"No. I want it to be a surprise. Would you like the riddle?"

"If you wish to give it."

Urumi delivered with her usual flair, tones suddenly lugubrious and dolefully hollow: "The answer is a mummy and its effects, hidden in plain sight before the royal palace. The surprise is the mummy rising and terrifying pharaoh before his throne. The secret is the mummy thinking it was and is pharaoh, unaware that it is now only ever a puppet and a corpse."

"Hmph," Chikane smiled after thinking on it for a few seconds.

"Either I am mistaken in my interpretation of that riddle or you deliberately omitted the part from it that would let on exactly what

novel mayhem you have planned-for the answer, as it is now, would be nothing too new as far as the bedlam-bringers in our Republic's history go."

A fine tinkle of mirth came from her side. The younger woman *had* omitted the last part of the riddle, for it did not suit her purposes to have Chikane know all of it at this point and Chikane was smart enough to figure out what the last part meant.

*The trick is the priest who unleashes the mummy, who sets it on the other priests with a club and a gag.*

"Well, then it wouldn't have been a surprise anymore," Urumi told the elder woman, who shook her head gently. "I know you well enough not to risk telling you more than three-quarters of a riddle if I want you to really experience the sense of mystery that comes with one."

"It is flattering that you think so highly of my deductive capabilities that you modify the rules of riddle-making, though still unfair," Chikane said. "And, yes, before you remind me: I know what you think of the word 'fair' . What fresh hell have you now wrought?"

"It's still in the process, but yes, it's awfully fresh." Urumi giggled, flapping one end of her ginger and brown cloak. "I should hope for it to be fresher, juicier of pulp and more virginal of pit than any other that Lord Pluto ever created and bled rot- *stinking* -dry."

An amused sound left the other's lips. "Competing with Dis, Urumi-hubris already?"

"Mere literary licence, actually."

"What morbid literature you create."

"All literature is morbid-the cheeriest ones are even more so, because they fail to realise the morbidity in themselves." The younger woman's eyes twinkled. "Now let's stop the shop talk for a moment. Simply rest assured my surprise shall fit perfectly into your own plans, Cousin. Having said that, will you do me a favour and tell me that I'm invited over tonight?"

"You are invited over tonight, as indeed you are welcome to be every night." Chikane smiled knowingly, nostrils flaring as she sniffed the air. It was heavy with damp: spring had yet to fully enter. "Bored with Reito-kun?"

The prodigy at her side groaned.

"He gets so *tedious*," she whined. "I don't know how his women find him so enduringly fascinating!"

"He has particular merits for them, one supposes. What of his younger sister? Surely she can provide more variable entertainment?"

"Always off at Tokiha-san's. I'm starting to think there's something going on there."

"Ah, a caution. You may start some dangerous gossip with that whimsical tongue of yours." She smiled at some people who greeted them as they passed by. "And your adopted mother, also known as your ever-acquiescent friend?"

"My pet? She's out of town visiting some relatives in the country." Urumi made a wistful face. "I don't want to stay at her place if she's not there. There's little fun in it without her to play jester."

She felt one sapphire eye on her and sighed.

"No, I don't plan on making you play jester in her stead, Chikane," she added. "Especially not your wife."

She reminded Chikane about her earlier enquiry for news and bade the older woman attempt to guess at an answer to her own question.

"Instead of attending the Senate's session, as you should have?" Chikane replied jokingly. "I wonder. I suppose you have been mingling vertically?"

Urumi said she had and that Chikane would be pleased by its results come time to unveil them.

"I look forward to it." Chikane quirked a slim brow at this. "I wonder,



by the way, that your speech makes them not uncomfortable. The lower classes have an aversion to such as they would call *high talk*."

"True, but my speech is not the height it regularly is, when I'm with them," Urumi retorted, before suddenly saying in a perfectly broad commoner's accent: "I can slum right well with 'em bastards, and talk from my arse withou' a sniff of a stink."

Chikane was delighted.

"You do that so well," she complimented, looking very much as though she wanted to laugh. "'Tis eerie."

Urumi giggled: "Or frightening?"

"Perhaps for some."

"Frightened?"

"Never," she replied, to Urumi's laughter. "In any case, I hope this heralds success for overcoming our latest obstacle. I-"

She stopped here, without continuing, and Urumi looked at her curiously.

"My apologies," she said with a quiet laugh. "I merely realised how odd it is to actually consider this matter an obstacle. At any other time, it would have been a blessing."

The shorter woman nodded, smiling too.

"Even more for Shizuru-san, I'm supposing," she ventured. "Are we sure, by the way, in our predictions of her reception, Chikane? This is a lot of work and preparation for something of which we have no real confirmation yet, or not from the woman herself. I don't grudge the trouble, but the problem is that I've come to enjoy and invest so much into it."

She stopped as they passed some acquaintances. Once they had moved on, she continued: "I just really want it to be for something! If she calls it off, well-I'd be a little put out, to tell you the truth."

"We must allow latitude," Chikane assured Urumi, touching the young woman's arm shortly. "But I am certain as far as I can be that you shall get to employ your latest instruments. Even if some chance occurrence rendered my certainty false, I would provide you with an opportunity to employ them all the same."

"You do humour me, don't you?" Urumi said, looking up at her cousin and friend. "I knew that, really. But even so, I doubt we could find another matter like that. Not another as deliciously notorious or attention-grabbing or challenging."

"If it proves impossible to find such an issue, I shall make one."

The tribune of the plebs laughed, her differently-coloured eyes bright and happy once again.

"You're so sweet, Chikane," she replied. "Thank you."

Chikane nodded, eyes not on her but on the road ahead.

"Well," she murmured, before raising her voice to a more audible level. "Well met, Tate-san."

Urumi turned to look at the man Chikane had just addressed and who was approaching them. He was of middling height and build and had on a blue cloak over a tunic the same shade as his sandy light hair. The blue of the cloak brought out the gold in his hair and brown skin. A nice-looking man; but Chikane and Urumi came from a clan of better-than-nice-looking women as well as men-so now, contrasting it with a mental image of their relative the Princeps, they wondered a little. Interesting, both thought, that Senator Mai Tokiha had preferred this man to their more urbane, more intelligent, and far more attractive relation.

The man now offered them a curt but not unpleasant smile.

"Himemiya-san," he said. "Urumi-san."

Both women smiled, although Urumi's disappeared as swiftly as his had. Chikane's remained in place.

"I tried to catch you after the Senate meeting, but you'd gone

quickly," he told them, eyeing the crowd of patrons hovering a respectable distance away. His thick brown eyebrows drew close. "Mai had a message."

Chikane moved her head very slightly.

"I noticed she did not attend," she said. "I hope she is well."

"Ah, she's fine," the other senator told her with some discomfiture, having read the question in the lake-blue gaze. "A little busy though. Just finishing up some things. You know, for the, uh, wedding."

"I see."

"Yes."

"You must be busy too. I dare to hope you are well, even so."

He half-smiled and half-wincing, as was his wont: "I'm fine, I think."

"That is good."

There was a silence after that which might have been perceived as awkward, though only by the sandy-haired man. The two women, for their parts, remained perfectly at ease during the interval.

Finally, Chikane took it on herself to prompt him.

"Tate-san?" she said, again very gently and with utmost courtesy. "Would it be preferable to seek a more appropriate venue for the message's delivery?"

He started a little at that, brown cheeks seeming to go ruddy.

"Ah, no," he said, looking irritated with himself- *and all things in general*, Urumi thought mischievously, as she watched him mutter the communication to her cousin. "She said she's agreed and all you have to do is send the item when it's ready."

"I see. Please convey my gratitude to her, and accept that which I convey to you now as well," Chikane answered, bowing her head. "My thanks for having taken the time to give us this message, Tate-

san. I am much obliged, and can only hope it did not trouble you."

He smiled a little, shrugging like an embarrassed boy. Up came his hand again to scratch, but instead of going to the back of his head, it went now to his chin. It was dark with light brown fuzz, and both women guessed it had been there from this morning.

"Don't mention it," he replied. "Anyway, she'd have made me go by force if I said no. Have some errands myself, too."

"All the same, I am grateful." Chikane inclined her head, causing a few locks of glossy black hair to tumble forward. "Shall that be all, Tate-san? You mentioned some other errands, so I would hate to keep you here if you have more to do."

"Yes, that's about it. I better get going now, Himemiya-san."

"Then please go with our good wishes."

He nodded once again before going off, leaving the two women-and the tag-along band behind them-to resume their walk. They were almost at the Palatine, the richest and most sumptuous address in Hime, and were going down the Clivus Sacer. As they rounded the corner and passed the great edifice of shops known as the Porticus Margaritaria, Urumi chose to remark on their most recent encounter.

"There's a fellow I think is morbid," she said, to the amusement of her cousin.

"How so?" Chikane asked, looking up at the high colonnades of the great Porticus. It had been a while since she had taken her wife to shop here. Perhaps she should ask her if she wanted to, tomorrow. "Mayhap it is the manner?"

"It's part of it, yes," Urumi replied, gold-lashed eyes narrowing. "Something more than that. Something within him."

She paused before finally elucidating: " *Rudderless*, I believe."

"Indeed?"

"Tate-san has muddled ambitions, Chikane, if he has any at all. It

makes him morose, I think. Do you disagree? I think him very unaware of what he wants."

"Does that not apply to most of us?"

"Perhaps. But not to you. Nor to me."

"No? I have heard you described as most unpredictable in your goals as well, Urumi. Is not an erratic rudder alike to having no rudder at all?"

"I am not so unpredictable as some think, Cousin. The consistency is that I aim always for interest . " The blonde woman lifted her shoulders in a gesture of indifference. "Anyone who truly knows me can vouch for that. I believe myself justified in claiming to be aware of what I do desire."

"Very well. Then the earlier statement is true of you." Chikane produced one of her slier smiles and lowered her silky voice. "Is it true of Mai-san?"

Urumi giggled, making a face.

"Remember not to smile like that when you're in Senate-you look positively *wicked*," she said, drawing close to the tall woman in order to speak more confidentially. "I can't believe she's marrying him, you know."

"On Reito's side in this case, are we?"

Urumi waved a hand, swiftly dismissing her other cousin's thwarted suit of Mai Tokiha.

"No, not really," she said. "It just seems a striking mismatch with the present players, that's all."

Chikane hummed, face calm and sedate again.

"I see," she said.

"I'm not entirely sure it wouldn't be a mismatch with Reito either, but I do think it would be *less so*. I suppose the outcome should provide

some social interest in the future, at least."

"Possibly."

A few seconds passed as they strolled on.

"I do hate the way you let us blabber while constantly withholding your own opinion," Urumi suddenly burst out, drawing a laugh. She shook her head in exasperation. "Really, Chikane. I'm quite sure no one can hear us now, so it's really all right. Do you think I'd have spoken, myself, were it not so?"

Chikane's eyes shone in that way they did, that way that made you think she was cherishing elegant secrets behind them. In all likelihood, Urumi thought, she actually was.

"Of course not," she said, supplementing the answer with a smile.

And no more.

"You're hopeless," the youthful tribune of the plebs ruled, nonetheless affected enough by her cousin's aura to return the smile. "All right. I'll let you keep your scruples and counsel in peace."

"Thank you." Chikane brushed away some of the hair waving about the smooth planes of her face, her cool blue eyes darkening with hidden irritation, which she voiced in the next second. "That proves increasingly difficult to do these days, I feel."

The other woman smiled with understanding: "Rarely have a moment to yourself now, I suppose?"

"Quite." The tall woman chuckled, as though amused by something. "But one supposes it is the price for this."

"And it's a great price to pay, especially for you, " the younger woman agreed. "But then again, Chikane, you are the one who decided you wanted to become senior consul."

Hime's leading consul of the year laughed, looking every inch the senior magistrate perfectly at ease with her position. The clients following them smiled curiously, wondering what her cousin had told

her that was so amusing.

"Peril awaits all those who seek great rewards," she murmured, before throwing a sharp look at her cousin. Her eyes were dark and deep, and it was that more than the cool hush of her voice that arrested the younger woman. "Perhaps even more for you than for me, Urumi. Be mindful of what awaits us. Of what awaits you. The tribunate of the plebs has always found renown in the most hazardous of businesses, and I would be deeply grieved should anything happen to you. I would not have you harmed, yet I cannot throw protections all around you so often as I do with others, for your office necessitates that you be always surrounded and in contact with the rest as well as the rabble."

Urumi nodded, giving her an unusually subdued smile.

"I'm aware of it," said the younger woman. "Don't worry, I have my own counters."

Chikane nodded, looking away again.

"At least we shall be prepared," she said, her cool countenance easing slowly again into a relaxed expression. "And if our calculations are not mistaken, we have not long to wait. Shizuru should be receiving the news soon, and everything gathering momentum."

Her cousin grinned, seeming as though she would rub her hands together with glee.

"So it begins," Urumi said, her light blonde hair waving as she skipped forward. "Well then, things for our golden girl up north should be coming to a head!"

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Things were indeed coming to a head. However, the golden girl was peacefully unaware of it at that precise moment, for other things were occupying her just then. At roughly the same time Urumi and her cousin were having their conversation in Hime, Shizuru was riding back to town with her companion, their destination being the

local staging of Euripides' Elektra. They were coming back from their ride to the cliffs, from where Natsuki had openly admired the great silver-flecked sea the Himeans called theirs. She had smirked when she said the name they gave it, seeming to find it amusing that Shizuru's people presumed possession of that great expanse of green and blue water. When Shizuru explained that it was because most of the lands about it had been conquered or annexed by Hime, the Otomeian had replied that she knew that much. However, she went on, she also knew that Himeans were allegedly mediocre in their naval skills, as opposed to the excellence they displayed on land. She said she knew that pirates trawled the waters of Hime's sea, and posed a constant problem for them; so constant a problem, in fact, that she considered the sea's true ownership questionable.

Much though she wanted to dispute the girl's opinion, the Himean saw the justice of the argument; indeed, how many times had she herself thought that the pirates were a problem that needed to be addressed by her fellow senators? It was true that Hime was not a naval nation. Its victories were won inland, rarely ever over the water, and Shizuru felt it keenly to have Natsuki point it out to her. She made a vow to herself: she would eliminate the pirates too, in the future. But first, from where had Natsuki learned all this, she asked, given that the Otomeian had lived away from water her whole life? Unsurprisingly, she got the standard answer: *I have read*.

At present, however, that conversation had ended. Now they were talking about their destination, and Natsuki was giving her opinion on the text of the play-which, of course, she had also read. While Shizuru could not complain about this facet of the girl's personality, she could not help but think how glad she was that she could offer Natsuki more things to do than holing up alone in a library as the girl seemed to have done for much of her life.

"I like it," Natsuki was saying. "This story, I like better."

"Than the Aeschylus version?" Shizuru replied. "Why?"

"Aeschylus, sometimes, I think is too... pffff... fantastic," the younger woman returned, before mumbling the rest of her statement.

"Fantastic, I think."



"I see. Prefer the sober ones?" Shizuru said with a chuckle. "I suppose I like both equally, on their own merits. But I am glad that it happened to be this one we shall be seeing, if it is indeed the one that pleases you better."

"Yes." She grimaced thoughtfully. "But it is such a story, no? A sad one, especially for one who is not truly the protagonist of the tale."

"Which character do you sympathise with, then?"

"Elektra. Especially in Aeschylus, always I think, 'Poor Elektra.'"

"Why so?"

The green eyes were looking away: Natsuki was watching some children running down the street, rolling a ball with a stick.

"All she does," the Otomeian answered a touch absently. "She waits."

Shizuru felt her heart patter, though she knew not why. What a queer time for it to do so!

"I see," she said. "And how does Aeschylus' rendition of her lot compare to Euripides'?"

"Umm."

"Natsuki?" She looked to see what had arrested Natsuki's attention. It was a trio of Otomeian warriors, all wearing the dark uniform of the Lupine division. "Oh. Your troopers."

A second later, Natsuki turned to her.

"We are near," she said. "If you want, they will bring Niger and Albinus to the stables for us. The stables are far, and the theatre is near. If you want, I can tell them to do this thing."

Shizuru nodded, seeing that the trio had already noticed them and were facing their way.

"Yes, it would be better to walk," she decided. "As you wish."

They brought their horses near the warriors, who saluted them. Though they gave the Himean general a very low bow, it was on their captain that their eyes fixed, the three of them actually forming a row and standing to attention.

Natsuki looked down on them from her superior height atop Niger. She began to talk in Otomeian.

*Interesting*, Shizuru thought afterwards while dismounting Albinus and transferring his reins to one of the Lupine troopers. While the three other Otomeians regarded their superior officer with both admiration and a seeming easiness, Natsuki herself seemed aloof in addressing them. Or was that merely an exclusive evaluation, on her part? After all, Natsuki was far more open with her than with most others, and she supposed her own experiences with the girl's warmer side were colouring her perceptions now. The Natsuki she saw now was Natsuki as she had been in the first days of their acquaintance, it seemed: face immensely grave, words terse and tone unchanging.

Once the commission was over and the two of them walked on, leaving the Otomeians to take care of their horses, she chose to comment on it.

"There are occasions," Shizuru began. "When you *do* seem made of ice."

Natsuki glanced at her and said nothing.

"I meant it in a good way," Shizuru continued. "Please do not be offended."

The girl shook her head, chewing a corner of her lip.

"I-I am not offended. Sometimes it is useful," she answered the Himean. "It is useful in the army."

"Yes, of course. You project an awesome aura when you look that grave," Shizuru returned, whereupon her dark-haired companion peeked a smirk at her. "What?"

Natsuki shook her head and shrugged it away.

A gust suddenly blew past them, setting both women's cloaks soaring. The dark-haired girl let hers flap freely while Shizuru used an arm to hold one end of hers closer. A shriek from down the street: a bystander was chasing after her escaped scarf.

"Yet, you are so with nearly everyone, Natsuki," the general was saying to her girl as they continued walking. "I believe you seem cold to most people. Why, you were at first cold to me! Shall you gainsay me there?"

The girl took her time answering, but eventually acknowledged the truth of Shizuru's words-albeit very reluctantly. Shizuru smiled in triumph.

"It does beg the question, however," she followed playfully. "Why are you not so with me?"

Natsuki sent her one of those looks: the one that seemed to say, *'I cannot believe you are asking such a question.'* Shizuru responded with a look of her own, which the girl well understood by now as meaning, *'You had best believe it as soon as possible, because I have every intention of repeating the question until such time as you find yourself convinced.'* On occasions as these, they would often take to shooting each other these glances as often as they deemed necessary, like two archers trying to take down each other. The outcomes of these duels were more or less consistent, however, and that consistency was perpetuated now.

Shizuru won.

"Because you are *you*," Natsuki finally replied a little haltingly, before giving the older woman a sudden smile. "And you are very funny."

A laugh: "Am I?"

Abruptly, Natsuki's smile became sly.

"Also," the girl said. "You are my commander."

Shizuru blew humorously through her nose.

"As though I have ever pulled rank with you," she teased.

Natsuki blew through her nose too: "This noon, you asked me to call you 'General'."

"And I danced straight into that one," Shizuru chuckled, winking at her. "Shall you take revenge and ask me to call you 'Princess'?"

"You do already."

"Yet you never complain."

"I do not because, um, because-"

"So you do not like it when I call you 'Princess'?"

"No, I do not *not* like, but-"

"So it is bad for me to do that?"

"No, but-"

"What if I addressed you from now only ever as 'Princess'?"

"Then I will not call you 'General'!"

Both of them erupted into laughter at this, dropping their serious miens after Natsuki's droll retort. They walked on, occasionally clutching a mouth or belly in an effort to stop laughing, and many a bystander smiled as he watched them go their merry way.

Meanwhile, from the second storey of the building they were passing, a curtain moved back into place.

"Would you look at that," came the voice of the Ninth's chief primipilus, even then turning away from the view and back to the room. "The general and her girl. Happy as usual."

The dark woman on the bed smiled.

"Are they?" she asked, getting up. "Did they pass by just now?"

"It's not like I imagine the pair of them for fun." Nao motioned for her to lie back down. "Save your strength. They've gone already, Poll."

Pollonia perched on the edge of the bed again, looking disappointed.

"I wanted to see them," she complained.

"Bad luck, then. They're long-legged fillies. Fast walkers."

Pollonia shuffled on the bed, bringing the sheets over and around her brown shoulders. The sheets were a creamy colour, and in the dimness of the room, they stood against her skin in bright contrast, making all of her seem even darker.

*Except for her eyes*, Nao thought, meeting the light grey look head-on. *She has the damndest eyes*. Now, with them catching the shaded light passing through the curtain, the thin ring of grey around the dilated pupils was almost white.

"Anyway, get your head on straight and listen to me now," the centurion said in her sarcastic-but still beautiful, Pollonia thought-voice. "As I was saying, I've already arranged for the transfer in ownership. You should be getting word from your owner soon, though she won't tell you you're being sold to me. She won't know."

Her future slave lifted both eyebrows, unable to help grinning. Her teeth were big and white.

"How did you do that?" she asked.

If the centurion noticed that Pollonia did not bother asking *why*, there was no verbal acknowledgment of it.

"Legal tangling and puppet buyers," she told the other woman. "No one should be able to trace immediately that you're sold to me, not just yet. Just in case it ever becomes necessary, though, I've set aside documentation as proof that you're my property now, or from the conclusion of the business."

"Does anyone know it yet, aside from us?"

"No, but that can change."

"I see."

Pollonia let her back fall on the mattress, feeling the nice, springy bounce that produced. Her legs were still hanging off the bed and she let them go wide open, leaving her exposed to the centurion. She did not care and it was comfortable; besides, the thought of those lime green eyes on her was not unpleasant. Certainly she liked to look at the place between the centurion's legs too, particularly for its unusual, bright red thatch of hair. She had never seen hair like that on anyone else or any other sex. It was hair so vivid it looked afire, and she often took to pulling at the little strands of it when her head was resting on Nao's thigh or belly. If she could do that, so could the other woman look as she pleased. Besides, the woman would soon be her owner, would she not? Let her look as much as she liked: she had the right to it.

But these were remote justifications made in a small-voiced part of her mind. The prime reason she did not close her legs, really, was that she just did not care, did not have a single care in the world for those few short seconds. A person used to living her life always with myriad concerns and considerations hounding her heels, she permitted herself now a rare moment of respite. She permitted herself to feel this once, exclusively and overwhelmingly, the great and soaring joy of *escape* .

She breathed out slowly, closing her eyes and letting the relief wash over her.

"Thank the gods," she whispered with reverence. "I'm so happy."

She heard her soon-to-be-owner giggle.

"Right," was the answer. "You should be."

The gravity lurking beneath the casual words was too much, her reprieve at this recent development too much: Pollonia let loose a great laugh. She did it loudly and with pleasure, and the other woman knew what was happening and did not interrupt her. Nao understood why Pollonia was laughing.

She was a little surprised, however, when Pollonia revealed that she understood what was happening, too.

"I was worried for the longest time, you know," said the bronze-skinned woman. "If you were going to decide to kill me after all."

The strawberry-red eyebrows shot up as Nao stared. All she got was an eyeful of Pollonia's sex, however, as the other woman was still not getting up.

"You thought I was going to kill you?" she asked. She followed it with a question that was more curious than incredulous. "Why'd you think that?"

"I knew you *might*," came the other's reply. "You could. Even more now, if I do belong to you. You'd do it if you had to-what's the way you'd put it, Nao? Oh, should I still call you Nao or 'Domina', now that I'm going to be yours?"

"Call me as you've always called me. You were saying?"

"I was saying you'd do it if you had to cut costs, I think . I was worried because it was either that or you'd make good on your promise to buy me." She chuckled lightly. "Obviously, I was hoping for the second one instead of the first. And now look where I am!"

The red brows sank slowly back to their usual places at this shrewd evaluation, the light green eyes below them unblinking. And then the centurion grinned a naked grin, as full of sharpness and animal danger as a snarl from a beast of prey. But Pollonia did not see it because she had not yet moved from her position, and Nao did not mind even if the woman did see it.

"Well, Poll, I've made good on my promise," the centurion answered, still smiling nastily. "But what if I hadn't done it? You'd be dead."

That brought Pollonia up, her body bending to lift her from the waist. She propped herself on her hands by stretching long brown arms behind her and looked Nao in the eye.

"I know," she said. "But I'm not."

"Could've been."

"I know."

Nao shook her head.

"Gods, you took a fucking big risk, Woman," she said. "I'm just a little surprised you didn't have a backup plan if it looked like it wouldn't pay off. If you knew that was liable to happen, why'd you even risk it?"

Pollonia sighed, making it sound as though she thought there was no need for his conversation.

"I know it was a fucking big risk, Nao-I could be fucking dead right now." She smiled to herself. "But I'm not dead. And I'm getting out of here. I'm going to be a Himean's slave and I'm going to do what this Himean tells me to do, which won't be a problem because I'm sure it'll be more interesting than what I've always been doing, just fucking and fucking and goddamned *fucking* all the fuckers in this town who think I've no brain between my ears because all they care about is the hole between my legs. Dis take them, for some it's even both holes between my legs."

The other woman seemed willing to let her continue, so she went on.

"I decided it was better to take that risk with the Himean because, worst case was, with that Himean I'd be dead-and that wasn't any worse than being stuck forever in this shithole life," she shot out with a defiant air, snarling with growing passion. She was warming to her subject; it was clear now just how important this had been to her and how much she had staked on it. Nao found herself wondering how many nights of sleep the woman had lost over worrying about this. Had she wanted so badly to get out of here, then? What would have she done if she had never found this opportunity and had to stay on in the brothel? The common story for prostitutes in an establishment was that they were kept by the establishment until their juices ran dry, milked and rented out like cows for hire. Most of them were treated all right by the establishment's owners, generally: not great, but all right. Or Nao thought so. Had it been different for Pollonia?

*But she seems to be fine*, she thought, raking the other woman's form now with her gaze, the yellow flecks in her irises glinting razor-light. *She seems fine. Her skin's unbroken, and I don't see any*



*bruises on her, and I should know because I've been seeing her nearly every day. She's mostly fine.*

Pollonia had been treated relatively well, she reassured herself. But Pollonia was still talking with her strange passion and Nao could suddenly hear an echo of her murdered mother's cries, and that was enough to make her wince. She closed her teeth on the inside of a cheek and felt the blood wash tinny on her tongue, the pain giving her a focus that let her listen only to Pollonia-only to Pollonia now, and no longer to the echoes of a long-dead past.

*Listen to Pollonia.*

"So I took the gamble because the possible loss was better than what I would've had if I didn't," Pollonia was saying. "Because that's what would've happened, most likely, if I didn't take the risk with that Himean that could kill me. Maybe I even preferred her killing me over just staying in this stink-awful trap. I could've died. I might've died. Nao, when you're in the sort of place I am, there aren't any risks you consider too high. At least, if I did lose the gamble and get killed, it'd be by a hand of my own choosing, was what I thought."

She stopped to stare Nao deeply in the eye, looking wild with joy at her triumphant wager. The centurion stared back, fascinated by the woman's daring.

"So it was a fucking big risk, fine," Pollonia finished. "Maybe for you it was the biggest sort of risk. Not for me. Either way, though, this is what counts: it fucking. Paid. Off."

She made a point of keeping her stare on Nao's as she said the final words, and was a little surprised when the lime green eyes snapped shut after her peroration. A reversal of roles took place as something that had happened earlier was repeated: only, this time, it was the redhead's mouth that opened and belched, to Pollonia's astonishment, a huge and ringing laugh.

Pollonia watched as Nao continued to cackle, feeling slightly unsure of herself again. Why was she *laughing*? *Perhaps*, she thought, *perhaps I shouldn't have said that*? Perhaps Nao did not like it, would decide to kill her after that cocky disclosure she had been

careless enough to do? But Nao was not like that; there was no logical reason for her to kill Pollonia over such a thing. And yet, here she was laughing, and Pollonia did not know what it could mean. Oh, better she should have kept her mouth shut and safe!

For all that uncertainty, however, Pollonia was a naturally brave person-as indeed Nao had begun to fully appreciate. After the first peal of mirth, each successive chortle merely served to steel her nerves. Thus, when Nao opened her eyes and found enough composure to speak to her again, all she saw was Poll being Poll: clear-eyed and quiet and attentive as usual.

Nao smiled at that.

"I've bought a cheeky slave, looks like," she said, and waved a hand to fan herself. Her face was still red from her bout of laughter. "Bloody cheeky, and a heavy gambler, at that. Do you gamble much, Poll?"

Pollonia had a ready answer: "When the stakes don't involve my life on the line, not really."

This time, both of them smiled at each other.

"Only in it for the big pots, eh?" Nao replied, crossing her legs and jiggling the foot that this act left dangling in mid-air. "Still, I want you to answer something for me, and you'd better answer me honestly, because I'll know if you're lying."

"Fine."

"That you even took the gamble means you thought there was a chance of actually winning. What made you think I'd possibly keep my side of the bargain instead of disposing of you afterwards?"

"I don't know."

Nao gave her a terribly amused grimace.

"Well, shit," she said. "What do you mean you don't know?"

"Just that," Pollonia replied with a helpless shrug. "It means the

same as it always does. I don't know. I just thought: *Hey, maybe*. Or maybe it's better to say I felt that." She winced, knowing that did not sound at all convincing. "Or something like that, Nao. I don't know. Maybe I was just desperate enough to think it? You get plenty desperate when something like that comes along, you know."

Unexpectedly, the centurion gave her an affable smile.

"No, I get it," she told Pollonia. "It's either of two things: luck or instinct. Either thing is useful Poll, and if you've got at least one of them, like I think you do, then I think I know what to do with you."

That caught the other woman's attention, and a quiver seemed to run up her body as she stiffened, staring intently at her new master.

"What?" she asked with deep excitement. "What are you going to do with me? Will I stay on with you, after all?"

A few seconds after dropping the final question, she seemed to remember that there was another alternative-which she had heretofore thought just as preferable. Her own forgetfulness of it was indication enough to both of them of what she wanted, however, and it intrigued Nao as much as it surprised her.

"Or am I going to be sent to Hime?" she followed, naming the other now-slightly-less-attractive option. Inside, she was asking herself why that was so. Was she reluctant to leave this place, after all? *If so, it's surely reasonable*. Yet that reason rang hollow, for another voice kept up a building susurrus in her head: *Nao, it's Nao, now it's Nao*.

The woman in front of her waved a finger before putting it to her lips, which curved up mysteriously.

"We'll see," she began, before being interrupted by a knock on the door. Both of them looked at it and it was Pollonia who got up first. Nao intercepted quickly when a familiar voice sounded her name, however. She told Pollonia she would take care of it. Instead, she said, Pollonia should get dressed; Nao herself was already in her tunic.

The centurion opened the door an inch and peeked out. After a few mumbled words with the person there, she told Pollonia to finish dressing while waiting for her to come back. Pollonia agreed and watched as the redhead left the room.

And exploded back into it only moments later.

"What's wrong?" the brunette asked, watching Nao thunder all over the room and pick up her scattered effects. She could see those thin red brows slanted close together, however, and the tightness of Nao's mouth arrested her. Something was happening, she understood, but exactly what it was she did not know. It must be bad-horrible, even - because Nao was not talking, not even spewing invectives like a sodden drunkard picking bones with a vengeance. Nao was silent. It was that, more than anything, that frightened her.

She stood at the side of the bed, holding her arms to herself in an effort to minimise the space she occupied, and watched the redhead helplessly. What was wrong with her future master?

After a few terse seconds, she found her voice above the din of Nao's stomping.

"Are you fine?" she asked very quietly. "Nao?"

The soft words seemed to make Nao remember she was there. The sharp eyes turned her way, and had Pollonia been made of slightly lesser mettle, she would have flinched.

Instead, she blinked.

"Find my boots," the centurion ordered, still scowling dreadfully but keeping her voice low. She sat on the stool she had been occupying earlier, beside the window. "Help me put them on."

Pollonia complied, quickly locating and bringing the footwear over.

Once she had knelt and begun to slip one over Nao's foot, the centurion threw her head back and suddenly let loose that thing Pollonia had been expecting.

" *Fellatores!* " she howled, making the other woman's fingers pause.

She breathed heavily after this, as though something about that had not released but only exhausted her. Pollonia dared to look up, concerned almost to distraction, and looked straight into Nao's troubled face.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Her hands continued lacing up the high boots as Nao glowered.

"Trouble," said the centurion, chewing furiously on a lip. "A shitload of trouble. Shit!"

Pollonia nodded, wondering if she could ask about the trouble or simply let the centurion keep discharging her oaths. She did not have long to wonder, however, as Nao herself began to tell her.

"It'll be all over town soon, Poll," she said in a growling voice. "Hey. You remember that thing I told you? About the general being among the candidates for our elections back home?"

Pollonia nodded eagerly, knowing any hesitation might well displace that terrible anger towards her.

"For praetor, I think?" she ventured.

Nao nodded in a swift jerk.

"Guess what happened," she snapped. "Hurry up."

Pollonia slipped the other boot on the remaining foot.

"She won?" she tried, hoping it would be the right answer. Nao probably preferred to hear right answers when she was like this. Then again, how would she know? She had never seen Nao like this.

"Damned right she won," Nao muttered, easing Pollonia's worry about her response. "Oh, those *cunni*, I'll bet they did this. I'll bet this is what they wanted all along."

"Er..." Pollonia tried to keep her fingers working steadily as she put the question. "Why is her winning a bad thing?"

This time, all she got was silence. Even the troubled breaths ceased, and she thought, suddenly, that silence could be a violent thing sometimes. She held her own breath, steeled herself as far as she knew how, and summoned every daring fibre in her body to risk looking at Nao again.

The glare she found on Nao's face forced anything she might have said all the way down her gullet.

"Oh, it's a bad thing, all right," Nao told her angrily, something in her voice registering like rusted nails dragging on a marble floor. "It's a bad thing because our goddamned perfect general had to do everything too well again. It's a bad thing because she just had to come in at the top of the poll. That's plenty bad, Pollonia. It's bad because it means she's been elected *praetor urbanus*. And that means she's got to go home."

# Chapter 39

## **Illustrations:**

*Please remove the spaces. Once again, we have Mlle. Iris Enigma to thank for this piece (and we do indeed thank her). Replace the Y's with W's, the ZZZ with COM, and remove the spaces after the full stops.*

YYY. deviantart. ZZZ/iris-enigma89/art/Inter-Nos-Shizuki-s-Haven-128740217

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## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Antakaios** (Gk.) - Sturgeon, specifically a stellate sturgeon.
2. **Manica** (L.) - Arm-greave or protector.

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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"You don't mean that, Chie? It can't-I mean-you didn't even know about it, for Juno's sake! Do you really mean that?"

A telling silence met these words. The first speaker, frustrated by this mute response, vented her anger in a loud snarl.

"Beggin' your pardon here, General," she said with a tip of the head to her commander. "Don't mean to make such a scene, really! But I'm just waiting for one of these bloody politicians-no offence intended to you-to explain this to me, because I'm just a dumb commoner who can't seem to see her way through this with common sense!"

The occupants of the room looked at the centurion, whose flame-like hair waved wildly as her roaming glower tried to prod some of them to answer her, at least. It was the one woman she was not taking to task who actually did reply, though, and with a gentle voice that yet brooked no argument.

"Nao-han," the woman said. "Let us be calm."

It was a command and Nao took it. The centurion shut her eyes in response, obviously trying to wrest whatever cool she could from a reservoir that had been draining all evening. Right now, she felt as though she was running on empty as far as that virtue was concerned. And it did not seem about to rain patience any time soon, as far as she could see!

She was in Shizuru's quarters within the gubernatorial residence, in a private meeting with a few select persons of the general's own request. They had all participated in a larger conference just hours earlier, which had been held at a different venue. That earlier meeting had been part of the reason for the deterioration of her patience, for it had taken a good deal out of her to stand silent while their commander announced to them that wretched news: that she, Shizuru Fujino, had been elected urban praetor and was consequently due back in Hime. That she had to go home .

The centurion took the inside of her cheek between her teeth, trying very hard not to bite all the way through the soft flesh. Going home already? Without having finished their objective? Wretched news indeed! For their situation had shades of complication to it that muddled the issue of who would be returning to Hime and who would stay.

She released the tissue of her mouth and took to grinding her teeth. The act produced a low and terrible sound, one that her soldiers had learned to fear by now. The common saying (when the centurion was not present to hear it) was that she ground her teeth first, then ground your bones afterwards. And given that she was the sort of person to whom one attributed such dark threats in a literal and not literary fashion, no one ever wanted to hear her grinding her teeth.

*It's not that I don't want to see Hime*, the tooth-grinder was thinking,



frowning direly at the handsomely-decorated floor of her general's quarters. Who would not miss their home after months in a land this chilled and this wind-blasted? Who would not long for the decent roads of Hime, which were generally kept smooth and easy to traverse, as opposed to the ice-crept walks here? It had been months since she had seen a true Himean tavern too, its latticed walls wreathed with clambering vines instead of the wretched frost that infested these northern lands; months since she had walked the warmly shadowed alleys of Hime instead of the bitterly dark ways of this place. No question about it: a part of her yearned now and had yearned, ever since arriving here, for Hime. For home.

But-and here was the rub-was *she* even going to go home?

The doubt arose from a bureaucratic point, one that had been discussed in the earlier staff meeting: the person to receive the summons had been their commander alone. Only she was obliged to return by virtue of her election as the chief praetor of the city for the new year. Her soldiers' fates, by comparison, were still floating. The commission that sent her on this campaign, it would be argued, was not actually done yet. Which meant she would have to be replaced in her command.

When commanders were recalled from and replaced on their missions, the rest of the pack had to face the possibility of staying. A good number of the superior officers stayed on too if they and the replacement turned out to be willing to make the arrangements. But, as for Nao... she was only a soldier. Granted, she was an invaluable commanding officer of the soldiers, but still essentially and indubitably a soldier: not someone of reasonable clout or distinguished lineage; not someone with the right to decide for herself when her service would be over. Much as it annoyed her, it had always been the fate of commoners to have such matters decided for them by others higher up the social ladder.

Applied to the situation, this meant that the soldiers would have no choice but to stay and continue their service under the replacement if their superiors decided it. The commander herself wanted it to be so, as she harboured fears of sudden incursions by the Mentulaeans while she was away serving her term in Hime. Hence, there was every likelihood that Nao would be made to stay. In effect, she and

her soldiers would soon find themselves under the command of another general.

It was this Nao found insupportable. She roared to herself that she would not have it, ready to belch this mental protest aloud if necessary to get her message to the woman in front of her. Again the grinding teeth, the revolt against the notion. The very thought of soldiering for another general was odious to her, and her general should know it: the patrician had been one of the legates for the last campaign Nao had taken under a different commander, after all. She had even been the one to prevent Nao from nearly killing the man due to his incompetence. Nao had seen enough of dimwitted and mediocre commanders to be fed up; the current campaign's leader was the gross exception who did not tempt her into the capital crime of mutiny. The woman knew that-she just had to!

It was not just her reluctance to soldier for another. There was, for instance, such a thing as investment . Nao believed in what they-under the guidance of their *true and only* commander-were doing here. She shared the sense of urgency in their true mission: she could see how important it was to Hime's continued superiority that they rein in the Mentulaeen expansion before the wretches reached Fuuka's outlying boundaries in the north. They had been just about to do that. But now? Now changes would have to take place. Bad changes. Changes about which, she nonetheless realised, none of them could do a thing.

And that was what she tried to remember. *Damn sure you're upset*, she reminded herself, *but the others are too*. Her eyes went instinctively to their general. She was the most upset one there, really, for all that most people would never have seen it. Nao did, but even so, she could not help wishing that Shizuru would show it on her face-as did most other people. But that would make her less of whatever she was that kept Nao following only her lead and no one else's, would it not?

"Right," she uttered after taking a moment to breathe. "Pardon me again, General. I'm sorry about that."

Shizuru surfaced from her isolation to give her centurion and occasional spymaster a smile.

"I just want to know what's going to happen, is all," Nao heaved. "What's going to happen to all of us, I mean."

"I'm afraid it's clear enough, much though I hate to admit it." The answer came from another of the guests of this exclusive conference, the senior legate. "Shizuru-san has to go home, and the same probably goes for some of the legates. As for the soldiers..."

Nao glared at her friend.

"Go on," she said. "What about the soldiers, Chie?"

Chie looked unhappy.

"Nao," she sighed, shaking her head. "I guess it can't be helped."

Out came the fangs again: Nao's eyes flashed with anger.

"Don't look at me like that-I'm not offering sacrifices of thanks for it, either!" Chie warned.

The centurion raised an eyebrow.

"Well, *shit*," she said, so frustrated that she was actually driven into the opposite direction and into smiling-though it was a rather nasty smile that she managed. "Shi-eeet . "

"My thoughts exactly," the senior legate said wryly, before suddenly producing an uncharacteristically malicious smile. "The only consolation I'll have is that when we get back to Hime, we can convey our thoughts in a more *concrete* way to everyone at the back of this mess."

Nao growled in agreement, avoiding Shizuru's eyes-as indeed everyone else was suddenly doing. After all, it had been her cousin who was most prominently responsible for the aforementioned mess.

And Chie seemed all of a sudden to remember it.

"Armitage and her posse, I'll wager," she qualified swiftly, darting a glance to their commander. Shizuru did not acknowledge her.

"There're more people behind this than meets the eye. Or gets to the ear."

Naο agreed: " *Cunni* must've been right thick in it, to get this. They'll have spent a pretty penny on bribes to guarantee this result!"

"Actually, I have a feeling they didn't spend as much as you'd imagine," came another voice, oddly serene and thoughtful considering the agitation of the other speakers in the room. "Given the news of the letters I have been receiving, I believe Shizuru-san has gained even more popularity back home of late. Certainly the tales of her exploits have been trumpeted this entire year, not only in the Curia but also in the Forum and to every sidewalk-vendor screaming news to his fellows down the street."

The others looked at the youngest of Shizuru's legates as she smiled coldly at her goblet.

"I also imagine it adds to it that there are no other interesting military ventures on Hime's plate," she continued casually. "Definitely none as successful as ours, anyway, and with as popular a commander as we have. The military woman of the moment in Hime, I think, is none other than Shizuru-san."

Her eyes met red ones as Shizuru herself looked her way. Suou met the gaze equably.

"If any were so ignorant as to be unaware of her before, they surely aren't now," she continued. "The Battle at Argentum was only months ago and has been followed by other exploits of interest: the solo parley with the King of the Mentulaeans-the annihilation of the long-standing forest bandits-the small but extraordinary battle to recapture a menagerie of giant and slaving cats. Tales from a distant world, frigid and freezing, and fantastically *fabulous*."

She smiled her laid-back, slightly calculating smile again as she went on: "Fables, you know, capture a child's interest. All the more when they're set down by an author as gifted as you, Chie-san. You have a natural touch for epic composition, you know: surely it's not escaped you that your accounts of our work have been selling out at bookstores back home? Often repackaged under titles such as 'The

Fujino Campaign: Adventures in the Northlands'. I even have correspondents who've waxed lyrical with praise over them."

The senior legate blinked.

It's no wonder Shizuru-san came out at the top of the poll. See, most persons, voting Himeans of the upper classes included, are still children." She smiled and showed her decidedly upper class teeth to them. "All things considered, their timing was perfect."

The primipilus frowned at this, too irritated to admire their foes' supposed temporal precision.

"I don't think we should be singing Hooray's for them right now, Legate," she snapped harshly-something most would not even imagine doing if faced with one such as the woman she was addressing. The young patrician was unfazed by her severity, however, and merely nodded before sending a lazy wink to Shizuru, for whom the gesture seemed to barely register. Indeed, the commander herself had thus far let her friends do all the talking. And this apparent muteness had not passed notice among the others, even if it had passed comment. Shizuru had spoken very little after her announcement to the other officers and her request for this small group to stay, adding only a noncommittal word here and a silent nod there. To most onlookers, she would have appeared the calmest of everyone: face nearly void of expression, body still and unshaken. However, as Nao had observed earlier, this was often her demeanour when most upset. All the people with her at the present time had known her long enough to either suspect or know it.

Perhaps, each one also suspected, that was precisely why she had asked them in particular to stay.

They let her have her silence and went on with their discussion. Meanwhile, the only other entirely quiet person in the room never moved her gaze from the centre of turmoil. Her deep green eyes communicated a plea so strong it was almost pathetic to watch: for Shizuru to be all right, *to please be all right*. However, Shizuru did not see her. As was true of most other things in that room, that night.

The Himean general was too busy thinking to notice much of

anything. For one of the rare times in her life, she felt that she had *lost*. It was true that it might have been a mere battle, figuratively speaking, and not the entire war; all the same, it remained a loss. And Shizuru Fujino never lost: not with her battles and most especially not with her wars. That was because she knew every battle mattered, because the secret behind her genius was her knowledge that each small blow landed on an enemy was what felled him, and not actually the last, seemingly grandest one. Every battle you won brought you a step closer to winning the war. That was why the lowest she ever permitted herself was a draw.

So much for never losing. Now she was running through the awful wastes where she believed her over-confidence had finally led. Unforeseen treachery! What was happening? How had it happened? How could she have let it happen? That was the crux of the matter, surely: she should have seen it before it happened. She should have been able to perceive it coming, and thus prevented it before it could arrive. But she had not. How in all the hells could she have not?

Her discomfort with herself manifested only in a shift of her crossed legs, which no one perceived under the table.

*Tomoe*, she thought lividly, wishing she could crunch the woman into powder as easily as she crunched the name between her teeth. Tomoe-her cousin-her own traitorous trap. Tomoe had done this to her.

Whatever small regard Shizuru might have previously held for that woman was now incinerated, burnt in the flames of betrayal. Her friends were right: Tomoe would have had to be in league with one of her foes to do this, a foe who surely knew that her supposed isolation in the North was actually better rather than worse for her career, given the opportunities it provided for her reputation's enhancement. A smart foe, evidently, and a rich one too, Suou's remarks on the easy funding of this petty plot notwithstanding. Even if she was as popular in Hime as Suou claimed-and she knew without arrogance that Suou spoke true-such a scheme would still have required a good deal of bribery, not least because its makers would have wanted to be certain of the results.

She had no choice but to return to the city, whether she would

challenge the election or accept it meekly. She had to return unless she wanted to be held in contempt of the laws she had respected and held for so long, and which she knew she would continue to respect and hold, if her *dignitas* had anything to do with it. Oh, yes, *dignitas* had everything to do with it!

If she returned, she would be able to contest the results in the proper courts and methods. No one could say she had been childish in stubbornly refusing to honour the Senate's summons just to make an infantile-if-valid point. Especially when she could more easily and effectively make said point in the flesh, before the Senate and People themselves! Tomoe knew her well, to have worked it out so perfectly. She would have to show Tomoe the price of having played this game too well.

The feeling of having failed herself and failing to see this little game's end rankled her pride even more than the betrayal. She had not cared for Tomoe enough to prompt expectations of great loyalty, after all. But that aside, she now had to think beyond the little game, and of what was really holding her back. Even with the prestige the position of *praetor urbanus* brought, she had no desire to return to Hime just yet. Why would she? Her plans had already solidified this far, her commitment to this venture concretised so much that she had only been weeks from the first foray. Every fibre of her was set to go to war, every horned patch of skin on her palms hardened and itching to take a weapon and swing it at the empire in the west. All those preparations, now to go to waste. Preparations that were not only of the body or the mind, but also of the heart. She had set her heart on staying here for a few years more. She supposed that may even have been what hurt most of all.

There was Natsuki.

*Dear Natsuki*, she invoked, finally turning her eyes to the Otomeian girl's face. The earnest look of concern on the young woman's countenance had mellowed, but there was still enough there to hurt her chest. How kind the girl was! How could one possibly go without that sort of concern after having lived with it every hour for months? It was selfish, she knew, but the possible selfishness of it did not make it any more possible a deprivation. She had no intention of condoning that deprivation. But how to explain to the girl that much?

There was another matter being forced on her all too suddenly!

It was decided-had been decided, prior to this-that she would do all she could to keep Natsuki by her side. All the same, Shizuru could not help but be anxious over the thought of separating the girl from her own home due to selfish desire. How could she possibly explain that to Natsuki without making it seem so egocentric?

*How can I, Child, she asked the girl with her eyes, taking a chance now that Natsuki had dropped her gaze to the floor. How do I go about this with you? This is why you frighten me, and why I call you 'Child' even when I know you are also already a woman.*

She could not help but feel it sometimes: that Natsuki was the only person in the world who could frighten her, who could crack her shell with that wide and brutally honest look, which was so like the impenitently sincere attention of children. Children were vicious in that way: they had no sense of subtlety in their glances; they bored straight and reckless into you. Was that why she had never liked children, even when she had been a child herself? But then, she had never been much of a child, was the truth of it.

If any of that was true, then it made even more ironic what she felt now. After all, Natsuki had the truest embodiment of that innocent look she so feared, had the most stabbing sincerity in her eyes that Shizuru had long disliked. Yet Shizuru could not dislike the girl. She could not possibly dislike her.

But by god, did she ever dislike being forced into this situation!

*Nevertheless, I am already in it, she thought resignedly, knowing she would have to face those emerald irises soon and speak her request-her selfish desire-to them.*

*If I tell you this, Natsuki, if I tell you this now in such a way, perhaps, or another, I cannot help but be afraid of it. I am afraid of what look you might give me.*

She made a small movement with her head, needed to lick her lips to mask the sigh that nearly slipped out. She needed to find out the answer to her private query soon, for it was clear she was operating



on borrowed time. The advance letter from her friend-currently the *senior* consul; Traditionalists, take that!-had warned that an official summons from Senate would soon follow. It would be either accompanied or followed closely by a formal deputation bearing her replacement, whoever that poor fool would be. It would have to be a fool, as everyone knew without illusion that few could claim to be a "replacement" for Shizuru Fujino.

She sneered inwardly, knowing herself well enough to have confidence in that common belief too. If only she knew the incompetents back home would choose someone decent for once! She would hate to have added work on her plate when she did return to these regions. But she had the feeling she was hoping for too much. The Senate had little idea of just how fragile the situation here could be and already was. They would most likely settle upon some other conceited mediocrity with the ancestry but not the skills for this mission. Calling it a mere fortification mission indeed!

*A pestilence on them all, conceited mediocrities that they are!*

Upon her replacement's arrival, she presumed she would be tasked to leave for Hime immediately. There was no use trying to pretend she could do otherwise, her racing-but-still-clear mind told her.

Well then: she needed to get as much as she could in order. What to do with the army, which was really *her army*, made up of her veterans for the most part? What to do with her legates, at least half of whom would most likely be going back with her? What to do with the greater plan, the one to whip the Mentulaeans into submission? And what to do with Natsuki, who would be uprooted from her home with violent speed if all went as she was now planning, if she would indeed have to make all these changes so abruptly?

*Ye gods*, she thought, sorely tempted to massage her throbbing temples. *I need another drink.*

She picked up the jug from the table and poured wine into her brass cup. She did it silently and with her typical fluidity; even so, it was apparent that everyone was conscious of her at that moment, and waiting tensely for her to do more than what she did, which was to lift the cup and drain it in mere seconds.

She set the cup back down, and looked at the people watching her.

"Very well," she said, and something in her voice elicited a common shiver. She had not whispered the words nor spat them, yet there was something in there that slid hard and scaly into each ear, slithering around their brains. How could a woman sound so perfectly civil and calm, they wondered, yet manage to inject so much venom into the substratum of the notes?

"It is clear there is much to discuss. It is clear too that there is nothing our talking here can do about the recent development that is the cause of all this discussion. I am not saying we have exhausted the topic, but I do believe we have exhausted ourselves tonight."

She smiled at them.

"It is late," she said. "I thank you for staying with me to this hour. Little though you may know it, your presence has done wonders for my peace of mind, and I look forward to continuing our talks more rationally-and, I hope, fruitfully-tomorrow morning. I feel what we all need now is simply a good night's respite."

Her senior legate smiled as well. As for the three others in the room, their expressions changed little: Nao continued to look irate; Natsuki, quietly concerned; and Suou, languid as ever.

Everyone rose to stand.

"Then we'll see you first thing in the morning," Chie told Shizuru, as she ushered them to the door. "I'll be up early, so just ask for me among the staff. I'll let them know wherever I am."

"Thank you, I shall," Shizuru said. "And thank you again for tonight."

"Not at all-this is a shock for all of us, anyway."

"Indeed. Thank you too, Nao-han."

The centurion nodded: "I'll be up early tomorrow too, General."

"Please do not worry overmuch." She spared a faint smile for her loyal centurion. "If push comes to shove, I shall ensure you are not

shoved into a duty not of your desire."

Yellow-sharp green eyes stared into glittering red ones and, a moment later, glittered too in satisfaction.

"That's a relief," Nao said simply in an exhale. "It's not that I'm being difficult, General. It's just... you understand."

"I do," Shizuru replied, smiling faintly as they filed out through the doorway. She realised she was missing one in the exit, however, and turned to find the remaining person lifting an eyebrow at her. "Suou-han?"

An unhurried smile from the fair young woman.

"I'm sorry, but mind if I impose just a tad longer?" Suou enquired, looking not the least bit apologetic. Shizuru understood what that meant, and shut the door quietly.

"Please," she replied, holding a hand towards one of the vacant chairs. "It would be a pleasure."

Suou met her look as they both sat again. Shizuru was conscious of Natsuki doing the same, on her stool from the far wall and near the bed.

The other patrician spoke first: "I've my own letter."

"I see."

"Hardly a surprise."

"Yes," Shizuru answered. "Hardly one."

Having said this, she took a vaguely tired breath, tapping a finger idly on one knee under the table. The atypically fidgety action was noted only by Natsuki, who remained in her corner and said nothing—save through her eyes.

"I suppose your letter consists of persuading me to do what your sister has suggested?" Shizuru volunteered, stilling her itchy fingers at the glimpse of her girl's disquiet.

Suou answered with a headshake.

"Do you mean to say I even have to persuade you?" Suou asked rhetorically as Shizuru copied her earlier motion: both of them knew there was no other logical choice, of course, other than to do as the elder Himemiya had recommended. She *had to* go home.

"My letter is most likely a mere overview of yours, with a few additional words here and there," Suou went on, flicking her longish blonde fringe away from her eyes. "I see no reason to strengthen my sister's propositions to you, as I'm sure she put them cleanly enough. She has a talent for that."

"Among other things."

"I do have a proposition of my own, which is the main reason I'm still here."

Shizuru eyed her with vague curiosity; she was still occupied with thoughts of everything she needed to put in order.

"A proposition?" she probed in a soft voice. "Is it one entirely your own, Suou-chan?"

"Primarily rather than entirely. I admit Chikane did put forward the option in her letter. Nonetheless, she also advised as much against it as for it, so the decision is truly mine, or so I like to think."

"I see."

Suou smiled before coming out with it.

"I shall be staying," she said.

The distracted red eyes focused, then blinked. For that alone, Suou was satisfied.

"Do you mean as a regular citizen?" Shizuru asked her now. "Or..."

"As a legate to the one who shall be replacing you, yes," Suou replied. "So I am actually here to ask for a transfer of duties from you."

This time, Shizuru did not blink but merely stared.

"You want to act in a legal capacity for my replacement?" she clarified.

"Yes."

"Could it be you know who my replacement is, Suou-chan?"

"No more than you do," Suou lied easily, her chilly eyes reflecting only the fabled cool of her clan. The only person to whom some alarm might have registered was her sister, and Shizuru-while already that in one way-was nevertheless still not her sister. Suou built on the deception effortlessly: "For all we know, it could be holy Jupiter himself."

Shizuru smiled very weakly. Suou knew she might not be smiling when she found out who her replacement would most likely be. Suou had smiled herself upon learning it from her sister's letter. But it had been the sort of smile that reeked of vinegar.

*You rat, Chikane*, she thought, with an inward sigh at her sister's nonetheless understandable caution. It was this that had put her in the delicate position of knowing something Shizuru did not, of the awareness of a probability Shizuru considered not. Of course it was still only a probability, as Chikane had informed her, but given the cautious way Chikane was handling the information, it probably meant that this particular probability had very good chances of coming true.

And what did that mean for Shizuru? Bad news, she guessed. Chikane had only had an inkling when she drew the inference from what facts were available to her, but Suou had the truth valid and verified, being privy to a closer familiarity with the facts than her sister: Shizuru would definitely not like the person who might just be her replacement.

*But she doesn't need to know that yet*, she thought to herself. Their friend was dealing with more than enough tonight and needed to get herself in order first before Suou put that additional information on her doorstep. Chikane was right, after all: it was still only a possibility

. There was no need to put even more grief on their friend's already strained shoulders until the possibility materialised. Or, at least, before Shizuru had recovered enough from the latest trouble given her. And, capable as Shizuru might be, even she needed to recover.

Added to this was that Suou had a feeling the red-eyed woman had very delicate matters to settle first; she also felt that Shizuru needed all her faculties dedicated to that particular set of tasks.

*So forgive me for this, Shizuru-san, she told the other woman, but only in her mind. I shall withhold the information for now. Only for now. After you've made the most important arrangements, then perhaps we shall see.*

"A pity you do not know," Shizuru was saying to her with tired expression. "I worry, you see."

"Naturally," Suou answered. "I'm sorry I can't offer anything more to the information pool."

"No, it cannot be helped if you do not know."

"No, it can't," Suou thought, masking the guilt with a light smile. "But I'm asking, all the same, and I'm confident of being accepted under their aegis, all the same."

And Shizuru knew that it was no conceit. Suou's familial clout was strong enough to warrant her acceptance into any position she sought by recommendation.

*No one would have the gall to turn down one of her brood, Shizuru thought. They would have to be stupid to do so, at any rate, given that all of the brood thus far has been so marvellously capable. But for Suou-chan to ask this-to ask to do duties under another commander and a yet unknown one, at that-and for such a hazardous mission as this one? Why, I never thought she would do it!*

She tried to keep the negativity from clouding her face. If there was one of her legates aside from Chie whom she had been certain of leaving with her out of pure loyalty, it had been Suou.

"An explanation is required, I see," Suou said a trifle deviously.

Shizuru shook her head.

"No," she answered. "I would hate for you to feel that all your decisions need to be explained to me, Suou-chan."

"That's sweet of you, but I would beg to differ. For one thing, you are my senior officer."

"Soon, no longer."

"Officially, yes. Actually, no."

The crimson eyes glinted. Yes, Suou thought with humour. *Yes, you silly nut. Now you see.*

"Why, Suou-chan," Shizuru said, smiling a little. "Have you been taking lessons from Nao-han?"

"Every now and then," Suou said with a furtive smile of her own.

"Now that that's established and you can stop doubting my intentions out of your usual over-courteous fear of being presumptuous..." She paused to grin as Shizuru gave a low chuckle: she had hit the mark. "I suppose I can continue. I said that was one thing."

"Indeed you did. There is another?"

"For another, might I remind you that we have known each other since childhood. That long a friendship merits some explanations of action, at the very least."

She was just a little surprised when Shizuru's eyes turned dark again.

"Pardon me for saying I am uncertain of that these days," the other patrician replied. "There are those who seem not to hold to the same theory."

*What? From where was that?*

Then Suou caught the answer in a flash: *Tomoe, of course*. Shizuru was talking about Tomoe. That meddling little bitch! That cousin of Shizuru's had done more damage than she knew, Suou saw. She had wrecked Shizuru's faith in her, precious little as it may have been. This had planted a small seed of rot in Shizuru's confidence in those close enough to her to be considered family. Suou suddenly thought in a flash of insight that she saw that seed working away at those red eyes: a dark infection, bloody and full of bile. A putrefaction of sorts. Chikane, Shizuru's dearest friend, would say it should not be allowed to happen.

She herself would say it *could not* be allowed to happen.

"I pardon you for that," she told Shizuru now. "It's understandable after your cousin's petty treachery. But I have to admit I won't pardon you if you apply the same uncertainties to me. I have never wronged you in such a way and never shall. And I have long held your interests so dear to mine and my sister's that I hardly even see the separation of our fortunes. You are my other sister, Shizuru-san, I always thought that was clear. You injure me if you apply your doubts to even me now."

Shizuru's face slipped into apology at the rebuke.

"Of course, Suou-chan," she said quickly, smoothly. "Excuse me if it sounded like that. I never even thought of it."

*No, you didn't*, Suou answered in her mind. *But a little more time, a few more years bearing that doubt of others without it being checked, and you might.*

She truly could not allow that to happen. A Shizuru that distrustful was not only a tragedy for her and her sister, but also-and she was cool-headed enough to admit this-a danger to everyone else. Their dearest friend was too strong, too limitless at heart: endow her with limitless distrust and you would be making a monster.

"That makes me happy," she said now. "May I go on with my explanation, Shizuru-san, now that that much has been cleared?"

Shizuru was acquiescent, her hands doing a graceful welcoming



movement. Suou watched them curl through the air and, because the palms were out, display the many calluses on the white skin. She thought it was a beautiful irony that someone could look so elegant and yet have hands so scarred by work and war. Her own hands, sword-worn as they also were, did not yet have as much character. Suddenly she wondered how many persons Shizuru had killed with those long fingers of hers. Hundreds? Thousands, even?

"I am your eager auditor," Shizuru was saying. "Please continue, Suou-chan."

The clear blue eyes, so light they were nearly white, twinkled merrily in response.

"If I remain, I shall be in a most useful position for you and my sister," Suou said. "After all, I dare to think my loyalty to our cause unquestioned, insofar as my loyalty to you and my sister is that. I believe some of the other legates may be remaining as well, but I'm going to state something here at the risk of being arrogant: no other legate that can or shall be willing to remain can possibly be as worth your money as I am. Feel free to rebut me if you believe you have ample reason, but I doubt you do, hmm?"

Shizuru's eyes were twinkling too.

"Perhaps Harada-san-or even Nao, for all that she's merely a centurion-could give me competition in that regard," Suou continued with a smirk. "But! First of all, they do not have my name and my family's clout. I daresay few could claim equivalence there, especially with you yourself out of the picture. And that already gives me a distinct advantage, not so?"

"True."

"Furthermore, you know as well as I do that the two I mentioned would not of their own volition ask to stay on under another commander. Chie-san might stay if you actually ask her, but you would never do that. As for Nao, she as much as declared earlier that she wouldn't even be willing to put up with any other general-unless it were my sister, maybe, and even then only because you would vouch for Chikane and Chikane already has a reputation for

being an excellent as well as humane commander too. Otherwise, Nao would be liable to commit several petty mutinies, and where would our favourite centurion be then, eh?"

Shizuru finally gave in to the smile peeking out from her eyes.

"Indeed," she smirked. "That would be troubling."

"As you say." The other patrician bowed her head lightly. "So, it is best for all of us that I be the one to stay stationed here, under the order to protect our common interests." Flashing a brief, coded look at a now-smiling Shizuru, she added: "Related to which, actually, is the other suggestion I have to propose."

Shizuru smirked: "Full of suggestions tonight!"

"Hah! Tired of them yet?"

"On the contrary-I am eager for any more. The origin of this next suggestion is?"

"Myself now, and no other."

"I see. Do go on!"

"My second suggestion concerns the most valuable local interests you have," the other blonde continued, as blandly and smoothly as if she were not speaking in cipher. "While I am perfectly willing and ready to look over them for you during your temporary absence, I nonetheless suggest that you look into some options for a provisional transfer of property."

Shizuru met her look squarely.

"Some of your recent acquisitions," Suou elaborated. "May be possible to remove, even if only temporarily."

Still no word from the other woman. Suou pressed on with a cool smile.

"Which is to say that I am personally in favour of making arrangements to remove them as soon as possible, and under your

express custody. Their temporary holding place need not necessarily be Hime, of course. I believe you have some excellent safes and lock-boxes in some of your villas near the city, and they may also be considered for the protection of your recent acquisitions. The choice of venue, however, is ultimately up to you. If I may, though, I would advise against banking said acquisitions even if only temporarily. That dear little banker, Sosius, while a perfectly capable financial advisor, would be hard-pressed to know how to deal with such *special* items."

She added perversely: "They rather have a life of their own, which makes them difficult to manage."

She found it intensely hilarious that Shizuru looked as though she knew not whether to smile or to frown.

"Suou-chan," the woman settled for saying.

"That's it, all right? I promise to cease harassing you with all my suggestions," Suou grinned, putting her hands up in false fear. She giggled when the war on that beautiful face was concluded, ending with Shizuru in a rueful smile. "They are good suggestions, though, aren't they?"

Shizuru exhaled a long breath, looking winded by everything her friend had just said.

"Yes," she said, turning her eyes heavenward for a moment. "Yes, they are."

She chuckled shortly and added: "You are right, of course, in saying that poor Sosius-han would not know what to do with such items."

Suou nodded.

"All right, then, Suou-chan."

Suou inclined her head curiously: "All right?"

"Yes."

"Does that mean my suggestions are accepted?"

"And to be put in action."

"Immediately?" Suou pressed.

Shizuru inhaled first, as though bracing herself. Suou watched her.

"Yes," the general decided, voice firm. "Immediately."

"Then my work here is done." The other woman rose from her seat and gave Shizuru a suddenly accusatory glare. "Have you eaten?"

Shizuru seemed mildly stunned.

"Oh," she said, her eyes round. They slid away from Suou and towards Natsuki, who returned the stare with only the same curious expression as before. "Oh, no."

Suou looked at each woman in turn before nodding to her friend. "I'll tell someone to bring up something. I'm going now, anyway, so I don't mind."

"There-there is actually a dinner waiting for us. It was supposed to be for us," Shizuru said, looking at her friend feebly. The latter woman could see it was taking all of her restraint not to run over to the Otomeian with them and begin apologising for having forgotten. "It was prepared in advance, that is."

Suou was already at the door.

"Understood," she said, throwing her flaxen hair over a shoulder. "I'll tell them to warm it and bring it up. And I suppose I should call for someone to prepare your bath too. No need to rise-I'm quite capable of showing myself out, thank you."

The general looked at her old friend helplessly.

"Thank you so much, Suou-chan," Shizuru said, from her seat. "I am indebted to you. Truly."

Suou left them with a wink, the closing door a prelude to the silence that followed her exit.

The two remaining women looked at each other. Shizuru dared to smile a little, hating herself for what she knew to be the weakness of the expression, and hating it even more when Natsuki responded with her own weak equivalent.

She folded her hands on her lap and tried to broaden her grin.

*First things first*, she reminded herself, falling back to the basics: she was actually doing her own version of breathing exercises. *Establish the situation.*

"Natsuki."

There was no response to that, save a small movement of the head.

*Well, naturally*, she told herself with irritation. *Establish the situation, not her name, Idiot.*

"Are you terribly hungry?" she asked the girl as casually as possible. "I am sorry I forgot."

Natsuki shook her head.

"I see. Still, my apologies. It is just that..." Shizuru began, before changing her mind halfway. "This is quite a situation, is it not? A surprise as well."

Natsuki nodded.

*How to do this, how to do this.*

Natsuki opened her mouth. Before the girl could get any words out, however, Shizuru suddenly saw the green eyes glaze over with something that warned her Natsuki was about to raise her mask-that rare mask Shizuru had seen only once before. The thought was so sinister that she cut the girl off immediately, letting out a deep and rushing sigh. How many times had she herself employed that same trick? Fate must be getting back at her!

"Ah, but enough of the politics for now," Shizuru heaved, raising the hands she had folded over the table and smiling at the girl. "I have had enough talk of it tonight though, haven't you? Let us set it aside

for now, *meum mel*, if you would permit me this selfishness for now. Just for the moment, until we can have our dinner. I need a reprieve and I daresay you might welcome it too."

That stopped Natsuki from saying whatever she had been about to say as well as from putting on her facade: Shizuru saw a shudder of something vague and unreadable pass over her lover's face in its place. Though she could not have given a word to it, the sight of that flickering emotion gave her the urge to shift in her seat, like a guilty child.

She settled for changing the topic instead.

"Please sit with me," she said casually. "Our food should be here soon."

Natsuki wordlessly made her way over and settled on the indicated chair. She turned to Shizuru, who was facing her.

Their eyes held each other's before both looked away.

Shizuru had the urge to fidget again. Deciding to rid herself of it by doing something else, she reached across the table for her cup. Only to find it empty. She was just about to get the jug to fill it when she realised that she had taken quite a bit of wine already, and unwatered wine at that. While it certainly was not enough to make her even close to inebriation-or even general fuzziness, come to it, for she was as prodigious a drinker as any true Himean-she felt that she wanted to approach Natsuki tonight with a perfectly clear head. For that, she needed to water the rest of her drinks, starting now.

"The water?" came the words from her companion.

She had been rising from her seat to fetch the other jug, set on one of the low cupboards: every drink for every person earlier had been unwatered. In light of the circumstances, it had been merited.

"Yes." She started as if to sit again, but changed her mind. "But I can get it myself."

"No. Please." The younger woman was already up and at the cupboard in a flash. How she moved so quickly without thumping

frog-leaps on the floor, Shizuru truly did not know. "I will get."

Natsuki carried back the jug and brought it to her carefully.

"Thank you, Natsuki." She eyed her cup. "Perhaps you would be so kind as to pour it until it reaches halfway?"

The young woman did just that.

"How far, the wine?" she went on to ask, getting the wine jug too. Shizuru looked at her helplessly, feeling even more fidgety with all this consideration. She pointed to about two fingers' width below the rim of the cup.

"Here," she said softly. "If you please."

Again Natsuki proceeded to do as she had asked, doing it a little more carefully this time. The Otomeian's black hair slipped over her shoulders as she leaned down, towards the table, and the cascade of it drew Shizuru's attention. The rippling shine on the hair led her eyes irresistibly towards that pale and serious face.

"Forgive me, Natsuki."

The green eyes glanced at her with the words, although they returned almost immediately to the task at hand the next moment. Shizuru went on, closing her eyes as she spoke to her girl.

"This should have been our day together, " she continued deliberately, her ears picking up the fine rush of wine slipping into the water and bloodying its clarity. She repeated her words. "This should have been our day together. I promised you that. I promised you we would have it all to ourselves and be uninterrupted, and yet I-

"No."

She tore her eyes away from the hearth and towards Natsuki, who had finished what she was doing. The Otomeian had set down the jug and was now smiling faintly at her.

"No, Shizuru," the young woman reiterated, timbre ringing a note of

exasperation. She frowned humorously as she spoke in her usual concise style, the staccato of her speech beating her point into her auditor's ears: it seemed to be telling Shizuru not to interrupt the rhythm.

"It is not your fault," she said. "Do not tell me sorry. No need for that, Shizuru. So no."

The older woman could only look at her powerlessly.

"Silly," was the chiding conclusion. "Poor, silly Shizuru."

Shizuru smiled now, amused by the words.

"I am," she whispered. "Am I not?"

Natsuki nodded.

"It was good," she said simply and with her distinctive gravity underlining the words. Her tone seemed to be warning the older woman again not to rebut her, and Shizuru took the hint. "Today was good. I enjoyed the ride. The stop at the cliff, it was good too. The play, it is fine if we miss it today. There are many others, and I do not mind. I really-I was very happy. I thought you knew."

Shizuru stared at her, surprised by this onslaught of speech. Natsuki grinned at her lover and brushed her fingers shortly against the woman's jaw.

"Shizuru, I liked today," she said. "You made me happy. No need to say sorry when it was good, or you make it seem that the good is meant to be bad."

The kiss in those green eyes softened the rebuke, and Shizuru felt that she dared not blink.

"Shizuru." Natsuki was looking earnestly at her now. "Thank you."

The girl pushed the goblet towards her. Her eyes were drawn to the motion, but did not focus on the goblet. Rather, they fixated on the linen-swathed hand that offered it.



*Oh god, she could not help thinking. She can make me feel such a fool, sometimes.*

She touched her hand to the other's face, grin softening when she felt the warm cheek lean against it. The muscle beneath the soft skin moved under her palm: Natsuki was smiling again.

*Really such a fool .*

"You're welcome, Darling. But did you like it enough for me to merit a kiss?" she asked, pretending seriousness.

The girl smirked, and there was relief in it.

"Hmm," the young woman murmured, although she did lean forward. "Could be. I think."

"Then that makes me happy," Shizuru smiled, barely having time to show her teeth before closing her lips on the ones a meagre inch away. The dark head was already angling to one side to accommodate tongues reaching out. She retracted hers first so that she could suck on Natsuki's briefly. Her anxiety was still at the back of her mind, though, while the fore was occupied with determining what to say, how to say, when precisely to say it . She could not permit herself to run away now and take refuge in this young woman's kindness, especially when the hurdle she had to overcome tonight concerned said young woman too. Unfortunately, the longer she stayed in the kiss, the longer she suspected she might try to hide in it temporarily-and she could make no more allowances for what she had formerly considered *temporary*.

She pulled away. She saw, too late, that her quick withdrawal wounded the girl, and that hurt her too.

"Natsu-"

A knock sounded on their door. Both swivelled their heads to it and listened to the announcement: dinner.

"Yes," Shizuru called. "Come in."

A group of servants entered, bearing the warmed-up dishes that

should have been their dinner earlier. Shizuru watched guiltily as they set it up on the polished table where she sat, all of them studiously avoiding her eyes-as well as Natsuki's, she noticed. Word was out, then. What was that they said about bad news travelling fast?

Once the preparations were finished, the servants bowed and took their leave. The ones drawing their bath left a little later, and Shizuru waited for them to go before finally making ready to eat. She looked at the rich repast laid before her, which she had selected herself and had sent to her steward to forward to the kitchens personally.

She felt her heart sink.

*All this food does not make me hungry at all.*

She had every reason to be hungry, though. For one thing, she had yet to eat since the light snack she had shared with Natsuki near midday. For another, the food before her was meant to be excellent, as her steward should have inspected every dish here himself. But now the fare she had chosen so carefully days in advance seemed stale and unappetising. Even the scent of well-roasted garlic, something that always made her mouth water, now seemed intrusive. Her belly almost turned at the thought of eating anything. To many others, this would have been nothing of moment; to her, regular and good eater that she was, this seemed like another minor catastrophe in a day-long list of catastrophes. How could she, of all people, feel unable to eat? She could not even seem to summon enough strength to lift a hand towards the food, and that was terrible to a woman who enjoyed good food as much as she did. Was it because she was still unsettled by everything? And was she really *that* unsettled by everything?

A grumble broke through her ruminations over this little crisis.

"Oh, wha-?"

There was a morsel of oil-wet bread hovering in front of her.

"Ah." She blinked in confusion, only to have the one attempting to feed her smile. "Natsuki."

Natsuki nodded encouragingly; the hand holding the bread moved a little nearer.

"Open," she said, low and huskily. "Shizuru, open. Mouth."

Finally moved to action by the hidden laugh in that voice, Shizuru did as instructed, parting her lips to accept the small scrap of bread. Natsuki nodded approvingly at that and, reminded of how the girl had once done the same when her panther performed a trick she had been teaching it, Shizuru could not but smile. Natsuki nodded approvingly again.

"Is that better, Domina?" Shizuru asked her jokingly, after having done chewing and swallowing the piece. Natsuki slid forward her goblet again in answering.

"Better, yes," she said, urging the older woman to take a sip. "You must eat."

Shizuru paused in the act of sipping her wine.

"As must you," she said.

"If you eat, yes."

Up went Shizuru's brows above the goblet's rim.

"My, my," she said, words echoing roundly as they were spoken half-into the cup. "Does that mean you refuse to partake of any nutrition if I refuse as well?"

A confirmation.

"Well!" she said. "I never expected such a threat. Especially not from my Natsuki."

"Not threatening, Shizuru. You should think of, hmm, a bribe . "

A laugh evocative of amazement spilled from her.

"You are bribing me, *meum mel* ?" she said incredulously.

Natsuki smirked and riposted, "You are a politician, no?"

Shizuru's face went blank.

"Yes," she said with some wistfulness, thinking now of the latest trouble her occupation had brought her. "Yes, I am."

She wanted to kick herself when Natsuki's face fell in apology.

"Oh, but enough of that! Look, Natsuki, have you tried this already?" she said, grabbing one of the dishes on the table like a lifeline. She slid it to Natsuki.

The young woman looked at her offering with interest, diverted by what she seemed to regard as an item of great strangeness. It was a wooden bowl with a modest heap of tiny, pearl-like objects, each miniature globe a deep and glistening black. It was apparent from her eyes that she had never seen them before. She part-turned to Shizuru but kept her gaze fixed on the alien food before her.

"I do not know this," she confessed.

"Ah, then I have surprised you with it. That is good."

"It is food, Shizuru?"

"Oh, yes."

"It does not seem like food."

"I assure you it is indeed edible and marvellously tasty too."

"What is it?"

"Sturgeon roe," Shizuru answered, before catching herself. Natsuki was a mountain child, a girl who trod paths far inland. Even with all her impressive knowledge from books, what were the chances of her being familiar with the large fish that lived in the seas and the rivers near them?

"I beg your pardon. Do you know what a sturgeon is?" she asked now. Seeing the uncertainty on the girl's face, she tried again in

another language, wagering that the girl would have at least run into the term in some Hellenic text somewhere: " *Antakaïos* ?"

"Oh! Yes, yes." Natsuki's eyes glimmered. "The big fish, no?"

"Yes, it is a big fish."

She stared at the dish again with different eyes. The Himean thought she seemed about to poke and pry at the little black orbs facing her, dissecting them in an effort to prise more knowledge from the strange things.

"This is that big fish?" she asked now. "The eggs of it, I mean? That is what 'roe' means, no? Eggs?"

"Yes, yes, yes, and yes," Shizuru said with a laugh, amused by the other's burst of enthusiasm. "These are the eggs. The fish itself is very large, as you say."

"And you-how did you call it?"

"The fish? Sturgeon."

"Stur-zheon."

"Yes, perfect."

Natsuki purred gently in her throat, still dissecting the miniature pearls with a green stare.

"Sturgeon eggs," she mumbled slowly. "So *small* ."

Shizuru's eyebrow lifted: "Why, did you think they would be bigger?"

"Mm-hm." She supplied an explanation: "That fish is very big."

She shrugged as Shizuru looked questioningly at her.

"I think of the duck and how big it is, and how big is the duck egg next to the duck, but now I see it is not the same," she rambled, quite to Shizuru's amazement. She grimaced as she considered her error, and suddenly addressed Shizuru in her splendid and scholarly

Greek: "It is a mistake, I see now. One must pause before claiming things in nature are so easily analogous."

She appeared both surprised and glad when Shizuru burst into laughter.

"So you thought the rule would apply as well, Little Scholar?" the Himean chuckled, leaning forward and giving the girl a kiss that she could not have held back even had she used all her self-control. She followed that with a quick squeeze of the girl's arms as thanks for cheering her up. It might have been inadvertently done, true, but part of her said it was not. And she noted and valued the effort even more because she knew what it cost Natsuki to do such a thing, even for her sake.

"You are a wonder, Dear Girl," she told the young woman. "And I swear that even just listening to your flawless Attic makes me weak in the knees. Now let us finally address the matter of these sturgeon eggs and why I asked for them to be brought in specifically for us tonight."

She picked up some of the small eggs on the plate before them, using the wooden spoon provided.

"They are eaten mostly for the flesh, of course, but there are some kinds even more valued for their roe," she said, trying her best to keep the mood light; certainly she would do it for this young woman, if not herself. "This is an example, and this particular roe is prized highly by epicures. Adding more to its value is that it is difficult to ship far inland-which is why I guessed you had yet to try it, given your prowling grounds."

Natsuki affirmed it. She brought the half-filled spoon to the girl's mouth.

"Then, would it please you to sample it?"

Natsuki acquiesced. She did not disappoint in her reaction.

"Well?" Shizuru said, although she already knew it had met the Otomeian's approval, judging by the glimmer in those emerald eyes.

"What think you, Natsuki?"

The girl looked in wonder at the dish of black globes.

"I am-it-it is very good," she said, large eyes opened wide. "Very-oh, Shizuru."

Shizuru laughed, feeling her spirits lift further. This girl really did know how to make her feel better!

"Very Shizuru?" she repeated, earning a mock-frown. "I suppose it must indeed be good, then."

Natsuki sniffed, still unable to help smiling at the dish of little eggs.

"You like it too, Shizuru?" she asked.

"How can I not, if it is very me?"

"Grr."

"Yes, I do like it," the older woman grinned at the weak rumble. She picked up some more with the spoon again and lifted it to Natsuki. "That is why I wanted you to try it. I am so happy you like it as well."

She found the wooden utensil being taken from her hand, however, and turned her way instead. Natsuki arched an eyebrow when she attempted to protest.

"You like too," the young woman said with determination. "You eat too."

The crimson eyes regarded her with as much fondness as amusement.

"As you wish," she said, letting the girl spoon-feed her. She had to add first, however, "That may be a dangerous thing if applied to me as regards you, though."

"Shhh. Eat."

Though both understood that Natsuki's hushing of her was merely a

jest, they nevertheless went through dinner more quietly than usual. They hardly finished half of the dishes that the cook had prepared so painstakingly for the day, and that was where the apprehension both were trying to hide manifested, for their bellies were too unsettled to do the exquisite cuisine the justice it was due. Ironically, it was the one with the smaller appetite who actually did her best to keep them keen on eating: Natsuki took on the position of server for both of them as she took from the plates and urged Shizuru to accept whatever her hand brought. Shizuru was grateful, of course, and did her best too to eat each crumb the girl offered. Even so, the distress was too strong; the two of them felt it, individually and as a pair. It was there in a shallow feeling in the belly, it insinuated itself into each hard-to-swallow crumb and heavy gulp of wine. They had hardly touched a third of the meal in total when both concluded that they had had enough, and rang the bell that would deliver a servant to their rooms.

"Please," Shizuru told the man who arrived. "Do take this down to the kitchen or the servants' quarters-to any people still up. We are unfortunately full already, and there is still so much here. It would be a pity to let it go to waste."

The man looked at the spread before him, eyes lighting up. How lucky!

Shizuru read the expression in his look and permitted him to ring for more of his comrades from among the servants, who readily arrived to take away the exquisite fare she and Natsuki had not been able to finish. They went about the task quickly, eager to sample the terrifically expensive food, and thus it was that the two women found themselves alone again. They seized this opportunity to go finally to their bath. It was still reasonably hot, as Shizuru found when she tested the temperature.

"Please allow me," she said, stepping away from the water and facing her waiting companion. Turning the younger woman around, she loosened the fawn dress Natsuki wore, sliding the soft wool off the Otomeian's shoulders. Then she removed her own clothing, putting everything in the basket the household slaves had left for the purpose. When they were both naked, she led the way into the water. She seated herself against one edge towards the shallow end



of the pool, her eyes fluttering when the warmth closed in on her.

"Ohhh," she moaned, letting exasperation whistle out of her lips.  
"Finally."

She felt the water lap and opened one eye: Natsuki was hovering uncertainly nearby.

"Here, Natsuki," she murmured, extending a slender arm. "With me."

Natsuki followed and sat between her legs, back against her breast. Only their shoulders were out of the water, and their heads touched gently as they found their fit.

Shizuru said it again in her mind: *Finally*.

She put her nose to the black hair and released a sigh. Natsuki murmured worriedly.

"I am fine," she assured the girl. "Really."

Natsuki mumbled something she did not understand and suddenly lifted away. Her back straightened at the loss.

"Natsuki, where are you going?"

"Uhhh."

The young woman waded through the water to reach the other edge of the pool, and Shizuru saw that the girl had left something there, sitting on the tessellated floor. It was a small leather-skin pouch, and Natsuki retrieved it before wading back.

"What is that?"

"Something... earlier." She looked apologetic as she smiled at Shizuru. "I forgot."

"What is in it?"

The pouch was opened to disclose a handful of small flowers, their delicate petals perfectly-formed and snowy.

"My!" she said, eyes growing. "Flowers? In winter?"

Natsuki made a sound that was almost a scoff.

"No longer winter, Shizuru," she reminded. "Nearly over."

"The point being *nearly*, Natsuki."

"Hmph." Natsuki squinted. "Still, yes, winter flowers. They bloom as winter dies."

She pronounced their name in her language and Shizuru repeated it.

"So they grow in your lands too?" the older woman asked, taking one from the tiny heap in Natsuki's cupped hands. The petals were firmer than what she had expected judging by looks alone. "An interesting shape."

The dark-haired girl in her bath nodded.

"In the bowls and valleys, there are more," she said. "There is less snow, but still cold."

Shizuru continued to handle the flower in her hand with care.

"Did you get these from..." She paused, remembering the least snowy or ice-bound of all their visited venues today. "The cliff? Earlier?"

An affirmative.

"How did you get them without my noticing it?"

The Otomeian looked smug. Shizuru thought her adorable when she did that.

"Keeping it a secret, were you?" she said. "Were you out to surprise me, Natsuki?"

All that got was a lift of beetle-black eyebrows. Then, before Shizuru could further quiz the girl, the latter suddenly lifted the handful she

had and held it above the older woman's head. Opening her cradled hands slowly, she let the tiny flowers cascade over Shizuru, on whom they fluttered like gigantic, but still-light flakes of snow.

Shizuru smiled gently, watching as some of them slid down her hair or brow to float on the water.

"Very pretty," she said to the girl, who seemed to be gauging her reaction. "Thank you, Natsuki. I adore them."

Natsuki was pleased by that: she inclined her head bashfully. The older woman drew her in and they resumed their earlier positions in companionable silence, now more at ease. The tiny flowers had done their task.

The two women remained quiet for some time in the water, neither ready just yet to actually begin the scraping and rubbing of their daily ablutions. Shizuru had her legs outside of Natsuki's, and the latter played with those legs that hedged hers, tickling them with her fingers under the water. The Himean permitted the girl to do as she wished, sighing when the tickles became firm squeezes on her thighs: a tender massage that helped wick away some of the stress from her muscles. There was a good deal of that, she apprehended. She rested her head on the edge of the tiled floor behind her, content to be pampered this way as she considered matters.

*I think I see, she was thinking, her eyes shut. She is worried about it too. She wants to know, as Nao-han put it, what is going to happen to all of us.*

Shizuru knew that was only a matter of course. Natsuki was involved deeply in what was happening, especially by virtue of being involved with her. Even so, it was interesting that the girl would not ask the questions Shizuru knew teetered on the tip of her tongue. It was interesting because Shizuru knew she was going through the same reluctance too, and because the fact that they shared it made her hope that whatever she had to say-for it would be she, certainly, who would say something first-would find resonance with the girl's thoughts. She wanted to believe Natsuki was as bothered by everything as she was, because if she could believe in that, then perhaps she could believe her proposal would go smoothly.

*But 'smooth' is a relative term*, she warned herself, aware of the rough road she would travel even after the proposal succeeded. *'Smooth' to one may be 'crude' to another*. If she did indeed bring Natsuki with her, how could she possibly prevent the deprecation that would be thrown on the young woman by her own people? Barbarian princess brought home by eccentric patrician: she could hear it now, much as she did not want to. Natsuki would be turned into a curiosity, an exhibit of her foreignness as much as Shizuru's eccentricity. That would *hurt*. The fact that the mere idea already hurt Shizuru now made it worse, because Shizuru knew that whatever she might feel about it the girl would feel stronger. Did she really want to subject Natsuki to that? Would she really go so far just to keep the two of them together?

And the answer was *yes*. Yes, she would. Did it bother her that by doing what she wanted she would be exposing not only herself but Natsuki to the aspersions of others? Yes, it did. But did it bother her more than the thought of being separate from the younger woman? No, it could not. Nothing was more awful than that option, at the moment, and nothing was less of an option. She would simply have to weather those difficulties when they came and hope that she could act as a worthy shield for the girl, even while knowing that what she shielded against were not mere arrows and swords that could be deflected: they would be words, and words passed through even the most solid of walls.

*So all I can pray is that you forgive me for putting you through it, come the time*, she told the image of Natsuki in her mind, an image that merely blinked at her and never spoke, for reasons she did not know. *I pray you will understand and continue to understand*.

But now she needed to begin, for this quiet friendliness between them had gone on long enough. She was more or less prepared and no longer had any excuse for delay. Natsuki was with her and, she knew, was waiting for some clarification within this fog.

"Natsuki," she called, feeling the kneading fingers pause afterwards. "I said we could talk after dinner. Did I not?"

The massage began again, Natsuki humming to her.

"Dinner is concluded."

Again just a hum in answer.

"I think we should talk now."

Natsuki stopped.

"If you want," she replied softly.

Shizuru did not miss the nervousness creeping into the low voice. She lifted her hands from the water and placed them, dripping wet, on the Otomeian's shoulders.

"May I know first how you feel about it, Darling?" she asked, clasping the lean shoulders like a hawk her prey. "I trust there is no need to say what I am talking about. You heard us earlier, yes?"

A nod.

"What do you think?"

She felt the bones under her palms roll uneasily, and copied the girl's earlier remedy for her own nerves: she started to massage.

"I, um, I think it is a surprise," the Otomeian managed to say, prior to glancing at her over one shoulder. "No, Shizuru?"

Shizuru smiled dryly.

"Indeed," she agreed. "Quite a surprise."

Natsuki nodded and looked away again, but the Himean continued to prod her.

"Is that all, *meum mel*?" she asked. Again the tension under her hands; again her attempts to calm the shifting bones with a rub. "For instance, do you consider it a good surprise or a bad one?"

When Natsuki answered, it was with an unexpected note of humour. Even if it seemed a little contrived to Shizuru, she allowed it to pass.

"Shizuru," said the girl. "I do not like surprises."

Shizuru chuckled, hoping her own amusement did not ring false.

"Yes," she said. "I suppose you would not."

"Hm?"

"What I mean to say is that I suppose that is in character for you."

"Umm."

Shizuru returned to the topic: "So it is a bad surprise after all?"

Natsuki's shoulders heaved: the young woman sucked in a breath. Shizuru refused to release her shoulders, and that told her she should answer.

"It-it depends, " she finally said. "I think it depends. You said to me once, Shizuru, *thuh-thuh-that both values*, they are for most things at once, no? That some things are both that."

The fair-haired woman nodded absent-mindedly, forgetting that Natsuki could not see her with the way they were. She did remember having said that once, during one of their more philosophical conversations.

"True, yes, I said that. Do you think this demonstrative of that, then?" she enquired.

"I think it depends," Natsuki repeated.

"On what?"

"Whom."

Shizuru's brow furrowed before she understood.

"Ah," she said. "On whom, then?"

"You."

"Right." Shizuru laughed flatly. "Naturally."

The girl turned a little to look at her, peeking from the corner of an

eye. Shizuru caught the beautiful green ring as it flashed around the pupil's black, then slid away.

"Yes, of course," Shizuru murmured. "You are right. As ever, Natsuki."

Their bodies moved slightly against each other.

"How is it then?" Natsuki asked, also very softly. "In your eyes, what is the value here, Shizuru?"

Shizuru's head bowed, and a few locks of hair slipped forward to dip into the water.

"What indeed?" she said, realising that there was now enough space between them for her to look at her reflection on the water's surface. A small white flower floated over her reflection's right eye, and she noted that with distraction.

"You are right, of course," she repeated. "About the simultaneity of occurring values even in this case. This is an excellent example of a situation both good and bad. Quite obviously, it is bad because it presents hindrances. It introduces new obstacles to what had been a plan all but perfectly smoothed over. Among other things."

"And, um."

"Yes?" She felt a little ashamed for leaping so quickly at Natsuki's answer. "Yes, Natsuki?"

"The good?" Natsuki followed, prodded further by Shizuru's hands again massaging her shoulders. "It is that you-you will be closer to what you want, no?"

Shizuru saw the reflection on the surface of the water look surprised, dark red eyes widening.

"Would I?" she asked it and Natsuki quietly. "But what do you mean, what I want?"

"Urban praetor," she heard the girl say to her. "One step under consul."

The younger woman paused before continuing, not seeming to notice how mournful her words sounded instead of seeming exultant in what she claimed to be the good of the matter.

"Yuh-you told me before, Shizuru. You would one day be praetor. Urban praetor is best. You said *and I remember*. "

Shizuru watched, hypnotised, as the reflection in the water stared at her angrily.

"I am wrong, Shizuru?" Natsuki asked.

Shizuru was broken out of her trance by a ripple coursing over the surface of the water. She watched now with a little less fascination as her reflection was smudged by the tiny wave, the only noticeable points remaining her eyes: blood-red and still uncertain.

"No," she said in her huskiest register. "No, you are not wrong, Child. I did say that. Once."

The movement of black hair in front of her let her know Natsuki had just nodded.

"Good, so it is good too," the younger woman said in an easy manner. Still, Shizuru could feel it was not easy to do at all, and that was sufficient to cause her another measure of pain. "And bad, too, a little."

Shizuru swallowed the rising lump in her throat.

"Yes," she said.

"Hmm."

"Then, Natsuki." Shizuru hesitated, truly anxious with this coming question. "Then you think I *should* go? Do you welcome that idea?"

It took only a moment for Natsuki to respond, but that moment stretched torturously long.

"Do you want to go?" the girl asked back, final tones dropping in a fatalistic timbre. "You want to go?"



Shizuru's reflection was broken by yet another ripple, and one that she felt twinge outwards from somewhere around her chest. It dragged her into wrapping her arms around the younger woman's neck, eradicating the image of herself from the water by insinuating her body in the space where the reflection had been. *Better*. She did not want to face herself right now.

Her head rested against Natsuki's, her cheek pressing into the crown of the girl's hair.

"Oh no," she said, eyes shut. "No."

Natsuki said nothing. After it was clear Shizuru was not about to say any more, however, she raised one hand and held it against the older woman's own mane, stroking the damp fibres with her palm. The water from her hand matted them down against Shizuru's scalp and held there as she continued petting the Himean's head as one would a sulky child's.

She hummed as she did it.

"Thank you," Shizuru whispered later, glad for the comfort the girl was trying to give. "I am fine."

"Mm, you say."

Up went light brows at the remark.

"You do not believe me?" Shizuru said lightly, not really expecting an answer.

The hand on her hair continued petting her. She chuckled and removed her arms from around the girl's neck. Her hands went low on the brittle waist, and she felt the strange undulation that always earned, a ripple of Natsuki's muscles and spine accompanied by one of the water.

*For someone who seems to fear dancing, she said to herself, breath coming more quickly at the friction between them, she dances beautifully if you know how to touch her body.*

She frowned the next instant, realising how she had phrased it in her

head. Knowing how to touch Natsuki-well, that was a piece of knowledge that should and would only ever be hers, was it not? That was a great part of her resolve to bring Natsuki along when she left for Hime, after all: the need to ensure that no one would even try to come near the girl in her absence. The jealousy of her feelings told her that the best way to assure herself sole proprietorship of this young woman was to safeguard it with her own presence. Again, selfish. But not all of it was selfishness: having Natsuki with her would permit her to safeguard Natsuki herself. How could she possibly rest easy on her own if she knew Natsuki was so far away, so distant from her sheltering hand? For, by this time, she had all but cast off every thought of Natsuki as her attendant or bodyguard. As far as she was concerned, she was now Natsuki's bodyguard.

Who could have imagined such an irony only months ago? She mused on the shift in their relationship with fascination, finding new appreciation for everything that had brought them here. Had anyone told her prior to leaving Hime that she would find such a treasure as Natsuki on this campaign, she would have laughed. Unthinkable! But now what was unthinkable was relinquishing this treasure, and that too was something she would have found laughable not too long in the past, fool that she had been.

The problem with the treasure in her hands, however, was that it was no mere parcel of gold. It *breathed*. It moved and thought and had a mind of its own. She could not and would not allow herself to forget that. Yet she could barely countenance the idea of it every moving, thinking, or exercising its mind in a way contrary to what she wanted of it. Hence, she had to think deeply on what she was about to do, which was to remove this treasure from the land whence it had come. As for most other living things, such a removal could be tectonic in effect. Was she wrong in wanting to hazard that earthquake anyway? Would her treasure think her wrong in doing so? A mind of its own; a life of its own. Would she, perhaps, be taking away a great part of that life in so uprooting the girl?

*But it would only be a year*, she reasoned out, both to herself and the young woman with her. *Only a year at most*. That was not too long, was it? If indeed it were a deprivation to Natsuki, it would at least not be a permanent one. Or rather, not yet. Besides, Shizuru

would ensure that it would be a comfortable and enjoyable period for the other woman, even with the possible bad opinions headed their way if they went through with this. She had to ensure it for, otherwise, how could she tell herself she was worthy of having this girl? If she could not even make her happy, if she could not guard sufficiently against the troubles, then what right had she to take such an exotic beast and call it her own? Exotic beasts were meant to be protected from whatever sought to damage them, whether it was the careless collector or the game hunter. And Shizuru knew-she just *knew*- that many a careless collector or hunter would die to get their nets on Princess Natsuki of Otomeia and Ortygia.

*That would kill her*, she thought, knowing that part of what animated the girl was freedom. *It would kill her to be placed in a net and kept there to be studied.* Natsuki was meant for other things: she was meant to be running freely, happily, as much as she wished. Surely she could not be wrong in wanting to take the younger woman with her for now if part of what she intended was to keep the girl from falling into others' nets. But what of the net she herself would be using, which would, for all its well-meaning fabric, still be a net?

*I cannot get away from that fact. I cannot pretend that I am sure I myself am not merely putting her in a gilded cage.*

"Nhh... mmn..."

The low moans in her ear woke her to the body chafing against hers, and she realised she had begun to massage Natsuki's hips during her cogitations, her distress coming out in the rough scrape of fingers in what was actually meant to be hands clenching and unclenching. She would have apologised had the younger woman not seemed to be enjoying it, going so far as to rest her head on Shizuru's shoulder and start fluttering her lips against Shizuru's neck. When Shizuru ceased the movements of her hands, those lips stopped too. An instant later, Shizuru felt teeth graze the skin near her throat. The false bite was followed by a slow-lapping tongue.

She hissed.

*Good lord*, she thought with surprise, feeling warm all over as the moist organ traced intricate whorls near her jaw. The hand over her

hair started playing with her ear too, a finger tracing the inside of the delicate skin and setting her eyes aflutter. The hedonism of it! Was it even right for her to feel like having Natsuki at this time, even with everything on her mind?

But her body seemed to decide that, right be damned, it did indeed feel like having Natsuki just then. Shizuru shut her eyes, seeing splashes of light in her shuttered vision. She held it in for as long as possible, but finally decided that a warning was necessary when Natsuki's other hand raked from her hip to her torso, setting off a minor sunrise in her blind horizon.

"Natsuki," she murmured, eyes opening as the girl twisted to better nibble and gnaw at her skin. "Unless you feel up to it tonight, I would advise you to go easy... Darling."

Natsuki went on with the assault and ignored her. What could one do in the face of that?

"Very well."

She wrenched the mouth from her neck with a pull on black hair, slanting her head in order to meet the tongue still out and reaching for hers. She twisted her own tongue around it first before jerking an inch backwards again, wanting to see if the girl would follow. She did.

*Good*, she thought, moaning at the ferocity of Natsuki's kisses. *You do want it.*

She felt Natsuki's weight shift, and knew the girl was about to turn so that the kiss would be easier. Shizuru denied it, however, and gripped the young woman's waist to hold her.

"No," she said, speaking to surprised eyes. "Tonight, like this."

And resuming their kiss with fervour, she used her hands to outline Natsuki's form, running them up the young woman's sides. When she reached the join of Natsuki's arms to her torso, she slid her hands forward and over two round breasts, palms over them as she pulled Natsuki flat against her body. Her own breasts were crushed

between them, and the feel of the lean and hard back on her chest was wonderful. It was such a small back, but the flesh underneath was strong. She broke their kiss yet again to push the younger woman a space away, enough for her to look at the back now intriguing her. She studied it with her eyes as well as her hands.

*Strong indeed*, she thought, using the tip of a finger to outline the pale terra. *And such a tensile strength*. Natsuki's back was well-muscled, as every part of her, but muscled in such a tight way that she looked even thinner than others of the same slight size: she was a tall girl, after all, even if she was shorter than Shizuru, and the tallness showed in the stretch of her form. She had barely padded ribs like bands of iron, ropy strands of hardworking flesh taut under still-adolescent skin. Her skin was beautiful. It was white and silky to the touch, even with all the scars.

"Your scars," Shizuru murmured, outlining the delicate tracery of war-wounds. Most were too light to be seen but some stood out in relief against the whiteness, minor constellations of pain that echoed within her too. This one was clearly an arrow wound, narrowly missing the vital organs: that one, a wound from some bladed weapon, which had obviously sheared the skin away. A dozen hairlines of hurt, a handful of leftovers from old lacerations. Shizuru had to shudder. She knew her girl was a warrior but that did not stop her from asking outraged questions in her mind. How could anyone have hurt her Natsuki like this? How dare they hurt her Natsuki like this?

"No more," she uttered, unaware of the emotion in her voice. "Never again. My dear girl."

Natsuki twisted to look at her.

The young woman smiled slowly when she understood why Shizuru was so troubled.

"You too," she replied. "See, Shizuru."

And reaching for Shizuru's hand, she pulled it forward over her shoulder, stroking a long and depressed welt on the forearm that was the desperate memento of a long-dead foe. Shizuru still

remembered it whenever she reminisced about her earlier, more reckless days in battle: the feeling of surprise when the tottering man had suddenly righted himself as she made to pass, believing him finished; the horror in the split-second where he swung his sword up, then down at her with that final, immense spurt of strength the dying had; and finally, the ringing sound in her ears as she threw up her arm against the blow, having neither space nor time for anything else. The sword had fallen on her arm like a hammer, beating into the iron of her *manica* and crushing it inwards to bite her flesh. The pain had been blinding, she remembered even now . It had been the thick steel of the arm-greave that broke her skin, smashing bluntly in and nearly breaking her bone. But Fortune as well as her own wits had saved her from certain amputation, for she had managed to slide the sword away as it continued along the arm-greave, shaving off her sleeve in the process but keeping her life-and limb, more or less-intact.

"Like this," Natsuki was telling her, kissing the fierce scar gently along its line. "You have scars too, Shizuru."

Shizuru watched silently as the other continued exploring the mark with her mouth. Natsuki pulled the skin between her lips, she tasted it with her tongue, and did all of it with such tenderness that Shizuru realised, suddenly, that her face was blushing.

"I know, *meum mel*," she said, bending her arm at the elbow so Natsuki could keep mouthing the scar. Her other arm angled down and forward, slanting over Natsuki's hips to slip between her legs. "We are both so."

She penetrated her easily and started moving. Natsuki kissed her arm feverishly and moaned to it, as though using it as replacement for the older woman's mouth. When Shizuru moaned too, impatient and aroused by the younger woman's groans, the latter threw a hand in the water and reached between their hips to help her.

"Yes," Shizuru groaned, closing her eyes when she felt Natsuki's fingers enter. "Yes."

They moved with each other. At first, it was still slightly controlled. It was only their hands that thrust deep and deliberate into each other

at first. But it did not take long for the restraints to break. Soon they were both bucking fiercely, wet flesh mashing into each other's palms, and every muscle in both bodies seemed alive, twitching, gloriously and explosively freed. Their voices too joined the sudden liberation, and each shuddering jerk of the hip held a cry, a groan, or a gasp.

"God," Shizuru managed to say in this chaos. "Natsuki, my sweet, warm Natsuki..."

She was answered by a whine and some words she perceived as Otomeian but did not understand. Surrounded by water as they were, Shizuru felt a sweat break out on her body. Thighs and hips on fire as she continued pushing against the thing plunging inside her, she clenched her teeth and heard the wind slipping through them, all sex and steam. A part of her was aware that the girl's arm was likely sore by now from being pounded between their bodies, but she could not stop herself from bucking, any more than she could stop making Natsuki buck harder against her. She could feel Natsuki's discomfort in their position from the sudden jerks her torso made in the water, but she could also feel her pleasure. That pleasure was undeniable. It was squeezing on her fingers, plumping around them, sucking them in hungrily, until there was only that great pulling spasm, the two of them one complicated and rigid machine as they came violently against each other.

And then there was the exhausted silence. Natsuki's head had fallen onto her shoulder, and Shizuru rested her own head against it, listening contentedly to the sound of the girl's soft gasps as small aftershocks jolted her. The gasps were desperate and high-pitched and so unlike the girl's usually controlled tones that she ended up tickling the girl's insides to force out more of them.

When she saw that her lover was already feeling pain from the continuous strokes, she stopped. As though the release they had just experienced was what had been necessary to break through her reserves, she decided she could wait no longer for their discussion. She knew she had to say it now, while they were still so closely bound together.

She drew in a laboured breath and felt the girl do the same.

"Hhaah."

It was Natsuki breathing. It moistened Shizuru's arm, the air condensing on her hot skin. She retracted the arm and noted the red bite-mark Natsuki had left on it. She almost wished the girl had bitten through, so she could keep this particular scar. Suddenly she felt a twitch inside her and realised Natsuki was removing her fingers; both of them were still inside each other. She did the same with her hand, but instead of letting it fall limp, raised it quickly from the water and pushed her fingers against Natsuki's mouth. It was clear what she wanted the girl to do.

Natsuki did it.

A purr welled up in her throat at the girl's compliance.

"Natsuki," she breathed, amazed by the sensuality of just feeling that soft tongue curling around her fingers. "You are so beautiful. You are mine, aren't you? Tell me you are."

Natsuki hummed to her and she took that as a 'yes'. She could not fathom any other answer.

"Then," she began, voice deeper than usual, "will you come with me?"

There was no answer, but Natsuki's mouth was still busy sucking on her fingers.

"Will you, Natsuki?"

She felt the coiling muscle on her digits pause, and took advantage of it to say something further.

"Please come with me to Hime."

The wonderful sucking feeling stopped.

"Natsuki?" she said uncertainly, heart doing a wild tattoo all of a sudden. " *Meum mel* ?"

Silence.



Her breath caught and she slowly took her fingers from Natsuki's warm mouth. She moved the wet hand to frame the young woman's jaw instead, holding it with her thumb and leaning in to speak into the Otomeian's ear.

Even if her words were beginning to sound nervous or panicked, she could not have cared less.

"Please come with me to Hime," she requested again, urgently now. Her legs crooked at the knee by instinct, caging Natsuki's limp body so it could not escape. "Listen to me, Natsuki. It is true that I can do nothing at this moment but return there, circumstances being what they are, but I shall come back here immediately, whether after the year of office is done or earlier. I shall come back here sooner or later."

Her heart, already doing dangerous flips inside her, sank deeper when there was absolutely no response from her companion. What had seemed such a warm, living body earlier now seemed to cool into stone.

"It may even be earlier," she stressed, picking up on the mute apprehension radiating from her companion. She hoped it was merely apprehension at the thought of being away from the place the girl called home for so long. Oh, by all the gods, let it only be that!

"Either way, it shall only be around a year or so," she said, "which is not too long for a-a vacation, really. You could think of it as a holiday, Natsuki. I promise I shall make it seem like a holiday for you. I would make it worth your while, I promise it. If only you would come with me."

Natsuki still was not answering, and that made her strive to fill the silence, dread rising to unfamiliar levels. Why was Natsuki not answering? Was it shock at the invitation? It had to be.

"I can show you around my country. I would show you everything-and there is much to see," she said with unconcealed eagerness, her hand having now moved to hold the other woman by the shoulder. She was rambling now; she could not help it. It was taking

all of her strength to keep her hands from shaking.

*Why this silence*, she thought, trying to swallow the dread. *Why this silence and stillness?*

"There are such sights, My Darling!" she said, her breaths coming quick and shallow though she strove to control them. "You will most likely have read about them already, but it is still something else to see them before you. Of course it would be going on spring when we get there, and perhaps the warmth of our climate may shock you. Even more the summer. But-well, I could show you my favourite summer villa then! It is a beautiful place, Natsuki, a beautiful place. You would like it. I know it."

Even as she talked, she realised she had to do what she had been dreading all this time: she had to face those eyes that so often told her more truth than she could handle. She had to see Natsuki's eyes; she needed to see the answer.

*Please*, she prayed unconsciously, summoning up her resolve to turn the young woman by the shoulder. *Please let it be all right. Let her eyes tell me it is all right.*

Blood roaring in her ears, she pulled the younger woman carefully, turning the light body to sit sideways on her straightened legs. Then she lifted her gaze.

And wanted to weep.

## Chapter 40

*My profound gratitude to the reviewers and all who sent messages last time.*

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### **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Casting grains over paper** - Standard scribal practice to help ink set by letting the grains absorb any excess ink still wet on the surface of the paper (the grains being sand, of course).
  2. **Cursus honorum** - Literally "Way of Honour"; the ladder of political positions up which one had to go in order to reach the highest office in the Republic (excepting dictator, naturally).
  3. **Falx** - A polearm weapon like the **rhomphaia** (s.v.). The falx's blade is more curved in shape than the rhomphaia's, which means it is designed specifically for slashing moves.
  4. **Military tribune** - Not an elected tribune of the soldiers; ranked below legates and above cadets, the military tribunes often performed staff duties for the general and were sometimes given command over soldiers as cavalry officers.
  5. **Pilum** - The standard-issue Roman spear. The original pilum did not break apart after first throw, and was modified (some sources claim) by the great Roman consular named Gaius Marius into one that did, for the same reasons Shizuru has here.
  6. **Rhomphaia** - A polearm weapon, similar to the **falx** (s.v).
  7. **Triumph** - The military parade of honours, achievements, and booty that an army often performed upon return to Rome if the soldiers had hailed the commander with the accolade of "imperator" in battle, and the Senate sanctioned the petition for the triumph.
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## ***Inter Nos***

*par ethnewinter*

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The senior legate of Shizuru's army rapped her knuckles on the desk, frowning direly at the many sheets of paper before her. The ink on some of them was smudged and though it would have irked her at any other time, she paid that carelessness no heed today. The work! There was so much of it. Natural that some papers would be smudged when she barely had time to cast the grains over one sheet before beginning another.

She rotated her wrists carefully and winced when an uneasy creak came from the right one. There was a dull ache starting already, no surprise. She was used to this discomfort as an occupational hazard, especially as her job description combined duties heavily taxing to the wrists. The only thing that bothered her any more these days was actually her sight, of which she had perpetual worries. Was it worsening? Could she still tell a falx from a rhomphaia a distance away? Could her peripheral vision still spot an incoming spear fast enough for her to dodge? Those were only some of the myriad practical considerations: there were her duties as a senior legate too, which not only involved her work as official chronicler but also included the task of running Shizuru's communications office. Reading, writing, or rerouting letter after letter after letter!

She needed a test. She looked over at the desk by the wall perpendicular to hers, trying to make out what the military tribune seated there had written. It took a while-and, she would admit only to herself, a little bit of guesswork-but she found she could still read the first word. *Good*. So there was no significant deterioration from the past year. Thank the gods for that much.

*Though I'll still not be winning any archery contests anytime soon.*

"Harada-san?" It was the young man whose work she had been eyeing. "Is there something wrong with what I did?"

"No, it seems all in order," she responded, smiling to allay his fears.

"I was just wondering if you weren't sick of this paperwork yet, Masato-san, and taking to doodling on the spare sheets yet."

He laughed easily.

"I've no hand for drafts, even as doodling," he answered. "Besides, just being able to work with such a great chronicler as you is an honour, so I'm still fine with all of this."

"Flattery!"

"It's the truth!"

He smiled at her, the corners of his eyes producing a few crow's feet; he was younger than she, so she recognised them as being natural to his face instead of the products of age. Masato had a very likeable face, broadly-shaped and deeply lined at the corners of his mouth, the straight brows above large eyes giving him an open expression. In terms of beauty, however, it suffered from a significant flaw: his nose. That appendage was too small to be properly Himean. It would not have been as noticeable had its other flaw only been that of being boringly and perfectly straight-as indeed the commander's was, but since that nose was appropriately long and also sat on a face of spectacular proportions, no one really saw that feature as a flaw on the commander. Masato's, unfortunately, was not only small but a little curved and boyishly snub. It had none of the bony, bumpy character Himeans preferred and as such drew some animadversions of foreign blood, specifically that of the conquered tribes on the edges of Upper Fuuka. Chie herself knew, though, that he came from good, pure-bred city stock. A pure Himean, though his nose might not have looked it.

"The general can tell you, Harada-san," he was saying to her.

"Aspiring chronicler that I am, myself, I actually volunteered to be assigned these duties so I could work with you." He caught himself and glanced at the other person with them, whose desk was opposite his. "And Akiko-san, of course."

Chie's personal aide did not acknowledge the mention of her name and simply went on with her work. The other two exchanged a smile.

"That's nice. For myself, I consider working with Akiko an honour," she said to Masato, who grinned back. "As you can see, her work ethic puts everyone else to shame."

Akiko finally looked up from the sheaf of parchment and answered her.

"Not the general," she said matter-of-factly. "Fujino-san manages to finish twice what I do without looking harried."

Her employer of five years winced.

"Shizuru-san gets an accolade but there's no mention of me, eh?" she said in still-good humour, having been subject to the young woman's prods and pokes for half a decade. "Besides which, Akiko, it's almost irritating that you accepted my praise so easily. Now that's not very modest," she clucked.

"Akiko-san doesn't like to beat around the bush," Masato chuckled.

Their subject merely turned back to her papers.

"It's part of my work ethic, Harada-san," she said in her prosaic voice. "It's called efficiency."

"*Brusqueness*, more like," Chie returned, hugely amused: she always was whenever it came to her top aide's unremitting candour. She leaned into her chair, and its curved back felt good to her.

"Akiko here is a dour one, Masato-san," she said to her other assistant. "And I love her for it. She's the one who pushes me into doing every little bit of work I need to do, and never hesitates to whip me into rephrasing one of my works if she thinks it's not up to par. She's the one responsible for whatever you may think is laudable about my work, so she's actually the one who should get the credit."

Akiko sighed, tucking her shoulder-length brown hair behind an ear. She scribbled two more lines before taking the sand-box and finishing the paper before her.

"Harada-san's just flattering me, Masato-san," she said. "Don't mind what she says."

She looked up and at Chie.

"I'm done with my share. Would you like me to finish yours, Harada-san?"

"Ah, so the flattery works after all."

"No, it doesn't. But the salary does."

All three smiled.

"Speaking of salaries, there's something odd in the financial ledgers," Akiko said, catching the others' attention. "I noticed it earlier."

Chie looked at her enquiringly.

"The accounts set each ranker's total share of booty at ten thousand sesterces," Akiko enlarged, "which is about right. But the final payout of booty share per ranker is officially listed at eleven thousand."

Chie frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I've even run up the figures again for undivided booty, just to see if the total is accurate."

The senior legate had risen to look over the papers on Akiko's desk.

"Let me see," she said, bending over the sheets. "And the total you got was?"

"The one stated," Akiko answered, pointing to one of the papers.

"Which, when divided across the members of the army, *does* come to ten thousand per soldier. But the directive for issuance of scrip states that each promissory note should have eleven thousand."

She fetched another sheet from one of her drawers and displayed it to her superior. The directive, as expected, had Shizuru's seal.

"See?" Akiko said, as Chie studied the document.

The senior legate nodded.

"She's right," she told the only man in the room, not wanting to isolate him from the discussion.

"Could it be that whoever did the accounts tallying up the booty missed something?" he suggested, a few wrinkles on his forehead. He could not imagine the general making such a mistake-everyone working for Shizuru Fujino eventually discovered she had a great head for numbers-so he immediately concluded that it had been the author of the other document who made the mistake. However, he missed a fact that rebelled against the logic of his conclusion.

It was Chie who revealed it to him.

"This is your first time campaigning with us, Masato-san, so I suppose you don't know," she said. "But the person who made that directive is also the same person who did the booty's tally."

Black eyes gleamed in surprise.

"You mean..." he started.

"The general," Chie told him. "She does all the accounting herself, usually, and checks her work against that of the official accountants. Only afterwards does she approve all the ledgers and send them on to us for finalisation."

Masato was confused.

"Then I don't understand," he said. "It's not like her to make such a mistake. Is it?"

Akiko produced a sound from the back of her throat.

"She *never* makes mistakes," she stated positively. "That's why I said it was odd."

A brief silence came upon the room, all three officers squinting in thought.

"Well..." It was Masato who spoke first; the two women looked at



him. "The general has seemed a little unlike herself, lately."

Chie and Akiko exchanged glances. Both knew what Masato meant, since they were among the officers working nearest the commander aside from having served with her in another campaign. As such, they had been among the first to note what Masato was mentioning, although neither had mentioned it.

"I suppose," Chie now said, shifting her weight to her other leg. "It's probably just because she's tired too, Masato-san, though she doesn't let on much."

Masato nodded.

"I know-I thought so," he said, before scrunching up his face in dislike. "It's all this, isn't it? The people back home do pick on her something awful. I'd be tired too, and enraged, I think. It's just Fujino-san's way not to be angry the way we are, I guess, but Jupiter! How I'd roar if it were me."

Chie smiled humourlessly in agreement.

"I feel the same way," she said, before lifting an eyebrow at him. "Say, then, Masato-san: so you don't agree with the others who say this is actually a good thing for her, being a technical promotion up the *cursus honorum*?"

He shook his head emphatically.

"That's too simple-minded," he volunteered. "I believe she's been genuinely surprised by this election-all evidence points to it. Even with the talk about her cousin having been the one to place her nomination, I still don't see enough to say that Fujino-san herself orchestrated this. The same goes for her allies back home."

"So your opposition to it stems from the fact that it's from an unverified source?"

Masato moved both eyebrows in agreement, looking at her with that clear, open expression.

"It's all shadow-work, Harada-san," he replied. "How can I say

shadow-work is a good thing, even with a shadow-gift? It's not like a person can feel safe opening a gift of wine if he doesn't know from whom it comes. Let's say he's lax and he does open it. Maybe he'll drink it fine down to half the container. Maybe it'll still be fine down to two-thirds of it. But what if there's poison settled down in the last third? By then he'll have become complacent because of the first two-thirds, and won't think anything of drinking it all up. Whoosh! Dead! No, Harada-san-I think we should be suspicious. That's why I think Fujino-san is, too."

Chie regarded him with a smile in her eyes.

"Well-put, Masato-san," she said. "You're being wasted just doing these papers. You should be in the Plebeian Tribune."

He was surprised and held up his hands with embarrassment.

"Oh, maybe, but it's still for the future," he said, cheeks red with pleasure. "Though it's kind of you to say it, Harada-san."

"Don't think it's flattery!" she said in mock warning. She raised her arms and stretched, turning to Akiko afterwards. "Would you two mind handling the rest for me, then, and finish up? Take a break if you think you need it. Anyway, we've finished most of today's work. I'm going to go see Shizuru-san now and ask her about that issue with the booty distribution."

The two subordinates assented and she went off, thinking about what Masato had remarked about their general. It was true that Shizuru had been unlike herself lately, though Chie had not really expected anyone other than herself and the other veterans to notice it. That Masato had was testament to his perceptivity, she thought. It would be wise to keep an eye on his career from now on, to ensure that his talents would be reserved always for their side. She would commend him to Shizuru, though she supposed her friend would already have noticed. Having so much of it herself, the younger woman seemed to sniff out talent even before it went on full display.

Her thoughts returning to their commander now, she reflected on what exactly had been unusual in the other woman's manner of late. It was hard to say. Shizuru's deportment was generally so

imperturbably dignified that it was difficult for many to see changes in it at all. Certainly she was still generally imperturbable these days and, as far as Chie was concerned, that patrician dignity was intact; but something was different and had been different for the past four days, ever since that private conference with the Ninth's primipilus and Suou Himemiya in Shizuru's quarters. What was it that had changed? She could not have given a name to it if she wanted to be precise, but if she had to guess, she would say that underneath the near-impenetrable wall of civility, the general was being *sulky*.

*Funny thing, that*, she thought with a twitch to her mouth: *I never could've imagined it before, and even after having suspected seeing it, still can't imagine it by myself now.* She did not even know how or why she had decided that the general was sulky. It had simply popped into her mind the first time she felt the change, and lingered there afterwards. It actually strengthened the impression that she had never before imagined it could happen. Given that fact, she was fairly sure she had not simply plucked the label 'sulky' from some assumed tendency about her friend; rather, it had leapt out at her from the very back of all possible labels, asserting itself out of the sheer strength of impression. Hence Chie believed her instinct was right in this case: General Fujino was sulking.

She chuckled aloud, ignorant of a nearby slave who shot an alarmed look her way. Chie was now on the first floor of the gubernatorial palace, where Shizuru had occupied one of the unused reception rooms for her office. She hastened towards it.

All six people inside looked up when she entered, though only five offered a smile: the general's girl was present, and her eyes were downcast. Chie held a hand up and issued an all-inclusive greeting, walking immediately towards the desk in the middle of the room.

Her first thought was that, even with the smile on her face, Shizuru still felt sulky.

"Welcome, Chie-han," Shizuru said, setting down the letter cylinder she had been in the midst of opening. "How goes it with your fort?"

Chie brushed a lock of hair from her eyes.

"Under siege by paper," she sighed in response. "Still, it goes as well as can be hoped, I'd say. Akiko and Masato are finishing up. How are you all here?"

"Quite well. Do sit down." She nodded to one of the men in the room as Chie took her invitation. "Kenji-han has decided that he wishes to be relieved of his duties when my replacement arrives."

"Ah. I see." Chie made herself comfortable in the chair. She eyed the tall, ginger-haired legate on his feet. "So you're going home too, Kenji-san?"

His lean face quirked in amusement as he gave an explanation: "Miyabi will kill me if I don't marry her soon."

They grinned.

"Dear me," Chie managed through a giggle. "I wish I could say that a betrothed was the primary reason for my decision too."

The other legate's heavy brows closed in, rust-haired and angry, and his lips thinned.

"There's that other thing too, of course," he said, with a nod to Shizuru. "I signed up for a campaign with Fujino-san. Not some paltry replacement chosen by the couch-generals back home, whoever he or she turns out to be."

A light, almost embarrassed laugh from the general.

"Kenji-han," she said. "We know not who it is yet."

A sniff from her loyal legate: "No one who can compare."

"I'm on his side this time, General," Chie remarked, stopping when she remembered something. "And Taro? Has he come here yet?"

Shizuru said he had.

"And?"

"He has yet to decide. He asked if he could take some time to think

on the matter."

"I see. And Suou-san's staying."

Kenji interrupted them, asking if he could go ahead. The pair excused him and resumed their conversation.

"That's another legate resigning, then," Chie said absently, glancing at the other people in the room. Two of Shizuru's scribes were present, along with a military tribune conversing seriously with one of the former. They occupied desks at the other sides of the room. Shizuru's own desk was in the centre, surrounded by buckets of scrolls and various paraphernalia that included an abacus, a shield, and a military-issue *pilum* -Shizuru's modification of it, Chie noted.

And, of course, there was also the black-haired girl on a seat near the general's.

"I see you're busy, so I shan't take up too much of your time," Chie began. "My question's about the distribution of booty."

Shizuru's head moved.

"Akiko saw something odd about the order for the amount to be put on the payout notes," Chie continued, going on to explain the issue to her friend. "So I came here to ask why it says eleven thousand per ranker when the total in the booty accounts says it should only be ten thousand."

The blonde woman smiled, resting her back against the chair and folding her arms casually as she pretended to think.

"It seems quite a disparity, true," she answered. A finger tapped twice on the proud slope of her cheekbone. "But not if you have read the note that states the added thousand sesterces are actually a bonus."

Chie's eyes widened.

"Oh, I haven't seen that yet," she admitted. "I suppose it must have been in the last of the papers you sent today. We haven't finished them yet-though I guess Akiko or Masato should've seen it by now."

"Indeed."

There was a moment's pause; Chie's eyes narrowed.

"The bonus is coming from your own coffers," she accused Shizuru.

"Yes, it is," the general answered, crimson eyes dancing for an instant. "Why, Chie-han, did you think I would use the State's money to bestow an unsanctioned gift on the legions, deserved as it may be?"

The senior legate smirked.

"No, I don't think you'd do that," she retorted jokingly. "Although I do think you would cut the State's bite on the rankers' shares of booty by working out the money distribution ahead of schedule."

They smiled cunningly at each other.

"Strictly speaking, it is not a reduction of the State's share but of the unlawful shares its employees take," Shizuru said, folding both hands on her lap. "Going from past experience, the Treasury officials will try and cheat the rankers into smaller shares if we distribute the booty in Hime, after my *triumph*."

The nostrils of the perfectly straight nose pinched as she added: "Distasteful."

Chie agreed, smiling at her friend's concern for the rankers as well as the woman's unusual manoeuvre. The Treasury officers would be rankled, of course, but they could hardly voice their irritation aloud-or not with impunity, anyway: the woman responsible for confounding their corruption was the same one who had already put thousands of talents into the state coffers. A very profitable campaigner was Shizuru Fujino for both State and soldiers.

She heard a shuffle of cloth and knew Shizuru had crossed her legs.

"Of course, they'll have to wait to be paid after all the loot is actually converted into hard cash," Chie mused aloud. "But even so, their shares will already be safe because they'll have been given the promissory notes before even returning to Fuuka. That's smart,

Shizuru-san. Very smart."

"Why, thank you for the compliment."

The senior legate pointed her chin at the general.

"Very tricky too," she said suddenly. "The bonus from you?"

The smirk was in the gleam of Shizuru's eyes.

"I suppose you plan to announce that bonus in a speech to the legions?" Chie guessed.

"Yes."

"Else they misattribute the largesse to someone else, eh?" The senior legate frowned in thought. "Since the directive was for *all* payout notes, that means even the legions posted elsewhere-say Sosia, or Argentum-are going to get the same bonus."

"Of course. It would be unwise to bestow such a gift on merely one section of the army."

Chie's eyes dropped; she studied her feet. "That's... nearly two hundred talents per legion you'll be spending for that bonus. A thousand talents for the whole."

There was silence; a very faint colour reached Chie's cheeks as she looked up at her friend, who regarded her with twinkling eyes.

"Yes, I did the numbers in advance!" she burst out, laughing in embarrassment. Shizuru laughed too, having been trying to withhold it earlier; both of them knew of Chie's distaste for numbers.

"Anyway, that's remarkable open-handedness-though we both know you can afford it."

Again, the subtle gleam of crimson eyes.

"I do not think I can truly contest that, at any rate," the fair-haired woman said to her friend, who listened to her attentively. "After all, I plan to spend even more than that. I have yet to write the directive, but I have decided on it."

"What is it now?"

Shizuru's eyes stared into hers, little red points in Chie's vision.

"It has been well past a century since the army has had a pay raise, so I am going to implement a pay raise for everyone in mine, before I leave."

"A pay raise for everyone." Chie considered it, then felt a shiver creep down her neck when she realised how much money that would entail. They had five Himean legions with them, which meant just about twenty-five thousand legionaries. Twenty-five thousand salaries to raise.

"That will be *expensive*," she said. "To say nothing of the trouble you'll be making for yourself once Senate hears of it."

"It would come from my own purse initially, until I can push legislation in Hime for the matter. Still, I do not intend to wait for the legislation first. Given the prevailing attitude to pay raises, it would be safe to say that the currency should have inflated beyond the pay raise my legislation would have stipulated at its introduction by the time the bill is passed."

Somehow, that did not dispel the shiver.

"That's-by how much do you intend to raise it?" Chie dared to ask.

"Double the present one."

The shiver erupted into a full-blown shudder. The senior legate did not have to do the sums to realise it: that was so much money! And Shizuru talked about it as though it were nothing.

"Then, since it's currently five hundred sesterces per year for each soldier, that would mean a thousand instead," she said, once able. "That comes to...?"

"Twelve and a half million sesterces," her friend finished for her. "Five hundred talents for implementation. So I estimate that I shall be spending at least fifteen hundred talents more before I go."



*My god*, Chie thought, staring in shock at the other woman. *She says it without even batting a blonde eyelash!*

"Of course, that does not yet include the cost of mass production for the new model of the *pilum*," Shizuru was saying, still in that nonchalant voice. Her lips pursed momentarily as she added: "Regardless of my-no, our, rather-impending return to Hime, I believe I shall still have it done. After all, I do intend to return to this place as soon as possible."

Chie noticed that she had a glance to the girl near them at that statement. Oh, the unease in a certain pair of green eyes! That definitely had to be the reason for Shizuru's odd demeanour of late. Was it not always?

"Uh, the new *pilum*," Chie began, nodding at the item propped up nearby. "It's rather neat a concept, as far as weapons go. Though how you thought of it, I can't imagine."

Shizuru acknowledged the compliment gracefully, remarking that someone else would surely have devised it had she not done so already.

"It is rather irritating when your enemies use your own spears against you immediately after you throw," she sighed, obviously reliving several instances of it in her mind. "Or, sometimes, simply keep them for a while and use them against you another day. It happens so often, and I have long thought about it. How could we prevent them from casting back at us the spears we cast their way?"

"You solved the problem impressively." The short-haired woman stretched her arms. "How precisely does it work now, this new one?"

"You hoist it with an arm, take aim, and throw. Ideally, it should work then."

"Stop teasing me," Chie said with a smile.

"Very well." Shizuru nodded at the implement they were discussing. "The join between shaft and blade is now a weak pin, which breaks at first impact. Not only does this ensure that the enemy cannot

return the spears immediately, but that they cannot take them for plunder and later use. I do not think they will spare the extra effort to not only pick up such a broken weapon but also *figure out* how exactly we put said weapon back together-for we can, or our artificers can. The mechanism should be sufficiently foreign to confound our foes in the meantime, however. Hence, we not only preserve our own skins but also preserve stocks. Chances are, most of our thrown *pila* should be left on the battlefield, broken in two but ready for repair by our mechanics."

Chie nodded appreciatively, loving the good sense of the invention as well as the imagination it had taken to think of it.

"You'll put the old military spear, the *hasta*, out of commission," she said with admiration. "It'll work, I bet. Who else would've thought of making a *pilum* that breaks apart after first throw? Still..."

"Still?"

Chie grinned unrepentantly: "You'll light another fire under the conservatives' arses. And maybe some other bums too. Let's just say most of Senate."

Shizuru smiled.

"True," was all she said, and very dreamily.

Chie laughed.

"I love your unconcern," she told her commander.

"Because their whining truly concerns me far less than the safety of the soldiers. They are not the ones on the receiving ends of the enemy spears, being quite free to lecture on tradition's importance over practicality as they lounge in their comfy couches."

"Well, that's a good way of putting it. But they still won't buy it."

"Again, something I believe deserves unconcern." This time, it was Shizuru who showed her teeth unrepentantly. "After all, they might not buy it, but I can always buy them."

The senior legate hooted with laughter, drawing the curious glances of the others in the room. The general merely smiled at her friend.

"Jupiter, you're wicked," Chie said when she calmed down, eyebrows wiggling. "But you're right. As always."

"Ahh." For some reason, that prompted a slight twist in Shizuru's expression. "No, Chie-han. I am not always."

And then she added with a humourless smile, "But I wish I were, vain though that wish may be."

The atmosphere in the room changed, as though a gust of the wind outside had somehow blown in. Chie hesitated after Shizuru's final words. What could she say to that?

A little to Shizuru's side, she could almost feel the general's girl fidgeting too.

"Chie-han."

She snapped back to attention, meeting Shizuru's eyes.

"You said that Akiko-han and Masato-han should be finishing your work soon. Perhaps you would indulge me in providing company for a short walk?" The eyes, which she would have sworn to be bleeding something earlier, were themselves again: warm with a serenely banked fire. "I believe I need a break too. Sitting in a chair all day stiffens the joints."

The legate agreed.

"I know what you mean," she answered. "Come on, then, and let's stretch our legs a little."

"Yes."

They rose, with Shizuru casting a look at the Otomeian who got up with them.

"Natsuki."

Chie held her breath, awash with curiosity; the Otomeian girl looked strangely as if she were expecting a slap.

"Did you not say you had some matters to discuss with your fellows?" Shizuru asked the question casually, even far too casually for Chie to consider it normal. When had her friend ever been casual when it came to this girl?

"You should do so now instead of worrying about it later," Shizuru continued. "We are not going very far, perhaps only to the trade street nearby. The nearest one, with the locksmith whose wares we perused last week."

The dark-haired woman opened her mouth, only to be cut off when Shizuru shook her head.

"Go on," said the older woman. "I promise you we shall be fine. If you finish quickly, you may come for me if I am still there. We shall not loiter any further than that street. I can go unassisted by you a moment."

Something painful crossed Natsuki's face. It was so young, so tenderly hurt, that even Chie felt wounded for her. Even more so when Shizuru spoke again with brutal finality.

"Now go," the golden woman uttered. "Child."

*Poor girl*, Chie found herself thinking, looking at the strangled expression in the Otomeian's eyes: she obviously did not want to leave her charge yet. All the same, she acquiesced to Shizuru's order and left the room. The two women watched her. Or rather, one pretended to watch her and the other pretended not to.

*And for being the one to send her away*, the former thought, while observing Shizuru from the corner of an eye, *you'd think she wasn't the one who gave the order from the way she watches her so yearningly.*

"Please take care of matters while I am away," Shizuru said to the other officers in the room. A tribune rushed to hand her two cloaks, and she gave the earnest young man a smile.

The pair exited the room and started to walk down the corridor.

"A cloak, Chie-han." She handed one of the wraps to the legate, who accepted it. "How are you, really? Not merely as concerns your work."

"By myself? Well enough, thank the gods. You?"

"Well."

*A lie*, Chie thought. "That's good."

"I am a little worried, though," Shizuru said, when they reached the main hall.

Chie waited, and was disappointed when Shizuru continued: "For the army."

The senior legate looked at her friend and commander.

"Do you mean with your, er, replacement?"

Shizuru nodded.

"I can only hope he or she treats them well while I am away," she explained, perhaps a touch doubtfully. "Or as well as can be expected, at any rate. Being stationed in a land such as this for so uncertain a mission is hard to a soldier. One must know how to make it better for them, and that without giving too much kindness or brutality."

She was too delicate to say what she really meant, of course, but Chie picked up on it: the only reason the legions had thus far been willing to put up with this 'uncertain mission' was the fact that *she* was their commander. Every ranker of Hime knew by now of the maxim that Shizuru Fujino could not be beaten-or had never been, anyway, and seemed unlikely to-and that her soldiers always came back from campaign loaded with wealth. The promise of glory and gold was always a great force of motivation. Even so, that was only a small part of it, Chie knew. There was always the thing between Shizuru and her legions, that which could not be explained simply but could nevertheless be expressed in one sentence.

Shizuru's soldiers loved her.

"So long as they know you'll be coming back, they should be set for anything coming their way, in the interim," Chie responded, although she was a little doubtful too; they still had no idea who the replacement would be. Would they love him too? Perhaps, if he was fortunate, but never the way they loved Shizuru, and never that much.

"I hope," she continued, "whoever the newcomer is, that he doesn't play too much with the legions' positions yet. Unless he actually knows what he's doing. But it's a tricky thing even then. The greener legions could suffer if he tries to put them too far afield without having their confidence."

Shizuru sounded agreement. Her choices of where to station each legion had been the results of care and calculation. Out of the five Himean legions total in her army, she had two legions of her veterans and another that was veteran from another general's campaign. The remaining two legions had been composed of raw recruits, which the legate Taro had first blooded at Stych Gorge.

"The Fourteenth and Eleventh have proven themselves, of course," Shizuru said. "Taro-han and Nao-han assured me of this much after they used them with the Ninth at the gorge. Hence I saw fit to leave them in Sosia's garrison instead of taking them with me here. At least, being stationed in the middle position, they would feel safe in the thought that they are accessible to both the Argus and Argentum garrisons-both veterans-which should give them more confidence in their defence, should anything arise. Impending help gives the most desperate soldiers hope."

They were out of the governor's mansion now, and walking down the path through its grounds. Officers and soldiers passing by saluted them.

"That's true. But I doubt you intended to leave them there for mere defence," Chie guessed.

"Yes. I actually meant to take the Fourteenth with me on the first incursion into Obsidian's lands," Shizuru confessed. "Blood them

even further, so as to make them true veterans. After all, it is a poor thing for a legion not to develop confidence enough to avoid relying on support for hope."

"I understand. Well, if they're marching directly under your command, it would've taken no time at all. Who's the primipilus you put in charge of the Fourteenth, by the way? I forgot."

"Kazama-han."

"Oh, right!" Chie burst into laughter. "She's a beast, that one."

At Shizuru's glance, she explained: "All sweet smiles and nice words, but Nao's equal when it comes to bloodwork and war. Thoroughly frightening woman."

Shizuru smiled too, always pleased by compliments to her centurions. She was extremely fond of all of them, as was true of any general worth her salt.

"What about the other greenies? The Eleventh?" Chie asked, only to receive a slight smirk. "What is it?"

The fair woman chuckled, bestowing a dazzling grin on her friend.

"I had intended to leave them in the care of my senior legate," Shizuru confessed, drawing an embarrassed chuckle from Chie. "But I suppose that plan must undergo revision."

"Heh."

"Worry not about it, Chie-han." Shizuru gave her friend's shoulder a quick pat as they emerged through the gates and into the street. "I already guessed you would prefer to remain in Hime afterwards, in order to make good on your promise to Senou-han about pressing your suit. Or am I mistaken?"

Chie confessed it reluctantly, unable to shake the feeling of abandoning her friend. After all, Shizuru had just admitted to needing her services for the campaign once she returned. She was about to say she had changed her mind when the commander stopped her, shaking her golden head.

"No," Shizuru said firmly. "If you would prefer to stay in Hime even when I return to resume my mission here, that is fine. After all, I believe you can aid me as much there as here, being as skilled in politics as you are in war. I always need more help with the Senate, after all. Unless you would decline?"

"It'd be my pleasure!" Chie replied quickly with relief, before catching herself. "But who will be your senior legate?"

"I already have someone in mind."

A while passed of her waiting before Chie groaned long and loud.

"You're not telling me, are you?" she accused Shizuru, who pretended to look innocent. "At least let me guess."

"You have one attempt," Shizuru replied.

"You're going to elevate one of the present ones-I'm betting either Kenji or Shouhei."

"No." Chie groaned again and the fair woman giggled. "You shall soon see. It is not someone who has ever served as legate for me, in fact, and I fancy it shall surprise you when I acquire this person's consent. It may be difficult, I admit, for this person has been away from the public eye for a while and seems generally set on keeping up that state. There may be some reluctance."

"Oh, now I wonder. Still, that presents a problem for you, doesn't it?"

"Perhaps so, but it is a problem I may overcome." She looked up, eyes fixed unwaveringly on the road before her. "I have every faith that I shall."

The senior legate inhaled deeply, smelling the salt odour of the nearby sea and the people, and the smoky scent of old and new fires.

"I'm sure you will," she said to her friend, whom she adored for her familiar yet still-surprising-sometimes confidence. It was so easy to adore someone who could be sure of herself with neither arrogance nor illusion. "Don't you always get what you want?"



The retirement into weariness in Shizuru's eyes... she should not have said that, she saw. She regretted it immediately, but found cause to be glad for her own slip afterwards, when she realised Shizuru had only been waiting for an appropriate opening in order to talk about whatever was bothering her.

They were walking in the public market now, and Shizuru slowed to peruse one of the stalls. The merchant came to life at the sight of the two army officers, pushing forward his best wares and urging them to touch and try whatever they found to their taste.

"I do not always get what I want, really," Shizuru said, waving the merchant away to show she needed no assistance. "Sometimes I think the gods like to remind us of that."

Chie sucked on her teeth for a second before daring to ask it. She had a feeling Shizuru was waiting for her, which was the only reason she had the strength to hazard a question at all.

"What happened?" she asked. "Did you have a fight?"

"I suppose. Although I do wonder about what exactly constitutes a fight," Shizuru replied, voice a little sad. "Should I say, rather, that it was a disagreement?"

"Differences, I guess," Chie replied, taking a look at the wares too. "What's wrong? Or is it impolitic to ask?"

The other woman made a vague gesture of the hand.

"No. I suppose the truth is that-that I did wish to speak to someone about it."

She lifted a set of beads to her eyes and pretended to frown at it in inspection, although Chie could see she was frowning at something else entirely.

That was when Chie realised, with some surprise, that Shizuru was *angry*.

"I suppose it may also be part of the reason I am here," the latter was saying, setting down the beads and moving on to another stall.

Chie followed her meekly. "I never realised-I had not thought it possible to be so discomfited."

She caught herself and added, for clarification: "With her, I mean."

Chie nodded understandingly, knowing the truth of what her friend said. That was because she guessed that this was Shizuru's first fight with her young woman. The first fight-the first time for anything-was often a thing in itself, and it overwhelmed you with how lonely it could be. She knew because she remembered her own and remembered how, at the time and perhaps even now, it had seemed to be something she carried along only in herself, without the other person's involvement save as provocation. She knew, too, that once you spent enough time having fights and making up-and, sometimes, not making up-with another person, even the fights would soon become things to be shared. They became no longer matters of loneliness you thought you carried alone, but simply parts of what bound the two of you.

But this was Shizuru's first disagreement with her Otomeian girl and, for now, it probably felt something like a separation.

"When did this happen, if I may know?" she asked, respecting the other woman's solitary pain enough not to tell her what she would know after a little more experience. "Only recently, I believe?"

"Four days ago."

"I see."

"As you recall, that was when we had news of significant events that transpired in Hime."

"Yes, I remember," Chie said, running a hand through her hair. It had more volume than usual, as it had ever since they arrived in this region: her wavy hair tended to do that in weather such as this. She peeked at Shizuru from under her brows, warm brown eyes glimmering. "I take it you're going to ask her to come with us, then?"

"I have."

"Sorry, what?"

"I already have asked her."

Chie swiped her locks from her eyes, looking at her friend in mild surprise. And, seeing the darkness in Shizuru's eyes, she thought: *Goodness me!*

Shizuru said it before she could ask, although Chie herself doubted she could have worked up the courage to ask this particular question.

"She denied me."

The bitterness ripening that answer! Chie froze in shock at the statement. The Otomeian had denied her?

The younger woman continued.

"She denied me thrice," she said, accents laden with a running, deep bitterness that gave her friend the impression that part of her was thinking, *How dare she deny me?* Not that Chie would blame her for thinking it, since the legate herself was of the opinion that anyone denying Shizuru would be a fool bird indeed. Oh, how that that particular bird done it? But the chick in question was certainly different from all others. That one flew a different path, if not a wholly different sky.

"Thrice did she deny me, giving such reasons as would a wearied-yet-still-courteous woman some common skulker, attempting such evasions as would fool only the most foolish." Shizuru spoke with some of her usual calm, but it stayed only as far as the surface. Her undertones still expressed a far different emotion. "And that even though I attempted to reason with her, giving her time even to think on it. Four days, Chie-han. Last night I asked once more-for twice did I ask her the first night-and still she refused, giving me paltry reasons for answer."

Giving her head a shake of disgust, she finished: "Not reasons at all, in fact."

Chie bit her lip at that. She was rather grateful that her friend was speaking to her of it-not to mention a little glad to know something

others did not, because her nature was to like special intelligence of any kind-so she contributed her reply. Even so, she had the feeling of treading in a trap-laden path as she talked, for she understood this much: the patrician's pride was terribly rankled, and the pride of a patrician was a terrible thing indeed.

"I did notice things were a little strained between you two," she said carefully, avoiding her friend's eyes as they moved through the sidewalk stalls. "No, that's not right. More than a little strained."

"Oh," Shizuru looked sad for a moment, then replaced the expression with a light frown. "Really."

"It's understandable, if that's the case. Even more if she's said it thrice now."

Shizuru shot her a swift glance.

"I am no fool, Chie-han. I do not persuade myself that she takes perverse pleasure in doing it." She shook her head again, forcing her tawny fringe to run riot over her brow. The wind ruffled several curls up at the edges and Chie thought they made Shizuru look almost as though she had tiny horns. She did not find it unattractive.

"I do not imagine malice in her refusals," the horned goddess in front of her said disconsolately. "Even so, I cannot help but feel-feel-I feel *mocked* by her stubbornness. Do you see what I mean?"

"Yes, I understand."

Shizuru looked anxious. "Is it wrong of me to feel so?"

"No, it's just natural, " Chie assured her. "Don't beat yourself up over that. It would be wrong, though, if just feeling that way were reason enough to make you give up asking a fourth time. Whatever happened to persuasion?"

"I believe it met Natsuki."

*Oops*, she thought, when she was unable to resist a chuckle. She could not help noticing too that her friend's voice, even now and with the anger, loved the name of the young woman. The way she said it!

Natsuki .

Chie bent her neck to one side, then the other. It gave a satisfying pop, and she sighed.

"Even so, you're not really mad at her, are you?" she asked.

The red-eyed woman threw her another unreadable look, suddenly glancing away just when the legate thought she was about to recognise what was there.

"If you could see her face when she says it," Shizuru said, before giving one of her lovely, forbearing sighs. "Can anyone really stay mad at such a child?"

"Which doesn't really answer the question."

"Precisely," Shizuru said dangerously.

Chie took the hint and changed her line of questioning.

"Anyway, no matter what happened," she started, "you're still going to try and persuade her, right? Even after these times?"

She saw Shizuru pause, holding in her hand a glittery piece of yellow-brown stone she had picked up from a display. She held it in the light and Chie saw the silhouette of something frozen in it-some insect or bug. What her friend was holding was amber. Shizuru seemed to consider the entombed creature carefully, frozen as it was in some crystal plane of existence. She herself seemed frozen in that plane too, in that moment.

That was because Shizuru was remembering.

*Try and persuade her*, the young general was saying to herself, echoing her friend's words. *Shall I try and persuade her more?* The answer was yes, of course. But the firmness of that resolve did not alter her apprehension. Each time she thought of how to do it next time, she also thought of how she had done it last. She would think on the first three times and then as now, she would be ashamed.

It was painful, she thought, to be shamed by oneself, especially in

front of the person one valued most. Her shame was in what she had done, and how she had reacted to Natsuki's refusal. First had been the shock, of course, of having her fears be realised. But then there had been the attempt to recover, during which she put together her injured confidence as one did a precious, broken crock. Only to find that what she had thought merely broken was actually shattered. How many reasons had she given; how many questions to find the contrary reason? All to no avail as, at the end of the bout, Natsuki had pronounced yet again: "I cannot."

And the apology accompanying each denial had been meaningless, really. Perhaps it had meant something to the Otomeian speaking it; perhaps not. To her, however-to Shizuru, the asker-it meant nothing at all. She heard it each time it was spoken; some part of her mind recognised the signification; nevertheless, no part of her accepted it. How could she accept it? To do so would mean she was accepting the reason requiring it.

Hence it was impossible for her not to be angry with Natsuki, especially when she could not even afford to recognise that Natsuki had, in fact, said the word "Sorry".

She had been so angry. It was only a natural outcome of frustration, so it did not shame her too deeply. What really shamed her, however, was the *wrath* coming with it. Anger was one thing; wrath, another. Anger could be cold. It could be chilled to the clarity of ice. But wrath to Shizuru was always hot, fiery and unreasonable when it bubbled. And it had bubbled that night she pressed Natsuki in their bath... so much so that she had actually imagined seizing the younger woman by the arms and shaking her until her teeth rattled. She had not acted on the temptation at the time. Even so, the mere knowledge that it had passed was shameful.

And it only grew to be more shameful, for she had acted on it last night.

*As though anyone could force such a creature by bruising her so,* she thought in self-revulsion, brows slanting so suddenly that it confused the senior legate, who thought the expression for her. She shook her head at the short-haired woman, smiling lightly to make it clear she felt no displeasure with her.

*Not with you, Chie-han, she told her silently. Only myself.*

She pointed out to Chie some minor detail about the amber in her hand, even as she continued her contemplations. Where was she? Oh, yes: bruising Natsuki . Very easy to do! Fair people bruised easily, of course, and Natsuki was so fair she could be considered pallid, if not for the colour that came so easily to her face. Unfortunately, the same alacrity applied to the colour that came to her knocks, as Shizuru had noticed. A modest bump on the arm would quickly see a mark in an hour; a knock on the shin bloomed blue in minutes. Natsuki had such thin skin, luminously white and beautifully translucent, enough for you to see the fine traceries of her royal veins. Such thin and tender skin, for all the hard flesh underneath; so thin that you tended to feel only the firm strength it sheathed, forgetting the tenderness of what lay above.

*Which I do, sometimes, as I did last night, she admitted angrily. I forget even my own strength. And that is unacceptable.*

Added to everything was the fact that this-the incident last night-was not even the first time she had forgotten such things. If she really thought about it, how many times had she carelessly subjected Natsuki to her force? What manner of greenhorn wielded strength so recklessly? Oh, how she hated that residual recklessness in her! Everything in her life thus far had been directed to the goal of weaning out such undesirable characteristics as recklessness and loss of control, such things as might prove her undoing. Now it seemed there were still vestiges left, deep in the corners. Her sole consolation now was that they only ever slipped from hiding around one person. That offered only the slightest balm to her pride; the consolation was still largely flat. In the end, the sole witness to her lapses was the one who mattered most of all.

*And could that even be why I forget, she wondered.* For it was only ever around Natsuki that she experienced those high flares of dark humour, only about Natsuki that she experienced losing her control. And such control! It was so envied, so admired, in fact, that it had grown fabulous among her foes and followers alike. Shizuru knew that, so she valued and tended to it. But at times like these, all that careful tending seemed for naught. Oh, how it would shock them, all those admirers! How they would marvel at Natsuki, who could crack

the hide on that fabled composure and squeeze out the pulse hiding in it, squeezing out Shizuru's self-possession until it was no more than a shrivelled pulp.

Shizuru winced at the memory of how it felt to be so undone by another. Still so fresh; still bleeding the drops, the pulp stinging within her . She continued to remember.

Remember, for instance, the awkwardness of the past four days, with the two of them hardly able to have a conversation that was not forced. Remember the coldness of the nights now, with her working late into the morning and Natsuki waiting wearily at her side, waiting with an impregnable aura of solitude that drove Shizuru deeper into the work, further into the numbers. Remember, even, her attempt to fix everything the fourth day-yesterday-with the awkwardness of resuming sweet words unspoken for a while, trying to overcome her own unease with a parody of confidence. Only to receive again the same answer.

*No .*

Remember the rising wrath, the scorching dissatisfaction with a woman who had only ever given her satisfaction until then.

Another private wince.

*Never before from her, this discontent. Nor this pain.*

Natsuki had been cruel in her constancy. She had refused to waver. Shizuru remembered too her own cruelty of the night before, choosing to relive it in self-torture. She remembered it with the sorrow of a woman who had done some wrong, perpetrated some meanness, and now took both satisfaction and shame from the experience. She remembered being disgusted with Natsuki's incessant and meaningless repetitions of the same reasons, the same themes and excuses. She had been so disgusted with the reiterations, in fact, that she had gone to bed straight after that first fruitless argument, leaving the girl standing awkwardly at the other end of the room.

She also remembered having blown out the lamp wordlessly,



speaking only when she realised the girl remained near the window.

The memories returned at the thought of Natsuki's slender form, a cold silhouette drafted by the low moonlight.

"Natsuki."

She had frowned at the time, her face turned to the small but inflexible back of the other woman. She had been angry still when she spoke her name, but had been unable to find the heart to truly growl at her.

"What are you doing? Why do you not come to bed yet?"

She had known the answer, of course, and it had only made the wrath rise quicker. It had seemed natural to wait for Natsuki to turn around, to attempt to answer, before cutting her.

"Why do you stay away?" she had asked again, before the girl could reply. Showing a twisted smile in the silver light, she had continued speaking casually to the Otomeian: "Is your determination to distance yourself from me so strong that you already do it now?"

That had struck Natsuki like a slap; it had shown. Shizuru had known it was unfair of her to say such a thing, even if only as a stinging tease, but some part of her took satisfaction in the hurt she caused the young woman. It was a very human thing she had done then, she thought: to be hurt and want to hurt back.

"Shi-Shizuru, no," Natsuki had begun, shaking her head slowly. "That-"

Shizuru had cut her off yet again: "Then come to bed already."

The Otomeian had obeyed, radiating a mute apology. That might have been what prompted Shizuru to turn her face away so that she would not have to watch the girl climb into bed with her. That had been and was still part the problem, was it not? That, no matter what she did or said, Natsuki had refused to get angry and only ever seemed apologetic. Shizuru was amazed by it, even now: how many stinging little words had she let loose that night, she wondered, how many traps? A dozen, perhaps, or more than a dozen. Each trap

had failed. Each time, Natsuki had flatly refused to get angry, evading each invitation to a quarrel even as it hit her hide. She had refused Shizuru even a salve that, petty as it might be, Shizuru had nonetheless needed in order to vent her fury. Perhaps had she done so, in fact, she might have been calmer later-as was true of most lovers, had she asked any about their quarrels or jealousies. However, Natsuki gave her no opportunity to expel the building steam.

All she ever gave Shizuru, it had seemed, was refusal and apology.

*I hate it*, the Himean had thought then, upon realising those two things from Natsuki, combined, were somehow unbearably close to pity. She had never been one to take well to pity, given her pride. Her *dignitas* permitted her to take no charity, and she would not take it even from the woman she loved. It tore her apart to see the unremitting gentleness that permeated all Natsuki's actions when it came to her-the oddly unwavering tenderness the girl could have even when she was flatly refusing her. Was that not insupportable? Was it not infuriating to have the girl continue to show such kindness, such partiality to her, while nonetheless declining her offer? For that was the oddity there, the thing Shizuru could not understand: if Natsuki could feel enough for her to refuse to become angry at anything she did even while remaining short of temper with most others, how in the world could she continue saying No?

It seemed as though the young woman was saying her affection for Shizuru was enough only for that: either it was pity, which was terrible in itself, or it was merely a passing like. It seemed that she liked Shizuru, but not enough.

*How can it be enough*, Shizuru had asked sorrowfully that night, as the other body had gone under the covers. *How can it be enough when I want her to feel not merely 'like'?*

It was that question that had turned her over in their bed, so as to face the young woman and promise her, darkly: "This is not yet over."

Natsuki had gone rigid.

"You must know this is not yet over," Shizuru had repeated passionately, her words coming out in a hot rush. "I will continue to ask, Natsuki. You must come with me. I don't-I just do not understand why you will not come with me. The reasons you give, they are weak. I told you. You say King Kruger would not permit it; I contest that highly. Why would he not? I would return you to this land in a short time, more knowledgeable about the world and having learned more than he could ever have hoped for you to learn about other cultures from your apprenticeship under me, as my bodyguard here. Even had he some reservations about it initially, I have no doubt that my influence would be powerful in swaying him-that I could persuade him swiftly to change his mind. I could do it in front of you, if you like, that you may witness it for yourself."

There had been a choked sound from Natsuki, followed by an attempt to voice a protest. Shizuru had stopped her before she could go further.

"The same goes for your argument about your duty. I know your command systems by now, and know that there are sufficient captains and even a second-in-command to take over for you should you be gone. As for your duty to the kingdom, I already pointed out it could be easily arranged such that your duty would be to accompany me and learn from our land-as I have done from yours."

Again had been the attempt to get a word in, edgewise; again her frantic refusal, an echo of Natsuki's too.

"It cannot be so that you merely fear to be away from your native land. It is so short a time. A year, at most. Would it be so hard a thing, were you with me? Natsuki, you must see the force of my argument. Is there something you are not telling me? Why will you not come with me? *In god's name, why will you not come with me?!*"

She had been surprised after that outburst, for she had found herself suddenly pinned and kissed by the other. She had almost thought it assent then but realised otherwise when she felt the restraint in the body above hers: the body that had, apparently, simply been trying to hold her down in silence. This from Natsuki, who had always been glad to listen to her when no one else possibly could. And the hurt

she had felt then-the injury of being so weighed down by someone else's rejection-had been terrible. Natsuki had been her own personal gravity, dragging her powerlessly downwards to her knees and into the silence.

*Now this*, she had thought in her grief, trying to dislodge the girl.  
*Now you even refuse to hear me.*

Natsuki's lips had been insistent and unmoving. Shizuru had bitten the girl lightly at first to make her move her mouth. When that failed, however, she had bitten a little harder, and a little harder after that, and still a little harder: hard enough, in fact, for her to eventually feel the copper juice of the Otomeian's blood on her tongue. Even then, though, the girl's mouth had stoutly refused to go, silent and silencing.

Something inside Shizuru had welled up, rebelled at this treatment. She had a right to plead her case; she had that much, did she not? Yet, there Natsuki was, attempting to deprive her even of that. *Not this too*, she had thought in frustration, *I cannot be deprived of this too*. Up had come her arms, gripping Natsuki around the arms and pushing her up and away. And then holding her suspended, holding her too hard but not realising it at the moment, or not until she felt the sharp indrawn breath against her face. She had felt the anxiety of muscle being crushed tight and saw, only then, that it was not her own. It had been so hard to tell: at the very moment Natsuki had mutely rejected her words, she had felt as though all the pain in the world had coalesced and become hers.

A light whine had sounded when she finally relinquished her hold, and it made her know, with a twinge of guilt, that she had indeed hurt the girl.

"Hmnn..."

The two of them had sighed at the same time, and had eyed each other sadly in the dark. And, though neither could see it, both their faces had been regretful.

"Natsuki."

At that, Natsuki had sighed again, almost with resignation. Shizuru had stroked the abused arms gently then, feeling the pulse of blood in the girl's arms, life returning to the vessels she had just constricted. That was when she had known that she should apologise, for she had not intended to hurt her that way. Or perhaps she had not intended it knowingly, at least.

Even then, it had taken a while before she managed to say the words. Who would have known if Natsuki would reject them yet again, even before they came out?

"I'm sorry."

The body atop her had shuffled down, Natsuki's head going to her chest in an unexpected gesture. It had been unexpected enough for her to feel guilty all over again.

"Sorry," she had murmured once more, starting to feel as though she could now return to being the young woman's lover. She had moved her right hand to the other's mouth, near her own breast, and stroked the younger woman's chin with a shaking finger. It had been the lip itself she had sought to soothe, but she had not been sure if touching it would hurt, so she had decided to stroke the skin below it instead. And that was when she had found that Natsuki's jaw held a faint tremble too, which was enough to rock her further back to her calmer senses.

"Natsuki, I *am* sorry," she had repeated in an urgent whisper. "I did not mean to hurt-"

A nuzzle had cut her off, brushing against her chest.

"I know," had been the unexpected answer, which had made the regret throb harder. "All right."

Before she could say anything, the girl had followed: "Sorry too. Shizuru."

"Ahh."

At the same time the breath left her, she had drawn up the body resting above, pulling it until she could kiss the other woman in a

sublimation of all her feelings. It had been a rough kiss, and that because she had known that it would take that, first, before she could truly be gentle with her again.

"No," she had whispered afterwards, holding Natsuki's hot cheek with one hand. "It was my fault."

Then had followed the softer kiss between them. Then, too, was when she had taken the time to feel that the girl's lip had still been plump: between her teeth like a segment of fruit, both sweet and coppery. Shizuru had tasted the blood she had drawn, and it had been enough to keep her from going further.

"I am sorry," she had said once more, after pulling back. "Very much so. I merely wanted so much to talk about it. To be given a chance."

There had been no answer to that, but she had not expected any. She had continued.

"But I suppose you are too tired to listen to my blather today."

She had felt the girl's head turn a little away, and had known it was because the other was afraid the wrath would come again. It was at that moment, having Natsuki turn from her, that she resolved to let it be for a while.

*Just a little while, for us-no, for me to calm down.*

"We shall talk about this again, but not tonight."

She had pressed another kiss on the injured lips. Natsuki had nodded, looking at her in the dark. To some extent, she had been glad she could not see it too well then: she had been glad, just that one time, not to have to see those green eyes that drew her so quickly out of herself. She had not wanted them to hurt her any more that night and prompt her to hurt them in return.

The sharp glitter of light on the amber in her hands pulled her back to the present. She looked at it again, trying to distance herself from the memories a little. She did not want to dwell once again on that ache. Better to look at this thing instead, this little piece of amber. Better to look at it as though it were the only thing that mattered.

The dead insect in the stone stood out darkly.

*Just like my wrong*, she mused helplessly, suddenly remembering the ghostly stripes of her fingers on Natsuki's arms this morning. She had seen them when they bathed together, and it had horrified her to see just how badly she had hurt the girl. It caused another inward groan: that wrong was fossilised too.

*My wrong is forever crystallised now*, she thought. *Not outside, even, but inside her. And, though she forgave me, the memory of what I did shall remain. She and I shall always know that I once intended to hurt her.*

She should not have hurt her, really. She should have known better than that. But it was hard to think of things in terms of what you knew and what you did not. Knowing you should not do something was rarely enough to prevent you from doing it. For instance, the cooler part of her knew she should not even have thought of bringing Natsuki back home. But that hardly compared to the strength of the part of her that was determined she would.

But now she was a little afraid of something, and it was something she had never really considered before, in her plans: was her love for Natsuki so injurious, then, as last night had proven? Would she be liable to hurt her again, and in a far worse way than that? If so, she truly had no right to take her to another land out of some muddled claim to love, or to passion. Or perhaps, it was better to say both, as with the words *passionate love*. Not all loves were passionate, she had come to understand recently, and she knew now where the line lay. All passions went too far. Otherwise, how could they be called passion? And she knew now that her love was of the most passionate kind.

It frightened her.

This was partly a result of having identified it for what it was, she thought. Having been able to name it, she had imbued it with even more power. And it was growing, in fact, even more quickly than she herself could have imagined. She had a notion of its hunger: she felt, sometimes, that it was eating her alive. But what should have been primarily a concern for herself was subordinate to that for

another. She wondered-would it eat Natsuki too? Would it reach a time where she would renege, even, on her promise to return the other woman to this land? What was the scope and breadth of this thing's hunger? Would her love for Natsuki be so vast, perhaps, that it would someday engulf the younger woman's life?

No, that could not be all there was to it. She pushed back against the fear, argued for herself *against herself*, defending her affection for the other woman as something more than pure selfish hunger. She wanted her: that was a given. But she wanted so much for her too.

She wanted her always safe. How could she ensure the integrity of that strong-yet-delicate body if it was so distant, far in a land where someone less skilled as a commander might place it in harm's way? This was the reality of their lives: to be soldiers meant to risk life and limb, to place it in the trust of both Fortuna's favour and a tactician's cunning. Shizuru knew she had both things in spades, and that was what had used to console her when she thought of the battles through which they would go. But now? Now both things were uncertain variables, not the constants her soldiers trusted to be in her. And if the uncertainty that spelled for her rankers' lives was painful already, then how much more was the thought of how it could affect Natsuki?

There were other things she wanted for Natsuki, too, aside from safety. She wanted to feed that enormous hunger for knowledge she often felt in the girl; she wanted to take her to the best booksellers and have her buy out their stocks. Then she would have the young woman pick out those tomes she most favoured, in order to commission specially-made, tastefully decorated copies of those scrolls for her own keeping. She wanted to give her a personal library, so she would no longer borrow from those of others. She would fill that library such that every book-collector in Hime would colour green with envy.

She wanted to show her a world beyond the library. She wanted to take her to the Forum and show her the edifices, the seats and structures upholding Hime's law and culture. She wanted to bring her to the games whenever there were any, and let her cheer at the races, urging her to place bets whenever she sighted a charioteer



she found promising. She wanted to bring her to the Porticus Margaritaria and take her shopping, watch her delight in the sheer diversity and excellence of the wares to be found there. Then, whenever she had to part from her momentarily to go to a Senate session, she wanted to pass by the Porticus herself and get something that would put the light into those lovely green eyes-or perhaps stop by the great flower market and buy blooms and lilies by the dozen, great sprays of colour and scent to bring back home. She wanted her to laugh with surprise at the gifts. She wanted her to be happy.

She wanted to live with her, as they already did now, but in her own house. She wanted her to lounge in the foliage-and-flower-strewn loggia of her mansion, while overlooking the view of the city considered the most powerful in the world; to see the brilliant dark blue of the sky from her home at night; to watch the splendid drift of constellations in her arms. When the warm days arrived, she wanted to bring her to the summer villa and let her frolic on the beach, stepping high and fast into the water until each droplet of surf kicked up by her feet was a crystal bead on her flanks. She wanted her to soar into the water like one of Poseidon's thoroughbreds, a creature that belonged to both the sea and the sky. Was it so wrong to want to give all of this to her? Was she really so wrong?

Her eyes misted, and she shut them.

"Shizuru-san?"

She opened her eyes and looked her legate, who was eyeing her with great interest.

Up came the polished hunk of amber in her hand.

"Think she would like it?" she asked the other woman, suddenly smiling. It was so stunning a sight, even to her friend, that it confused the senior legate for a second.

Chie stared in puzzlement at her, then at the object, before nodding.

"I'd guess so-it's an interesting little thing," she replied, as Shizuru smiled at it. " *Would* she like it?"

"I believe so."

Shizuru made a gesture to the shop-owner, who gladly quoted the price of the bauble. She produced the money and pocketed the amber with satisfaction.

"Thank you," she said sweetly to the merchant, who flushed pink with pleasure. Chie chuckled a little at that.

"Natsuki likes such 'interesting little things', as you put it," she said afterwards, as they went their way through the long street full of traders and their stalls. She gave a wistful chuckle. "Any little thing that might be deemed a point of interest, were it an actual gem or a measly rock. Sometimes I think she would be just as pleased with my gifts were I a poor woman only able to give her paltry things bought second-hand."

"I wouldn't call the things you've picked up for her paltry," Chie said with amusement.

"Some of them might be, monetarily speaking." At the legate's quizzing glance, Shizuru explained: "I *have* actually given her a rock, you know. To be precise, a terrifically cheap but nice-looking marble I picked up from the ground. To think I meant it as a joke..."

The other woman laughed. "She liked it?"

Shizuru laughed too.

"My girl is a wonderful recipient. I give her marbles still every now and then, if I find any rolling around." She shrugged lightly, allowing herself to feel better for a moment with the good memories. "On occasion, I actually buy them when I find one I think she might like. Glass ones, for example. Glass fascinates her. She says it is water frozen without the cold."

Chie chuckled at the fanciful idea.

"What does-" She paused halfway and amended her question. "Oh, does she play with them?"

The answer sparkling in Shizuru's eyes made Chie laugh again.

"As I am forever saying, such a child," the younger woman said with a grin. "It is why we used to frequent this street and the other, similar areas, if you have noticed. They have such things as would interest her. Knick-knacks of all kinds."

Chie hummed thoughtfully.

"'Used to', Shizuru-san," she said. "You make it sound as though it's a thing of the past. I don't think you need be so pessimistic, if you'll let me say so."

Shizuru smiled softly her way.

"Thank you, Chie-han," the younger woman said. "Thank you for that. I suppose I know that too. I merely said it that way because—well, we had not been out in so long."

"There is a lot to do. Doubt you could find the time."

"I could have made the time." Shizuru smiled that gentle smile again, only now it was directed to the greying sky. "I could and should have."

Chie said nothing to that, knowing it was not her place to respond to such a confession. Instead, she chose to remark on another subject, tangential to this one.

"Some things do put out our plans with the timing," she said with feeling. "This news! Four days ago, we were ready to take on the Mentulae. As Suou says, those curs back home who like to pick on you did it at just the wrong time. Everything's gone awry. The timing is just brilliant."

Shizuru nodded absently at her sarcasm. "Such things do have a marvellous way of appearing at the worst possible time. To think it had to happen then, of all days, too. That particular day and time . "

Tilting her head curiously as Shizuru sighed again, Chie arched her brows in query.

"That particular day? Why was that day so special?"

Something about that put a falter in her; Chie saw her hesitate, and did the same.

"You don't have to sa-"

"No, I do not mind," Shizuru waved, shaking her head slowly. "I do not mind, Chie-han. After all, it did not come to realisation."

"Oh."

They walked a few steps more, Chie watching the street they trod.

"What was it? Had you something planned?" she dared to ask again, a little later. She had a feeling Shizuru would answer, and that was too tempting a possibility to let pass. When the rueful sound passed her friend's lips, she knew she was right.

"That day," Shizuru said, her voice low and beautiful. "That day was indeed special."

Chie kept silent.

"It was when I planned to tell her that I loved her. Not as one loves a passing mistress. As one loves another whom one already feels a permanent part of one's life."

The short-haired woman actually froze in her tracks. Shizuru continued walking, however, so Chie had to rush to catch up after that.

"You-you were-Ecator! Really?" Chie spluttered, earning an amused look from her friend as well as the shopkeeper at whose stall they had paused. She waved her hands frantically, eyes wide. "No, I mean, rather, that I'm not exactly surprised you feel that way-well, all right, perhaps a little-but good gods! Shizuru-san, that's quite a confession!"

Shizuru smiled and said nothing.

"Wait," Chie said, catching herself. "Wait, now. If you planned to tell her that then, does that mean you'd never told her anything of the sort? That you, er, loved her, for instance?"

"Before that? No, strangely enough," Shizuru replied with strange detachment, looking over the items in the stall. "Foolish of me, no?"

"Well, I-I don't really know. I don't know what to say."

"I felt the same way for a while," the other replied with a chuckle.

"Not knowing what to say, that is. And then realising what to say, only to realise it too late."

Something flickered over Shizuru's face; another instant, and it was gone.

"Ah, well." The blonde sucked in a deep breath, and regret rasped it. "It cannot be helped."

She resumed her walk and Chie followed, still wondering. She was not really *that* surprised, as she had remarked, that Shizuru felt so much for her Otomeian lover: it was already clear to everyone who had regular contact with the pair how much Shizuru adored her foreign girl and how many things she would permit of said girl that no one else would ever be allowed. That said, she still could not help but be astonished by the final, established fact coming from the woman herself. Shizuru, avowedly loving someone? And doing so in such a headlong, dedicated manner? How many ears would rattle, how many hearts sting at that?

She stopped herself with a curious thought: would the Otomeian girl's ears have rattled too at it? Would her heart have stung, only with happiness?

*Of course it would have*, she insisted almost angrily, her natural compassion letting her feel some sadness for her friend's thwarted plans. *No matter how different that bird is, she should've been glad for that too. I can't accept it if she weren't. If the woman telling you such things is someone like Shizuru Fujino, you can't be anything but thankful. It's just not possible!*

"I know I should have done it earlier," Shizuru was saying, bringing her back to attention. "I know it now. But I did not."

Chie nodded very slowly, still coming to terms with this unexpected

confession.

"I guess you're not really the type to be cavalier with words like that, so I'd understand why you didn't," she said after a moment.

Shizuru looked thoughtful at her answer.

"Do you think so?" Chie's commander asked.

"I-yes, I do. Definitely."

There was a pause. Then Shizuru said something that caused even greater wonder than her words before.

"Yet I felt it even before I knew I should say it."

Chie all but stared at her, and the younger Himean nodded at her legate's dumbfounded expression.

"It is so," she confessed. "It took Suou-han, too, to make me realise it. Now I only wish she had done so earlier, or that I had enough strength to see it on my own, before that. My girl is not someone to be treated lightly, after all, and at the very least, she has long deserved to know without uncertainty the strength of my regard for her. I should have clarified from the beginning that I never saw her as a mere bedwarmer."

She smiled at the still-speechless Chie.

"I am new to this, Chie-han, and yet a tyro at affairs of the heart," she said. "But I do not think that should excuse me from the mistakes I make in this matter, any more than a novice commander's greenness to command makes her any less liable for errors made with her army. I am the one who takes the lead in our relationship, it is true, and thus the one more at fault for such errors than she would be. Yet I have failed her in this thing, and though you may tell me now that it is not as grave a failure as one in battle, this is in a sense a battle of epic significance to me."

Shizuru's eyes fell to her feet, lifting and setting down with near-mechanical precision, and their automation prompted her to smile, because she thought of the other part of her that beat regardless of

her will but perhaps in tune now to another's. Something about her in that moment was so lonely then, and so sublime in that loneliness, that Chie forgot even the wonder and shifted almost entirely to concern.

*Oh, that fool girl*, she thought, without real rebuke but with a touch of sorrow at Shizuru's forlorn expression. She had never seen Shizuru forlorn, and it hurt to see it now. Did that girl even know what she had done to their commander?

She tried to comfort her friend, knowing there was very little she could do or say but knowing that she needed to try at least.

"Most of us don't see it before someone else does, either," she said with care. "Please don't blame yourself for that."

"Perhaps so," came the still-smiling reply. "But I can blame myself, at least, for missing the chance."

Chie turned her head at her friend's fatalism.

"You can still tell her now," she suggested gently.

Her friend's lips moved in yet another soft smile.

"Now," she echoed, looking wistful. "Perhaps I *could* tell her now. And then, too, I am asking such a thing of her—"

She broke off here and shook her head, liberating a few strands of golden hair from her loose tie.

"No," she uttered, still giving Chie that fond and regretful smile. "I fear I cannot. Consider the circumstances in which I shall be telling her that. Then consider the fact that I mean what I want to tell her, beyond no uncertainties at all. I am a politician, so she knows I am no stranger to manipulation. Surely you understand."

Chie looked at her tenderly, heart going out to the younger woman. She did understand. But it was still so unexpectedly romantic coming from someone known for being ruthless in her outlook that it staggered her even as she thought of it.

"But I shall certainly continue my persuasion, of course," Shizuru conceded a little later, drawing from Chie a smile.

"That much, at least," the legate replied.

She stopped when she noticed someone waving at them from a nearby shop. It was a tailor's store, and it was one of her fellow legates waving from the doorway.

"I say. Well, it's Suou-san," she said to Shizuru, who turned at that moment to see their comrade.

They came over, exchanging greetings quickly and coming into the store to get out of the cold. The shopkeeper offered refreshments for the three officers-which they declined-but insisted on fetching wine anyway. They thanked him for his trouble and talked while waiting, looking over the bolts of cloth he had put up for customers' inspection.

"How good to see the two of you here," Suou was saying as she stroked a grainy, reddish-brown fabric. "Doing some shopping too?"

Shizuru, standing next to her, answered: "Oh, we were merely stretching our legs... although I did end up purchasing something."

She extracted the amber she had put into her pocket earlier and displayed it to the other patrician, who nodded appreciatively.

"Very nice," she said. "The wasp's preserved nicely. For Natsuki-san?"

"Yes."

"She'll like it-she's the type for that sort of thing," Suou returned, before explaining in reply to Chie's droll look: "You know, the curious type. I imagine she likes such curiosities."

The woman who knew best that specimen of the curious type agreed.

"Yes," Shizuru said. "Indeed she does."



"And you, Suou-san?" Chie started, walking around the little shop.  
"What brings you here?"

Suou reached for yet another bolt of cloth as she answered.

"Just updating my wardrobe," she said. "I had intended to do it come this time, anyway, even without everything else that's happened."

"Setting in for the cold?"

"More like the damp." She smiled and held up a large square of patterned light blue cloth to her front, twirling foolishly for the sake of her friends' laughter. "They assure me this country gets terribly wet come the thaw, flooding rivers and all. I thought a few more full-sleeved tunics might be useful. How is this?"

Shizuru said she suited it, as did Chie. The Himemiya held the fabric away with her arms and eyed it pensively.

"As I thought," she murmured. "Blondes really do go well with icy hues."

Smiles tugged at the others' mouths from the double entendre.

"Shizuru-san doesn't wear blues so often, though," Chie noted. "Do you?"

Shizuru made a vague gesture at her clothing. She was in a long, white tunic that was belted around the waist, with the tight reddish-brown breeches used by the officers for winter under it. Over her shoulders was a yellowish cloak, its fabric thick but of obviously high quality.

"Often enough, I would think," she said. "You simply do not notice because you are so often with me on army duties, Chie-han, and we all tend to wear the standard military issue gear then."

"Ah, true," Chie answered.

"Where is she, anyhow?" Suou asked.

"Where is who?"

"Obviously, tha-oh, never mind," Suou said, pale brows rising as she spied something or someone through the open window of the shop. "Here she is now. I suppose you sent her on an errand?"

The other women turned to the direction she was facing just as a blast of black hair and wind entered. The new arrival shut the door behind her, frantic green eyes easing when they settled on her general. Something in her body seemed to sigh.

The three women stared at her in varying degrees of surprise and interest. To Chie, particularly, her appearance was a strangeness, something she had yet to see.

*I don't think I've ever seen her so anxious*, the legate thought, silently assessing the girl's flushed countenance. *It's so different from her usual cool.*

It was different indeed. It was obvious the newcomer had come from outside at a great rush, for the perpetually straight hair seemed wind-tangled, rolling tendrils around her face. They coiled around her whiteness and Chie imagined, suddenly, that this was how she must look when Shizuru took her: her black hair damp on hot cheeks, the petal mouth parting. *Lovely*. She was such a lovely young filly. Certainly worth hiking up a tunic, as the soldiers would say. A more articulated picture came to her all of a sudden, and she found she had to look away.

She had imagined, for a small instant, being the one hiking up her tunic.

*Dangerous!* she thought with a scowl at the floor, refusing to look at Shizuru's bodyguard just yet. Chie had always thought the girl beautiful, true, if a touch cold in her haughtiness-but that just now had been pure heat. It stunned her. Then again, perhaps she had always known it was there too. But now she had actually felt what she had known, and the power of it made her ask how she had failed to do so before. The nerve-searing pull of it! She struggled for words, shaking her head inwardly. How did someone so frosty manage to be so suddenly sexual as well?

And if she felt like that, if the sight of the girl this instant could make

her feel like that-how did Shizuru possibly feel?

She remembered the third Himean in the room. She looked off to the side and was relieved: her fellow legate's eyes were fixed only on the couple before them and had not seen her slip.

"Sshhh."

The hissing sound was the Otomeian, obviously about to say her superior's name yet hesitating before she could finish it. Chie turned again, only to have Shizuru's tall form blocking the view of both her expression as well as the girl's.

There was a moment's silence. Chie did not know what was passing during that time, for she could see neither of the pair's faces. Then, she heard the Otomeian murmur something. Shizuru's head dipped and then nodded.

"Finished?" the taller woman asked the raven-haired one. "Already?"

Again the unintelligible murmur in reply.

"You must have rushed through your duties," Shizuru said gently, her voice carrying a faint reproach.

This time, the answer took a little longer. Both women listening in to the conversation heard it, however, and heard the plea under the words.

"My-my first duty is to you."

Suou and Chie heard each other's indrawn breaths at the same time. Shizuru's hand twitched at her side, as if it would rise. Would it?

The proprietor of the shop chose that moment to return.

"Oh, how lovely," Suou said, so naturally that Chie secretly found it hilarious. "The wine's here."

The words worked, however. The tension having been broken, the cups were distributed and the shopkeeper hovered again by Suou's

side, Natsuki doing the same behind Shizuru. The commander beckoned the Otomeian closer, however, and handed her the wine.

"Here, Natsuki," she urged. "Wet your throat."

The Otomeian hesitated before taking the cup, lifting it gingerly to her lips. Shizuru stopped her just as she was tipping it, however.

"Natsuki."

Everyone was watching them again, even the shopkeeper; there was simply something in the way Shizuru said the name that called attention. Besides, the girl herself was something to see in her reactions too. At the moment, her expression was bewildered, strange eyes luminous between strands of fallen black.

"It is unwatered," the older woman explained with smile. "Your throat is delicate and I do not want it to be shocked. Mind you do not take it in a gulp."

Comprehension invaded Natsuki's face. She nodded bashfully. As the young woman finally began to sip, Shizuru turned a wide smile to the shopkeeper.

"It is an excellent vintage you have served us," she said graciously. "It is my pleasure to have had some of it."

The man beamed at the compliment, diverted from his curiosity about the couple before him. Shizuru continued the diversion, chatting with him shortly as she finished the cup of wine returned to her by Natsuki, then ending the conversation by promising to visit his shop again sometime soon. After having thoroughly charmed the man, she then turned to her fellow Himeans.

"Shall you excuse us now?" she asked. "I believe I should return to the office. You may continue as you are, Chie-han, being finished with your work, but you may walk back with us too if you would rather return now."

Chie nodded.

"Thanks," she said. "I think I'll stay here and keep Suou-san

company."

"Why, thank you, much obliged," the Himemiya purred, sending smiles to the others' faces. "It's always fun to have Chie-san along, you know."

"The way she says it makes me worry," Chie said humorously to Shizuru. "Go on, and don't worry. I'll do the worrying, though, to be honest, I don't really think there's cause for it."

The crimson eyes softened at the message, and Shizuru bowed her head gently.

"Thank you again," she said. "Good day."

They bade her farewell too, watching her back wordlessly as she exited the shop with Natsuki. To be precise, Chie watched her back wordlessly, while Suou occupied herself with asking the shopkeeper to wait for her decision-another way of telling him to leave them alone for a moment. He took the hint with utmost delicacy, all the while wishing he had better ears to eavesdrop on them from the next room.

"Something's wrong and has been wrong for a while, I see," Suou said, as soon as the man had gone away. Chie was only mildly surprised at her lack of preamble, and nodded silently. "Would you care to inform me?"

The older woman eyed the young patrician a little warily, wondering if it would be fine to talk to her about Shizuru's problem. She did not know this young woman as well as Shizuru did, and though she knew they were great friends along with Suou's sister, she still wondered how much that should reassure her here. After careful thought, she ventured: "Yes, though I don't really know that much, really."

"When the subject is Shizuru-san, it's a given disclaimer," Suou ventured. For all the humour in her mouth, however, Chie noticed the younger woman's eyes were cold as ice. She was a little encouraged by their clarity nonetheless. The purity of those eyes betrayed no taint of malice.

"Has it anything to do with what occurred-and should have occurred four days past?"

Ah, so she had been aware of it. Again Chie nodded.

"She mentioned something about you being the one who made her aware of it?" she asked the patrician.

"It?" After a musing pause, Suou brightened with understanding. "Oh, that. Perhaps. I just drew her attention to the matter, to be honest."

"She was grateful."

"Hm."

She gave her answer readily, only realising afterwards how it might have sounded: "She said she only wished you had done it earlier."

Suou let out a fine stream of mirth before Chie could qualify the words.

"Is that not what all of them say?" The exquisitely blonde, perfectly classical face was alive with hilarity. "They do evade the issue as long as possible, then feel the fool later for having done it consciously. I believe it's their choice, you see."

Chie grinned at her, liking her more than before after that observation.

"That's rather perceptive of you, Suou-san, though perhaps a little cruel," she said.

"Honesty is that, generally." Suou rolled her eyes with a chuckle. "At least, now, she should have worked that out between the two of them. It's better to have such things aired and out. Do you not think so, Chie-san?"

She halted at Chie's expression.

"Why," she began. "Whatever's the matter?"

Chie made a small movement of her head, then looked away.

"That," she said, hesitantly. "It's not aired yet, that is."

Suou took some time to assimilate the words before comprehending what they meant, at which point she stared at her fellow legate. Her chilly eyes conveyed disbelief, frozen in their lucidity.

"What do you mean?" she asked in a low whisper. "She didn't tell the girl, after all?"

Chie looked wistful. Suou took the hint and frowned direly.

"It seems she wasn't able to," the senior legate explained gently, looking more and more wistful by the second. "I think they were interrupted by the news just then. You know, the news about her election as praetor."

Suou frowned.

"How troublesome," she ventured. "Still, she should have been able to say it later."

"No. She didn't."

"Good heavens, Shizuru-san is becoming surprisingly slow here, then. Did she tell you why?"

The older woman shook her head, raking a hand through her dark hair. Then she looked at the other woman-and was caught off guard.

When she was being serious, she realised, Suou actually looked terribly like her older sister.

Something about that prompted her to disclose what she knew.

"She asked her to come to Hime," she whispered.

Suou was unsurprised. "Of course. And?"

Chie's face spoke for itself; as did Suou's, in fact.

"Oh dear, " Suou uttered.

Chie nodded at this expression, agreeing with the feeling behind it.

"Dear me," Suou said again, looking puzzled beyond countenance.

Chie sighed: "I know."

"I can't say I expected that."

"Me neither."

"So that's why."

A silence settled over them, and it was pregnant with worry for their mutual friend.

Suou broke the stillness first, shaking her head slowly.

"She must feel awful," she said quietly, her lips thinning with displeasure yet again. "Oh, what a fine mess! How could it have turned out this way?"

Chie exhaled wearily.

"I don't know either," she admitted. "I couldn't have imagined it, myself. Turning out this way, that is. I mean, it's Shizuru-san!"

Suou smiled wistfully, knowing what the other woman meant.

"I know," she said. "You simply can't imagine her first-or any other-affair to end with her being turned down in anything, right?"

"The worst of it is that she can't even tell the girl the one thing I think would be sure to persuade her."

"Oh, yes. Yes, that might work if played well, as a matter of fact." Suou's eyes flashed, gleaming suddenly as she came to a potential solution in her efficient, terribly practical mind. "Now there, Chie-san, is a thought. I would certainly tell her if I thought it would convince the girl to bend to my will. Shizuru-san can still do that, at least, and I agree with you: it would be likely convince Natsuki-san to come with her, and would have a better chance of doing this than anything else. Yes, she should tell her. Phrased properly, it would give her



what she wants."

The look Chie gave her in response was odd, to say the least. She arched an eyebrow in query as the short-haired woman moved away slowly, going to the window and looking outside.

"No, Suou-san," Chie said shortly. "I'm afraid she can't."

"Oh? Why so?"

"Because it *would* convince her."

There was no reply, and Chie supposed she did not have to look behind her to know the young Himemiya's answer. So instead, she looked ahead.

She looked out and saw she could still see the subject-or subjects, rather-of their conversation in the distance. A sigh escaped her: Shizuru's hand was already going to bury itself in the Otomeian's hair. What she could not see was the heavy quiver that passed through the Otomeian at the touch, the longing shudder going all over the girl's body like a part of her soul being freed.

"There's the rub," she murmured to Suou, who had come to her side and was also watching the couple vanishing from sight. "I think she won't tell her now because she really does love her. Isn't it a surprise to know your friend can be so romantic? Because I never would have dreamed it of Shizuru-san."

# Chapter 41

## **Illustration:**

*Please remove the spaces after the full stops.*

ethnewinter. deviantart art/Contagious-137526897

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## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Carbunculus** (L., s.), **Carbunculi** (L., pl.) - The precious stone known as the ruby.
  2. **Denarius** (s.), **Denarii** (pl.) - Ancient Roman coin/currency; often minted in silver. For this story, it takes 6,250 denarii to make a silver talent, which is the amount of silver a man can carry.
  3. **Garum** - A smelly sauce more or less popular among the ancients, and immensely so in Rome. It was made in a process that would generally turn stomachs in modern times. There are several kinds of it, however, with some being rather lighter of flavour and odour than others. Here, assume that the garum referred to is generally the stronger variety used as a sauce.
  4. **Pavo** - Latin for "peacock"; show - off.
  5. **Smaragdus** (L.) - The precious stone currently known as the emerald.
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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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In the latter half of February, Shizuru was finally able to learn all of

the legal decisions on her impending replacement, which would most likely happen sometime in the following month. Letters had arrived from Sosia and Argentum at a steaming gallop-and several horses nearly dead with exhaustion could attest to that, to the stablemasters' irritation-disclosing the responses of each legate to the commander's query: Will you request transfer of duties to the as-yet-unnamed replacement, or will you come home? Shizuru read the answers in her office, tossing some denarii to the last wind-bitten courier to come with a scroll.

"The verdict is in," the commander announced cheerfully to the others in the room. "Toshi-han says he shall stay where he is in Sosia and so shall Aidou-han in Argentum. Thus far, only three legates have declared they shall seek to stay on with the new commander."

One of her senior scribes looked up from his desk, eyes narrowing.

"Toshi-san and Aidou-san," Aisuka returned. "As expected. One is after experience, and one after finances."

Shizuru smiled at him. "Succinct way of putting it."

"Added to Himemiya-san, that makes it an interesting trio choosing to remain, doesn't it?" he asked, his greying hair glinting in the torchlight. "Does it bother you that the less seasoned legates are the ones who shall stay, General?"

The general's beautiful face turned thoughtful.

"I see not why it should," she replied. "For all that they are less seasoned, each one is capable in his own right. Do you not think so?"

"Of course, General," Aisuka replied, somehow managing to convey the meaning that he had his doubts about the matter yet still deferential in that unvoiced opinion.

"Among them, whom do you think least seasoned, at any rate?" she asked.

He rested his writing hand over a sheet of paper and said, "If I

remember right, Fujino-san, they all came into your service at the same time, and it's each one's first campaign as a legate."

"Save for Aidou-han, in Argentum."

"Yes."

And he said no more.

"I have heard it said by many a cook that different meats season differently, some more slowly or quickly than others." She smirked lightly: that slightly sardonic, rather superior, very knowledgeable, and yet- *yet, even with all that!* -eminently likeable smirk only she could do so well. He was not proof to it, and he found himself smiling back. "Do you cook, Aisuka-han?"

"No," he said, and going along with her analogy: "But I'm fond of meat, whatever kind it is. Sometimes, however, I can't tell which meat is which. My palate, I'm afraid, is just crass."

She laughed, as did the others in the room.

"I think it depends, really, on the cook to bring out the flavour," he told her, watching her odd eyes lighten with appreciation of his use of the metaphor. "And thus far, I can't fault the cook who's been taking care of everything here, for us."

She smiled down at her desk.

"The cook," she said, taking up her quill again and glancing up to briefly grin at him, "has always had excellent staff, I am sure."

He accepted the compliment with a nod and returned to his own papers, still meditating on her words. It always pleased him to receive praise from his employers-for he was a truly good worker and he had the pride in his work all truly good workers did-but praise from her stayed with him longer. That was because she was a great woman, he thought, and a nice woman too. He would know, for he had served for another great woman once before, and *not* a nice one, either. Aisuka had been scribe once to Shizuru's archrival, or the woman who proclaimed herself Shizuru's archrival, and had found it a trying experience.

To be sure, he thought Haruka Armitage formidable in her own right, a true Himean without an inch of corruption where the standard was for a mile; however, he also thought her a difficult, dreadfully contrary character. It had been with some relief that he had finished his duties in one of her campaigns some years ago, his ears near-shot to deafness after her incessant braying-for that truly was the word to describe Haruka Armitage's manner of speech. Thus it had been with pleasant surprise, afterwards, that he had greeted her supposed archrival's polite summons, seeking an interview about a position with her.

*Charming*, had been his first thought upon that preliminary talk. Shizuru Fujino was nothing, he had decided at first impression, if not charming. She had seemed the opposite of Armitage at the time: soft of speech and graceful of movement, exceedingly subtle in all her actions. And so generous! More generous than other people; certainly far more generous than Haruka Armitage, who squeezed a denarius so tight she made the silver run blood. He had been offered nearly twice the amount Armitage had paid him for his services, although the young Fujino did warn him too that he would be well used in exchange. The money was not what made him accept her offer, however, nor was it her charm.

Indeed, many things about her had initially put him off before the actual meeting: she was too young, perhaps too inexperienced even with the awards she had won for fighting in battle; she was too good-looking, and good-looking politicians were always suspect for the havoc they could cause among personnel; she was far, *far* too patrician-everyone knew that the old-blood patricians tended to be highly eccentric. Aisuka was too knowledgeable about these matters to find the qualities attractive in an employer; doing background research on her, he had not actually been "all that drawn".

No, what had eventually drawn Aisuka to her was the tingling in his spine he felt upon meeting the young woman, a tingling that told him she was great in ways Armitage would never be-or anybody else, for that matter. Aisuka had had the premonition of something vast and immensely powerful looming on the horizon, had felt a presentiment of something about to dwarf everything he had ever known. He had dashed immediately towards it.

She had proven the premonition true. Accompanying her from amazing campaign to amazing campaign, Aisuka had offered countless thanks to the gods for sending him that intuition about her. He might complain to his fellow scribes, sometimes, about the incessant work she gave them, or the way she dragged them around with her one nauseating carriage ride after another... but the truth was that he enjoyed working for her.

Shizuru Fujino used her subordinates well. But she also paid them well in return: not merely in gold or cash, but also in glory. Her victories were such that one could not help but be proud of having had a part in them, of having been part of something greater than oneself. Aisuka as a scribe and a human being was prey to that elemental hunger: the hunger to take part in something that would live on forever in the great pageant of history. And there was no better place to do it than at the side of a woman who seemed poised to outrun everybody in that very pageant, such that all others would only ever be treading the road she had already marked.

He had been quick to see, during the first campaign, that she had her own similarities to his previous employer too. Like Armitage, Shizuru Fujino had unquestionable authority in her decisions, for all her vaunted delicacy. She might delegate with care, she might request in her voice full of honey, yet the sting lurked under the sweetness, always poised to strike should she be gainsaid. And she was never gainsaid; something in her aura forbade mutinous notions.

She was also incorruptible, but the incorruptibility was not the same rigid thing it was in Armitage. Rather, her incorruptibility was a supple and nuanced construct, like a flexible but eminently cutting sword. Indeed, Aisuka often thought that the best metaphor for comparing his former employer with his present one: whereas Haruka Armitage was a wide and old-fashioned broadsword of the most stubborn metal, Shizuru Fujino was a slender katana of the most tempered steel. And while Aisuka admired the obstinacy of the former, he much preferred the elegant strength of the latter.

There were some difficulties her particular character posed sometimes, however: difficulties he had never had to face with Armitage. Her subtlety made her moods difficult to read, as opposed

to her rival's blatant fits and furies. Shizuru Fujino, he had swiftly discovered, had different ways of expressing displeasure, and they were ways that made one ask if she was actually *expressing* at all. She did not rave, nor did she suppurate. Heavens, the woman did not even properly curse! No, she stayed still and calm all throughout. And at the same time could charge the very air to make the whole room shiver.

Those times were actually rare and far between, so infrequently did she lose her temper. He remembered the last time such a thing had happened: just recently, mere weeks past. A departure from normal. Of course, suspicions ranged from the issue with her sudden election as urban praetor-which made it hard to tell if it would be proper to congratulate her on that achievement-to possible difficulties with her foreign lover, the Otomeian cavalry officer assigned to safeguard her. What was that she called the foreigner? Ah, yes: *My Girl*. As though she were warning everyone else to steer clear of the young woman or face her wrath.

*Her Girl* was another departure from normal, come to think of it. Still, Aisuka had not been among those to blame his commander for taking up with the young woman. The foreigner, even with her alien looks, was widely held to be of alarming beauty, even if a touch too slender and too small-nosed. At least she was no discredit to his commander as far as looks were concerned. On the other hand, he knew that was not really the point of contention by those who disparaged the relationship.

Whatever the case, Aisuka preferred not to meddle with the matter, so he concerned himself not with it. He liked his concerns distinct, isolated; he focused them now on his commander alone.

The recent frigidity was gone, he thought, sensing the atmosphere in the room. That was good. The general's moods could be disturbing to the younger workers, and sometimes to him too. All was calm now.

Or was it?

Truth be told, he had sensed some difference in the general of late-another development. He had been among those to notice the

irritation in her some weeks ago, and he was also among those to notice its disappearance. Thus he marked the advent of a fresh attitude, a scent of something he recognised with some surprise. It was, he was sure, the scent of the general preparing for a battle.

How odd to sense that now! Where was the battle? None were imminent, as far as he knew, and he was high enough in the chain of information to be fairly certain. Of course, it could merely be that he was misidentifying the feeling. He could have mistaken her circumspection for something else. Yet intuition told him he was correct: the commander was being strangely wary and tentative these days. Of and due to what, Aisuka just could not tell-and that was an utter pity. The other senior officers were probably already making bets on it. It was army custom to do so.

A low, hardly audible humming started in his throat at this new subject. What if there were bets starting on it already, in fact? Aisuka liked a good wager, and often made a little money on the side that way. There might be a chance for a good gamble on this one. Perhaps it was best to consider the options as early as possible. It occupied him for a while.

He supposed that if he had to place a wager, his money might be safest on the Otomeian girl.

"Aisuka-han."

He was startled, looked up at his general.

"Dreaming already?" She gave him a light smile. "I must say that is not very like you."

He shook his head and apologised.

"My mind wandered to some other work," he said quickly. "What were you asking? My excuses for the slip, General."

"Are not needed. I understand it is getting quite late already," she answered. "Should we stop, you think?"

He felt the eyes of the others on him and nearly laughed aloud. *Fools*, he thought. When she asked a question like that, the answer



was usually already decided, no matter the response she received. Well, they were still young, all these other members of her staff in the room; they had not served long enough with her to realise that, for all her seeming deference to the desires of others, Shizuru Fujino always did and got what she wanted. Her enquiry was not a point of decision, but a point of form.

"I wouldn't mind, Fujino-san," he said with usual obsequiousness, bowing his greying head to a woman twenty years his junior. "Of course, I'll do whatever you decide."

She nodded, set down her own quill. There was a low sigh from the others.

"Well, it is decided," she announced. "We may conclude for the night."

The others hurried to arrange their desks at her dismissal, knowing the general's quirk on constant tidiness in the workplace. Scrolls were rolled up and put in buckets, buckets stacked up neatly in the corners. In the midst of this shuffle and movement, the great wooden door to their office creaked open.

"Ah, Na-"

The general's voice faltered when she looked up, so everyone else looked too.

"-tsuki."

Aisuka remembered his thoughts earlier, thinking them validated by what had just entered their presence. The general's Otomeian girl was certainly *alarming* in beauty tonight, and far more than that: she was wearing something the likes of which neither he nor the other Himeans had ever seen before. Such an odd costume! Was it the dress from her country, perhaps? Why did he not remember it from their brief time there, though? He would have remembered something like this, especially had she been the one wearing it.

The general's girl had a tunic-dress that was very bright, very white, and slashed to the thigh at the sides so that the front and back strips

brushed her feet like separate banners. Her legs were covered in tight and creamy wraps of wool to keep them warm, and the dark leather bindings of her footwear held these even tighter, crossing the legs just below her calves. The most outstanding part of her attire, however, was the great furred pelt atop her shoulders: grey and fading at the edges to a dusty, wolf's grizzle blue.

The commander stared. Aisuka gaped. Indeed, everyone in the room gaped, until the girl made a nervous flick of her head that woke them from their stupor. And even then, it was only the general who recovered enough to glance at the others, some of whom remained staring. That further pushed the general out of it: Shizuru saw something familiar in her staff's gazes, something she felt whenever she looked at her girl. It displeased her.

"My excuses, everyone," she said, eyes narrowing just the barest fraction. "But I believe you have done enough for today. You may go now, with my wishes that you have a good night."

This time, it was not just Aisuka who read the message in it. Unspoken but discernible were the words: *Leave us*.

They gathered up their effects in a hurry, the youngest dropping her quills clumsily because she kept sneaking glances to the Otomeian watching them.

"Good night to you too, General," Aisuka said in exit, sparing the Otomeian a fleeting nod out of courtesy. The others followed his example. "Thank you for today."

"And my thanks in return, Aisuka-han," Shizuru Fujino replied. "To every one of you."

He bowed again and scurried around his desk, leading the way out. Shizuru watched as her subordinates left, bowing and murmuring courtesies to her. It did not go unnoticed that some shot a final, fleeting glance over their shoulders in turning away, their eyes on the Otomeian. When the last straggler had gone, Shizuru got up and went around her desk, holding out her arms to her last visitor for the day.

"And a good evening to you too, Pretty One," she said with a sweetness that would have made Aisuka pause had he tarried a little longer. The Otomeian came up for an embrace, and the fur on the young woman's shoulders tickled Shizuru's neck and chin. "It is a good evening now that I have seen you. I take it that it is time for us to go?"

Natsuki pulled away, but not before dropping a kiss on the edge of her jaw.

"Yes," she said. "Dinner is ready, Shizuru. We can eat."

She spoke as though it were a simple meal to be identified that simply, though both of them knew it was not. Shizuru's lips twitched at the younger woman's bare speech. She had long thought it opposite to her own, which tended to be layered over with many levels of meaning. Time had shown her it was not so, in fact. She had since seen that Natsuki did not so much lack complication in terms of meaning but only in terms of presentation. Her approach, instead of layering over, was to cut away. And perhaps it made her communication the one that was subtler, for all its simplicity.

This was not a simple dinner, as Shizuru had noted. This was intended to be a night of revelation between them and, for once, it was the younger woman doing the revealing. She had set upon the idea two weeks ago, after they made up their first true argument, but had only offered it to Shizuru another week after. It had taken her time to prepare, she had explained, not just what she needed but also herself. Shizuru understood that it must have taken a great deal from her to set her will to this, to make herself vulnerable by being the one exposing herself for a change.

To be sure, Shizuru expected nothing like a full exposition of the taciturn girl's thoughts and feelings. Rather, tonight was to be an exposition of Natsuki's culture, her roots, the place whence she came. This was what Natsuki had claimed it to be. Shizuru guessed at the presence of an explanation there, in the more banal topics, something important Natsuki was trying to say to her. She thought it was very like Natsuki to try to say things this way instead of directly voicing them: again the trimming away of meaning, the use of it as fuel for the fire. Shizuru felt it her task to draw already discarded

words from the girl's actions, and she already had a few guesses as to the words involved in tonight's undertaking.

*This is I*, she imagined hearing the younger woman say. *This is who I am. I need you to understand.*

So be it, she thought anxiously, in equally silent response. So be it, this mute declaration of identity. She would listen-if it could be called listening-and she would try to understand, since it was for Natsuki. And there was the defining reason behind so much, now: had anyone told her it was necessary for Natsuki that she throw herself into the inky Underworld and crawl back out unassisted, she would have done it in an instant.

Now she stepped a little back to appraise the Otomeian all over again, leaning a hip against the desk in her consideration.

"I am glad," she said, angling her head slowly to one side. "And you, what is that you are wearing? You look lovely."

She saw some immense relief break free in the girl's face, like that of a person being reprieved from a death sentence, and she knew then that the younger woman had been afraid she would not like it. How intriguing. Did Natsuki worry about her that much? Was that why she had come into the room with that odd hint of fear and defiance, the one that sometimes wafted from her like a tantalising yellow smoke?

"My clothes," Natsuki replied, still a touch uncertain. "My home dress."

Shizuru continued to take it in.

"The dress is not so very different from the Himean and Greek ones, is it? Save for the legwear, and the splitting of the tunic between front and back below the waist."

"Yes."

The red eyes travelled to the silvery, blue-pointed fur.

"The wraps are certainly something else," she remarked, sweeping

its soft tips. "What fine fur. How it does suit you: you are so pretty in it, Natsuki. Is it something you often wear, your people?"

"Yes. Pelt, I mean." Natsuki's face was still glowing from the compliment. "Fuh-for the cold."

"It is most unusual... and most handsome. Do show me!"

She laughed and reached out for the girl's hand, twirling her around playfully. Natsuki was surprised, but turned anyway.

"You look like you belong in a forest, or a white mountain, or a frost-speckled plain. I am almost afraid to touch you for fear you would melt away like a fleck of snow."

Natsuki laughed at her foolishness. How nice to be able to make her laugh unselfconsciously again!

"You touch me now, Shizuru," she said, eyes darting to where they were handfast. There was no effort to break the touch, however.

"That I am," Shizuru averred, eyes hooding a little as she leaned in to scent her: it was nice to be able to do that unselfconsciously again, too. "And if you do not melt now, I am glad, for it means I can attempt to make you do that later, in a more pleasurable sense."

The Otomeian flushed scarlet.

"Silly," she said brusquely, a choke in her voice. She cast about for something to use as a lifesaver and found it in her hand. She pulled from Shizuru's grasp, doing it with enough of a final clasp to show that she was reluctant to do so.

"Shizuru." She held up the parcel in her hand. "You like chestnuts?"

The older woman angled her head again to one side.

"Why, yes, Natsuki," she said. "I rather do."

A pleased rumble came from Natsuki's throat. As soon as she loosened the drawstrings of the pouch, a wonderful smell hit Shizuru's nostrils, which she immediately identified.

"Oh, roasted chestnuts!" she exclaimed in delight, as Natsuki presented the bagful of mahogany-skinned shells. She bent over to examine the contents of the bag more closely. "And still warm. How delicious."

"For you."

Shizuru looked up. "For me?"

"I-if you liked them, I thought. Maybe." She nibbled at her lower lip. "I hoped."

"Thank you," Shizuru said, chafing her lover's cheek with a callused thumb. "I think most people do like them. Thank you, *meum mel*. I rather missed them."

Natsuki's pink cheeks turned red again, and Shizuru eyed them appreciatively. The girl nodded at the scrolls on the older woman's desk.

"Not finished?" she asked shortly, while Shizuru returned to her seat at the table. "Still more work?"

"Oh, merely a little left. I simply need to read this note from one of the local bankers and the rest can keep." She crossed her legs. "I know I promised to spend the evening without work, with you. We can go soon, do not worry."

The young woman fell into a seat on the stool next to hers, which was always there for that purpose.

"I will wait," she said simply. "It is all right if I wait. Do not worry too."

The Himean lifted an eyebrow, amused.

"Why, thank you for the assurance," she said, returning to her work. Breaking open the cylinder she had mentioned, she read through it swiftly and set it down scant moments later. If her haste amused Natsuki, she did not know, but there was a bemused expression in the younger woman's eye.

"I am finished, Natsuki," she announced, receiving a beckoning

motion in reply. "What? Oh."

She watched as Natsuki took her hand and held it open with pale fingers, dropping two shelled chestnuts into it. The Otomeian pointed to the parcel she now held on her lap, quickly chewing and swallowing the chestnut she herself had been eating.

"You read very fast," she said in her husky voice. "I just opened. You will eat a little?"

Shizuru smiled, bringing up her hand to look at the pair Natsuki had placed there.

"Of course," she said. "I must try them immediately. And if you think that fast, perhaps you would suffer me to glance at just another letter, then?"

Natsuki acquiesced graciously. Shizuru cast a nut in her mouth.

She spoke her verdict: "Delicious."

"Mm."

The general picked up another cylinder from the bucket beside her, breaking it open and going over the contents. She ate the other chestnut in her palm. "I did not know your people ate chestnuts too."

She was both surprised and amused by Natsuki's swift reply.

"We do," the latter said. "We eat chestnuts too. And walnuts."

"Ah." Shizuru took another shelled piece from her, trying not to grin. "And almonds?"

"And almonds," Natsuki insisted, haughty. "And meat like you, the meat of sheep and pigs."

"And cattle, goat and deer."

"And cattle, goat and deer, and also cheese."

"And *black* bread," Shizuru teased, smiling with near-credible

innocence. "And milk to drink, during meals, and great tankards of foamy beer."

Natsuki arched an eyebrow at her, knowing she was being baited but unable to help biting anyway.

"And no foul sauce," she bridled. "No strange, fishly-fishy-fish-smelling sauce."

Shizuru put a hand to her mouth and muffled the laughter.

"True," she agreed, trying to bury her nose in the scroll so that those emerald eyes would not bore into her. " *Garum* is rather fishy, is it not?"

Natsuki seemed surprised that the older woman knew what she had meant; it seemed she had made the retort almost as a private joke to herself.

"I know you do not like it, Natsuki," Shizuru giggled further at her face. "I did notice, you know."

There was a pause before Natsuki answered, and when she did, there was a peculiar note in her voice that made Shizuru look at her a second time.

"You know this?" the raven-haired one uttered. "Then, if you know this..."

Shizuru smiled hesitantly, a little puzzled by the glimmer in the other's eyes.

"I did," she answered slowly. "Why, Natsuki? What is it?"

There was no answer, save for the unfathomable one glimmering in those eyes again. And even that soon subsided after a moment, the bright green irises downcast and darkening.

"Natsuki?"

A negative movement of the head, as though to say it did not matter. Whatever it was Natsuki had been thinking was lost in the dark pool



of unspoken words she seemed to always carry with her, and further forgotten when she went on to remark on the "foul sauce" itself.

"I thought-I wondered how you could eat it," she said to Shizuru, who listened attentively. "It smelled-it smelled so- and I worried it was only I who smelled it and my nose was going bad."

Shizuru grinned.

"No, I think your nose is still perfect," she said with a mountebank smile to make the other giggle. It worked, of course, although it was accompanied by a sniff.

"But later I knew it was so very foul, and I was surprised because your people eat it and *you* eat it and you like to smell good things so much." The Otomeian misinterpreted Shizuru's suppressed look of amusement here and hurriedly added: "I do not-I do not want to insult your people, Shizuru. I know, I see sometimes some of you think what we eat bad too, or maybe foul. I do not intend to insult."

The red eyes widened at her fretful explanation, their golden lashes outcurved and fanning.

"I understand, Child," the older woman said amiably, surprised by her care. "There is no need to explain. Even I know it is indeed foul. Do go on, please, and do not worry about me mistaking your words."

Natsuki nodded. "I wondered very much why it smelled so. I asked."

Shizuru threw her a steady look.

"Not me," she accused. "You did not ask me, did you?"

"No, I asked another."

"You could have asked me."

The stunned look in the Otomeian's eyes made her smile, and she waved it away.

"I am not hurt," she said swiftly. "I do understand why you might have hesitated to ask me, so I am not fool enough to take offence

that you asked someone else. Even so, I wish you to know that you may always ask me anything. Anything at all."

Natsuki was embarrassed after that, and kept her eyes on the floor. Shizuru had to prompt her to go on.

"I learned, I found the name was *garum*, and I knew then it was popular among you," she said cautiously. "I knew it was popular with many other peoples, too."

"True. I suppose you should have come across it in some of the texts you have read, at least."

Natsuki made a sound of agreement.

"But I knew not what this thing was, and how it was made, and what was in it," she said. "How does one, um, achieve such a scent, I wondered. So I went to look for that, and-and I found it was of fish insides, let to ferment for a long period."

"So you discovered it, hm?"

"Yes."

"Yes, it is indeed made that way."

The appalled look in the green eyes made her giggle, and after a while of that, even Natsuki giggled too.

"It is strange." She shook her glossy black head, mouth halfway between a grin and a puzzled frown. "It is fish insides, Shizuru, and you even let it stand, as if to let it spoil. I think it is strange."

"I suppose it must seem so," Shizuru avowed, still covering her mouth. "No, *I see* it must seem so. It must make you wonder what sort of people could come up with such a mad notion: to take fish innards and let them cook under the sun."

Natsuki squinted into space, seeming preoccupied with something else. The older woman put a palm on top of her head while waiting, stroking the Stygian-black tresses with a gentle hand.

"Shizuru," the girl called in the next moment, suddenly adopting an awesomely grave mien. Shizuru admired the handsomeness of such an expression on her, mindful of keeping her own face sombre: she worried it would trouble the girl's pride not to be taken seriously after such an effort.

"You like it?" came the sharp question.

There was a moment's hesitation.

"Do I like *garum*, you mean?" Shizuru clarified.

"Yes." Again the awesomely grave look. "You like it?"

"Well, not excessively, I should say. I eat it too, however."

Some of the gravity was lost: Natsuki's lips parted.

"But I do not eat it overmuch and have recently grown ill of it, so it is fine," Shizuru went on, returning her stroking hand to her lap. "Let us just say I do not dislike it, rather."

The pink lips closed, the plump lower one was sucked in thoughtfully before being wet by the tip of a nervous tongue. Natsuki took more than a few moments before she talked, but Shizuru waited patiently for her, glancing at the contents of a scroll on the desk in the interim.

She had read a few columns when there came the expected murmur.

"Uh, Shi-Shizuru?"

"Yes, Dear?"

The sideways glance from under the long black lashes actually made her knees tremble. Had it been any other girl, Shizuru would have thought it a practised move. She would have told herself, *she is trying to reel me in like a fish*. But this was Natsuki, and she had long since learned that Natsuki did things like this without knowledge of how potent they could be in the game of charm, and despite that—or maybe even due to that—Shizuru thought they were even more potent when done by her.

"If you like, you should eat," Natsuki went on to say. "This *garum* . The smell is not so bad after a while, to me, so you should."

A corner of the pink lips curved up timidly, glossy from having just been wet, and the girl finished: "I will learn not to think it so bad. This is not trouble, Shizuru. I can do this thing for you. If you like it, you should eat it, no?"

The wide eyes, the vibrant shade of a new leaf seen through a dewdrop, came again to her. Once more she felt the delicate shudder as they brushed over her face. *Oh*, she thought, *don't look at me that way. Not here, where someone might interrupt me if I do what that look asks, tempts me to do.*

She ripped herself away from the compelling gaze, invoking propriety and cursing it at the same time.

"Thank you, though you need not undergo that torture for my sake. I do not like *garum* to the point of ever missing it if it were to be banished from my table," she lied, silently bidding goodbye to that once-firmament of her daily dinners. Her hands on the desk clapped together. "I believe this should be enough for today. And I am just about ill with reading this other scroll, so perhaps I should continue tomorrow. Gods know this particular piece is not really conducive to working up an appetite, in any event."

"What, um." Natsuki paused, looking at the cylinder she had indicated. "What is it?"

"Would you like to see?" Glad for something to divert her from thoughts of ravishment, Shizuru took up the scroll and unfolded again it so that Natsuki might peek inside. "Another speech from the House. I generally have copies sent of each senatorial speech my people might think pertinent to me, as you know, and this one apostrophised me quite a bit in tangent." She smoothed her long fingers over the paper. "This speech is from one of my more noteworthy opponents, a senator named Sergay Wang."

Natsuki scowled.

"Opponent?" she asked, looking displeased. "An enemy?"

"A Traditionalist, to be precise. Therefore, one in principle as well as sometimes in practice."

"And he mentioned you?" The cool eyes darted to the scroll. "Here, he did?"

"Yes. They never miss a chance, even if the chance is distant, in tangent." Shizuru nodded at her companion's expression. "Wang-han, he knows the game well. He generally manages to squeeze in references to anything on any foundation. To some extent, I appreciate the skill it takes too, though not too much when what is being said is negative and about me, of course."

Again Natsuki's brow furrowed.

"What does this man say?" she demanded. "What does he say of you?"

"Nothing new... merely the same old things about my being a danger to the Republic, my perilous ambition, my overly patrician arrogance, *etcetera ad nauseam* ." She waved a hand lazily in dismissal. "To be honest, I cannot even feel insulted with what he said, since it is nothing new. It is not one of his more remarkable speeches. He has better ones."

"He does-he makes-remarkable speeches?"

"On occasion. He is renowned for his skill as an orator."

"He is so good?" Now the young woman seemed more worried than peeved, and it made Shizuru smile to understand what had caused that in her. "How good?"

A finger smoothed away the crease on her brow.

"I suppose better than most," Shizuru answered her, adding a cooing note afterwards. "Of course, that may very well be hardly anything. Nonetheless, he has fine rhetoric, often enough... Although, yes, I do think he is overly in love with the scesis onomaton. Sometimes, he strings together whole paragraphs of them, and it becomes a little tedious to listen to-like a vain man in an empty room, pleasuring himself to the rhythmic up-and-down bob of

his own mouth. Tee-e-dious spectacle," she drawled, even more aristocratically than usual. She was pleased when Natsuki giggled, red-cheeked from the picture she had imagined.

"You should not worry," she assured her. "I am yet certain that, for all his skill, he still cannot trounce me."

Natsuki's brows arched, a dark swan's wings in an elegant lift.

"Shizuru," she said, "no one can trounce you."

The older woman replied with a penetrating stare, a little surprised by the conviction in the girl's voice.

"You sound so certain," she said curiously, for all that she was certain of the same thing herself. "Do you really think so?"

"Mm."

Shizuru was about to ask if it pleased the girl to think this when she was stopped by the pride gleaming in Natsuki's look. She saw then that it did please Natsuki to think that of her; it was the pleasure a woman feels when she has found a perfect lover, as she often thinks the first one to be, and believes this lover can do anything. It was such a girlish fancy. She was amused that Natsuki could actually regard her with such worshipful admiration, but she also marked that fancy well, and the look that indicated it: she decided to remember both from then on so that she would never give Natsuki cause to be disappointed in her, nor she in herself.

"Shizuru, Shizuru," the young woman smiled uncertainly, her call having brought Shizuru back to attention. "Which one is this? The one you said? This scesis?"

"Oh, the scesis onomaton?" Remembering that the Otomeian was not actually specifically trained in rhetoric and was only familiar with some of the devices through her perusal of so many texts, she explained carefully. "It is when the speaker emphasises the idea through a series of more-or-less synonymous sentences, closely strung together. I use it too, though nowhere near as often as Wang-han."

She saw that there was a request to leap off the younger woman's tongue, held back by her typical hesitation to ask something for herself.

"Yes, Darling?" she said. "What is it?"

Natsuki smiled, her little nose scrunching briefly.

"This scesis onomaton," she said with great care. "You can make one now? To show me, maybe?"

The Himean looked at her with great fondness.

"Yes," she said, suddenly assuming a deadpan look. "I think myself not so very bad at rhetoric."

Natsuki breathed a chuckle. She knew Shizuru was renowned for her rhetoric as well.

Shizuru inhaled, then leaned forward.

"How your beauty breaks me, Natsuki: you drive me to distraction, you move me to madness, you send me past sanity and shatter all good sense," she uttered passionately, making a point of staring into the green eyes as she delivered the example. She was satisfied to see them shine as she said the words; she was even more satisfied to see the anxiety behind that shine, for that at least told her Natsuki had seen through the example and into the confession.

Natsuki looked away for a second, obviously embarrassed. Shizuru could read pleasure in the embarrassment, so she permitted the green gaze to stray from her.

"You put another."

Shizuru moved her head enquiringly.

"Yes?" she said.

"You put another," Natsuki repeated softly, turning back to her with a small quirk of the brow. "You put what I asked and put also the alliteration."

Shizuru nodded, acknowledging the statement.

"Indeed I did," she said. "And also..."

"Also?"

"You do not notice there is at least one other?"

"One other?"

Shizuru was about to tell her when she shook her head, hand up like a royal calling for silence.

"Do not tell," she commanded imperiously, before softening. "You will say it again?"

The Himean acquiesced to her wishes. It took a while, with her scowling direly at the floor in thought, but she eventually found the answer. When she gave it, she turned a bright face to the older woman, who smiled back encouragingly.

"Anaphora, I think," the girl said. "You repeat 'you'."

Shizuru brought together her hands, clapping softly as she laughed.

"Quite so, *meum mel*," she said. "Very well done."

She beamed at Natsuki's flushed, proud face.

"I gave you not one, but three," she told her. "You see how I favour you, you lucky girl?"

Natsuki smirked.

"*Pavo*," she snorted with gleeful insolence, causing Shizuru to laugh. "*Pavo, pavo*."

"Impertinent brat," the other retorted, kissing her fleetingly. "Divine, impertinent brat. I am of a mind to keep kissing you here, since you insist on being so cheeky tonight, so we should go now. May we?"

Natsuki agreed. They rose at once and left the room hand in hand. Shizuru stopped to bid the remaining guards outside the door a



good night, noting in passing the knowing smiles lurking in their eyes. What had they thought she and Natsuki were doing in there?

She permitted herself an inward shrug at the query. If it amused her soldiers to have a lusty commander, that was fine. Besides, she wanted it firmly set in every man and woman's mind that this delectable little catch was hers, and only hers for the having. No soldier was fool enough to even try to come near his commander's 'favourite', and Natsuki was the sole title-holder of that, in her case. Therefore she saved herself a great deal of jealousy and Natsuki, a great deal of irritation.

As they walked on, she threaded her fingers through the silky dark hair. Natsuki moved her own hand carefully around the taller woman's trim waist, fingers so light on the leather belt that Shizuru could barely feel them. The hand holding the parcel of chestnuts swayed loosely at the girl's side and every few steps or so she would jangle it idly, the dull thock-thock of the chestnuts in it like the sound from the marble-board of a child.

"Embarrassing to say, I am actually quite famished," Shizuru told her, stroking the soft skin at the base of her neck. "I am eager to see what you have had prepared. You *did* have it prepared?"

"Mm, yes."

"I see." A pause. "Merely out of curiosity, Natsuki, do you know how to cook?"

"Um-not very much." They glanced at each other. "Only very simple things. I can roast and make some stew. Such things - such things as you make during hunting, or on the march."

"Preparing venison."

"Yes." She smiled suddenly, green eyes taking on newfound confidence. "I can cook with herbs too, and such things as I find in the forest. I know how to forage."

"A child of the wilderness." The older woman put a suitable note of admiration in her voice. "You have knowledge of herbs and

medicines? Of what plants are good and what are poisons?"

"Mm-hm. It is important if you go out much, and often hunt."

"And you do, I suppose."

"I like to hunt."

"You really do belong to Diana after all."

They were silent a little while, still walking.

"Shizuru?"

Shizuru looked down at her. "Yes?"

"You can cook?"

"Only things on the march. Perhaps much the same things as you do," the Himean replied. "I daresay I can make a tolerable stew, myself. But then, I suppose it is only to be expected of both of us that all we can make are simple dishes."

"Us? Why?"

"I am a patrician, a noble by birth and brought up in an affluent household. You are a patrician of your people, related to their royal clan and brought up under your king's supervision. I grew up in a mansion; you in a palace." She quirked her eyebrows drolly. "Spoiled monsters that we are, we could hardly have been expected to learn complex cooking."

Natsuki laughed, for it was true.

"I am a spoiled monster," she growled humorously, making a slight face. "You are a spoiled monster."

"Gorgons," Shizuru agreed, nuzzling the top of her head.  
"Chimeras."

The girl's wit was sharp as ever: "Not sphinxes?"

That made Shizuru laugh. She stopped at the door to their room and

bade Natsuki show her in, as she did not want to rob her of the pleasure of the flourish and presentation.

"Reveal your secrets," she said playfully, "oh Great Sphinx."

Natsuki went ahead of her, opening the door gingerly and swinging it with a creak on its hinges. Shizuru stepped in and into what seemed another world.

"Not a secret, maybe," Shizuru heard her say, as she walked ahead. "Maybe... just me."

"Ahh."

It was Shizuru who sighed. After recovering from the first jolt, she swept her gaze around the redecorated room. So many changes! Gone was the citrus-wood table lent to her by the Argus governor: it was set aside, pushed to one wall, along with all the stools and chairs. These last had been decorated by lush fur covers, and some of the same furs were hung on the walls. Still, she doubted they were to use these refurbished seats. Rather, she guessed they were to go with the true Otomeian custom of dining on the floor.

She judged this from the low table that had usurped the taller table's former place. It was set over a gigantic rug stitched from several separate pelts. There were many cushions over this rug, of a great many sizes and patterns and textures in covering, but not very many colours: most of them were black, white, or brown; brown in various shades and mixtures, from the colour of red earth to that of dark wood. The brightest object in the room, aside from the lamps, was an enormous tapestry that hung half the length of one wall. It depicted a winter hunt, with wolves and hunters worked in red, black, and gold thread as they sprinted on a white and midnight blue background. A connoisseur of art, she paused over it. *Beautifully-woven for all its simplicity of colour*, was her verdict, and it pleased her that the girl had such good taste in picking it.

Being a Himean-and thus a lover of bright tints-Shizuru was amazed by the sombreness of the hues: not just in the tapestry, but with the place entire. At the same time, she was open-minded enough to see the appeal. It reminded her of the monotonous and uncomplicated

colours of Africa Province, where one could look out at cities of entirely brown roads and houses all painted white. In that place it was the shimmering heat that prompted the lack of daring shades blazing at the beholder's eye; in this frigid country, she supposed it was the same extremity of weather, only on the reverse end of the scale.

While she had been noticing all this, the younger woman had moved ahead, removing footwear to get on the rug. Now she shot the Himean an expectant look. But Shizuru did not move, for she was experiencing a secondary jolt: she was too busy taking in the image of her companion amidst these odd surroundings, taking in the strange belongingness Natsuki had with this glut of peculiarities. Herself a woman who slipped smoothly into place in any situation, the Himean felt herself for the first time at a disadvantage; her bright blue, orange- and gold-embroidered tunic seemed a blazing disturbance amidst the restrained colours; her height, at odds with the depth of the table before her. Why were their tables so low, anyway? She had always thought it ridiculous given the stature of their people, and she would probably have continued to think it ridiculous in any other setting save this one, where she was the minority and the foreigner... and, therefore, the ridiculous thing instead. Even the girl crouched by that table struck in her some awkward hesitation, some deep and silent awe.

*She belongs here*, she realised with a sense of astonishment. *I have never seen how much she belongs here, for I have never seen this, or her in this.* When last had she seen Natsuki in such surroundings? In Otomeia-it seemed long months ago-and only for a fleeting instant then. Since the girl had been assigned to her so early in their acquaintance, she had not had much of a chance to observe Natsuki in her native element. Further, it had been Natsuki who had always acquiesced to dance along to her tune, trying to make her peace with a culture that, before meeting Shizuru, she had only ever encountered in texts. Now she was the one playing the pipe, it seemed, and Shizuru would have to be the one to follow the rhythm. It was form of surrender she was demanding of the older woman tonight, and Shizuru saw it only now.

*She wishes this of me tonight*, she mused, still frozen. *To join her in*

*this unfamiliar place she has made of our familiar bedroom.* Oh, she had expected this-but she had never thought to face it in a form of such clarity, to realise the gap between them with such... what was the word for it? Vividness? To see the girl she wanted to belong to her in this situation, belonging so perfectly to an atmosphere so unfamiliar, hit her like a slap.

Again she looked at her. She had grown accustomed to Natsuki's manner of reclining on the floor whenever possible and on some occasions had even joined the girl in doing it. Even so, she found herself amazed all over again by the thought of people who truly did this all the time: conducting affairs on the flat ground, so close to the earth. The truly Himean part of her-for, even with all of her radicalism, she was still a true Himean-acknowledged it as barbaric; but her curiosity and especial favour for Natsuki slid that judgement away from the fore of her mind. She was a person who condemned hardly anything immediately, especially when it was related to this young woman, and thus gave herself the chance to try to accept what she saw. Thus it transpired that she was snatched up by the fascination before she could even begin to truly think on what should have been *the savagery* .

She looked at the dozens of cushions on the floor, and at the low, wide table. She looked at their newly low-to-the-ground bed, of which only the thick mattress now remained where it had been, layered many times over with even more cushions and blankets and furs. She forgot to school her expression in that moment. It was the nervous flash of green eyes that reminded her what was happening and what she had to do-for this was about a young woman who was unusually brittle in both pride and dignity. Shizuru hesitated another moment and regretted it at once: she saw the sharp recoil, the quivering worry in those young eyes, more like a girl's than ever before. And that was when she described to herself the shape of Natsuki's anxiety.

She went forward a few steps, stopping just short of the thick rug and smiling.

"How wonderful it all looks," she breathed. "It is very strange to me, of course, but not unwelcoming."

Her words caused a little of Natsuki's apprehension to melt away.

"As I am a stranger to this, perhaps you must direct me," Shizuru invited, not knowing where she should go next.

The Otomeian nodded, crawling to kneel at the edge of the rug, just before her feet.

"We take off these," she said, nimble fingers swiftly undoing the laces to the Himean's sandals. "Put up the foot, Shizuru. Yes."

Later, when the other one was unlaced as well: "This too."

When her feet were bare, Natsuki bade her sit on a large square cushion of the softest sable. Then the girl drew close a basin of warm water, still kneeling before her.

"I will wash them, Shizuru," the girl announced, and then began.

Until now, Shizuru had not said anything in return, so awed was she by her companion's acts. Here the Otomeian was on her knees: of the blood royal, yet so natural in her assumption of such duties as washing and drying another's feet. She even did it with the lovely care of someone who knew how to do it best, like a well-used slave-girl. Ludicrous thought! Still, she did it so well. Had she washed any other's feet before? Oh, but Shizuru did not like the thought of that. Natsuki could wash only her feet, if at all, and no one else's.

"You prepared this?" she asked, looking around the room again, marvelling once more at the transformation. Wholly Himean it had been when she left it this day; utterly foreign now that she had returned at night. "Only you?"

Natsuki made a negative movement of her head.

"Some help," she murmured, still bent on washing Shizuru's feet as tenderly as possible. She even spared time to chafe the surface of each toenail with her thumbs. "I had a little help."

"Of course. I could hardly expect to trouble you by yourself so when all of us are deadly weary."

"No trouble, even."

"Thank you for the thought, then."

Natsuki finished by drying off her feet with linen cloth, pinching the toes good-naturedly before returning to her seat. Shizuru arranged herself to face the squat table better along with her partner. Her feet dug deep into the cushion as well as the rug. The white fur, she noted with almost sly relief, was very smooth and dry. That meant it was clean and free of one of the things she feared most in the world: those accursed pests known as lice.

She noticed Natsuki give her a knowing smile.

"This pelt is most comfortable," she said casually, to avoid the topic. "I see why you use it. It is so warm. It is good for such lands as these."

Natsuki permitted herself to be diverted.

"Yes, it is why," she said slowly. "You understand now? It is cold here but even colder in our lands. And it is colder to sit up like your people, on your high chairs and stools, and have the legs dangle from the seat, uncovered."

She gestured to her legs, tucked warmly under them.

"It is better to sit like this so that the legs are warm with the rug, and with the heat of the body close. It is good to be warm near the earth when the air is cold."

Shizuru smiled at her words, and at her way of saying a true thing simply.

"Indeed," she said. "It is better to be warm."

Natsuki nodded again.

"Now for a drink," she said, placing a bronze cup before the older woman. "For your drink..."

"Beer, I suppose?" Shizuru guessed, knowing that beer was to the

Otomeians what wine was to her people.

"They often drink beer very often, my people," the Otomeian agreed gravely. "But I do not drink."

Shizuru's mouth twitched. "Yes. I know."

"But I have now, if you want."

Shizuru readied her stomach, so used to the smooth and sweet warm wines of her country, and took the plunge into the foamy dark and bitter sea.

"Well, for the sake of rounding out the experience, I suppose I should have some."

Oh, never mind the offence that frothy stuff would be to her gullet! She would have gulped down a barrel of it just for the sight of that gladness she saw in the girl's eyes. Natsuki poured her a cup and set the beer jug away, gesturing to two other jugs that remained.

"Your *calda*- spice wine and warm water with honey," she said, with an impish smirk. "For after you drink that, to calm your throat."

Shizuru giggled. "You know me so well."

Natsuki smiled, then caught the question in the other's upraised brows.

"What, Shizuru?" she asked.

"No milk tonight?" Shizuru asked her.

"Ah, no." Her eyes sparkled with hidden mischief. "Tonight, I drink wine."

They laughed.

"Very funny," Shizuru said. "Though I wager it shall be more water than actual wine."

Natsuki had the grace to look discomfited.



"It's quite all right," Shizuru said kindly. "I understand you are not overfond of liquor."

"Mm. It is strange in my head."

She reached for the jugs and began to portion out her own beverage. Shizuru stopped her, however, and asked to take over the task.

"Please allow me," the older woman said. "I know how you like it: one part wine, three parts water. Now, do tell me what is all this I see here, this food you have had prepared so kindly for us."

Natsuki acquiesced and began to describe the food to her as she poured the drink, looking at what the Otomeian was pointing out even as she did so.

There was an abundance of meat on the platters, she could see: various red and white meats, dark and light, sliced and sausaged, salted and smoked. There were cheeses too in wedges and thick, soft slabs, as well as a great wicker basket of different-coloured loaves. She could see the black bread of which Natsuki's fellows were so fond, as well as a very white bread that reminded her of her countrymen's own. There were some fat, round rolls and also some that were flat. And she smelled that scent, the warm fragrant odour of something she had come to know as a staple of Otomeian fare.

"Butter?" she asked, to which Natsuki nodded. "I see. I thought so."

Again the minor frenzy behind the green eyes. She hastened to reassure her.

"I am not averse to butter-I rather appreciate the particular taste of it," Shizuru said swiftly, as the girl nodded.

"But, umm." Natsuki chewed distractedly on a corner of her lip, and Shizuru stared at it with equal distraction. "I have this too."

She removed a cover from one of the dishes and revealed a wide saucer of olive oil, which made Shizuru laugh.

"You are too considerate, really," she giggled. "And I am grateful for

it . But I shall try your butter." She turned next to the great platters of meat. "Your people do eat a great deal of meat, yes?"

"Mm, yes." At Shizuru's pointed look, she said: "I eat only enough."

"Which do you prefer, meat or grain?"

"Hmf." She shook her head. "They are fine. Both."

"Oh, the indecision of youth! Let us say that bread and your porridges fall under grain. Now choose only one."

Natsuki thought it over for a while. Suddenly, she grinned.

"I like fruit," she said, to Shizuru's hilarity.

"An elegant way to avoid the question, " the Himean remarked, a little ironically. "But very well. You are the host tonight, so I shall permit you to escape with that." She set aside the jugs and passed Natsuki her drink. "Which fruits do you like, though?"

The answer was surprisingly quick: "Apple."

"Oh, really?" Shizuru made a mental note of it. With a sudden grin of her own, she remarked idly, "We have excellent apples in Hime, you know. Very crisp and fresh."

Natsuki refused to bite, but seemed to acknowledge the bait with a small smile.

"And a great many other fruits that you would enjoy. I love grapes myself. Have you ever tried grapes fresh from the vine?"

Still that small smile, but she answered anyway.

"No," the girl said.

"There is nothing quite like them."

"Mm."

They grinned at each other. Shizuru shook her head humorously in exasperation, recognising when she was beaten in battle-though not

quite in the war, of course.

"Dear me, there is so much food here. How shall we finish it?"

Natsuki gleamed, still chewing her lip with that provocative half-smile.

"You can, by yourself, no?" she said.

"Indeed." Shizuru smirked her way. "Are you going to force me to eat more than half of even your share again, you accursed Spartan?"

The younger woman smiled a little wider.

"What if I did eat it all?" Shizuru said merrily. "What then, my dear, would you find with you if I did that each day? Methinks you would be horrified to find in my place a bucket of lard for company, a great waddling pouch of butter: soft to cuddle against, but oh so tremulous!"

Natsuki rewarded her with a sexy gurgle of laughter, pushing forward some sort of pie.

"A danger for me, maybe," Natsuki was saying. "At night, especially."

Shizuru giggled, knowing this was about her tendency to roll over and atop the Otomeian as they slept, always soothed into more comforting dreams by nuzzling into the girl's soft white breasts.

"You would have to wear a full metal cuirass after all," she replied. "Better to endure that weight than be crushed by the waddling butter pouch."

Natsuki made a face.

"You sleep well, Shizuru," she said with a naughty smile. "I think I can push you off the bed."

"And what makes you think I would not wake with all that noise and tumult?"

The black brows rose and her eyes widened, as if she were surprised Shizuru had even asked that.

"Butter *is* soft, you said," she answered smartly. "You drop, it makes no sound."

Shizuru smirked.

"Now I am beginning to wonder if I should have coaxed out this smart tongue after all-the Sphinx does not just bite, but also stings," she murmured, delicately taking a bite of the pie Natsuki had put before her. "Oh, that is good."

Natsuki nodded, continuing to watch her. After a few moments of this, Shizuru stopped eating and turned glibly her way.

"I do not know if I should be worried that you are watching me eat without doing so yourself-I feel like a pig at the trench," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "With the herder watching approvingly as I am fattened for the slaughter."

There was a girlish crack of hilarity.

"I will eat, I will eat," the Otomeian chuckled, picking up a piece of meat on which the skin had bubbled from roasting. "I will eat..."

She held up the meat and finished: "... pig."

Shizuru laughed too.

"Is that pork?" she asked, opening her mouth to receive a titbit Natsuki picked for her from the same dish. "Ah, yes."

"Pork roasted," Natsuki explained, and Shizuru was fascinated with the way her low voice made even those words sound like a bedroom whisper. She gave a low chuckle at the fancy.

"It tastes interesting, as though there is a slight sweetness in the background. Ah, was it cooked in milk?"

"Yes. Good."

"Thank you." Shizuru raised her eyebrows. "Impressed yet?"

The girl sneered.

"No," she said.

"And here I have been all this time, only ever trying to impress you. To think that it has all been for naught, and all my brilliant devices have failed!"

"Hmf." Natsuki swung her head away disdainfully at the dramatic jest. "Why try to impress me?"

"Natsuki."

The edge in her voice caught Natsuki off guard, and the green eyes turned her way were wide and vulnerable.

*All the better.*

"I have always tried to impress you."

Natsuki's facial expression was broken, torn apart by a sudden burst of emotions. Shizuru held her own peace, however, and merely smiled at it. The younger woman looked away when she finally remembered herself, flushing with renewed ferocity and chewing furiously on her lower lip. Shizuru noted it and finally acted, using the back of one hand to turn the girl's head her way again.

"Pax, little one," she said tenderly. "Be at peace and chew not on your mouth so angrily when there is far more suitable fare here for your teeth. Between the food and my lips, of course, I shall leave it to you which one you find more appealing."

Natsuki frowned shakily, but failed to keep the expression for more than a mere instant. Shizuru chuckled her under the chin.

"Come," she said, cooing again to her. "Will you not smile a little for me again?"

The girl swung a look towards her that was nearly a glare, taking her by surprise.

"When I - I met you." Natsuki paused, frowning deeply. "When I met you, Shizuru, I was very impressed."

Shizuru made a droll face, settling herself back onto her cushion.

"Aside from thinking me not right in the head?" she joked.

"Yes."

"Oh." So much for that being a joke: Natsuki had not even hesitated. "Well."

"First. You were-you are very tall." Natsuki paused with another sharp glance at her, quelling her rising humour. "I did not think your people to be Otomeian tall."

"Ah." Now she was beginning to understand. "Which I am."

"You are." The younger woman's expression eased, smiled. "I saw, too, your officers."

"And some of them are also tall," Shizuru said in understanding. "But some of them are not."

"Yes, and you are so tall even among them." Natsuki squinted and Shizuru saw the old trooper, Mino, in the gesture. "Some tall, some not, so it made me think."

"Until you saw the others-the rankers, that is?"

"Yes." Natsuki's eyebrows drew together thoughtfully on her white face. "More short. Then I knew the truth, and I knew you were very rare."

Shizuru looked up, a smile in her eyes at this pronouncement.

"Rare, am I?" she asked.

The smile infected Natsuki too, who nodded.

"I am honoured you think so." Shizuru bowed her head. "I am honoured my unnatural size has made you impressed."

She went on later: "Though it is rather sad that the thing that impresses you is not really something over which I had any control. I wonder if I should still be honoured."

Natsuki hummed playfully to her and picked out of a piece of venison, offering it. Shizuru nibbled at her fingers in mouthing the food and the younger woman giggled at the ticklish sensation.

"Otomeian tall," she said with a smirk, watching her lover eat. "And not right in the head."

There was an answering smile from the older woman that was just a little rueful.

Natsuki continued: "Red eyes, too."

Shizuru swallowed the food in her mouth, following with a sip of the bitter beer.

"Ah, yes," she replied. "But you are hardly one to talk, with such as eyes as you have."

Natsuki frowned.

"But green is-green happens among you," she supplied.

"Among my people?" Shizuru nodded in agreement before starting abruptly. "It does not occur so often among yours, does it? In fact, I have not yet seen anyone else with green eyes among the Otomeians." She laughed in wonderment. "Dear me, Natsuki, you do stick out, do you not? Hair and eyes and demeanour all!"

Natsuki affirmed it with an embarrassed look.

"But with you, Shizuru," the Otomeian persisted. "Among you, you have these too. Green eyes."

"No."

"No?"

"Certainly black hair occurs among us-though rarely of such sheen

and lustre as yours. You are wrong about eyes like those, however. I have never seen eyes like yours, in fact."

"Hm? But, no."

"Think of an example for your case, if you can."

"Um, the senior primipilus."

"Her eyes are light, sharp yellow-green, not true green."

Natsuki thought on it, and seemed to realise she spoke the truth.

"Um, her body-servant?" she suggested next.

"Erstin-chan? Sea-green or, more properly, aquamarine. It depends on the light, but they are more like a pale, greenish blue."

"Um-ah! The governor."

Chuckling softly at the anticipation of victory in the young woman's eyes, Shizuru shook her head.

"Hazel and flecked, which is the usual shade for supposedly 'green' eyes among us. Not so much green as greenish brown. Again it depends on the light."

"Ohh."

"Yours are the oddest of all, Natsuki. For see! No matter what the light, no matter what angle, they hold no other colour but green in them. There are no impurities in your eyes whatsoever. Dark green at the edges; a cool leaf-green in the ring; a white, lightning-bolt green shooting along the flakes. I see no blues, no browns, no yellows. And I have must surely have spent hours by now in just staring into your eyes."

She paused to contemplate said eyes again.

"Yours are remarkable for sheer purity, for being so unadulterated," she told her. "Merely green through and through like... like something I saw once. Shards of broken glass. Or like multi-faceted



*smaragdus*, shot with flames at its core." She held out one hand, pleased to see Natsuki incline her head automatically to lean into it. "Never have I seen such a true green, and I doubt I will ever see the likes of it in another. When the gods created this colour they must have marked it for your eyes and your eyes alone."

Natsuki, even in the midst of her furious embarrassment, managed to contribute a touch of her own. She slid her eyes to Shizuru in a wily glance.

"You are good at the talk, too," the girl said, her true green eyes dancing above reddened cheeks. "That too made me impressed."

Shizuru grinned.

"So you say," she said, patting and then releasing her face. "Yet you hardly seemed so the first few times I talked to you. If I recall, you regarded me with a countenance that clearly said, *What foolishness does she talk to me?*"

The girl laughed.

"No!" she denied roundly. "I did not think that."

"Really?"

"No." She made a comic face. "Silly. And those were early days, Shizuru."

"Yes, they were. Though they were not really so very long ago."

Both women stopped to think about it, for it was true.

"Not so long," Natsuki agreed softly, sobering.

"Yes." Shizuru's voice was quiet too. "And now I can hardly sleep easily without first talking to you about your day or mine."

The girl's eyes were so wide that they looked stricken. She plodded on, however, still quiet-voiced and smiling.

"It is true," she confessed. "Surely you must have noticed from our

recent disagreement."

Natsuki swallowed, opened her mouth, and swallowed again.

"Thuh-the work," she said hesitantly.

Shizuru shook her head.

"I could have put it off," Shizuru said, dismissing that excuse swiftly. "It was merely that I needed something to do to keep my mind away from the fact that we were not talking-or not as usual, anyway."

She threw a sharp and quelling look the girl's way, stemming any apologies before they could come.

"Please do not feel guilty, Natsuki. We have already spoken about it and both know where the blame lies, and most of it was on me. Let that be the end of the matter and know that I, for one, am immensely glad you are again talking to me."

It seemed to her that Natsuki's eyes, in that moment, were shining very brightly.

"I am, um." She stopped, pausing to nod shyly to Shizuru, and drew a breath. "Glad too."

Dropping the morsel in her fingers to her plate, Shizuru reached over to touch Natsuki's hand.

"Welcome," she said with a grin. "Welcome back. I missed you."

Natsuki's hand turned over to hold hers, and the girl had a smile.

"I am here."

"Yes. Right now." Her luminous eyes, edged with a rich scarlet in the lamplight, slid slyly upwards. "But what of the future, Natsuki?"

The hand holding hers tightened: she had surprised the Otomeian.

"If I miss you this much even when you are within my line of sight, from such a thing as this..." She paused just long enough to make

the girl think she would let the statement hover. She threw it at the girl's feet the next instant, though, like a soldier announcing siege with an unexpected bolt. "What more if you are not with me?"

There was soft inhalation from Natsuki, almost a gasp. She herself half-chuckled and half-sighed. How many times had she done this the past weeks, still trying to persuade Natsuki to agree to her demand? She was intent on doing it to the last second, of course, but the young woman's nervous reactions sometimes made her feel like a nagging suitor, and she felt a little bad for it.

*At least*, she reminded herself, before she could be tempted by the idea of pressing further, *at least this is better than trying to push her.*

"Fear not, that is the most I shall say about it for tonight," she said, squeezing the smaller hand. "I merely mentioned it in passing. Tonight is about you. Forgive that little selfishness I edged in, please. Say you forgive me and I shall promise to see to the rules and play nice tonight."

Natsuki's fingers fiddled against hers. The girl let out a nervous laugh.

"Nuh-nothing to forgive," she said. "It is all right."

Shizuru smiled pleasantly, still trying her hardest to reassure her. Oh, the restraints one never imagined in courtship! She had to attempt moderation where she had it not, and soothe the other woman too while trying to catch her in hand. It was very like trying to coax a skittish wild creature, when she could so easily throw the rope around its neck and lead it home.

"That is the kindest forgiveness of all," she said, with admirable composure for a woman who felt herself much tried. "Very well. As promised, I shall keep to the rules for the rest of the night."

The younger woman gave her an amused look.

"I made no rules," she pointed out.

"Yes, but you forgot you lived with a terrible and inveterate lawmaker," Shizuru retorted immediately. "And the second you

turned around, she went and did it for you."

Natsuki laughed favourably. Meanwhile, Shizuru looked at the table, pretending to take her time deciding what to eat next. In the midst of her considerations, she noticed that some of the crockery Natsuki had set out was different from usual, and she turned her attentions to it.

"These are from your land, are they not?" she asked curiously, pointing to the pots and plates, their red geometrical patterns bright on a white background. "Or are they Greek? They seem Greek, and yet there should be more human figures on them, I should think, were they indeed Grecian in make."

Natsuki's eyes lit up at her assessment.

"Not Greek, but ours," she said. "Fewer human portraits on them, like you say."

Shizuru appraised them all over again: "Your pottery is beautiful."

"Thank you."

"Do some of these represent myths?"

"Not so many." Natsuki stretched out an arm to point at some of the motifs. "Many are only plants and animals, simple ones. Like this. This one, it is from our forest, especially. *My forest, my old home.*"

Shizuru frowned as she tried to remember the word for the depiction of the beast Natsuki had singled out.

"Yes, I recall hearing mention of it before," she said. "Would you tell me about it again? What did your people call it-will you tell me of the au-rot? Or is it au-ros?"

Natsuki laughed.

"*You are a great fool,*" she said in her language to the older woman, who lifted an eyebrow at this insubordination. "It is the au- *rox* . Aurochs."

"Indeed," Shizuru said dryly, amused anyway. "Go on, Smart-tongue. Tell me about the aurochs."

Natsuki lifted her chin grandly.

"I will tell you of the aurochs," she concurred. "You will eat and I will tell you of the aurochs."

Shizuru's head dipped and she said, "Yes, Oh Wise Woman."

"Am wise to know it is not au -rot ." Natsuki looked away and sucked in her lips when the Himean shot another dry glance at her. She also waited for the latter to take some bread first before starting, her voice unconsciously dipping into a husky timbre. "I will tell of the aurochs, the great dark beast of my forest. The forest is great and dark too, and everything in it is great and dark."

She paused dramatically and her large eyes grew larger, the green in them vivid and sparkling.

"It is not a forest you know," she began, hooding the older woman's eyes with her cool voice. "It is not a forest of Otomeia. It is a giant's forest, where the shadows of the trees have no space between."

Up came a hand, only the index finger stretched to point upwards.

"My cousins, the Otomeians, were also frightened of this forest because it was full of shadow beasts, like demons, and sky-tall trees. Trees so tall they stab at great Zalmoxis' sky. Trees so high they are said to be like blasphemy."

Shizuru nodded, thoroughly enjoying herself. She had asked Natsuki to tell her several myths or legends of her home before, and had discovered then that the girl had a skill for tale-telling-not entirely surprising given that it was a thing much practised by her people. She even seemed to forget her shyness enough to fall into the narration, although Shizuru suspected it was easier with her because Natsuki felt more at ease with a familiar and known audience. How lucky that they should be comfortable with each other, then! The girl's usual nervous stutter vanished when it happened, and to listen to her silky-low voice without a stammer,

Shizuru thought, was to be serenaded by the muses themselves.

"So I recall," she said now, briefly. "Your true ancestors were not of the faith of Zalmoxis, of the Otomeians."

"Hmm," Natsuki said with a nod. "We were people of the dark forest. The Black Forest."

"And thus perhaps a little closer to the lore of the Mentulae, in fact, than of the Otomeians: that is, believers in the spirits of the trees."

"And the earth. But so do you believe in such things, Shizuru."

"Yes, but in a different way. But you, do you adhere to the cult of the Otomeians now?"

Natsuki hesitated.

"Yes," she said. "No." She shook her dark head. "It is complicated."

Shizuru smiled: "I suppose so. I shall hazard a guess. Do you mean you adhere to it only insofar as necessary, Natsuki?"

"Yes."

"Dear me, I seem to have found myself a pragmatic girl. Please go on with the story."

"Yes." Natsuki hesitated before starting, however. "But what is that? A prag-ma-tick?"

Shizuru explained it to her.

"Oh. I understand." She squinted again to show her indecision over the matter. "I do not know. It could be I am pragmatic."

"You are not sure what you believe?" Shizuru was amused. "My, my."

"I am not sure what is better." Her brow wrinkled; she was *such* a serious young woman. "I believe, I think there are many gods."

Shizuru nodded her head. "Including the Himean as well as the

Greek gods?"

"Yes. And even, maybe, those of Egypt."

"Those of Egypt." Shizuru frowned. "You know they consider their ruler a god?"

"I know." Natsuki grinned. "I do not know if their pharaoh is truly a god but sometimes they call you a half-god, no?"

"Because of my divine ancestry?"

"Mm, they say."

"My divine ancestor is so far back in the line all that is left in me must be a mere drop of divine ichor now. I am no more than human flesh and blood as is, I believe, even the Egyptian pharaoh."

The Otomeian chuckled before suddenly turning red, to Shizuru's puzzlement. *Does she really think me so arrogant as to consider myself an actual god*, Shizuru wondered. The Himean could not know the young woman was thinking of all the times she had considered Shizuru's attentions the equal of some divine visitation—the appearance of some benevolent god who knew best how to please and even took great delight in giving that pleasure. Had she not heard it said so many times that the older woman was descended from a deity of love, after all?

"Could be," she said shortly, rubbing one flushed cheek with a knuckle.

Shizuru gave her another curious look, but let it go.

"So you consider all of these gods likely?" she asked. "They do not exclude each other?"

Natsuki sounded affirmatively. Before she could explain herself, Shizuru stopped her to place some food in her mouth, bidding her take a drink before going on, as well.

"I do not know very much oh-of gods and magic. Not for me to say if they are, really," the girl said later. "But I think it is better to give

each one the respect of... hmm. I forget the word. Ah! Possibility."

Shizuru smiled at her.

"As I thought, you *are* pragmatic," she said with a deep chuckle. It passed through Natsuki in a shiver. "Hardly a bad thing in a girl. It merely means you are as level-headed as I have always thought you to be. Very well, now that we have settled that, please do continue with the story. You were speaking of the forest?"

There was a consenting rumble.

"I talked of the Black Forest," she said, licking her lips. "Where my true people lived. We were a tall people too, Shizuru. My cousins the Otomeians will tell you."

"I see it in you."

"Hrm." She tossed her head, like a horse throwing its mane. "We were like the forest where we lived. In that forest, everything grew tall. The wild wolves there grew twice so big as the ones we see here. Their howls were twice so strong. They sounded like-like-like the great horn your callers use for battle. The great one with the sound that goes round and round?"

"The big bugle?"

"Yes, that. They were so loud, and to hear them howl was like to hear an army. It would make the lightning shiver go through the old ones, the ones that had seen what the wolves were like and what they could do."

"I can imagine."

"The wolves were powerful," Natsuki went on. "But, sometimes, you would hear the wolves cry at night. Not the long howl but the whimper, and they would sound like dogs beat with the stick. It was a great bellow you hear after that dog whimper, Shizuru. More powerful to hear than the wolves, and a little like an ox. But not an ox. More as an ox from your gods' Underworld, an ox from the one the Greeks call Hades."



"Dis, Pluto. Master of the realm of Erebus."

"Yes, Dis. Like an ox from Dis of Erebus." She inhaled slowly, majestically. "This sound could make even the wolves cry. That they had tried to hunt the horned beast of this sound and failed and died. That the wolves had been crushed under the foot of the aurochs, the *urus*, the great and terrible black ox."

Shizuru nodded, spellbound. Natsuki glanced at her and saw she was snared by the story: the girl nodded too in satisfaction.

"My people lived long in that forest," she went on. "We knew its creatures, its spirits. We knew, too, the aurochs. We faced it, running it down into a pit for the hunt and spilling blood to get its wide horns. Much blood it cost, Shizuru. The hunting of the aurochs, it was for the strong and the ones with courage. And sometimes even those two were not enough. It would stamp the ground-huf!- and the earth would shake and the leaves would fall and, if you were slow, you would too. I saw."

"You saw?" Shizuru's eyes snapped wide. "You had been to one of these hunts?"

Natsuki's nod was grave.

"You could not have been very old, Young One, " Shizuru said somewhat apprehensively.

"I was small." The girl met her gaze. "I was riding, it was my first horse, and I saw. It was very close. My uncle watched too, and he said it was good that I saw."

Shizuru wondered if it was truly "good" to have a child watching such a thing so closely. After all, if she had her facts correct, Natsuki could not have been more than seven years of age at the time this had happened. Hunting those beasts sounded too dangerous for a child, even if the child was only playing spectator! Nonetheless, she held her tongue.

"It was the time before winter, the time of autumn," the girl told her, in that lovely deep voice that echoed in Shizuru's dreams. "The

autumn, the fall. And the leaves fell, many, around the hunters, and to see the hunters fall was like to see the leaves. It is something I remember now when I see the leaves change colour, red like the blood of a hunter, and drop to the earth."

The older woman smiled, still a touch disturbed at the thought of the girl-child before her and the girl-child's violent memory, but enchanted anyway by her imagery.

"Yes," she said, pouring herself a little wine now for her empty cup. "I see how such a thing would stay with you."

Natsuki inclined her head.

"But, Shizuru," she said with vast mystery, her eyebrows slanting down in earnest. "Even if we hunted the aurochs, we owed much to it too. This is why the hunt of it was for us a sacred thing and not-hmm-not a time to throw spears and arrows with hate or hunger at the animal, but with respect. It was a hunt for courage, not for only meat or food or fur. So it was a hunt to face a thing of respect, and to win the courage with respect."

Shizuru tilted her head to one side to show she was listening.

"I say we owed much to the aurochs, and this is why," Natsuki continued, still looking intensely at her. "There is a story... a long time ago story... about the aurochs, and how it was the aurochs that took away from us an enemy that wanted to try to pass our forest, and maybe try to take our homes. It is a story when the ones we fight now, the people of Obsidian, were not yet so many, and Obsidian was not yet himself."

The blonde woman leaned a little closer.

"The Mentulae?" she asked, even more intrigued now, if possible. "Does this story include them?"

"Yes, they are here." Natsuki smiled a touch wickedly. "They were a smaller people then, as they are small people now."

Her auditor broke into soft laughter.

"Indeed," Shizuru said, regarding her affectionately. "Fine wordplay."

Natsuki looked dignified.

"So, from what I understand of your words, the Mentulae did not have as many territories and people yet, at the time of this tale?" the Himean clarified. The younger woman answered affirmatively. "I see. What you said earlier: do you mean they were considering expanding into the lands of your forests?"

This time, the younger woman smirked.

"Yes," she said. "Stupid. They could not then. They cannot now, even with my people gone. It was very stupid, their-what do they call their priest again?"

"Druid?"

"Yes, druids. Their druids should have said to them."

Shizuru lifted an eyebrow at the reference: "Their druids? Why their druids?"

"They worship spirits of the trees too, Shizuru," Natsuki said, speaking snidely now. "More than my people, different from my people. They were afraid to cut down a great tree, they did not think to make an offering in exchange. We did that, and we knew it was good because we lived with the big trees and they were still good to us even if we cut from them. But the Mentulae live on wider land and lighter forests than our forest. They did not understand."

"I am sorry for taxing you with my queries, but what did they not understand, *meum mel*?"

The girl held out her hands as if to say it should be obvious.

"That people like them would not know how to keep a forest like ours," she said. "They were grown used to small, thin forests as they have. They live next to their little trees and fear the big ones. They look for the wide spaces to ride their little horses. My people lived *with* the trees, Shizuru, deep in the heart of them. We rode our horses between the hanging branches. We knew to find the rare

space for passing, ourselves, and were not afraid to make a rare space for passing, ourselves. They are bad at the trail, at seeking the path that is not made already."

She paused, frowned deeply for a second. "It is like to a person only good at following a thick rope, who will not find his way through net of very small thread. A fine net that is even more... *complicated*, because it is poked with the many needles of many combs. Like to a person who sees only in the day because he is blind in the twilight."

Shizuru smiled with her teeth.

"You really are very good at this, Natsuki," she said delightedly, at which Natsuki merely tossed her head, as though to signal she should be silent and listen to the rest of the story.

"What I mean is that they did not see that they were a people who could take and keep that forest only if they cut through it," Natsuki told her sternly. "To make a space for them, a space they knew and could move in and guard and keep. But they were-and they are still now-people afraid to cut down a great tree, they know of no offerings to keep the spirits of the tree well after the cut, and they think of the spirits as unreasonable. Thus they could not cut for their paths. They could not keep something they could not pass. They could not take."

"The druids who worship the trees," she concluded, after this unusually lengthy dissertation. "They should have understood. The land was not for a people such as them."

Shizuru was sitting up straight now, the smile on her face gone.

"Why, of course!" she said. "As you say."

She gave her girl a glance with even more respect in it than before.

"Not good forest people, are they?" she said casually.

"Some of them are horse people and forest people too," Natsuki told her. "But they are horse people only of the wide and flat places. They are forest people only of the thin forest. A weak people because they do not-how do you say? *Adapt*?"

"Adapt to other terrain, yes."

"Yes, that. You see?"

"I see now," Shizuru answered. "And I understand. It may be we shall need to use that knowledge in the future, and I shall remember."

Natsuki inclined her head lightly.

"Good," she pronounced. "But that is so. Now I go back to the story."

"Very well." Shizuru looked at her apologetically. "I am so sorry for making you digress."

"No. If it helps, it is good." She accepted the morsel of food Shizuru put to her lips and swallowed it first before continuing. "Thank you, Shizuru. I was talking of-of the *Mentulae* that time, no?"

"In the time when Obsidian was not yet himself, you said."

"Yes. He was not Obsidian. It was one of his early grandfathers that was their ruler, I think." The young woman tucked back a wing of raven hair behind her ear, the shimmer of its movement silvery even in the amber lamplight. "Even then, they were a people who thought to grow bigger, you know. That was the time they began to spread out and push out their limits, their-their-uh, what is the word? The province of *Terminus*."

"Terminus? The boundaries," Shizuru supplied helpfully.

"Yes, the boundaries. And part of these boundaries was our forest."

"And this forest they sought to take by force," Shizuru finished for her. "Is it not so?"

"Yes, it is so." Natsuki bowed to her shortly. "In that time, that autumn time, they came one year to do it. They came to the edge of our forests with their faces shadowed by the shade of our trees and threatened, and posed, and promised to come into the falling green."

Shizuru sighed, again enjoying herself mightily.

"They came, yes. They came and they were very many. They came so powerfully because they wanted not just the land but also our riches, the great riches of my people from our ancestors, and from great battles we had won." She growled, thin hands describing a great host, an imaginary army in the air. "They came with their little horses, many, and their swords and spears, and their tread was so powerful we heard it deep in the forest, from the ground. They were many, and they had much greed for our lands, our gold. They were many, and they were powerful."

Her gently curling hands froze, her lips curved up.

"But our people say that the power of the many is nothing in a forest, nothing in the dark space always between dawn and night," she said, smiling that small, proud smile. "It is nothing when you know not that forest, and know not its creatures. And the Mentulae, though they were many, were nothing in the end because they knew not our forest. At all."

She shifted lightly in her seat, the sound of her legs over the rug feathery to Shizuru's ears.

"It was the dark time," she continued. "The cold, black time between night and day. The Mentulae made camp near the boundary, near the thick trees of our forest. My people watched them from the tops of those trees, because my people can climb a tree and sit still there, like the night-cat. They watched the Mentulae and counted their fires. And they saw the druids come up, to their big flat altar, a great big stone they brought, and lay the man they chose on it and kill him."

Shizuru exhaled slowly, knowing this custom of ritual sacrifice in the Mentulaean ways of augury. On that point her usual tolerance for foreignness always failed her: surely human sacrifice was savagery!

"They tied the man before the cut," Natsuki recounted. "And they tore him at the belly. The insides were like many fish still live but dying, spilled from the net. Two old druids came to him. One druid-their druids do this-took the insides from him and held up the liver.

He cut it open to see more, to see the future."

The older woman was too deep in the story to say anything, but nodded.

"My people say there was talk between the two druids over the liver," Natsuki said. "That the two looked to be arguing over it. But the older druid, the one whiter of hair, silenced the other and took up the liver. And my people saw, they saw from his black eyes that he would say it was good to come into our forest. My people said it was a lie to him, as some crept close to listen, and the other druid covered his face in shame."

Shizuru frowned and murmured disapprovingly, as she knew Natsuki wished her to do.

"So the old druid started to say the lie," Natsuki went on. "He put up high the liver and said it. But, as quick as he said it, there was a great startle noise. It was a noise my people knew well, so they did not startle where they hid. But the Mentulae were surprised and thought it was great and earth-bound thunder."

Her countenance darkened, a pretty scowl on her features.

"Here is the wicked thing of men," she said, mysteriously again. "Here is the wickedness of the old druid. He ignored the thunder, the warning, and told the lie again. He tried-he tried to use the thunder for his lie too and said it was of their gods, that their gods sent good signs to them."

"Wicked indeed," Shizuru whispered. "I have also known such men, such women who interpret even the clearest portents and muddy them."

"Yes," Natsuki agreed, herself speaking in a voice no more than a whisper. "A wicked thing, a soiled thing. But the lie came out, Shizuru. The thunder grew so loud he could not make the lie heard, not any longer-and the beasts of thunder burst from our forest."

A fierce, terrible joy overcame her face, and Shizuru found herself burning in it.

"My people say the aurochs came out and ran to them-hah!-and the sound hurt the Mentulae's ears. The aurochs came close to the wicked druid and he was like to a stone, frozen with fear, and one beast threw him."

"Ah, it hit him?"

"Yes. He was dead. It hit him like thunder." She made a dark expression with her lovely face, trying to convey the horror of the moment she was describing or perhaps the ferocious beauty of it. "The aurochs caught him in the belly. The horn ran deep, deep in him until he flew away and his insides were outside. The others caught by the aurochs were also dead, and everyone else was yellow with the scare. And this was because of what the old druid spoke. So did the gods send good signs to the Mentulae!"

Shizuru chuckled darkly, shaking her head at the strength of the images in her mind. She could actually see the old druid being skewered and thrown by that monster.

"Later they said the other, truer druid looked at the liver again, but it was crushed," Natsuki said, to end. "And so he looked at the wicked druid's insides instead, because the gods did the cut for him. And this-this is what my people, the ones watching, heard that he said: their gods, their *Tuatha*, said not to go ahead. That it was clear to them their *Tuatha* did not wish them to go into that forest because it was not their place, because any forest that could grow demons of oxen could also grow demons of men."

She dropped her eyes to the floor after concluding, and the fine black length of her lashes cast pinprick shadows over her skin. Shizuru held her breath and the silence, lengthening the magic of the moment before finally finding it in herself to break it.

"What a beautiful tale," she said, sighing with deep and heartfelt appreciation. She meant it: the hair on her arms had stood up at the end. "And told by such a beautiful teller. Thank you for saying it to me."

Natsuki bowed gravely, pink in the cheeks. "I am glad to tell. But I am not so good, really."



"You were excellent. In fact, you deserve a reward." She got up and, to the girl's mystification, strode over to the closet near their bed. She opened it and extracted a leather purse, returning to place it on the table. "And here is your prize, Story-teller, Word-weaver. Here is the recompense."

Loosening the mouth of the parcel, she extracted from it a spiral of the brightest gold, the thin metal ring worked into a shape such as would fit on Natsuki's lean upper arm, and the ends of it made into the arrow-shaped head and curling tail of a snake. A carbunculus stone was embedded into the top of the golden serpent's head, its glassy red surface winking in the light. It was a beautiful piece of jewellery, and she knew Natsuki could see it.

"I had meant to give this to you before, along with the saddle," Shizuru said softly. "But I fear some events intervened. Therefore I am finally presenting it to you now. Your arm."

Taking her silent companion's arm, she held it straight and slipped the spiral on it, bringing it from the wrist and fitting it finally on the slender bicep of the arm. Natsuki regarded the object mutely, eyes wide and lips slowly parting.

"As I thought, it becomes you," Shizuru told her, still holding her hand and bringing it up to her lips. "There, and give me your cheek too, Child, for a kiss."

But Natsuki beat her to it, lunging quick and light towards her to give her the kiss instead. Shizuru fell back, laughing, hands stretched backwards to keep her from collapsing entirely.

"You like it, then?" she said, surprised when the answer she received was another catlike spring away from her lap. "Natsuki? Where are you going?"

Still the springing agility of her as she leapt to get something from a drawer in an obscure corner, then the lithe leap back. Shizuru watched every movement in fascination: the girl was so vibrant, her presence at once sensual and aesthetic, that every twitch of the muscle seemed part of a carefully prepared dance. Every action was alive and beautiful. *Oh*, Shizuru groaned, hit by desire for her all

over again, *I really do want her* . If she could only have her, if she could only know that she truly had her!

"Ah!"

Uttering the triumphant cry, Natsuki presented a small, flat box to her, handsomely carved out of wood. The girl's face was flushed as she handed over the object, and her breathing anxious.

Shizuru took the box with careful hands, looking curiously from it to its giver. She was surprised, she had to admit, and tried very hard not to show it.

"This is for me, Natsuki?"

Natsuki gave a jerky nod.

"Well!" She smiled just as jerkily in return. "Thank you, Darling. I did not expect this. Thank you."

Natsuki frowned.

"Open," she commanded, sounding a touch imperious again. She was being defensive, and Shizuru could feel it. What in the world did it mean? "Shizuru, open. The box."

And, realising she might have transgressed the older woman's authority, suddenly amended with a trembling addition: "Please."

"Very well, as you wish." Shizuru undid the clasps and removed the smooth black lid. She stilled at the sight of what Natsuki had given her. "Why, Natsuki. This is lovely!"

Natsuki hummed quietly, rocking slightly in her crouch now. Shizuru noted the action only distantly, but still recognised the frenzied tension being held in check by her companion. She shook her head and tore herself away from the glittering object in her hands, looking at Natsuki to smile brightly at her.

"Natsuki," she uttered again, putting everything into the syllables. "Natsuki."

Natsuki continued to rock on her shins and knees. Again the wafting scent of her fear and defiance; her eyes were so wide they were boundless.

"I *adore* it," Shizuru finally told her. "I really adore it. Is it truly for me?"

There was another quick nod.

"My beautiful girl. Thank you so much."

Shizuru stared again at the gift nestled in the dark cloth inside the box: a torc woven out of cords of silver and gold, fashioned into a tight spiralling rope that curved into an arc she knew should encircle her neck. The ends of the arc ended with two knobs which, upon closer inspection, were discovered to be the heads of two wolves, each biting down on a bright red gem.

"Wolves," she said, admiring the fine metalwork of the heads. "Wolves' heads holding *carbunculi* in their fangs."

There was a strangled hum of agreement from her companion, who still had yet to abandon her unease. Shizuru smiled again her way, trying to dispel the worried scowl on the young woman's face.

"The distinctive jewellery of your country," she said, knowing the torc was most favoured of all ornamentations among the Otomeians.

"This one is especially distinctive, however. What detail there is on the wolves! Oh, Natsuki." She allowed herself to break into a laugh, channelling both gratitude and surprise into the sound. "Natsuki, Natsuki, you darling! I love it!"

The Otomeian finally let through a smile, flushed and a picture of gladness. She held out her hands, and though they were much aged with scars, all Shizuru could see was her face, which held in it the simple but unassailable joy of a child.

"You like?" she asked in a breathy voice, obviously greatly excited about the present. But she remembered herself the next instant, and tried to look stern; she failed magnificently, and swiftly gave up. Instead, she looked at her own outstretched hands. "You like it?"

"Oh, you little fool, how could I not like it?" Shizuru laughed again, leaning forward to peck her lips. "I like it, I like it so very much. It is beautiful."

"Good, good." The girl nodded to herself, and looked down in an effort to hide her growing smile. Suddenly she remembered her hands, which were still aloft. "Oh, I will place it for you?"

"Yes, if you please." Shizuru placed the torc on the slender, many-lined palms, trying to keep hers from trembling. Natsuki had never given her a present like this, she thought, or never one quite this overt. This must surely mean something. Yes, it simply had to mean something.

*Ye gods, please tell me it is good, and that it means something.*

The delight was nearly unbearable. She felt the coolness of the metal go around her neck, the reassuring weight of it on her skin. It was heavy enough to tell her it was true gold, true silver, yet light enough to be bearable over her collar. The *carbunculi*, she could tell too, were particularly fine, like little drops of blood close to her throat. Oh, never mind that she was a rich woman, that she had no need of yet more gold and silver, or even *carbunculi*; the torc might have been woven out of old twine, for all she cared. Natsuki gave it to her! That already made it impossibly valuable.

"Good," she heard the young woman murmur, while coming to sit again before her. "Very good, Shizuru. It is beautiful on you. You are beautiful."

She raised a hand to finger the knob of one wolf's head. The metal was no longer so cold, but she had expected its cool to dissipate slower. It was only then that she realised she had been blushing, and thus warming the metals quicker.

"Natsuki..."

She trailed off in silence. She searched for words and found nothing appropriate, or rather, nothing sufficient. Again something that only ever happened with Natsuki. It was hard to talk, she thought, when the young woman you loved was looking at you in such a way. How

could she talk? How could anyone talk then, with the feeling of hope having just ringed their throat and bound it with two glittering drops of ache?

She decided not to try it, knowing whatever she could possibly say would still come short of its intent. Moving swiftly, she instead drew the girl before her into a tongue-melting kiss that continued until she felt Natsuki's pulse race almost to dangerous speeds.

"Thank you again," she said earnestly, cupping the other's face as though to claim it that way. "I am glad for the gift. Here I must ask, however, in case I have been ignorant: is there an occasion warranting it?"

The answer was still out of breath: "No occasion."

"I am doubly glad now." She had to pause to breathe, herself. "I am glad, and yet I hope you have not somehow felt compelled, perhaps, to give me this gift due to some unfortunate things of late." She asked, a touch worriedly: "Did you, *meum mel*?"

Natsuki shook her head.

"I see." She sighed again, resting her forehead against the pallid, white one. "I am happy."

A few moments later, she laughed. Natsuki was startled and moved her brow away.

"So this is why you were in an excitement over fetching it earlier," Shizuru observed, rather brightly. "Oh, this is fortuitous, is it not? See, we have given matching gifts to each other-and at the same time too."

Their merry eyes darted from the older woman's neck ornament to the one on the younger one's arm.

"Yes," Natsuki said. "Strange, no?"

Shizuru breathed in languorously, savouring the feel of the gift on her.

"Perhaps," she answered. "Perhaps not."

She detached herself from Natsuki's arms, but only so that she could rearrange their position on the soft rug. They tangled closely together again in the blink of an eye, as though neither could bear to be long without the other's skin.

"We are like peas," she said gaily, moving so that she could place the girl's head on her lap. "Like peas from one pod."

But the dark head moved gently at that, turning so that it could face her. The profound look Shizuru found there, one that made her breath catch, arrested her momentary joy and froze it into something else.

She felt a small shudder. Natsuki spoke.

"Like peas, could be," the girl told her quietly, sounding so grieved herself Shizuru could not summon the strength to contend with her. "Could be, Shizuru, but we are from different soil."

## Chapter 42

*Below is a very pretty piece of art Mlle **medoty** made recently, and which shall no doubt amuse you terribly if you think on Shizuru's persistent requests to Natsuki in the previous chapters as well as this one. Thank you very much to the artist who, one thinks, has made one fall in love with Natsuki even more with that particular picture.*

me-doty-77. deviantart art/quot-Come-with-me-quot-140623679

*(Please remove spaces after the full stops.)*

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### **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Century** - Military unit within the Roman army, composed of 100 men and their leader, the centurion.
2. **Cohort** - There are ten cohorts in each legion, each with about 600 persons (500 soldiers and 100 non-combatants).
3. **Cunni** - A latin profanity: "c\*nts"
4. **Nomenclature** - An agent used by politicians when performing their patron-client duties. Clients for the more popular politicians in Rome were significantly numerous, so it would have proven difficult to recall the name of each one. Nomenclatores were used to address this problem: they would stand beside the politician as he received his clients and would whisper each client's name and social details to the patron politician.
5. **Octet** - Military unit within the Roman army, composed of eight men. Each **century** (s.v.) divided its soldiers into octets.
6. **Strigil** - Flat-bladed implement used for bathing. It was used to scrape away oil and dead skin.

7. **The Seventh, the Ninth** - This is the standard naming pattern for legions, which are all assigned numbers. For further reference, the names of the legions Shizuru has with her are the Seventh, the Eighth, the Ninth, the Eleventh, and the Fourteenth. The first three are veteran legions in this story, although the Seventh is not a veteran legion of Shizuru's (which means it served and gained experience under another general in a previous campaign, and not with her). Incidentally, if you are wondering where the other numbered legions are (e.g. the intervening legion between the Ninth and the Eleventh: the Tenth) they are stationed elsewhere.

Furthermore, for those interested, here are the present (as of this chapter) locations of Shizuru's five legions for the Northern Campaign: **the Eighth** and **5 cohorts of the Seventh** (1/2 of the Seventh) - Argentum; **the Eleventh** and **the Fourteenth** - Sosia; **the Ninth** and **5 remaining cohorts of the Seventh** (1/2 of the Seventh) - Argus.

8. " **Vah!**" - An Ancient Roman expression used to signify, among other things, pain.

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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It was a nightly battle.

Over the next days, Shizuru waged war with her lover in a fight of will, trying to get the foreigner to agree to go to Hime. It was the sort of battle where words were laden with snares and lust was a risky corner. She threw it in their conversations, in their silent exchanges, and gnashed her teeth privately at each failure. She threw *her* on the bed, against the wall, anywhere with a hedging side, and tried to wrangle the 'yes' that would declare herself the victor.

"Come with me," she would say, brow gemmed with sweat. "Come with me, Natsuki."



And the only response would be that persistently sorrowful look-refusal-whereupon she would ask again and continue her thrusts with wretched vigour.

"Do you not want to come?" she would ask, a dark smile spreading on her face. "Natsuki. Do you-not want-to *come* ?"

Sometimes the girl groaned in frustration from her insistence, right before shattering furiously in her hands. The dark head would throw back and, if it was the third or fourth time for the night, hammer itself rhythmically on the bed as the pale body thrashed for that instant of sadistic pleasure. Shizuru would take pity whenever that finally happened, because she would no longer be able to ignore the spasms of the overused flesh protesting around her fingers. Even her own climaxes were often painful too, because it truly took a great deal from her to withhold it for so long while watching her lover struggle on the sheets. When the moment came that she thought Natsuki could take no more, that to keep pushing would be too cruel, only then would she sigh and tell herself to try again another time. Only then would she relax the self-restraint and grind herself so ferociously against the limp, wet form that it took no more than an instant to blind her, the pleasure so strong it crashed afterwards in her head as a migraine.

" *Vah !*" she uttered, clutching her head afterwards with one hand. "Too much."

She was atop the other woman, one hand still resting on the inside of the latter's thigh, both thighs hedged by the latter's legs, which were still spread wide as if to receive her. Their skin pressed together was wet, and her hand was sticky. She brought up the sticky hand and fed it to Natsuki.

"My head," she whispered, waiting for the other to finish cleaning her fingers with those slow, sluggish strokes. She laughed in self-mockery, her breath whistling past the Otomeian's ear. "Dear god, it *does* hurt."

The licking at her hands paused long enough for the other woman to make the derisive sound she had recognised by now as meaning: *I told you so; it is your fault.*

She sniffed right back.

"You know, if you would only say 'yes', I would cease having to suffer drawing it out," she said with a pout, even knowing her partner could not see her. "What do you say to that?"

The answer came when teeth nipped at her fingers. She frowned, head aching too much to dwell on another night's failure. Instead, she settled for releasing her feelings in a groaning sigh.

"You are..." She shifted a little, but did not abandon her position. "Obstinate."

"You are so obstinate," she repeated. "Natsuki."

Natsuki gathered enough of her wasted strength to reply. Her voice was ragged and small but bore, even then, the cool husk of her strength.

"That!" she puffed scornfully. "You too."

Another sigh. "And does that not tell you that we belong together?"

The younger woman did not answer this time, but gave her fingers one last kiss. Shizuru moaned softly and turned over onto her back, barely able to enjoy the pleasant tickle of the priceless furs heaped on their bed. Their room had returned to its old Himean appearance from Natsuki's redecoration of it a week ago, but not entirely: she had told the girl to keep a few of the foreign furnishings, and had asked for the pelts, in particular. She knew Natsuki liked to curl against the soft warmth of them, a feel of the cat about her, a streak of the wolf: a hybrid creature at once feral and elegant. Shizuru liked to see her against them, so much so that it was not even dislodging to superimpose that image of the girl on her memories of her own bedroom, back in Hime. It was a pleasing picture, and one she wished to see come true.

"Oh, the ache. This is ridiculous." She finally managed to sit up, her sight going bright from vertigo. She shut her eyes when her head swam. " *Ecastor* !"

There was a rustle of movement from the limbs nearby; she could

not see it, but she heard Natsuki crawl slowly away, towards their end-table. She remained where she was, legs over one side of the bed, and furiously massaging her temple.

Soon she heard the rustling approach return. Natsuki was moving back her way, still slithering on the sheets. Involuntarily, a tired smile came to her mouth: amazing that the girl still managed to move, after everything she had done. What a lovely challenge was there in that stamina, that resistance. Simply lovely... and damned *infuriating*.

"Shizuru."

She looked up at the whisper. Natsuki was crouched at her side now and holding a little cup. The Otomeian poured a small puddle of the water from that cup into one hand and held the hand to the top of Shizuru's head. There, Natsuki tipped it, very slowly, and the fair-haired woman felt the trickle of coolness run over her scalp, soothing the pounding she felt deep behind her eyes. The girl's hands were wet next, and she used the drops of water on them to massage Shizuru's temples herself.

"Better?" the young woman whispered, still clearly exhausted from their exercises. "Now?"

Shizuru smiled gratefully. "Yes." It was true: the cool water had taken away some of the heat in her head. "Thank you. You are sweet."

Even with her terrible weariness, Natsuki still had an answer to that.

"No, Shizuru," she muttered ironically. "I am obstinate."

Shizuru blew through her nose in amusement.

"Quite right," she agreed unreservedly.

She relaxed under the attention for a while, letting the tender hands continue the massage. It was not long before the pain had waned enough to permit her to take the cup of water away and take the other woman by the waist, laying her back so she could stretch comfortably atop her again.

"We should really sleep now, you see," she murmured. "We may wash in the morning. Pardon me for doing this to you again, as we have to wake early tomorrow."

Natsuki rumbled.

"Nnh," she said. "It is all right."

A few seconds of silence passed, and Shizuru thought she had fallen asleep, until she disproved it by speaking again.

"Shizuru..." she whispered, arms folding about the older woman's slender body. "Your head?"

"Much better now."

"Um." She drew a breath and called her again. "Shizuru?"

"Yes?"

"Often, now... this. Why?"

"From holding myself back," Shizuru said, a little puzzled. "I have said this to you already."

She felt heat next to her cheek.

"Nn-no," came the other woman's answer. "I mean, why or-why do it?"

She laughed throatily into the young woman's ear for reply and felt her tremble at the rush of air.

"Really," she said, as though in disbelief at the question. "You should know the answer to that yourself, *meum mel*. You should see it in what I have done tonight, as I have been doing nearly every night. You should see why I save mine for the last moment."

And she knew she was right, because Natsuki said nothing. A malicious thought came to her all of a sudden and she smirked.

"A good thing I am not a man," she said.

Natsuki was amazed by the remark, and pushed her up with a stare. Shizuru held the position, holding herself up by her arms.

"It is difficult enough to keep myself from spending just from touching you," she went on nonchalantly, by way of explanation. The torch-hot blush raging over her companion's skin was ignored. "And I am a woman. They say it is even more difficult for men to hold back from release when so tortured by stimulation, and you are nothing if not an inundation of that."

She let herself down again to nip the angrily pink ear before saying, with conscious wickedness: "Were it so and were I a man, I might spend on you in seconds. It would hardly suit me to shorten your pleasure... not to mention possibly inconvenience you with certain-hm-side effects. Aren't you lucky, in that sense?"

It had the desired result: Natsuki's body went rigid, flaring into heat and pushing involuntarily against her at the same time. It amused her terribly to elicit such reactions from the girl, particularly since the stimuli she used were such forbidden words, things she would never have been able to mouth to any other. The first time she had said such sinister jokes, Natsuki had stared at her in shock, face seeming to say, *Oh, I never thought you could say that!* And yet some of the black magic had gone to the disturbed girl, the fear-thrill of the forbidden shown in the quivers that coursed through her body at Shizuru's laugh.

Now she gripped the older woman's back furiously, her shaking hands clawed. They dug deeper when Shizuru only chuckled.

"No-buh-bad," the Otomeian chastised quietly. "You are *bad*."

It was Shizuru's turn to shiver. How did Natsuki make her voice sound that way, she wondered. Even trying to be gruff, it was alluring, as musical as the low snarl of an angry cat. She turned to kiss her gently on one cheek and then the other, an ironically chaste action to follow so ribald a jest, and felt the cat's distress subside in a purr.

"I am," she whispered, deciding to stop this train of thought before it could continue to its logical conclusion-which had been reached so

many times tonight that it really would kill both of them to continue. "I am bad, yes, for keeping you up so late. Please forgive me. And go to sleep. You may yet have a few more hours of it."

Natsuki released a sigh too, and Shizuru smirked at the relief it held.

"You too," Natsuki told her, describing her collar with trailing fingers. "Sleep."

"I shall as soon as you do," Shizuru rolled to one side, Natsuki following her so that they were still facing each other. Shizuru pulled the younger woman in, holding the sleek head close to her neck; Natsuki yawned once she had settled and it trailed off into a soft mewl. "Rest now, My Darling. Please rest."

"Hard to get up," Natsuki complained almost sulkily, even while nudging closer. "To-tomorrow."

"Perhaps. You need not rise early, actually." Shizuru smiled, torn between guilt and triumph for what she had done to the younger woman. "Is not your own errand in the late afternoon? You need not accompany me in the-"

"But. Yes, but no..." She was mumbling now, barely beating back the sleep. "I will. Go with you."

"No, it is fine." Shizuru cupped the back of the black head protectively. "You need not, truly."

"No." Natsuki shoved further under the older woman's chin, her breath tickling Shizuru there. "No. Will go early."

"But-"

"Shh."

"Natsuki."

"Grr."

Shizuru sighed in capitulation, seeing there would be no convincing her this time. At least, not if she wanted the girl to actually rest, for

she had a suspicion: Natsuki would stay up until it was time for her work, to ensure that she was not tricked into sleeping in.

"As I thought," she said, teasing even in surrender. "Simply obstinate."

She felt the lips on her neck smile slowly and knew Natsuki had a reply.

"Quite... right."

The result of all this was that, the following morning, Natsuki's prediction proved true: it was indeed very hard to get up. Days-or, more properly, nights-of their furious exercise could still take a toll on the healthiest bodies. Though they numbered among the ranks of the athletically elite, they were not immune to the effects of excess. The price finally fell on that particular dawn, when the two of them rose feeling creaky and ill-rested. The girl, in particular, yawned so terribly throughout their breakfast that Shizuru felt the guilt keenly-enough even for her to try and persuade the younger woman to return to their bed. To no avail. And once again, the older woman had no recourse but to frown and sigh. *Obstinate.*

*At least, she consoled herself when they were in the office, she will have plenty of time to rest herself, while keeping guard over me here.* As Shizuru went through the usual routine of interviews and client-visits, all that was required of the girl was to sit quietly by her chair, on the little stool. Visits to the general's headquarters were regulated, duty officers and legionaries stood guard outside, and her staff accompanied her within: one could not possibly imagine a threat approaching the location. Therefore, Shizuru supposed the young woman watching over her could rest then. There was nothing to stop the girl from dozing at this time, was there?

This was one of those occasions where Shizuru's understanding of Natsuki failed her; she had assumed the girl's idleness during those times they were merely at her desk. She was correct in that the sum total of Natsuki's duties at those times was merely to sit still and observe. Nonetheless, she had not fully understood that Natsuki approached those duties with the same determination she did every other: Natsuki did it constantly, Natsuki did it assiduously, Natsuki

did it to the point of practical exhaustion.

Perhaps had the Himean asked the girl for an opinion on these banal hours of their routine, she would have gotten a sense of it. Shizuru already knew that her girl was a thinker. What she had yet to learn was how constantly that thinking streak in Natsuki blazed, how deeply the reasoning under Natsuki's curiosity ruled. It was persistently mathematical, this reasoning: it was ever pragmatic. In this was one of the differences of their nature: Shizuru, while eminently capable of cool and calculating thought, was still capable of the occasional daydream when whiling away time; Natsuki, the consummately grounded observer, was very nearly not. Or rather, it might not have been so much a question of capacity as it was of courage. The girl would not permit herself to daydream for, most of her life, her only experience with daydreams had been as nightmares. Surely no one could blame her for eschewing that little pleasure so many others had, of the occasional pleasurable trance?

Whatever the case, Shizuru had not yet fully realised that the girl next to her was perpetually note-taking in private, even while appearing unconcerned with everything nearby. That was part of her feint, of course: having been compelled into wary observation of her surroundings all her life, the Otomeian had long learned that people did not take well to being so obviously watched. Therefore she pretended apathy and set her enchantress's gaze only on those she wished to freeze.

But in Shizuru's offices, she had no need to freeze. Even should the occasion merit it, she knew her older lover well enough now to see that the Himean could do it even faster than she could. She might have the constant winter, after all, but Shizuru could bring in an unexpected blizzard.

Thus she was forced into the watch, and her diversion of note-taking when doing a watch. She was a critical note-taker, one whose mind raced with endless connections and relations and categories. She tried to work out the How's of this foreign culture hedging her about, the What's and Wherefore's. She was perpetually absorbing everything and everyone in it, yet retained a focal point to this universe that beat in her head like drum keeping time. *Shizuru, Shizuru, Shizuru*. Why did Shizuru do this? How did Shizuru do



that? Always she overheard people asking the Himean commander the same questions, and sometimes she was the one asking too... but more often than not, because of her pride and her nature, she tried to ask herself. And thus learned a great deal without really intending it.

For instance, she had often asked herself why her lover did not employ a *nomenclatore* as did the other Himean nobles, when receiving clients. Certainly she understood part of the reason was Shizuru's great memory. Still, she also understood that Shizuru invested effort in trying to remember and invoke each client or soldier's particulars in an instant. After a while, however, she had come to notice each client's pleasure, each ranker's grin of delight at being so remembered; she had noticed how Shizuru's warm familiarity with them made each one better disposed to accept her counsel or decisions. Herself not of a personality naturally inclined to seeking familiars-as well as descending from royalty, which dictated no real need to remember the names of those significantly lower-she saw the value of it in Shizuru's dealings; it was something she thought would be well to remember.

There were other things on which she pondered. She took note of the obsessive organisation the Himean demanded in all matters, a mode of organisation that permeated even to Shizuru's command of the army. She wondered about the Himean's manner of dictation, which she had never seen anyone do before: speaking to three scribes at once for three different letters, switching from one to another in between columns of words, yet never actually losing track of where she had been. She marvelled at the older woman's ever-surfacing unorthodoxy, which tampered with everything and spared no one, yet was forever making things better where people had previously thought matters already best.

On such things did she think, and on thinking of such things did she labour, Shizuru's quiet and seemingly uninterested girl. Thus it was that she actually had no rest by the time her errand was due, and thus it was too that she found herself yawning, at the end of particularly long interview, in unison with her general.

It was at this point that someone she thought among the army's more interesting creatures entered. The Otomeian-coloured

patrician Shizuru called a friend, the cunning one called Suou.

"Owls hoot by night and yawn by day-or was it cats?" said the blonde and blue-eyed woman, strolling in with the indifferently haughty posture of her rank. "Whatever it is they say. Good afternoon."

Shizuru's staffers quickly returned the greeting.

"It might very well be bats. Welcome, Suou-han," Shizuru said, her yawn interrupted and abandoned. The Otomeian watching continued hers with nearly royal leisure. "Pardon the yawn, please."

"Consider it pardoned. I've been doing it all day, too." She looked about. "Chie-san is not here either. So she hasn't recovered from her cold yet?"

"No, unfortunately. I hope she gets better soon."

Suou nodded. "Yes, although she did send a note to say she'd still be meeting me and Sugiura-san later, for an evening drink. So she might be feeling a little better."

"Well, then." Shizuru smiled and laced her fingers across the desk. "How goes it?"

"It goes... but there is something that might have gone the wrong way, just now." At the other woman's quizzing look, she clarified. "Trouble."

"Trouble?"

She occupied the client's seat, facing Shizuru across the desk. "A grievance lodged against some of the soldiers."

Shizuru nodded, not seeing anything meriting true animation in the news. But that was before Suou continued.

"Lodged before *me* ."

And with her swift grasp of nuances, the commander of the army immediately understood the suggestion. Suou was her youngest

legate, true, but the Himemiya was also in a sense the most important, due to her name and connections. For the complaint to be lodged expressly before Suou's desk meant that whoever had placed it was terribly serious-and, perhaps, terribly wronged. The provost marshals rarely thought it necessary to refer disciplinary matters to someone as high up as a legate; they dealt with all the usual problems themselves, like the angry parents of the local girls taking up with the legionaries, crabby tavern-owners after the brawls, and so on. These things Shizuru, like every general since time immemorial, expected and had learned to tolerate; any other misdemeanour she had also learned, she could not. It brought out the angry gleam of blood in her eyes, as it did now. Her feelings were akin to those of a proud parent, suddenly disappointed by a formerly well-behaved child.

She flexed her spine to prepare tired muscles for yet another task, stretching her arms over the desk. The girl next to her watched the motion fixedly, green eyes riveted to the muscle sliding under her long arms. Shizuru did not notice it, but the other Himean did. The latter swiftly pretended not to have seen.

"Credible?" Shizuru asked briefly.

The other patrician was just as brief, although there was still a flickering smile in her eyes for what she had witnessed Shizuru's bodyguard do. "Looks like."

Shizuru shut her eyes in annoyance.

"Please tell me it is not rape," she responded. "I do not cherish the thought of cutting away noses today."

Suou denied it. "No, not rape, thank heavens. Alleged theft of the property of a local..."

Shizuru waited impassively.

"Who happens to be one of the more influential citizens," Suou finished.

"Ah!" The general nodded. "Political."

"More than anything-the plaintiff's representative was rather haughty about it." The other patrician smiled wryly. "He intends to be difficult, I imagine, though I also imagine that, between the two of us, we can prevent any such posturing. The irritating part is that it's a more or less complete case, too, with witnesses. There would have to be witnesses, the direct victim-the slave carrying the stolen goods-included. Whoever the fools are, they apparently did it while stumbling around drunk."

A soft click of the tongue. "And how are the witnesses so certain the perpetrators are from our legions?"

"The idiots were wearing some of their gear-not the older-issue ones of the local garrison, so easily recognisable."

Shizuru winced; the other officers in the room were very subtly leaning in too, trying to catch as much of the conversation as they could while pretending immersion in their respective papers.

"Inelegant," the commander said at length, a look of distaste on her face. "Inelegant."

"I agree completely."

"The names?"

Suou's silvery brows rushed together, and she crossed her legs leisurely while talking. "We're not sure yet, although we are trying to figure it out right now. However, Nao's supervising the culling with the other centurions..." She smiled her slow-to-complete grin. "So we should be assured of names sooner or later."

"Right." Shizuru rested her chin on one hand. "I should suppose so. The items stolen?"

"Just some nice pastries and two jugs of wine. They accosted the slave on his way to transporting the goods-supposedly sustenance for some of the master's nephews, who were out on some business late." The legate dropped her eyes and grimaced at her feet, which were speckled with mud; she had come from outside, after all, and outside was wet. "I suppose the soldiers were just out to continue

their little drunken party and saw the slave as easy meat. Overall, just trifling things were taken, really, even if the wine was-according to the plaintiff, anyway-a very expensive Falernian. Still, I personally see little trouble there."

"Theft has a nearly magical power of imbuing value, which means even a stolen pebble is no longer a mere trifle." The crimson-eyed woman inclined her head to one side, as though deep in thought. "Besides that, we must remember that I stated it at the outset of this mission: I would sorely punish anyone who stole anything."

Suou hummed.

"The word of a commander is divine law to the legionary," she said. "You're right. Whatever was stolen, it doesn't change the fact that it is bad form. It was counter-orders. That says everything."

"There is also the fact that it sullies the name of the entire army. Civilians are wary enough of soldiers without having this sort of thing happening, and if an influential civilian happens to be the victim? A word is enough to sow a harvest of distrust for the army."

"And suspicion is a fast-growing crop. I see."

"Rather." Shizuru leaned forward and made a steeple of her hands, putting her elbows on the desk. Her forehead came to rest against her hands as she spoke very quietly, so that only Suou and the girl beside her could hear. "And here I thought I had kept them busy enough."

Suou dropped her voice as well: "You did, as much as you could. It's not your fault."

"No? Perhaps-only *perhaps* -that could be true if the soldiers were discovered to have come from the cohorts we detached from the Seventh, who are not my veterans... but if they come from the cohorts of the Ninth, then I am easily to blame, for the Ninth is made up entirely of my old soldiers. It reflects negatively on me, whatever the case."

She sighed, letting her eyes close for a moment as she concluded:

"And of all people, they had to choose someone in the household of a significant person? Really, so inelegant."

"If there is anyone to blame it would be the sluggards in Senate," Suou returned. "It's they who have put us in this awkward stasis with nothing to do. You've been doing your best with the hard drilling, but the legions-especially veteran ones, see-get twitchy without actual fighting, as we all know. This sort of thing happens all the time when rankers don't see action."

Shizuru peeked at her friend with one red eye. "True. Nonetheless, I would not say *this sort of thing* entirely. Why, by all the gods, were they fool enough to be wearing their gear?"

"There were drill field exercises until late the other day, remember? We are surmising it's among those legionaries who didn't bother changing back to their civilian tunics."

Shizuru's brow wrinkled. "And here one would think that the normal thing to do. Is not all that material and sweaty fabric encumbering?"

"You forget something, Shizuru-san: the mating urges." Suou laughed at her old friend's puzzlement. "See, most of them go looking for companionship afterwards-though I'd like to think they bathe first-and they do it in uniform, because..."

"Because local girls and boys, in every locale, have always been mad for the soldier in armour," Shizuru finished in understanding, sighing deeply again. "Oh, I do wish that fascination would wear out! It gives the provost marshals the majority of their problems: all those fuming fathers and mothers, angry brothers, sometimes even sisters, all the new babies made at every corner... Why, I cannot help but feel it cheapens our uniforms when a soldier uses his merely to posture and troll about for a willing boy or girl who thinks it the sexiest attire ever!"

Suou looked at her friend pointedly, thinking it delicious that a woman who indeed made the gear look "the sexiest attire ever" would so complain of that particular phenomenon. And, she noted with a satisfied smirk, the Otomeian girl's heightened colour seemed to agree with her.

"Well, at least it gives them practice in having it on," she replied glibly. "They can't complain come time for the long marches if they're used to having it for that petty hunt as the weapon. Still, you do realise people like us can say this easily?"

Shizuru seemed confused for a second and stared quizzically at her friend, whose beautiful features regarded her with frank amusement. She finally caught on to the joke.

"Oh," she said, with a short laugh. "I wonder."

"How modest of you to do so." Suou raised both brows airily. "But, anyway, that's how it is."

"I see." Shizuru took a deep breath. "I had best see to it now. Yuukihan is doing the inquiries now at the camp, you said?"

"Yes, she has them in assembly on the parade grounds."

"Then we must go there." She rose and was emulated by Suou and the girl beside her, whom she then addressed. "Natsuki, is it not yet time for your errand? It seems we shall have to separate here, for the moment."

The girl twisted her mouth, but did not argue: Shizuru was right, after all. After a few more words, they agreed that they should part, with the older woman promising to meet her in their quarters for dinner, telling her to wait there should she finish ahead of them. It was in recollection of the girl's weariness upon waking in the morning that she stipulated this, not wishing to tire her with this new activity this afternoon; so did she explain it to her friend, as they left to head for the camp.

"I understand," Suou simply said, being wise enough not to ask a question to which she already knew the answer. Instead, she put forward another. "Have you ever attended any of their meetings, by the way? Natsuki-san's with the other Otomeians?"

"A few times, yes." She gave her friend a comical look. "You know... you were there too."

"Oh, not those! Those were expressly with all officers, Himean or

otherwise. I meant with *their* officers presiding, strictly, and you watching as a mere observer."

"Then no, not yet." Shizuru lifted her brows. "Have you?"

"I wouldn't say I was truly in attendance in the sense of having been invited, but I chanced upon one once, when I had some business with one of their barons. Their posts let me in, since the meeting was nearly over." She smirked, and her crystalline eyes were supremely amused. "Either that or they thought I was one of them."

Shizuru laughed. "How was it?"

The legate's teeth flashed white as she answered: "I rather had the sense of seeing many an Achilles."

"What?" Shizuru was eager for her to say more. "Is it for their appearance? They are all fair, I think, save for my girl."

Suou agreed.

"Yes, though her impression certainly doesn't suffer for it!" she said, remembering Natsuki's slender, dark-haired figure next to all those blonde giants, whose presences yet could not manage to dwarf hers. "But more than that. Is it all the gold and silver glittering so brassily on them, like the gifts of Vulcan? Is it their terrible height, colossi as they all are? I wonder. See, Shizuru-san, the impression their officers give is not like ours, who can seem unmartial sometimes unless actually thrust in battle. Some of our officers look more like businessmen, so to speak, while theirs never do."

She shook her head, frowning lightly as she searched for how better to express the idea.

"Oh, I don't know," she finally stated. "It's just that every single one of them, without exception, looks and feels an absolute warrior. Barbaric, and beautiful that way!"

Shizuru nodded in comprehension.

"Yes, I think I see," she said slowly. "They do reek of fierceness, down to the last blonde-or, for Natsuki, black-hair."



"Exactly. A blonde horde." She halted by some legionaries with horses. "With equally barbaric, beautiful monsters for horses. Here are our mounts."

She pointed out the largest to Shizuru.

"As you can see, that one is of the largest Otomeian stock," she said. "I purchased it from them recently."

"Beautiful indeed," Shizuru observed, stroking the muscular neck of the huge bay as the soldiers greeted them. "You chose well. I hope the price was fair?"

"Fair enough! It was worth a fortune." She smiled faintly, something furtive underneath. "Do you know that they generally do not sell their horses? Those particular ones, at any rate. The smaller, more ordinary ones owned by the less important warriors and less affluent among them are the ones they are amenable to selling."

"The breed close to the stock used by the Mentulae?" Shizuru said, thoroughly inspecting the animal. "Truly more ordinary, compared to these enormous steeds. As ours generally look ordinary compared to these too."

"Precisely. As with most horse people, status is generally indicated by the quality of horses owned, and the number," Suou answered with a smile. "We Himeans invest in real estate; they invest in horseflesh. And the investments are terrifically costly."

"With good reason. You are lucky to have found someone willing to sell this one, then," the general returned. "A mare, too!"

"It took over two months of wrangling since we've been here, and a load of gold." The younger woman turned away, so as to conceal the smirk in her eyes. "It's not just the value they have in coin, see. Their warriors consider these horses as they would a partner, with whom they have spent years together. They are not tools for them, nor are they mere beasts for convenience. They invest a great deal in their horses, in each of their war chargers."

Shizuru was silent; it was clear Suou had given her cause to think.

"Would that I had had someone willing to give me one, as a present instead of a purchase. But I'm not so fortunate."

The Himemiya turned to face her friend again and whatever else she had to say on that particular thread was communicated in a look. Suou nodded, telling her she was welcome for the detail.

"Anyway," the younger patrician said, breaking the moment. "I intend to send her back home. For my sister."

Shizuru appreciated the thoughtfulness of the gesture.

"She will adore it," she answered, thinking of her old friend's-Suou's sister's-love for horses. "I am certain."

"I did want you to see it too, first," Suou said, deciding to ride on one of the other mounts, which was one of her favourite horses. While certainly not as large as the Otomeian-stock horse Shizuru was inspecting, it had an especially slender grace about its carriage that she favoured. "You and Chikane have much the same preferences in horses. Please go ahead and ride it this time, just as a trial. Tell me what you think later."

The general acquiesced.

"There are three," she also noted.

The other woman shrugged. "I had assumed another presence, naturally."

"I see." With a snap of her limbs, she swung herself up on the large horse, suddenly doubly eager to conclude her work. "Let us be off quickly. I only hope Yuuki-han has begun to achieve results."

Reaching the camp a short ride later, they found her hope justified: Yuuki-han had indeed achieved results. Shizuru's acid-tongued primipilus had already found the culprits, having worked indefatigably with the other centurions to produce the perpetrators. The guilty soldiers turned out to be from a cohort of the Seventh-a small balm to the general's soreness, since they were not from her old veterans-and were turned in by their fellow octet-members, who had seen them leave the tavern drunken and return to barracks at

the times specified by the investigating officers. Both had been noticeable, for they had reeked of liquor and a night's mischief. Their centurion was one Hasumi, who turned over the two legionaries to his cohort's chief centurion. She then passed them to their legion's senior primipilus, named Takashi.

It was Takashi who was tongue-lashing the guilty pair with Nao when their two superiors arrived.

"They are in the drill field, then?" Shizuru asked the soldier who had informed her upon arrival; he had been waiting for them. Everyone in the army knew the general's mania for efficiency and swiftly available information. "Takashi-han and Yuuki-han, as well as the two responsible?"

"Yes, General." He directed two rankers to stable the patricians' horses. "Their century is also there, General."

"Along with Hasumi-han, their centurion."

"Yes, General. Everyone else was sent back to barracks."

"Hmm." Shizuru slowed her walk smoothly and darted a look at Suou. "Then we can take our time. I suppose Takashi-han and Yuuki-han are trying to talk to them."

Both her companions looked at her curiously. Did she really think those two salty primipilii were just "trying to talk" to the men responsible?

"I feel it would be discourteous to, ah, interrupt just yet," she continued, speaking as though thinking aloud to herself. "Yuuki-han and Takashi-han might appreciate me letting them have a few words with the legionaries first. They are the senior centurions of the legion and army. It would only be proper to let them put a gentle word in the pairs' ears before we get to it."

The soldier-also a centurion-leading them swallowed a guffaw, although part of it came up his nose as a snort.

"Why, of course," Suou said, laughing inwardly at her friend's innocent expression. "Of course it would only be proper."

She turned to the man accompanying them, whose blue eyes were dancing.

"Don't you think so, my good man?" she asked.

"Right you are, Himemiya-san, and so's the general," he said, trying to compensate for the delight shining in his face by sounding gruff. "Right and proper."

"Would you be so kind as to inform my two primipilii of this?" Shizuru asked, smiling at her centurion. Invitation to the conspiracy shone in her bright-blooded eyes. "They should also welcome the word in advance, I imagine, to know that we are on our way."

"Right away, General."

"Oh, and please inform them as well that we shall be waiting in the command tent overlooking the drill field."

He grinned. "Yes, General."

He was about to go off when she stopped him.

"Ah, one more thing before you go," she said affably. "Would you also have someone check with the plaintiff to see if he is feeling well enough to come? In the event that he is, please tell him I am inviting him over for an interview to settle this affair; if he is indisposed, then please extend the invitation to whomever lodged the complaint for his sake and wishes to represent him. Whatever the case, be sure to arrange pleasant escorts and proper hospitality for the visitor, for I would like him to be kept in one of the offices while waiting—merely say I am seeing to something urgent, in that time. Keep the person happy; ask the military tribunes how to go about this, since they are well aware of how things should be arranged. I shall send for the visitor when I require him."

"Right away, General," he rapped out, pleased to have been tasked personally by her. "I'll get it all ready."

She smiled at her eager subordinate. "I shall leave it to you, Kitano-han."

How he beamed when she said his name! He saluted her one more time and ran off to do her commands. The two women ambled at an easy pace, smiling and nodding at the legionaries they passed. They were not in too great a hurry any longer, for it was part of Shizuru's intent that her primipilii should have their way with their rankers first. It would save her the trouble of "giving the saltier lecture". The legate agreed with a hearty bout of laughter.

"Crafty, crafty," Suou smirked to her. "And I suppose you shall rescue them from those two raving centurions' clutches and *try to talk* to them so carefully they'll be grateful and guilty enough to beg you for the punishment afterwards?"

Shizuru shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

"Look at this, by the way." Suou suddenly frowned, turning her icy gaze to the muddy patches on their path. "You can't blame Chie-san for catching cold. We'll be spotted like hogs in a sty before the afternoon is done."

Shizuru made a wry face as well, suddenly reminded of the fact that her feet were freezing: the damp had gone through her boots and socks as they walked.

"It has begun to slush," she said worriedly. "I wonder how well-channelled are the rivers hereabouts."

"The city's safe enough, they say, though that's probably not your focus. Concerned about mobility?"

"Of course." A corner of the tawnier blonde's lip turned up in a fleeting sneer. "I may be about to be replaced, but it does not change my concern for these corners. After all, I have every intention of returning here immediately when that happens, my trip to Hime being only a short stopover."

"I know. And speaking of Hime..." The legate's lips thinned. "Soon, the floods around spring and summer. Ugh!"

"Yes, they should come on in a few more months."

"Exactly. This is one time I am actually glad to be stationed

elsewhere, so I do not envy you for your impending return home, short as you intend it to be."

Red eyes peered at her shrewdly.

"The Himemiya manor does not suffer from the floods, Suou-chan," Shizuru reminded. "We both live among the highest spots in the Palatine district-which, actually, is placed high in the entire."

The other patrician shook her head dismissively.

"Of course it doesn't suffer from flooding," she answered. "But that does not save the rest of Hime from the rainy season. I hate the way it affects the lower areas and the districts around the Forum. Not only does it become disgustingly muggy once the floodwaters start to evaporate, but the stench of backfilled latrines is *amazing*. And not even the precious height of our snobby hill can escape that miasma."

"True, the city does become quite ripe in vapour and aroma."

"Not to mention insanitary. The diseases come on like a plague."

"Oh yes, quite terrible-"

She broke off here abruptly and Suou glanced at her in puzzlement. The blue-eyed patrician could not know Shizuru was thinking of her girl and how, if said girl did come to Hime, she would have to be sent away from the city during that time of flood and disease. The Otomeian would be likely to suffer in that alien, hotly noxious weather; foreigners unaccustomed to it and the diseases spread due to it were known for suffering the most. In fact, foreigners from cooler lands were often among the fatalities come the end of the summer term.

She clenched her hands unconsciously at the idea.

Her fellow patrician's voice intruded on her thoughts, and she welcomed the intrusion to take her mind off her morbid notions.

"Ah, here we are!" Suou's sky-blue eyes lit up as she saw their destination. "And there they all are."

They skirted the grounds shortly, keeping within the growing shadows. Reappearing at the tent erected atop a dais nearby, they chose to display themselves at its entrance, standing there like visiting deities come to observe a judgment dispassionately. The two senior centurions on the field, upon noticing them, ordered the legionaries to salute and snap to attention.

"The general's here for you arseholes," the male centurion, Takashi, said savagely; he was chief primipilus of the Seventh legion. He faced two men standing stiffly to attention, in front of the rest of their century, and his face was like flint. "For you sons-of-bitches! I'm ashamed to have her come here for you! I'm ashamed to be here in front of her, and have to tell her it's you little shits from my legion've given her this headache... and tried to get away with it! Get on the fucking ground and kiss it, you shit. Get down and bow! You've no right to be saluting the general after what you've done. You've no right to even stand up a'front of her. I'll not be sending you to her before you do that for a start on penance!"

This tirade was followed by the senior primipilus, who stalked over to the men with her eyes blazing a menacing yellow, virulent green at the edges. Takashi stepped aside and quieted down for her: he was mindful of the pecking order.

"I should roast your balls, you *cunni*, if you had them," the army's highest-ranked primipilus said with rancid sweetness. The two observing patricians heard the words hang in the damp air, icicles dripping venom. "Going out and getting piss-blind is one thing, but thieving and attacking someone in the gear is another. Takashi's right-I can't send you to the commander at this rate. You're not worthy of facing the general yet. You're not even worthy of the armour!"

She snapped her fingers in a crack and pointed at the two culprits.

"Strip!" she ordered, to general astonishment. "Off with it."

The two men hesitated, and she rounded on them like an enraged harpy.

"Gods damn you, didn't you hear me, *cunni*?" she howled, hair

spiking wildly around her like a carmine halo. "Take that shitty armour off! Hurry, you little mincing flowers, before I peel your worthless stalks where they are! Be quick about it!"

Hands shaking, the two legionaries struggled to get out of their armour, leaving only their tunics and breeches on. The shed items were picked up by the hapless pair's octet-members, who would put it away for their sake. The two Himeans at the tent continued to watch, their spines ramrod straight and cloaks thrown elegantly over their shoulders. Both their faces seemed majestically serious from a distance.

The chief primipilus of the army spewed another jet of steaming invectives, ordering the tunic-clad pair on the muddy field to divest themselves even of their closed-toe boots.

"Get out of it, you bastard fools!" she spat, alternating with the growls of the Seventh's senior centurion. "Hurry or I'll bury you in your gods-fucked gear!"

The two patricians watching from the tent on the dais struggled with their laughter.

"She'd peel plaster from a wall," one said affectionately, provoking the general's muffled chuckle in return. "Oh, Jupiter, don't you just adore her? I *must* introduce her to Urumi when there's a chance!"

The other patrician managed to look thoughtful at that.

"You know," she said. "I have always wondered what would happen if I put Yuuki-han and Chikane in a room together, and bade them have a conversation."

Suou fell back into the tent's recesses and dissolved in a peal of mirth, unable to control it any longer.

"I don't know if I would feel sorrier for one or the other," she said, dabbing tears from her eyes. "Anyway, shouldn't we break it up yet? Those poor men might wet themselves from terror."

Shizuru turned away from the sight outside to shoot her friend a flashing smile.



"Oh, right," Suou said, with another breezy laugh. "Not that they'd be safe from that once they get to you."

"Well, we shall see." She held up her hand anyway, which the two primipilii on the field took as the signal to send the men over. "In any case, it is well that we should not appear unduly cruel."

She left the opening of the tent upon seeing the men walk over, accompanied by their superior officers.

"Is that so?" Suou tilted her head thoughtfully. "Truth be told, I used to wonder what exactly was overboard in the army, or what was cruelty. The first time I joined, my mindset was that of a pampered civilian-worse, a pampered patrician. Everything, suddenly, seemed to be phrased as an order full of salt and vinegar. Or so I thought, watching the officers and centurions talk to the men."

The other woman was older than her by a mere year, but far more veteran in terms of military experience. She answered:

"Understandable. I suppose the only thing I can say to that is that it takes time to learn exactly where the borders are."

"Really?" Suou flicked her hair, the pale strands spreading over her shoulders like limp flax. "I don't know. I should like to think I am learning well, and that your theory on time being the teacher applies to me..."

"It does."

"Yet I have seen and heard tell of such people who are accused, sometimes by their soldiers and sometimes by their subordinate officers, of undue cruelty. And these, people who have had the benefit of time, from campaign to campaign."

Shizuru seated herself at her table, still smiling.

"There you have me," she admitted. "Well, time is not the only teacher, really. Good sound, common sense matters, as well as the ability to adapt and see when something calls for a touch of relativity." She tapped a long finger on one smooth cheek. "For myself, I believe I try to seek a balance between the bat and the

bait. Certainly not everything should be phrased as harsh interdict."

She quirked a brow at her friend.

"Everything," she said. "Is portioned out according to a proper calculation."

Suou smirked this time.

"Oh, naturally- *for you* " she granted, taking her post at another table, next to the general's. "Calibrated responses are your speciality."

Truer words had never been spoken: Shizuru proved to her that day that she was indeed a master of calibration, handling the entire affair with her signature and measured delicacy. By the time she had the two culprits in the tent, the plaintiff was already in one of the staff offices, being entertained by some very sympathetic military tribunes and two charming young women-they were prostitutes, but the visitor did not know that, though he may have had suspicions-and flushed with a good deal of food and drink. The wine, in particular, was of the best vintage, according to her instructions. No standard army wine for this occasion! Perhaps it surprised the visitor when he first partook of it, but greater than the surprise was his pleasure at being so treated.

At the same time Shizuru was having her talk with the legionaries, the plaintiff was also being regaled with calculated gossip of how sorely the two culprits were being treated on the grounds, and how angry the centurions and the general were with them. As she judged the guilty, her officers kept up a constant stream of charming talk and flattery for the mistreated party. Treated like a royal dignitary, his complaints met with great concern and beautifully-worded apologies, the plaintiff was thus of a mind to be a little more agreeable by the time he was summoned by the young commander, who saw him in another of the camp's offices herself.

Shizuru informed him of her judgment, which had been to order the concerned legionaries to remunerate the total cost of the doctor's fees and stolen goods from the plaintiff, as well as to suffer a gruelling rebuke by way of the lash before their fellow soldiers. She

explained the reasons for her decision, as well as invited him to view the whipping if he wished to see it, which invitation he declined: businessmen were not best-suited to such gory spectacles, he answered a little shamefacedly, and said that the thought of a grave penalty having been enacted was enough. She agreed and said it was just as well, for the men she had chosen to carry out the flogging had heavy hands with the whip. The placid little businessman just nodded and shuddered, saying he was truly satisfied and could happily go home from there.

"But I would still have preferred that he see this," she told her legionaries later, as some of them, along with the guilty pair's century, gathered to witness the punishment. "That he see the discipline expected of my army. I would have preferred that he witness it, so that when he tells others of this matter, he shall be able to say we treated this occurrence for what it was-something alien to us and unnatural, something evil that we flayed upon revelation. I wish this because it did pain me to hear of the incident, and to have to apologise to a man in this matter. Perhaps it pained me more, even, than the whip shall pain the two of you."

They were silent and still, regardless of the damp, ugly weather. It was already dark, and they could see their general's face only through the fickle light of the fire. Oh, but her voice! Her voice was clear and steady as ever, and it was very solemn.

The sound of it drew them closer.

"To steal," the general said, in a soft but still intelligible timbre. "I hardly knew what to say when I heard it. How could I believe it? My soldiers-my wonderful boys and girls-my beloved legionaries. You *steal*?"

She shook her head and some of them mirrored the action unconsciously.

"I thought my soldiers do not steal," the general told them sadly. "They have no need to steal for I make it unnecessary. My soldiers are not impoverished; they need impoverish no one by the brutal philosophy that requires the poor to thief for the sake of life, and thus they need not make their *dignitas* the pauper. Why steal when I

always provide?"

Her hands went out in supplication.

"Why steal?" she asked again. "Have I ever deprived you of anything you might require? Have I ever withheld from you your due, which permits you to subsist as comfortably as you might desire? Have I not even doubled your pay and given you bonuses to ensure this, all from my own purse? Have I not assured you of a good pension at the end of your service in the legions and with my campaigns? Have I not done enough?"

The two men awaiting the lash bowed their heads, letting their tears seed the already muddy ground. They were miserable with the agony of disappointing her. Suou had been right in what she said earlier: by the time Shizuru had finished speaking to them, both had been so ready to claim their deserved punishment that they had declined even the cords to keep them still as they were whipped. They would submit willingly, they had declared, and with perfect regret.

"My soldiers do not steal," their commander reiterated, eyes at once stern and sorrowful. "They do not steal because I have forbidden them to steal, because I have removed all reason for them to steal, and because-most importantly *because!* -it is beneath them. Such an act is beneath you, my soldiers, my brave legionaries. It is beneath you, and it is beneath me. What you do reflects upon me, and further, upon your comrades in the army-further, upon all other Hime's soldiers and-even further!-upon Hime itself. Hime does not raise barbarians for soldiers, who pillage where peaceful exchange is proper. I did not think myself a barbarian, raising barbarians for soldiers. Or am I? Have I?"

There was a low murmur, dozens of guttural voices responding that she had not, that she had no fault by them. She lifted her face again at the sound, sweeping them with a faintly sad, if somewhat grim smile.

"Then remember," she said to them, in closing. "Remember what I have forbidden you. Remember of what you and I are unworthy, for we are one in this matter, and what touches on one touches on the

other. Never pain me like this again, I ask of you! Never fall so far beneath your pride! To steal is unworthy of my soldiers. To steal is unworthy of *me* ."

"All of which was very beautifully done," Suou told her afterwards, as they rode back to the governor's palace together. The business concluded, they had left as soon as the lashing had been meted out, letting the other officers sort out the minor matters. "They shan't be forgetting that any time soon, I should think. Everyone was more or less satisfied, which is very well done indeed considering that they were also all put in their place."

Shizuru, who was spurring her horse to a faster pace, smiled into the evening breeze.

"Thank you very much," she said cheerfully. "It was a good day's worth of work."

"That it was," her companion said, nudging her horse in the ribs to keep up with Shizuru's pace. Their escort, riding respectfully behind them, followed suit. "Ridiculous. All because two fools could not hold their liquor. It's foolish to attempt something like that without all of your senses."

"Indeed." Shizuru paused shortly. "I am really so pleased it is over."

Suou nodded, knowing to where the other woman's thoughts had turned. She was of half a mind to tease her friend about acting like a newly-married woman rushing to her wife, but relented at the last second.

"You did promise to have dinner with her," she said instead. "How is Natsuki-san these days?"

"Lovely-wonderful-obstinate!"

A gust of laughter. "I'm sorry about that. So it is still 'No'?"

"As it is, I would prefer to think of it as 'not yet Yes'," Shizuru said affably. Her hair was streaming in the wind behind her, a golden banner at once darker and more vivid than Suou's own. "Oh, Suou-chan, her intractability is impossible. Who would have thought my

sweet girl could be as stubborn as a common mule?"

Suou, who thought anyone but Shizuru could have seen that much in the Otomeian's serious, surly nature, smiled at her friend.

"It must be like laying siege to Troy," she said. "Would this one accept any wooden horses?"

"She might, but alas! I am no carpenter."

"I recall nothing about Ulysses having been required to build his device himself." She went on to the alternative they had been discussing. "Have you given any thought to what I proposed last time, by the way?"

"Which one?" Shizuru called back with near-perfect nonchalance. "The proposition about forcibly hijacking and putting her in the ship's hold, or the one about seeking her King's formal consent to transfer all her duties to you? As it is, I must confess I have given thought to both, and one more often than the other."

The younger woman's mirth puffed through her teeth.

"The latter," she specified, seeing Shizuru's face go blank. "I know it's a terrible prospect, Shizuru-san, not having her agree to go with you to the end-but we do have to prepare for all possibilities."

"Yes, believe me, I do see that," Shizuru said, permitting a wisp of the dryness to come through her voice.

"And?"

There was a long sigh that was lost in the wind.

"And I have already sent the letter to Otomeia stating that it should be carried out in that eventuality," Shizuru replied, with a small frown. "Though merely considering the possibility gives me no joy."

"I understand, so I shall not take it as an insult," Suou drawled humorously. "I hope it could relieve you a little though, if you at least knew I would be here to take care of her as I would my own sister."

Shizuru, who had been about to apologise for the unintended insinuation of her earlier words, stopped in favour of casting the younger woman a grateful smile instead: Suou's pledge was deep indeed, she knew, since the person Suou loved most in the world was her older sibling.

"It would," she said sincerely. "If it came to that, it would relieve me."

The other patrician smiled back.

"Of course, there's the question, though: would I make her sleep in my bed too, for my purported safety?"

"I would *cripple* you."

Their voices joined in a ring of laughter. It was only afterwards that Suou replied, explaining why she had laughed longer and harder than Shizuru.

"See, I do think you would," she smiled, as they dismounted from their horses and parted. "No matter who it happened to be, I think you would."

*Is that true*, Shizuru wondered afterwards. *Would I do that to anyone-anyone at all-for her?*

The somewhat ominous words stayed as she walked into the mansion, stopping to change her muddy boots and pick up something that had been delivered to her office. They were only driven away when she found Natsuki in their room, feet folded under her bottom where she sat on the bed.

The young woman was polishing a toothed dagger.

"Natsuki," Shizuru intoned gladly, relieved to find her already there. "Natsuki, Natsuki."

The other woman welcomed her with a tiny smile, glancing cautiously first at the train of slaves Shizuru had with her as they headed straight for the doorway to the bath. Only when they had vanished did she speak.

"Shizuru, Shizuru," she said in a hauntingly low whisper, parodying the older woman's greeting. "Shizuruuu..."

The older woman giggled.

"You are tired," Natsuki said, directing the comment to Shizuru with one of her sudden, serious flashes.

"I am, rather," answered Shizuru truthfully. "And you?"

A shake of the head.

"Good. I had hoped you could rest a while here." She looked her over, noting her companion's attire. "You changed out of your uniform already. Have you bathed yet?"

"Mm." Natsuki scratched one side of her nose delicately and stretched. "But I will help, later."

"I would like that." Shizuru glanced at the dripping water clock on the stand. "As promised, I am in time for dinner. I hope you are not too hungry yet. You have yet to dine?"

"Yes." She pointed her chin at the older woman. "I will wait."

"All right. We may dine after I have my bath, if you would suffer it a moment longer." Shizuru shook her mane out, freeing it from the ribbon she had used for a tie. The mass was pale and shiny in the light, and a pair of emerald eyes followed its swell as it was freed. "How was your meeting?"

Natsuki murmured something vaguely positive. Shizuru made her way over to a chair and placed the package she was carrying beside it.

"That is good." One of the slaves in the other room appeared near the doorway to fetch a bucket they had forgotten, and she called to her. "A basin of water, if you please. And some fresh linen."

"I feel such a dirty wretch," she said jokingly, once the items were produced. "I even had to change out of my boots on the way here, so as to avoid trailing the mud all over. My socks were sodden. Was



it the same for you, Darling?"

"Mm."

"All the better that you have already changed out of those damp clothes, then."

She dismissed the slave and washed her face, bending over the basin next to her chair. When she opened her eyes again, she nearly upended the bowl's contents onto the floor.

"Natsuki, you scamp!" she laughed, heart racing in surprise. Two beautiful green eyes narrowed in amusement, a mere two feet away from her face. "Why frighten me?"

The girl had pulled a chair over near hers and sat on it, taking the square of linen from the table.

"Sorry, Shizuru," she uttered, brushing away Shizuru's fringe, matted to her forehead. "I will help."

Shizuru half-heartedly frowned, letting her continue pushing away the wet locks. "You can be such a mean girl. At least make a sound when you step so close like that. Even ghosts are louder."

Natsuki held a small, slightly crooked grin.

"Sorry," she said again, using the linen to wipe the Himean's face. She allowed the older woman to wash hands next, and also patted them dry afterwards. When that was done, she threw a quick look over her shoulder to check that none of the slaves were hovering by the door; assured, she pecked Shizuru's cheek. Her lips were smooth as fine silk, and just as light.

Shizuru understood the words she would not say.

"I know," the older woman said, looking fondly at two lightly flushed cheeks. "I missed you too."

She remembered herself the next second, however, and her state. Making a disgusted face, she drew backwards and warned: "But I would caution against kissing me right now, *meum mel* . You smell

so sweet, and I reek of work and trudging around in the muck. I do not want to defile you when I am so... foully unworthy."

The young woman's mouth suddenly quivered at that. Eyes alight, she took one of Shizuru's hands and raised it to her nose, sniffing deep and aloud. Before the Himean could jerk the appendage free, she suddenly turned her lips to the spot she had just smelled, where the soft skin joined thumb and index finger, and kissed that place lovingly.

"Not foul," she said light-heartedly, relinquishing Shizuru's hand. "Not unworthy. Mmm."

Shizuru smirked at the girl's mischief, aware of her own cheeks succumbing to a faint blush.

"I should spank you," she said under her breath, to the Otomeian's subdued, victorious laughter.

Natsuki returned the smirk to her.

"Mind you I am still the master," Shizuru continued humorously. "You are yet a tyro at the tease, Beauty, for all that you do it well. I shall exact revenge soon."

She stopped to reach down, beside her chair.

"Before that, however, I brought you something." She presented the parcel she had been carrying and handed it over, watching as Natsuki unfolded the cloth to reveal what was inside. "Sweet, perfumed jellies carried by a ship just come from Parthia. They are a delicacy among the girls in Hime, and I thought it might please you to sample them. I had one sent to my office earlier."

Natsuki had opened the jar of jellies and was gazing at the trembling contents intently. As Shizuru had thought, she had never before seen anything of the like.

"Ice that moves," she said wonderingly. "It shakes. What is it?"

"Jelly."

"And it is to eat?"

"It is, yes. Let us have them after our meal, later," she suggested, tucking some wheaten hair behind an ear. "You may try them now, if you wish, although I would recommend taking only one. I would hate to have your appetite spoiled for dinner, and more than one of those can cloy not only the tongue but also the appetite."

"All right," Natsuki replied, with a shake of the head. "Later. Like you say."

"Very well."

"Shizuru." Her lips pulled up almost hesitantly. "Thank you."

"You are welcome."

The servants came out to tell them that the bath was ready, and were directed to fetch the two women's dinner from the kitchens as Shizuru bathed. When they had left, the two women remaining in the room headed to the bath.

Once in the bathing room with her only companion, Shizuru began to undress. She started with her accessories first, removing them piece by piece and beginning with the gem-encrusted cuffs on her wrists. She handed them to the girl, who was ready with a cloth in which to bundle the items. When she had gone to removing the torc around her neck, Natsuki mumbled something about one of her rings being starkly plainer than the rest.

"Oh, that?" she said, glancing at the ring in question: a drab grey band of iron. "It is my senatorial ring-the ring worn by all of us upon being accepted to Senate."

Natsuki murmured again.

"What do you mean 'for you it should be gold'?" Shizuru laughed, handing over the torc as well. "What does that mean?"

The younger woman frowned.

"Gold is your... your metal, I think," she explained. "It is best for

you."

Shizuru smiled in puzzlement at her.

"If you say so," she said softly. Suddenly she remembered the time Natsuki had told her that she liked her hair because she saw it as wrought of precious metals. "At any rate, many of the other senators do have golden senatorial rings. Mine is iron because I come from one of the oldest senatorial families-which follow the original tradition of having an iron band."

Natsuki drew together the corners of the parcel and bundled it away.

"Strange," she murmured.

Shizuru divested herself of her tunic as well, and the leather knee-breeches she had under them. The clothes were balled up and put aside.

"Do you think so?" she asked.

"Gold is more... umm. Valuable."

"Implying that when you think of me, you think of something valuable." She smirked when Natsuki's eyes rolled. "Incidentally, you know the crowns, yes? The major awards we have in battle?"

" *Corona*, " Natsuki replied, with a nod. The girl watched her step into the water. "Like yours, Shizuru. *Corona graminea* ?"

"Yes, or a *grass crown*, literally, for all that it is the highest distinction possible in the army." She sighed as she immersed her legs in the warm water, perching on the edge of the pool. Her eyes shut to the blurring vapour. "There are other crowns, the one second in importance being the *corona civica*, which is made of ordinary oak leaves instead. Would you be so sweet as to fetch me the oils?"

"Ah." Natsuki also brought the *strigil* . "Here."

"Thank you-no, you need not apply it for me. You have already bathed and I do not want to get you dirty. Just sit there, on that bench, and talk to me please. That would keep me happy."

"Um."

She tipped the bottle of oil into her hand and began to smooth it over her own skin, inhaling with sensuous pleasure its fragrance. "As I was saying, the *c orona graminea* and the *c orona civica* are the two most illustrious decorations for valour in battle, and both are made of such simple stuff as leaves and grass. Compare them to the minor crowns, like the *aurea*, *muralis*, *vallaris*, and *n avalis*, all of which are fashioned out of true gold. Those are intrinsically more valuable because of the material, yet of less honour and value than the first two."

"Ahh." Natsuki pulled up her feet onto the bench, hugging her knees to her chest. She began to repeat the list of minor crowns Shizuru had just enumerated. Once she had finished and gained Shizuru's approval, she went on to say: "I remember these, yes-the gold ones."

"You do?"

"Yes." She seemed to be making an inventory of the ones she moved her fingers as though ticking off in her head. "You have many of them, Shizuru."

Shizuru acknowledged that with a nod, remembering too the time the girl had seen all of her military decorations; Natsuki had inspected each one so closely that she had been embarrassed. It had been such that she had felt compelled to explain to the Otomeian that she had brought them with her because all Himean generals did on campaign, because they were proof and guarantee of a general's luck. Even then, seeing the girl accept the explanation while gazing admiringly up at her had still flushed her cheeks with a healthy bit of colour.

*Which seemed the more gaudy then, surrounded by all that gold and silver*, she thought wryly, remembering Natsuki's barely suppressed grin at the time. The Otomeian had been quick to mark her blush, after all, and had even worsened it, whether on purpose or not. What was it she had said? *You are strong*. Yes, that had been it. She had held Shizuru's painfully flaring cheek with one hand and told her, in that low voice, *I knew you were strong...*

She shook her head imperceptibly to dislodge the embarrassment before it could fully return.

"In any case, that is the way of it," she said. "The less illustrious ones are the ones made of precious material. The higher awards are the ones wrought from simple matter."

"Are they older, too?"

"Which ones are older, Natsuki?"

"Those not of gold." She drummed her fingers rhythmically on her shins like a restless youngster forced into sitting quietly by a parent. "The *corona civica*, and the *corona graminea* ? The ones more... illustrious."

She said "illustrious" like a delicate thing, and held it on her tongue like something she did not want to break. Shizuru, who loved it when the girl did that, paused in her ablutions.

"Yes," the older woman said. "Yes. What do you mean by 'older', however?"

"I mean older of, um, of tradition."

"You noticed." Shizuru was approving. "When Hime had yet to become great, when it was no more than a community of people living in a small group of oval, thatched huts where our city stands today, gold was not much in abundance. Therefore most of the materials having to do with traditions carried over from that ancient time are not the precious ones today. Like my senatorial ring."

"Oh." Natsuki ceased her fingers now; the energy shifted to her feet. She curled the toes in and out, alternating from one foot to the other. "Tradition. Value."

The older woman darted an amused look at her wagging feet.

"Natsuki," she began. "You're so frisky."

The girl immediately calmed her twitching toes, looking awkward.

"Is it that you are actually hungry or have you some nasty surprise waiting?"

Two spots appeared on the Otomeian's cheeks.

"No, I am not hungry," she admitted slowly, brow wrinkled. "No surprise."

"Really?" Shizuru studied her with concern. "I am worried you are famished and are trying to be considerate by hiding it from me. You should not."

"No, I..." She stopped and held the back of her neck with one palm. "Only, I..."

"Yes?" At her further hesitation, Shizuru sighed and lifted both brows, quizzing her with a gentle smile. "You what?"

There was a long silence before the Otomeian gave in.

"I waited," she said lamely, lower lip thrusting out just a fraction. "Earlier in-just there, in thuh-the room."

It took only an instant before Shizuru understood the code behind the stuttering speech.

"*Meum mel*," she said sympathetically, after a swift nibble on the inside of her cheek. She wanted so much to get up and kiss those petulant lips back into a smile. "I am so sorry I took so long; it must have been terribly dreary."

*Were you so lonely without me?*

Natsuki shook her head, refusing to meet her eyes. Shizuru went on.

"I truly am sorry." She stopped and had a thought. "You could have brought up Shizuki for company... or was there an obstacle, perhaps?"

A downwards screw of the mouth: "Sleeping."

"Oh, I see. What a pity." Her mind went to the few buckets of scrolls

she always kept nearby. "Have you finished the books there, by the way?"

"Mm. You read the last to me... remember?"

"I should have thought to ask them to bring up some new ones for you."

The younger woman shook her head.

"No," she said. "Am fine. Now."

Shizuru smiled.

"Yes," she agreed. "Now, / am here."

Natsuki made a sound in accord and they settled to the comfortable peace for a while, the girl's feet still moving, but paddling up and down in a slower, more relaxed motion. Shizuru was taking up the strigil to scrape away the oil upon her when the Otomeian called her name.

"Yes?" Shizuru said.

"About the trouble earlier. The trouble Himemiya-san came to tell?" The young woman twiddled her toes carelessly again. "Yuh-you will tell me, maybe?"

"I meant to tell you about it over dinner. Would you like to know now? I do not mind."

An ardent nod.

"Very well."

So she told her, giving special attention to the delivery, since she was speaking to someone she knew would appreciate it. And in the telling, she realised how much she had been wanting to tell her. It was true that she had gravely needed a soak earlier, that she still needed to dine and then rest after a tiring day. Yet more than anything else, she realised, had been the need to share thoughts with *Her*. Only then did she find her muscles finally unwinding



themselves, working free of the knots in a way that had less to do with the hot water around her than her quiet audience. She continued to bathe while talking, and was already immersed in the water by the time she had finished.

"They were so bad?" Natsuki asked her afterwards, seriously. "You will kill someone?"

"No, not really; and no. Ye gods, you're bloodthirsty." Shizuru pretended to shudder and leaned back against the pool edge. "You terrible girl. Shall you pause from being terrible long enough to get me a drink? I do feel parched."

Natsuki arched her brows.

"Wine?" she enquired. "Water?"

Shizuru chose the latter and soon received it. She thanked her attendant, who perched again on the bench after giving her the chalice.

"Water," Natsuki mumbled. "I knew it was water."

"How so?"

"Could not be wine." A hand waved emphatically in the air as the Otomeian explained with sagacious confidence. "In a warm bath and drinking wine too? You will get too warm, Shizuru."

"Mmph." Shizuru giggled. "Natsuki, Dearest, please try to remember I am not born of the taiga and tundra as you are. Being a winter-weak foreigner, I doubt it possible to get 'too warm' in these lands."

Natsuki laughed shortly, paddling her feet again.

"They are putting dinner there," she said, apropos of nothing. "On the table."

Shizuru nodded, having heard the sounds. She took a drink.

"But... what will you do to the soldiers?" the girl asked, suddenly returning to their topic. "What do you do for that?"

"First, let us make it clear it is not a capital offence," the older woman told her, easily following the sharp turns of the conversation. "Though still a grave one, not least for social and organisational nuances. The punishment varies for such cases, but I elected to have them make monetary reparations equal to the value of the stolen items. That is docked from their pay and share of the booty. Furthermore, for their disobedience of my order, I decided to put them through the chastisement of the whip."

"How many?"

"Fifteen stripes of the lash each."

Natsuki's eyes widened in appreciation of the penalty. "They will bleed."

"Yes, they will bleed."

"Hm."

Shizuru smiled. "They went against orders, intoxicated or not. Do you think me fair in judgment, or was I cruel?"

"You are fair." The low voice was positive. "It is just."

"It relieves me to learn that you think so." She paused and chuckled. "And then again, blood is already involved, so it might not be so surprising to have you agree with me now, My Bloodthirsty Girl."

"Hah!"

Their grins came together. A short while later, Shizuru decided she had had enough of the bath and rose from it, drying herself before doffing the dress-tunic Natsuki had waiting. Thus attired for the night, she went with the younger woman to their bedroom, where the dinner had already been set on the table. The Otomeian professed hunger and Shizuru echoed it.

"Let us have our dinner, before we start eating each other." At Natsuki's suddenly suspicious glance, she laughed. "I promise to let you rest this night, in restitution for the others."

At yet another cautious glance, she held one hand to her heart and the other to the air. "Have I ever broken a promise to you, Natsuki? Perhaps you would like me to swear an oath by the old gods of Hime, to prove my sincerity? I am never forsworn-I could never abide it."

Natsuki wrinkled her nose at the older woman.

"I know," she said cheerfully.

"Very well." And ushering her to the table, Shizuru added the proviso: "But to be sure... I do so promise to keep true to what I have said, and not to take you later unless you release me from that oath."

The younger woman smirked at the disclaimer and muttered something under her breath that Shizuru translated to herself as "terrible woman" or something of the sort. The Himean chose to receive it as a compliment.

They had a pleasant dinner, complete with a serving of finely cooked snails that both professed to enjoy, and whose size astounded them. They finished with a serving of the perfumed jellies Shizuru had brought, and were about to call for the servants to clear away the dishes when a knock came.

A tribune in armour was revealed when they opened the door.

"Begging your pardon, General. There's a message," the man announced with a crisp salute. He looked discomfited and Shizuru realised he had been afraid of interrupting whatever she and her bodyguard had been doing. "From a scout. Said he's from one of the checkpoints by the road south, the passes to Hime. Said you'd likely want to see it, insisted on it."

Shizuru rose and took the missive from him. It was light in her hand.

"Thank you," she said, eyeing the outside of the paper. Not red wax: not to do with danger, then. That was good. "When did this arrive?"

"Just now, General."

"The courier?"

"The scout's gone with his horse to the stables. Said he'd stay there if you wanted him, General."

"I see. Is that all?"

"Yes, General."

She thanked and dismissed him. He saluted and left with a brisk step, looking immensely relieved that he had not come at such a bad time after all. Really, who would like to be interrupted during *that* ?

"And here we thought the day was over," Shizuru said to her bodyguard, who had pulled up both feet on the chair. "Work comes chasing after me even here."

She opened the missive, which had been sealed sloppily in brown wax.

*To the General*

*Ave! Sighted a party coming in from Hime. Official. Scouts met them. Allowed to pass. Claims to carry proxy commander for present mission, with officers. Wrote this as quick as we learned it, following your orders. Should get to you a day before they get there. Proxy is Takeda Masashi.*

Her breath caught in a tearing sound.

*Proxy is Takeda Masashi.*

"What?!" she whispered savagely. "No!"

Natsuki feet were down on the floor again in a flash. Shizuru read through the short message once more, now no longer caring about the irregular handwriting and rushed syntax. She did not even smile anymore at the use of the inglorious title, "proxy", for her replacement. All she wanted was to read the very end, the name of the truly inglorious replacement.

*Takeda Masashi.*

Still there, that name, no matter how many times she checked. *Of course it would be*, she thought in annoyance, *no matter how much I want to wish it away out of sheer incredulity*. And she was incredulous, what she was feeling was beyond simple disbelief. Takeda Masashi, that fool, was her replacement? How in the world could it have happened? Of all people in the world, why did it have to be him?!

Questions swarmed in her mind like an infestation of doubt. The news so taxed her credulity that she was even compelled to read the missive again. But she received no answers from it save the one she did not want, which was his name along with his claim of succession to her task. Oh, what a travesty was this surprise! She could scarce believe that the man Senate had chosen to replace her was the very same man with whom she had quarrelled only months earlier, the same man she had vowed to detest for the loss of poise he had elicited that time. An unthinking, headstrong idiot who had even had the temerity to practically threaten her with a bared sword, not to mention insult her lover as well. Her lip curled up in a sneer, surprise giving way to sarcasm as her mind began to accept the fact . Just splendid!

*This year is one of surprises*, she decided, mood gone sour. *First was the election to urban praetor, courtesy of my traitorous cousin, and now this piece of prettiness*. Suddenly she thought of something from that juxtaposition of ideas. Of course! Takeda Masashi had been the one to introduce that bill, had he not? The letters from Hime had said as much, she remembered. Oh, how doubly foul it was now, how much more this twist reeked! He was more of a rat than she had thought if her notion was true, that he had conspired with her foes in some way!

She wondered how deeply this was related to their argument: if he had become part of the plot because of what passed between them. Had he even decided to participate in this political trickery with the foremost intention of replacing her himself? Could it be some form of petty revenge? Petty indeed, were it so! He stood to gain nothing from replacing her. He might even be said to have been cheated by Tomoe and whoever else had assisted him with this scheme. Even

in the midst of her roused fury, Shizuru was rational enough to know that the Senate would probably have elected to further reduce support from her present mission. That would put whoever replaced her in an awkward state of holdover with no chance for gold or glory. Certainly the Senate would not permit any truly ambitious person to take over for her, since Senate's object was always to reduce risks of financial drain. Not for the conservatives the breaking of new ground, which war on the Mentulaean empire would be; they only ever approved of tilling old fields with the same plough.

She knew no one would initiate war on the Mentulae unless her allies or herself were in the tent of command. Therefore, whoever assumed her command by the Senate's orders was likely to have been given injunctions to maintain consistent conservatism in policy- as well as have been chosen for innate conservatism, she guessed. If there were triumphs to be had by her replacement, they would not belong to him but to her enemies, the Traditionalists: and that, purely symbolic, as well as weak. The fool had been tricked into a cheap seat, probably, all because he hated her enough to fall for it!

She had no doubts on that point, in particular: that Takeda Masashi hated her. She remembered his eyes last they had seen each other months ago, back in Sosia: eyes with that dark shade of loathing she understood if only because she had reflected it whenever she looked at him. She had known him to be an enemy then, but this was still a surprise.

*I wonder if he feels any victory in this*, Shizuru pondered. That puny, puling fool: what could he hope to concretely gain? He would be stuck here until she resumed the mission, which gods knew she would, for no one could prevent her. He would only be pretending to hold it until that happened, there could be nothing more but waiting for him. Unless...

Her head jerked, a swift spasm.

"Natsuki."

Natsuki leapt over, swift as always, upon the call of her name. But Shizuru did not look up at her.

"Natsuki!"

The young woman was startled now, and her mouth was open, stance faintly defensive. Shizuru finally looked up at her, and did so in a look that was very nearly a glower.

The Otomeian flinched.

"Impossible!" spat the word, low-voiced yet angrier than Natsuki had ever heard her. "Even he would be a thrice a fool to imagine it! Goddamn him if he thinks it!"

Shizuru's bodyguard stared at her helplessly, the girl frozen with the confusion of the Himean's mutters, which seemed to have no referent. What was Shizuru saying? Who was "he"? And why had Shizuru said her name first, twice even, with that oddly despairing timbre roughening the air?

Shizuru did not enlighten her: she simply continued to glare and glare.

The Otomeian, for all her legendary frosty bravery, could not help but be affected: she began chewing on her bottom lip furiously under the older woman's blazing eyes. Had it been anyone else, she might not have given in to this show of anxiety, but it was Shizuru-and to her, Shizuru was not merely anyone else. Natsuki was the retainer, the watcher, the attendant; Shizuru was the charge, the centre, the referent. It was as though the girl was watching the sun in her sky suddenly bursting into an even greater flame, with no warning or explanation behind the cataclysm: it merely exploded a threat of apocalypse over her unsuspecting head.

Shizuru was staring at the paper in her hands again at this time, crumpling one end of it in her clenching hand. She was too busy sneering at it to notice her companion's unease, for her own unease was too great to see anyone else just yet. Reading through the missive one last time, she reached once more the accursed end.

As expected, the name written in ink stayed the same.

*That will not change*, she told herself, to shock her limbs out of their

unmoving tension. *Damn it, but it will not change. Fruitless to merely stare at the thing. To sit still and ponder the irony is fruitless, for the situation calls for act. And if what is written it is true, the act must come now.*

Uttering a curse for the man in her mind, she crushed the ill-omened name and the paper in her hands, and sprang to her feet.

"What hour...?" Ignoring the nervous shuffle of her companion's feet, she turned to glance at the water-clock, still murmuring to herself. "Not too late."

She strode quickly to the closet and drew out one of her cloaks, throwing it around herself. She was pinning it with a clasp when she remembered to pause and address her waiting companion, who had taken to switching from one foot to the other in a closely-checked frenzy of anticipation.

"Natsuki," she said briefly and between her teeth, speaking like a woman close to tearing apart whatever was nearest to her hands. "Natsuki, forgive me. Something-something has come up. Wait for me an instant, yes? I promise I shall return shortly this time. I shall go no further than the corridor. All right?"

And though the girl was uncertain, what else could she do but say yes?

Shizuru stalked swiftly to the entryway and out of the room, shutting the door behind her. At the end of the long corridor, she found two slaves passing by with a basket of laundry between them, and they paused to bow deferentially as she approached.

"A moment," she said, accent unusually crisp. "I need errands run for me, and quickly."

Both men dropped the basket immediately.

"Send for the senior legate, Harada-han, and Himemiya-han, and ask them to meet me at my headquarters downstairs. Harada-han is not in her room, and neither is Himemiya-han, at this time. They are with the governor, I believe, in her private atrium."



The slaves nodded stiffly, a little frightened of the briskness in her words, which was unusual for the woman.

"There is also a scout in the stables who has just recently arrived bearing me a message, which I have already received. Send for him as well, or ask one of the legionaries on guard in the manor tonight to fetch him. He shall meet us in the same place."

Nodding frantically, the two men dashed off to do her bidding, deciding hastily who would do what and who would go where. She lingered only a second after they left to rake a frustrated hand through her hair. Another second and she found a name poised on her lips, but not the one on which she had been calling so many maledictions the past few moments.

"Natsuki."

Her brow was seized by a short spasm of emotion that she thanked the gods no one was around to see. She grit her teeth to push it away, lest someone should suddenly appear. Yet the words in her mind held all of the feeling she was trying to push back.

*Mine. She must be. She is. Mine.*

Spinning and dashing down the corridor to their room, she flung the door open with uncharacteristic hurry. The report as it slammed against the wall came in time to the shaky flash of green that met her. There were two frantic eyes glimmering with a multitude of questions she knew she would have to answer. That she even felt the need to answer them at the moment was indicative of what she felt for the girl, for she had never felt a need to answer queries unless it so suited her-and if she had to be honest, it would suit her better at the present time not to give any answers.

Still, if the Otomeian did so ask, she knew she would respond. There was hardly anything that emerald look could not wrangle out of her, whether the author of that look knew it or not, and now she could see them trying to wrangle some meaning out of her passion, as well as a little calm. That was when she remembered something about the girl that she should have considered before running out in that manner: her emotions, when flashing out of her hide, often sank

into the girl's skin and made a reflection. Each time she was agitated, she could feel her agitation rousing the girl's own.

*But the difference is that hers is even more chaotic than mine*, she thought, seeing now that strangely empathic quality in Natsuki boiling in those stormy eyes. *Hers is confused, because she does not understand all the reasons for the feeling, whereas I do*. It was the bewilderment of a child who felt the anger or emotion of someone important—a parent, for instance—awakening hers, and did not know what to do with it. An untraceable light, light that you could not follow to its source because it was cast not from a torch but from the shine of that torch on a mirror. A confusion of feeling, a frustration about which the child could not do anything.

*But I can.*

Shaking her head slowly at herself, and her recklessness, Shizuru turned to shut the door carefully behind her. There followed a slow, deep breath that seemed unbearably loud in the silence, but she felt she needed to take it nonetheless. She had to compose herself, and the breath grounded her.

*Be calm; if you are calm, Natsuki will be calmer. There is no need to make her so troubled as well.*

"Pardon me, Natsuki," she said cautiously when ready, turning again to face the girl. "I was rude."

Natsuki started, one hand going up halfway in the air to deny her apology. The gesture faltered, and her fingers curled on the empty air before the hand was drawn back, falling limply to the Otomeian's side.

"No," the younger woman said, just as cautious as she was. "Fine. It is fine."

Shizuru nodded, stopping for an instant before the need for action again seized her, and she strode a little closer. And though she did not know it, her aura was still so menacing that the girl nearly backed away. It was just as well the girl did not, for that would have hurt her terribly.

"I am sorry," she said again, not knowing how to begin explaining her previous display of anger. Her brow was still threatening to cloud, and she focused on batting away the urge to give in. "There are some things, you see-some things that have come up. They are urgent."

The questions were still shimmering in Natsuki's eyes, in the young woman's hesitant stance, but they calmed a little as she spoke. As she thought: the more she explained and reassured, the more it soothed the Otomeian. She tried to continue speaking calmly, wishing now more than ever that she had her chief centurion's capacity to curse, even if only to vent a little in her head. Since she could not, she resorted to moving around instead.

When she spoke again, she was successful in making her voice steady, though her tone was flat.

"I am going to meet some people," she told the Otomeian. "Some of my legates. Chie-han and Suou-chan."

Her auditor said nothing, still frozen. Ye gods, how she wished she could curse!

"I sent for them already," she went on. "Would you prefer to come along?"

A quick nod.

"Very well." She frowned when she saw the girl run to their closet, probably to fetch her uniform. She directed her actions, trying to find some distraction in the process. "It does not call for that, Natsuki. Merely put on an outer robe. I think you should use the green one. The pale olive one I gave you, with the grey trim. Is it there?"

It was there.

"Wear that."

The girl complied with her wishes so hastily that she could not help but note it even in her state. Then she realised that the young woman was being even more tractable at the moment because she wished not to agitate her further.

She stopped her by a pull on the wrist.

"Come here, please."

When her mouth closed in on those soft, sulky lips, it muffled the sound of Natsuki's surprise. She swallowed it up, her own lips making the familiar opening and closing motions that often passed between them: the play that coaxed and coerced at the same time. The younger woman's mouth soon warmed and grew wet under it, and when she tilted her head to better meet Shizuru's supple tongue, Shizuru drew back and pulled at the girl's lower lip with her teeth.

She gazed down at the dazed look Natsuki was giving her, which sank through something soft and heavy in her chest. Suddenly she was the one having to muffle her own surprise.

"You are very beautiful," she said suddenly, the words explaining why she was feeling a sinking dismay in her stomach. She saw now another thing that seemed to compound her troubles: that she would never be immune to the girl's arrows. How did that trouble her? It was in the thought that if she, who saw the Otomeian nearly every hour of every day, could still be so stricken by Natsuki's beauty afresh, how much more would her old nemesis be, when he had not seen the girl for so long? She could only imagine the ache: a hundred times greater than the ache she herself felt at the moment. How was it that beauty did that, anyway? Why did it hurt to see it, as much as it did not to?

She ducked to slide her nose against the curve of the other's brow, kissing the smooth skin with a longing that was better suited to a Penelope reuniting with her beloved after a separation of twenty years. The roil of emotion in her seemed to sublimate in the gesture, and she let the intensity of her desire for the young woman substitute for the anger she could not show. Her mouth murmured another apology for her curtness earlier, in having rushed out and failed to explain-and, indeed, for failing to explain anything still. It was not that she would not explain anything that night; she had no intention of keeping Natsuki in the dark. She just needed to be close to her for a moment: she needed to feel, undeniably, the reassuringly tactile presence of her nearby. It was almost as though

she imagined doing so could push away the dangers waiting. Perhaps, for those few seconds where she assured herself the young woman was truly beside her, it did.

The Otomeian nuzzled back, as was her wont, and kissed the older woman's jaw. Shizuru looked down, finding waiting for her those lovely green eyes, greener for the fringed rim of black about them, and that rim blacker for the pallor of her surrounding skin. The eyes blinked, and the older woman stilled at the way the lashes brushed each other across the depths of an emerald sea.

Her breath caught audibly for the second time that night.

"Let me see you," she said, staring as though it were the first time she had seen the girl: sometimes it felt that way still. She held her back with her arms, to better stare at her. "God. Let me see you a moment."

Natsuki looked at her questioningly, suffering the strangely passionate inspection. After a while of it, Shizuru spoke her wonder aloud.

"You shall break his heart."

"Shi-sorry, who?"

The Otomeian's bemusement was silenced again by a rough kiss. Shizuru handed over the crumpled-up paper of the missive afterwards, remembering only then that it was still in her fist. She signalled that the other woman could read it, so she did.

There was a stifled gasp. Shizuru stepped back and began to watch her closely.

"Aah." The girl dropped the paper onto their bed, face covered with concern. Interestingly enough, Shizuru realised, the concern seemed to be for her sake. "Oh. That?"

"Yes."

"That is the replacement?" Amazement rasped the girl's voice. "Him?"

Shizuru said nothing, merely continuing to study her. There was jealousy in her red eyes the entire time, burning hot under her bright brows, but the Otomeian never seemed to notice. Or rather, never seemed to understand.

"Him," she said once more, sounding dismayed. Again Shizuru noted, with some interest, that the dismay was for her sake. But it was explained with Natsuki's next words. "Him you don't like."

It made Shizuru cease momentarily her scrutiny. Her eyes were soon fixed again on Natsuki, however, with the paranoia of a woman afraid of seeing something she would not like yet unable to help seeking it. Had she actually found it, what did she think she would have done? What could she possibly do to the man Natsuki referred to so generically as "him"?

What could she possibly do, even, to Natsuki?

"Yes," she said warily, repeating the girl's words. "Him *I don't like*."

The way she said it was sullen. She caught herself the next second, however, and looked at her companion with an apology.

"Pardon me," she said, trying not to frown. "I am merely..."

She stopped and tried to think of the correct word, the subtlest word, but none in her mind combined the qualities of accuracy in this situation as well as subtlety. She resigned herself with a sigh.

"... a little put out," she said slowly, feeling suddenly very tired. "A little."

Natsuki moved to her as though wrenched forward by an invisible cord. And then did something quite unexpected.

Shizuru let her head be pulled down by the younger woman's hands, let her carefully impassive face be covered by a flurry of light kisses; she was, in fact, very surprised by this sudden show of tenderness. What did it mean? Did Natsuki sense how truly worried she was, then, as well as all those other emotions in her at the moment? How much could the young woman actually see? She felt like an emotional lattice, the threads of her being suddenly thrumming with

foreboding vibrations she could not stave off: the rage and fury and sheer disbelief for whatever foul dealing had brought this latest development mixing all through, spinning a web that had two centres, in both her heart and her pride. Each kiss Natsuki gave her came dangerously close to both centres, and it prompted her to hold her jaw tight, for fear that this compassion would be the end of her composure.

"Why, what is this?" she asked softly, not trusting her voice to speak aloud yet. "Such sweetness... so suddenly?"

Natsuki kept a hand on her face, taking the returning lilt in her voice as permission to keep it there.

"Oh, Shizuru," she uttered, sounding as strained as Shizuru felt. "Shizuru. This..."

"Yes? What of this?" Now she felt a touch confused too under the look Natsuki was giving her. "Why, what is it?"

The girl said something she had not expected: "Sorry."

"Sorry? What do you-" She started mildly and said, the next moment: "Is it that I was angry? I am sorry, Darling, for that. I was not angry at you, do not worry. It is for someone-something else-and was only for that instant. I shall not be angry any more, all right?"

A wildly shaking dark head stopped her speech.

"No, not that. I know," the low voice told her quickly. "Not sorry you are angry. It is fine to be angry."

"Then what is it? Why are you sorry?"

Natsuki made a strangled sound before speaking.

"Look," she said miserably. "Shizuru, you are *unhappy*."

The Himean's crimson eyes widened, and Natsuki took that opportunity to press their cheeks together again, lips brushing in a flutter against the skin.

"Ah no," the dark-haired woman whispered, voice betraying the kindness underneath that cold appearance. "Poor Shizuru."

Her hand went up to the crown of the older woman's head, gently patting the soft, still-damp hair. The action was so natural that Shizuru's lips suddenly twitched, her sense of humour rising within her notwithstanding the darkness she had been feeling. She felt, all of a sudden, as though she were a forlorn pet being petted into comfort... and the notion was really too outrageous to give her any displeasure. So much for having a royal fit of temper: Natsuki's response rather robbed her earlier furore of its majesty. "Poor Shizuru" indeed!

She released a curt chuckle, shaking her head ruefully.

"Natsuki," she intoned, feeling as though she could now smile a little; how oddly this young woman affected her! "Really, Natsuki... You silly girl."

The Otomeian, still her usual serious self, looked up in confusion. Could anyone blame her? The older woman's moods, after all, had just been swinging like a gamecock fluttering on a gibbet. Still, the lightening mood in the crimson eyes reassured her: as did Shizuru's smile, which had begun to return.

Shizuru kissed her forehead, and she blinked.

"Thank you, *meum mel*," the older woman said, holding that white face tenderly. "I am all right."

She got a doubtful look in return.

"No, really, I am all right," she repeated. "I have you here with me. How can I not be all right?"

Again Natsuki merely eyed her in puzzlement, still trying to make out what exactly was happening.

"Do not worry so much," Shizuru said, now truly smiling; her companion's bewildered face was too adorable to maintain her foul humour. She addressed one of the suspicions she saw there in a tickled voice. "And no, before you begin to revert to your old



impression of me: I am quite right in the head, thank you."

The younger woman was shamefaced at having been read so accurately.

"I am merely very, very glad you are here with me," Shizuru told her. "I am not so unhappy any longer; I really should not be when the situation does not call for such fatalism yet. Who knows? Perhaps I might even have overreacted. Certainly not everything is so drastic, and you serve to remind me of it."

She shepherded the younger woman to their bed, where both of them sat facing each other.

"They are probably not there yet-it shall take some time, I expect," she said, now far clearer of mind due to the calm Natsuki had given to her. "In the meantime, I should so like to speak quietly with you... just with you. Let us talk a moment?"

The young woman nodded and Shizuru put a hand on her shoulder, running it lightly down the sinewy length of her arm. She followed the line of it down to the fingertips and saw next to them, on the sheets, the missive that had caused all this excitement.

"Now then..." She took an extended inhale and glanced at the letter. "As you see, this has precipitated a few things. Or no-rather, it merely announced precipitation that has already begun elsewhere, reaching us now as a trickle. Or should it be a flood? Well, who cares about the metaphors now?"

The green eyes watched her, their owner saying nothing.

"This is why I am meeting them, as you see."

Natsuki nodded.

"It is most troublesome. And certainly most unwelcome, as you know." A short pause. "But it cannot be helped, if it is true."

Again Natsuki nodded.

Suddenly she asked a question: "It *is* true, Shizuru?"

Shizuru's brow wrinkled at the query.

"I suppose so," she said, before shaking her head and making an amendment: "It is, in all probability, true. There would be no reason for them to lie to my scouts just for the sake of getting safe passage through the checkpoint. At least, no reason for them to lie about bearing my-"

She stopped for an instant before continuing what she had been about to say: "My replacement."

The green eyes were downcast, but Natsuki still nodded. Shizuru did the same.

"Well," she decided. "That was harder to say than I thought it would be."

Natsuki looked up again, clear eyes suddenly liquid with worry. She moved closer and Shizuru smiled to give her encouragement.

"It's quite all right, Darling," she said again. She rested her hand on the bed such that it covered the tips of Natsuki's fingers. "We knew he was coming. Yes?"

The answer was reluctant: "Yes."

"We just did not know it would be... well, that man."

"Um."

They looked at each other in understanding. And the same words passed through their mind at once: *of all people*.

"Yes," Natsuki told her shortly, lacking anything else. "Yes."

Shizuru stayed silent.

"He is one of... them? He is a Traditionalist?" the girl asked suddenly, brow creasing in curiosity.

One of the golden eyebrows lifted.

"As well he might be," came the response. "Or rather, it seems he is allied to them. Certainly his politics have always been more or less on the conservative end."

The girl looked grim.

"That much was expected at least-I wonder what Chikane has to say on this, no doubt I shall be receiving a letter soon. I am actually a touch surprised I do not have one yet, from her."

"Himemiya-san's sister," Natsuki volunteered.

"Yes, Chikane, the senior consul." She stilled for a second and looked pensive. "Do you know, Child: I actually believe Chikane would have been able to stop his appointment to be my substitute had she wanted. Certainly she has the means to do so, no matter if Masashi-han's allies were truly the Traditionalists and they had all insisted on it."

The younger woman looked disturbed. "Then why?"

"Why *not*?" Shizuru slanted a wry glance her way. "She had no overwhelming reason to stop it. After all, she is most likely viewing my replacement in the same light I do, or used to do: as no more than a *very temporary* title-holder of a probably now-meaningless command. Therefore, an empty vessel whose identity does not matter. Permitting the conservatives to seat one of their ilk here would be no great problem, as I would be returning as soon as possible to reclaim the position and Chikane would be legislating to give the campaign teeth, as soon as possible. Besides which, Masashi-han, *so I hear*, is not entirely worthless, militarily-speaking."

Her lip curled involuntarily into a sneer as soon as she finished the assessment: "She must have thought he suited the part of temporary housekeeper well enough."

Natsuki puffed peevishly.

"But... you and him..." she started, having no intention of finishing the statement.

Shizuru caught on, as she had expected.

"No, she does not know about that," Shizuru told her. "Or, I believe she does not. Suou-chan might, but given this matter we have on our hands now, I believe she did not tell her older sister. Chikane would have kept him out of these lands were it so."

She grimaced and burst into a rueful exclamation.

"Ye gods, the politics!" she said, shifting her shoulders in a long exhale. "And this is my world, eh? At any rate, I shall discuss matters related to this with Chie-han and Suou-chan tonight, so we shall see. I am actually quite glad you are accompanying me, so that you may listen in too." She frowned thoughtfully. "Perhaps you may tell me what you think of it afterwards."

Natsuki nodded in earnest.

"Good girl."

This time, Shizuru was the one who petted her. But she received the touch with less amusement and surprise than Shizuru had, even inclining her long neck towards it.

She reminded her charge of their appointment.

"Yes, I suppose we should go and see if they are there," Shizuru agreed, but stopped her from rising. "Wait, Natsuki. Wait a moment."

The dark-haired woman waited.

"There is something else too," the older woman said softly, eyes very gentle. "Another reason for why I would like you to be there when we discuss."

The dark head moved a little to show her the girl was listening. Shizuru steeled herself and ploughed on, one hand going to hold her companion by the shoulder.

"There is that other thing, and you and I both know it." She felt the girl still under her palm, and her voice grew softer. "We shall need to talk soon about... that other matter. Come to a final decision."

Natsuki's mouth opened, but shut again without having pronounced

anything. That told Shizuru she understood, and the older woman nodded. There was no more to be said for tonight, she decided: they deserved a good rest before that, before she tried to persuade her again.

*And pray all the gods I get the answer I want.*

"Well, then, that is that. We may go now."

She got to her feet, feeling the sweat this new anxiety had brought to her hands, and surreptitiously pressing her cold palms to her robe's cloth: her belly felt empty again, for all that she had just eaten.

"Shall we?" she asked.

Natsuki still looked a little troubled, and very slowly got up from the bed. Shizuru tried to make her relax with a grin.

"We need not do it tonight, Natsuki," she said. "I suppose you may consider it *his* fault, really." She was only half-joking. "For arriving and thus placing the pressure on you to settle that matter with me."

"Him." The girl scowled suddenly, nose pinching. "Him you don't like."

"Yes." Shizuru had a thought and gave in to the urge to voice it. "And you?"

"Me?"

"Do you like him?"

Natsuki stared at her a long time before giving the answer.

"Good," Shizuru said fiercely in affirmation of the response. " *Good* . Whatever happens from now on, remember that."

## Chapter 43

*This is, perhaps, an apology in advance. Therefore, please bear with the political and cultural intricacies for the moment, as they shall explain a good many things about to happen. Also, to the reviewers, please pardon me: my replies may be tardy, due to certain pressing circumstances to which I must attend. Please excuse me.*

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1. **A reminder on Hime and Fuuka** - Hime is a city state that is surrounded by Fuuka. Think of it as Hime = Roma and Fuuka = Italia. This is not a simple matter of the capital vs. the country. The Ancient Roman Republic was its own entity, separate from the nations who made up the Italians (who were considered allies, but certainly not Romans). Not all Romans lived in Rome either, but often lived among the Italians. They were always conscious of who they were, however, because to be Roman was far better than being Italian.

2. **Equites** (L.) - Members of the **Ordo Equester**, called "the knights" as opposed to "the senators". Those of knight rank were usually as well-born as those of senatorial rank, but the difference was that they chose not a political career but a commercial one. Recall that there are restrictions on senatorial businesses, which is the reason the knights are generally the richer of the two ranks. One may consider them the equivalents of the modern "business sector" of the community, with the senators being the "government or political sector", for a simplified but convenient categorisation.

3. **Imperator** - See note below for **Triumph**.

4. **Imperium** (L.) - Authority possessed by a curule magistrate or promagistrate, specifying that said magistrate possessing the authority of his office and cannot be thus gainsaid in that capacity. All commanders of Roman armies are vested with imperium.

5. **In utrumque paratus** (L.) - "Prepared for either (event)."

6. **Augur** - A Roman priest of divination, belonging to the College of Augurs. Note that to be a member of a priestly college was a distinction, and in the present setting, members are co-opted by their fellows. **Chikane Himemiya** addresses Shizuru with this title because Shizuru is an augur, and in the context where Chikane mentions it, she does so for a touch of ironic humour.

7. **Knights** - See above note for **Equites**.

8. **Pomerium** (L.) - The sacrosanct boundary encircling the city of Rome/Hime, which could not be crossed by soldiers or generals for the duration of their service in a military mission or capacity.

9. **Tribune of the plebs** - An elected official of the Plebeian Assembly, holding the power of both legislation and (more importantly) the sacrosanct veto, which may be applied to anything except the decisions of a Dictator.

10. **Triumph** (L.) - A victory parade carried out by a Roman general hailed on the field by his troops as "imperator". One who celebrated a triumph was called a **triumphator**.

11. **Vestal Virgins** - The female priests of Vesta, the goddess of the hearth. They served the goddess for about thirty years under vows of chastity.

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## **Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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Shizuru's scouts were wrong: the proxy commander's group arrived not one but a full five days after their notification, so difficult were the land passes and so sluggish was that Himean delegation. From this Shizuru later deduced that her replacement had elected to travel in relative comfort. Understandable, as there was no real hurry to his mission; had there been any actual conflict taking place in the North, the incoming deputation would doubtlessly have proceeded at full martial speed. As it was, they gave her time not merely to prepare

for their arrival, but also to react to another missive. It arrived the day after the one telling her who her replacement was.

Hime's senior consul of the year wrote to advise her of several points. Apologising for the tardiness of her letter, Chikane Himemiya explained that she had deemed it wiser to sort out several matters before writing. Her solution to the current nuisance she outlined in this latest correspondence, which Shizuru practically tore open the moment it arrived. The great general had been so starved for news from a friendly hand! Now she finally had it, and her eyes raced all over the page, sweeping over column after column.

Chikane, while deploring most of the unfortunate events that were so troubling to Shizuru, wrote that she believed it better to follow the Senate directives meekly for the moment. Shizuru would be returning to Hime with some of her soldiers, for Senate had determined that the Northern expedition was bloated and had to be trimmed. Therefore, it was decided by the House that Shizuru would detach three legions- *Three!* she cried as she read, *when there are only five!* -to take home with her to be paid out. This left her replacement only two Himean legions and the rest of the Otomeian auxiliaries.

*Impossible to counter this, Chikane had written on the topic. Impossible, because we must both admit that the tasks originally entrusted to you were all but concluded to the public eye, wrapped up with your usual efficiency. You were tasked to repel Obsidian from all allied and annexed lands-which you achieved at Argentum; to inspect the provinces' garrisons and ensure their integrity against further incursions-of which none have taken place since the battle abovementioned; and, ultimately, to make a show of menace and capability such as would intimidate the Mentulae into forever keeping their boot-heels away from our properties-which, it would seem, you have done beautifully indeed.*

*Therein is the problem: ever since your brilliant doings all over the North, the Mentulaeans have lain low. This has given us, the members of the House, no more reason to be wary. To use the words of the Princeps, which were invoked again in our latest debate regarding you, Vesuvius has been tamed and all but ceased her rumblings.*



*Yes, I can already hear you protesting! Before you berate me, attend me first: I did disagree. I wholeheartedly argued against this naive position, as did several others military-minded enough to see the possibility: that Vesuvius only set in for the winter sleep, and shall soon be waking; that the enemy may have only held off on any further incursions for now because the season is winter. We both know that large campaigns, when planned, are normally planned for the warm months. Generals plan their movements for the dry seasons when feet do not sink into the ground or toes fall off from the frost. Hence, if there is any further provocation to be made by the Mentulaeans, it should be happening only then-perhaps soon, in our case, for the cold months are nearly over. Spring comes, and while it brings with it the flowers, so might it the avaricious weeds.*

*So much did I and those few with the experience-and common-sense-argue to our fellow senators. But now I ask you, Shizuru: how many of our fellow senators truly have the experience to see reason? How many of them have the common sense?*

*Not many, is the truth. We have with us a House full of armchair generals, thinking themselves experts on matters military where they know nothing. One must allow it is easy to deny the possibility of war when it is so distant, when no threats have come to us for so long from foreign shores. One must consider, too, the innate smugness we all can be accused of having when it comes to our military prowess. And who can blame us, when Hime's armies truly are the best-trained, best-organised, simply best of all in the world?*

*But forgive me the trickle of panegyric; I need not laud the excellence of our legions to you, who have been instrumental in proving it time and again. There is one final factor, after all: one must also consider you.*

*Pray do not misunderstand. I do not blame you. However, it cannot be denied that most of the Senate already believes you have cowed Obsidian into steering clear of our boundaries forever. And who, unfortunately, can truly be so quick to blame them, our poor couch generals who see only the generalities? Argentum was magnificent; it was proof-positive of your genius, an example for all future generals and an envy of an achievement for every military man to come. Your parley with the foreign king has become similarly*

*legendary. All our children sitting on their parents' knees will be told the story from now on; the simplicity of your words and their effect on that foreign regent shall live as testament to Hime's influence forever. This everyone can freely acknowledge, as do I.*

*But the problem is that what is acknowledged by our side may be acknowledged differently by another. Our fellows are now imagining, I believe, that this understanding of the testament holds true for the foe as well... forgetting that what one side sees as a testament to their power can actually be interpreted by the other as merely a momentary self-disgrace, "a bitter insult to avenge, perhaps compounded with interest come time to collect." Indeed: I quote your own words to you now, if you would excuse me for it.*

*That was what you said in one of your letters, as I remember, when you described your conversation with Obsidian. You spoke of your belief that he would return when able, to attempt again where he had failed.*

*You saw the peril of his resilient ambitions at the time, as do I and a handful of others at the moment. But the rest do not. Even our friend the Princeps seems to be lacking in the conviction that the Mentulae shall have the courage to attack us direct, which should demonstrate to you the general feeling in the House. Reito-admittedly dulled as I think his mental facilities are showing themselves to be here-is still a man of no mean intellect, as well as an ally to us both. If even he should be so doubtful, then you may well imagine how much more so the rest are. Scepticism reigns, which is ironic when one considers this is the same lot so credulous they once invalidated a law due to an allegation of "inauspicious omens". Yes, I know that was before your time; I had just entered Senate myself, then. Nonetheless, Shizuru Fujino Augur, the inanity of it!*

*Hardly anyone seems able to imagine the Mentulae as a threat any longer, having heard nothing of them for the past few months. The command you are about to turn over to Takeda Masashi is actually no more than a hollow shell, our fellow senators having sent him only for the purpose of doing a general review. After that review, which shall predictably state that northern disturbance has been settled, they shall recommend the entire mission be terminated before the year is even over.*

*You may imagine I had something to say about that. Still and all, the atmosphere here has been nothing but stifling. That the House even allowed two legions to be left is actually a feat on our parts, since the general idea was originally that only one need be let remain. The Otomeian auxiliaries could be easily called up if needed, as well as the two other local legions stationed in Sosia and Argus (which, they conveniently fail to mention, are grossly understrength).*

*But you know I would hardly have let it reach such a pass without coming up with a plan that would allow us to go on with our proper intentions. I promise you that we shall prevail, and do so with a jaunty waggle of the finger to all dissenting faces. For, as I see it, the obstacle we face is nothing: a pathetic attempt that has no more chance of stopping us than a rickety shield would a thunderbolt from Jupiter. I am set to waggle my finger, Shizuru, and I believe you are the same. If you are agreeable to it, let us then unleash upon them the thunderbolt.*

It was thus that Chikane reiterated her earlier advice: to go along with the Senate directives and turn over command to her replacement, then pack up the legions she would take with her and travel until they reached Hime. *Do that much*, Chikane wrote. *But only that much.*

According to the plan, Shizuru would not actually enter the city of Hime at any time upon her return. She would not cross the sacred boundary of the city, which any Himean general could not cross without giving up both his troops and *imperium*. Rather, Shizuru would bivouac herself and any legions she brought with her in the Campus Martius, the area just outside the city walls where generals awaiting their triumphs were installed and new legionaries were trained.

That she would do that was actually still in keeping with all expectations: she had been hailed *imperator* on the field by her troops and thus deserved a triumphal parade. To get her triumph, she had to file a petition to Senate that, after approved, would allow her to carry out the procession. Only after that would she be allowed to enter the city as a triumphator, and then an elected magistrate to still according to expectations-properly assume her new office as the urban praetor.

That, she would never do.

The snag Chikane had prepared to stop Shizuru from being formally instated as *praetor urbanus* was none other than her newly-elected cousin, the tribune of the plebs with a mouthful of a name: Urumi Nemura Himemiya-Kanzaki. Vested with the awesome power of the plebeian tribunate's veto, Urumi would act as the primary agent in delaying Shizuru's instatement, allowing their other allies to further conspire in preventing Shizuru's triumphal petition from being granted by the State. In other words, to let the fingers start wagging.

The delay had a twofold purpose. First, it would permit Shizuru to retain her *imperium* and whatever legions she would be bringing with her, parking the latter in the Campus Martius outside the sacrosanct city boundary. Effectively retaining custody of these legions, she could not be ordered to pay out and surrender them yet. The troops were always expected to be part of their general's triumph, so they had to stay with her until said triumph occurred. Preventing this dismissal of the soldiers would mean legions readily available should an emergency arise, or available for marching after the plans had succeeded.

Shizuru knew that whatever legions she paid would be fat in the purse upon dismissal. A recently-dismissed soldier with a fat purse would not be too eager to sign up again for the army right after having just got out of it. Some of them might sign up should she call for enlistments again, yes, but some might not. Those latter laggards would be too busy roistering up and down Fuuka with their newly-gained money. Indeed, some soldiers even outright disappeared, only materialising again when their purses no longer clinked. Keeping her present ones under the standards was an expedient to prevent that little inconvenience from transpiring.

The postponement of her inauguration was also to permit her allies to bring up the issue of her election to office—a perfectly valid issue, so long as she did not formally assume said office before that. There would be a question of its legal basis due to the dubious circumstances of her nomination, a candidacy of which she had not been apprised and that she had not endorsed. Here was where the political convolutions would multiply, for there was no doubt that the events related to this impending debate would set precedents. It

would bring into question several items of the *mos maiorum*, or the way things had always been done.

Given that the problem to be tabled for discussion was a precedent as well, Chikane confessed that was only to be expected. Whatever the case, the senior consul concluded, she was certain all would go the way they intended. They would return to Shizuru her command over the North and-soon after that-over the annexation of the Mentulaean Empire.

Shizuru read through all of this with blazing interest and finished well-satisfied. Even with that annoying detail she had just learned about having to strip her army of three full legions, her friend's letter had acted as a marvellous salve: options were opened, doors unblocked again. Now she could see her way more clearly through the fog that had seemed to envelop her of late. Chikane had lit the way.

*Perhaps even*, she thought humorously, *with a thunderbolt*.

How good to have someone so capable covering where you were blindsided! Chikane had put everything as Shizuru would have wished it to be done, had she been there. Looking dispassionately again over the letter, the younger woman even thought that she could have scarce done better herself. The senior consul's plan was as clever as it was elegant. Even so, Shizuru still managed to think of her own bit of elegance to contribute, which she explained to her regular confidant in Argus as "leveraging through letters".

"What is that?" her confidant had replied, a puzzled look on her face.

"Exactly what it says, My Darling."

"But what does it mean?" the younger woman had demanded.

"What is it you shall do?"

"It means I shall talk, *meum mel*, " she had answered. "It means I have to do a lot of talking."

To which the other had replied, still somewhat puzzled: "Well... if so... then it is good."

"How so?"

"If it is talk you must do, it will be easy for you."

Given that the chief purpose of all their coming movements would be to remove her from the restricting position of urban praetor and return her to the Northern mission, Shizuru determined that two points would have to be strengthened: first, that she had truly been unaware of her candidature in Hime for the past elections; second, that she was infinitely preferable to any other Hime-sent commander, as far as everyone in the North-and even in Hime-was concerned. Knowing the tack her allies would take was a great help, for she now saw an advantage to her remaining time in the region.

Over the days following her friend's letter, she began to campaign tirelessly amongst the local notables in Argus. She explained the situation to each one, hinting constantly at the danger of the Mentulaean king's ambitions. She was careful to phrase the issue of her replacement in such a way that her auditors always left with an unshakeable dismay-hard to credit to any of her actual sayings, yet so strong in the gut-that someone so far less inspiring would be replacing her in such a time of probable peril to them. And with three legions fewer than she had borne!

Shizuru puffed a breeze over the local elite, who felt it on their backs and lifted their hackles. It left them shivering as they looked about in search of an untraceable wind. Questions began to fly around. Why did everyone feel in his bones that trouble really was coming? Why was the special defence commission being given to this Takeda Masashi, who did not only have lesser credentials than his predecessor but would also have fewer soldiers? Could he possibly browbeat the Mentulaean king as effortlessly as Shizuru Fujino had? Could he really protect them as well as she had proven she could, in life as well as living? Remember, after all, that the lifeblood of a province was money: money moving in, money moving out. Countless Himean businesses thrived in the North. Argus itself was a great trade centres, fortunes passing through its docks and warehouses any given day of the week. Sosia was famous not only for its armoury metals but also the ones used for coin and moneys. Always money!

But money needed a good environment to be able to do its job, and that environment needed protection. Businessmen needed to know they were safe to let the cash flow. If the guarantee was weak-as many were now thinking Shizuru Fujino's replacement was, even before his arrival-then business folded up. Already capital was starting to hide, taking fright with the natural paranoia of the commerce-men. Money hidden away was useless! The more of it went into concealment, the nearer the economy stepped to stagnation. Was this what would happen? The business community scented something in the wind and began to bare its teeth.

Shizuru also sent letter after letter to various others in Sosia, in Argentum, and even to Otomeia, entrusting the same task she was carrying out to a few select people that would be her agents, for they would maintain this political campaign even when she had left. She spoke to the Otomeian barons and high officers, some of them through Natsuki, who was herself a high noble. Shizuru told them of the treacheries that had brought her to such a point, apologising profusely for having to entrust them to another's leadership without warning. To her surprise, she found that she did not need to do anything more in that quarter. Strong echoes of pessimism were already coming from those allies, independent of her working.

Natsuki was the one who explained it to her, speaking with a coolly detached observation the Himean general could not fault, and which was verified later through other agents. It was only to be expected, it seemed, that the Otomeians would grow restive at the news of her replacement. They had already grown fond of the foreign commander. They liked working with her, and liked the alien but effectual way she had of going about things. They liked how well she treated them and how, if favour was shown to the Himeans, so was an equivalent one given to them by her. But these were all secondary considerations, Natsuki admitted, and were subordinate to another, primary reason: the Otomeians had been looking forward to her command .

Being a people who liked anything *dangerous*, the Otomeians had been quick to appreciate their Himean general's flirtations with danger. They had seen the way she could leap into it with her soldiers and come out practically untouched, smiling with the blood-

love expected of a true warrior and the luck of a great commander. To be handed over to another general-one who, they heard through the gossip, was hardly as well-credentialed, hardly as daring in combat-was galling to them, for they had just begun to get their stride. They had been looking forward to whatever new battles the strange, red-eyed Himean had promised in the future.

Who was this other person, who had not been the one to meet with their king and request them from him? Could they trust this new general to give them the same thrills, the same fairness? With these questions leaping from one baron to another, from one trooper to the next, all Shizuru had to do was send her own dispatch to King Kruger, not even bothering to involve the aristocratic officers. As it was, those Otomeians had already started sending official dispatches to their monarch. Her informants told her they were complaining themselves hoarse on the matter.

To be fair to Shizuru, she made no bald-faced effort to destroy her substitute's reputation to anyone. Rather, she settled for worming doubts of him into their minds. She fed the notions so subtly through little nuances of mood and manner that no one could later say anything of her attitude to her substitute as being anything other than beautifully dignified even in resignation. The only thing she could be accused of having outright stated, later, would be her suggestion to each person about writing a letter, on the pretext that informing those in Hime of their position could sway the Senate. Other than that, all was hint and implication, and sometimes barely even that.

But precisely because of the sly way she set it all in the motion-and perhaps this was the malefic aspect of it-the result was that the apprehension about the replacement commander was stronger than if she had blatantly cultivated it herself. This was true of any notion wormed into a person's mind instead of being spoon-fed. That most of them could not trace their dislike of the coming man to Shizuru made them believe they had formed the dislike themselves, and as with most self-formed notions, the antipathy was encouraged and developed further with no more urging from the woman who had actually seeded it in them.

Within two days, the first letters to Hime had been sent out in a



packet, complaining that Shizuru Fujino was a victim of manifest treachery, that she should be let remain in the North to do what she was meant to do. The letters were addressed to friends, to significant acquaintances, to senators whose clients implored them to do something about this travesty. More letters were sent the following day, and even more the day after that. Already the movement was gathering force, and everyone, from the lowest trade merchant to the highest shipping magnate, was turning to the pen to cry foul for both Shizuru's sake and theirs. *Think of the perils to the Northern territories*, they hounded, over and over again. *Think of the perils to our business!*

Should it continue-and Shizuru knew it would-her return to Hime would be prefaced, accompanied, and even concluded with hundreds of letters, all demanding her reinstatement in the Northern Mission. Something to think about for Senate and those senators who were patrons of those who had written; something over which the knights or *equites*, the powerful plutocrats who made up the backbone of Hime's economy, would see blood .

Apprised of all this, her confidant had concluded: "You are so scheming a woman."

"I am a politician, Child. I scheme like any other."

"More, maybe... and better, too."

And remembering the girl was, besides being her lover and attendant, still one of the Otomeian regent's favourite attendants; still a royal princess of the blood, aside from being a titular noble of her adopted people; and while still very much a cub, a cub possessed nonetheless of teeth, she asked her gently: "Does that displease you?"

"You do not scheme against me?"

"Never."

"So I cannot be displeased."

Which got a laugh out of both of them. Natsuki's pragmatic opinion

of her cunning aside, it was her Himean friends who were most impressed by her scheme-or perhaps even alarmed by it. This latest design from Shizuru, they realised, hinted at just how different she was from the rest of them, how strangely close her ideas could come to demagoguery. Truly no one else of such patrician birth could have thought of such a-a-oh, a *populist* thing to do! Demagoguery was traditionally the province of the plebeians, and most of the plebeians themselves refrained from it. Using the force of mass opinion, indeed!

It was brilliant, of course. It would work too, so much was true. The *equites* with investments tied to the North would agitate, and the senators would have to listen. *It would work*. But that confidence did not stop some of her friends from wondering what had put to her mind so outrageous a notion.

The senior legate herself, who loved Shizuru dearly, was still heard to comment to Suou Himemiya that their mutual chum was a freak, a product of some mischievous god wanting to see what would happen if he created an absurdly un-patrician patrician. And the Himemiya, coming from a family accused of being so undiluted of blood they had all the earmarks of freak products themselves, laughed herself sore on every side, loving the idea of this perfect but un-Himean fruit coming from one of the orchard's very best trees.

Still, their friend saw no problem in her doings, far more at ease now she had set a ball rolling and did not feel like the one being tossed about. Her intelligence networks-both the one managed by her agents in the army, and the one managed by one of her new clients, Yamada-buzzed constantly, feeding the doubts of her replacement further into the system. If her actions had been unorthodox, as she knew they were, then what of it? She had always been unorthodox, at any rate, and it tickled her to start something new in retaliation.

"I merely thank the gods I received Chikane's letter in time to start all of this," she even said cheerfully, over breakfast of the day after her replacement's actual arrival: Takeda Masashi and his posse had reached Argus the prior evening. "It always helps to be warned in advance of anything coming. Even a few days' notice can spell the difference between a glancing blow off your cheek and a stunner on the nose."

Her Otomeian companion looked intrigued.

"You have ever had that, Shizuru?" she asked suddenly, repeating the latter part of the metaphor: "A stunner on the nose?"

Shizuru took the detour: "Figuratively or literally?"

"Literally."

"No."

"Oh."

The Himean paused in the act of lifting a dish of tuna.

"*Meum mel*," she said. "Why do you look disappointed?"

To her credit, Natsuki made a wonderful attempt at looking both innocent and grim. Shizuru laughed.

"Too late-that only makes you look guiltier," she said, taking the saucer of fish. "And if you are really all that eager to see my nose crushed in, Darling, you might try to do it yourself. Spar with me one of these days and point your paw towards this protrusion."

She twitched said facial appendage when Natsuki's face lit up again: it was the alliteration that had done it, of course.

"Well, then?" she prodded.

Natsuki shook her head, pursing her lips for a second.

"No. Not eager for, ah, for that," she said sheepishly. "Sorry, Shizuru. I just wondered."

"The tunny is good this morning. Try some?" Shizuru passed her the dish after she agreed. "What violent things you do wonder, though. At any rate, what about you? Has it ever happened to you, the stunner to the nose?"

"Hmm." Natsuki smirked while tearing a chunk of fish into flaky halves. "Figuratively or literally?"

She smiled: "Both."

The Otomeian looked up.

"Yes," she said. "No."

"So we have the same answers." Her smile soured just a little.

"Speaking for myself, the past year's events have tweaked my poor nose quite a bit. It does feel a mite sore... though, I hope, not out of shape. I rather like it the way it is."

Natsuki chuckled, still occupied with eating her tuna. She suckled her fingers carefully afterwards, pulling them through her lips and licking the sections close to her palm where the oil had run. The Himean watched with mild fascination.

"Will you, um. Will you maybe do what she said?" the girl suddenly asked, still licking her hand clean. "Your friend. The consul?"

Shizuru looked thoughtful.

"Of course," she said. "It was what I always intended to do, anyway. To make a show of departure is only proper, as it would be unwise to act obdurate by refusing to do that much and cede the command. My foes would only use that as further capital for their claims that I am seeking personal power against the interests and orders of the Senate-and through that body, the people of Hime. Chikane did not say that expressly, but it is understood."

She stopped to take a drink, then continued.

"If the senatorial sheep were so threatened by me even when I was just another senator attending the House's sessions, what more were I to be a truculent general with the immediate strength of five armed legions, telling them I refused to follow their dictates? The next thing I know, there would be people claiming me setting up for civil war against the State."

Natsuki was incredulous.

"How does it go there?" she asked. "Why-it jumps there so fast?"

"Hyperbole, I am afraid, is one of the favourite pastimes in Senate. It takes on a life of its own. So, much as I would like to, I cannot afford to countermand the orders this time."

"Ah-hah." She smiled a touch shakily, which Shizuru noticed. "I see."

To the Himean's interest, the young woman then assumed an intense inspection of the food on her plate, which she began to move around with stagy fuss. Shizuru watched wordlessly, for she understood. Hence she merely waited for the Otomeian to say what was on her mind, unwilling to spare the girl by saying it herself. A few moments passed in relative silence.

When she thought that Natsuki was beginning to lose her nerve after all, Shizuru set her goblet on the table with a little more weight than usual, making an alarum of the sound. She ignored the girl's glance and merely picked up the chalice again, taking a quiet sip from it. Her smiling, steady eyes showed above the rim.

*You should talk now, her tranquil nonchalance seemed to urge. Talk now, else I shall do this all day, other business be damned.*

Wisely, the younger woman gave in.

"When?" Her question was soft, though it tried to be gruff. "Thuh-the departure."

Shizuru answered readily, having reconciled herself to several matters of late, one of them being that the sooner she returned to Hime, the sooner she could undo her troubles. "About three weeks' time, I estimate. As soon as the Fourteenth and Eleventh arrive from Sosia. Perhaps a day or two shall be allotted to sort them before shipping out, but that would be all. Speed is of the essence, for the sooner I return, the sooner all may be put right."

"Ahh. Yes."

And Natsuki said no more, returning to her act of moving about her meal. But Shizuru followed with the usual question, also with her usual snakelike quickness.

"Are you coming with me?"

The other woman's hand fell limply on the plate, giving up the farce of fussing. She stared at the clumps of food she had just made, seeming bewildered by how they had managed to get there.

And then she looked at the older woman uncomfortably.

"Shizuru," she murmured, in mingled reproach and regret. "Shizuru."

Shizuru sighed reproachfully as well and picked up what was left of her bread roll, dipping it coolly into olive oil.

"Natsuki," she intoned, quite warmly. "*Meum mel*. You know I love hearing you say my name, but I would prefer a direct answer at the moment. Again I ask, are you coming with me?"

What did she expect, she wondered. Certainly nothing less than the usual slanting away of those green eyes from her, the guilt in them. She finished wetting the bread in her hand, but could not summon the appetite to put it to her mouth, and let it fall to her plate, neglected. The younger woman noticed her action and looked at the food sadly, so forlorn one would have thought it were she and not the bread that Shizuru had abandoned.

Which the older woman found tellingly ironic.

The younger woman spoke: "Sorry."

Shizuru lifted an eyebrow. "Really?"

Natsuki was reluctant, but affirmed it.

"So the answer is still the same?" the Himean asked grimly.

Another terrifically guilty affirmation. There was a pause of breath after it, as though Natsuki were preparing herself for something frightful. What the young woman actually received, however, was an amazed exclamation.

"Such a mule!"

Natsuki looked up. Shizuru had turned her eyes heavenward, looking disappointed.

"We are back to that again," she went on to say. "Again you reject me, hm?"

Something in the girl snapped at that, and the Otomeian stared at her, eyes wide.

"*Reject* ? No," she said anxiously, grimacing at the word. "That is only, I-"

"Cannot come with me. I know. You say it every time I ask, every day." Shizuru passed a sharp look her way and suddenly replaced it with a droll expression, startling her companion. "This is fast becoming routine with us, really."

The blonde woman leaned forward, wavy tresses falling about her face.

"Have I told you that you are impossible, Natsuki?" she asked, smirking unexpectedly. "That you are the most impossibly, unbelievably, exasperatingly unwavering creature I have ever met?"

This she said with humour quivering in her voice, clear enough for her to be sure that Natsuki would hear it. Her smirk, too, widened into a genuine smile-and while it might have been unforeseen, it was also irresistible to the younger woman. She could not help but succumb to Shizuru's lightness, and so was unable to prevent an equal smile tugging at her lips when she finally responded.

"Yes... every time you say, Shizuru," the young woman affirmed, trying valiantly to stay sombre. "And every day."

"Ara! You do remember."

Natsuki's lips twitched. "What is everyday is hard to forget."

"True. It must be getting tedious to have it every day, though."

"You, uh, you grow used to it."

"I see, but that adds to the tedium. You must be bored with it by now?"

"Could be, a little."

"Would you like to make it more exciting?"

"How?"

"See what happens if you say ' yes ',for a change."

Their eyes clashed in an instant; and in the next, fled. It was impossible, it seemed to each one just then, to maintain this conversation and look at the other woman too without breaking into laughter.

When both had bitten their lips enough, they turned to each other again.

"What a terrible mule my Natsuki can be," Shizuru said, poking a corner of the other's mouth with a finger. "Well, never mind for now. I shall keep pestering you, you know, so I trust you are used to it, Dear. I really would like you to come with me, and I really am adamant in wanting that, so I fear I shall have to keep asking."

She made a dismissive inclination of her head and finished: "There is no use looking so guilty... especially when you still have over three weeks of this in the future, each day of each week, to wear you down."

Natsuki's eyes fell to her plate again. Shizuru was swift, however, and immediately brought up a brighter topic, thus preventing the Otomeian from starting to brood. It was not that the older woman was being more flippant about their discussion, but she felt that there was surely a better way to start the morning with the woman you loved other than taking up an ongoing argument. Furthermore, she too had grown accustomed by now to their daily routine with this problem, as she said.

Although it was admittedly a routine that was slowly undergoing change.

She did ask Natsuki that question, at least five times a day. At least five times a day, Natsuki would tell her no. However, while the successive refusals were not enough to prevent her from asking



again and again, they were at least enough to foment a change. It was the irrevocable blighting of what had formerly been an absolute confidence that Natsuki would, after having been sufficiently harried, give her a "Yes".

It was hard to tell from where the blight began. Was it from the constancy of Natsuki's refusals? Was it from the first time Natsuki had given one, even? Or could it perhaps be from the fact that sometimes, when Shizuru looked at that young woman with eyes not glazed with adoration, she caught a glimpse of something she had never truly been able to fathom before? Not that she thought she could truly fathom it now, that strange and glinting thing. She could not even name it yet. It was something seen only when she steeled herself to look at the girl without thinking of how much she loved her eyes, or how pretty was her face when in sternness, or how elegant was the shape of her small nose. It was hard to do that, really. But sometimes... sometimes she would look at Natsuki, and try to look at her as at an unfamiliarity.

*What are you, Natsuki?*

Pretending herself a stranger sometimes, she would wonder at it. What was Natsuki indeed? An enemy yet not an enemy. An indefinable being that seemed capable of resisting Shizuru's hand, which had shaped everything else to which it had been put. *How could that be?* She did not like to be vainglorious in that respect, but it was simply that she had never been so confounded before, so persistently resisted by anything that only ever yielded to her otherwise. Yet Natsuki did it so relentlessly. How was it the girl could be so resistant in one way, yet be perfectly compliant in another? What was it that defied her so adamantly in her acquiescent Natsuki, that hard-glinting thing that could not be pushed, pulled, or shaped?

Whatever it was, it attracted her as much as it caused her dismay.

Her doubts of the girl notwithstanding, her desires remained consistent. She still wanted so badly for Natsuki to join her when she left. Perhaps it *had* relieved her somewhat to know that, gods willing, her plan with Chikane would mean she would stay in Fuuka only briefly before coming back to the North. A good thing if Natsuki was with her, since it meant the girl would not suffer being away from her

native territory too long; a good thing too if Natsuki was *not* with her, since it meant Shizuru would not suffer being away from the girl too long. The latter consideration, unpleasant as it was, was beginning to look ever more likely.

It did not help her diminishing confidence to think of her replacement. Had it been any other senator, she might have been a little less nervy. But to think of Takeda Masashi, who wanted also the same young woman; to think of that man being here, where she would not be soon, and where Natsuki *might* stay... Intolerable! True, she had yet to ascertain how the man felt, yet to see if he still wanted Natsuki as he had seemed to then. Shizuru guessed he would. She believed it more and more each time she looked at her young woman, sometimes so rapt in the Otomeian's beauty she forgot to shut her mouth, sighing lips parted as though ready to catch Natsuki's. There was no doubt in her mind Takeda Masashi, upon seeing again this beauty, would quite easily do the same.

But if he did that in front of her, she prayed she would remember enough not to kill him.

"You should have told me," she had complained to her childhood friend, Suou, after the woman confessed she had known of the possibility Shizuru's replacement would be the man. "You should have told me who it would or might be."

Suou had been largely impenitent. "Pardon me, but would it have helped if I had?"

"Would it have helped what?"

"Anything?"

"It would have helped me prepare," she had insisted irritably. "I would have been able to ready myself, instead of having it cast unexpectedly at me."

The other woman—equally patrician, equally formidable, and equal to the task of disagreeing with her where hardly anyone else would dare—had denied it.

"Maybe, but not for much good," she had said. "You could have done the same self-readying in a day, were it necessary, and we both know it."

Shizuru had lifted an eyebrow.

"Even so, Suou." The lack of the honorific had been indication of her mood. "It was your duty to divulge such information to me, being my legate."

"As well as your friend, though that does not mean I claim privileges for myself with it." Suou had smiled at her: the lazy, lovely, exasperatingly disarming Himemiya smile. "See, you may still be annoyed with me after this, Shizuru-san, but let me say it first. Punish me from my failure as a legate, yes, but please allow me to explain first. May I not explain?"

"You may."

"I kept it from you because I did not see what good it would do to have known it earlier, whereas I did see the harm. Remember that was about the same time you began asking Natsuki-san to come along with you."

"I am in no danger of forgetting."

"Quite. Now, I admit I never thought she would say 'No', but I thought you would prefer to ask her without having *that* worry hanging over you. You're, well, you're a *passionate* woman, Shizuru-san, if you'll allow me to say. Would not the thought of Takeda Masashi's approach have altered the way you asked her, the way you asked it? Would it have altered it for the better, or for the worse?"

And that had made her think. Her friend had been right and she saw it, much as she wished she did not: knowing of that man's approach would have changed the way she had first asked Natsuki, and imbued it with an inner panic, a darker frenzy than had already been there. Suou could not have known it, but she had done Shizuru a greater favour than she knew. The older woman only had to think back to time she had hurt Natsuki, and she would think of how much

more she could have hurt the girl, had she known who might be coming. It made her cringe to admit that, but she could not spare herself if she wanted to spare Natsuki: she would have hurt her far more.

That, too, was intolerable.

But what could a woman do? How many times could one accept a refusal whose reason refused to be seen? And she was, as Suou had noted, a *passionate* woman. It came hard to her to stymie the ardour of her feelings when taking the No's that had become her daily fare, hard to ignore the paroxysmal urge to clamp her hands around her girl's neck and claim it with that collar. Sometimes she would sigh to herself, as though to Natsuki: *Why can you so easily refuse me?* And yet she could also see the refusal did not actually come "so easily".

Still, ease was relative.

One had to understand the circumstances. Shizuru was a woman who asked and always received. To have been born with all her gifts, her wealth and her ancestry, it was only natural that she should have thus gone through her life thus favoured. And as for the matter of love-why, what else could be expected of a woman descended from the goddess of it? Shizuru was gifted there as well, drawing infatuations and obsessions after her like an indifferent comet trailing expiring stardust in its wake. Given her abstinence from affairs during the time she had been in Hime, it had become all the more noticeable, going so far as to become the stuff of amusement to her fellows and the base of several jokes.

"It's so it gets hard to tell if she really has that large a clientele," the Traditionalist pillar, Sergay Wang, would say, referring to the custom of clients accompanying their patrons when the latter went about Hime. "At least half of that crowd is just her pack of moon-eyed fillies."

And fillies it always had been. It was not so much about men: it had never been about men and few men were actually attracted to her romantically, as though able to sense her preferences with a glance. Yet a good number of men liked Shizuru, and sometimes even

lusted after her. But women were different. Women were where she worked her magic.

It had forever been her gift to draw the women. They lost their minds over her, sighed after her, tossed away all judgement and good sense. How many of them had tried to go from pillar to pillar furtively, stalking her tracks as she walked through their beloved city? How many fellow senators had she found to be enemies, simply because their wives went mad over her even when she had never given them cause for it? That was the magic of it: she never gave them cause to follow, treated none of them specially over the others, and yet they seemed to keep coming.

Her peers had long debated what about her women found so attractive.

"She has the natural charisma-it runs in the family," said her favourite cousin, the notorious philanderer.

"She has such a lovely accent, so enchanting," suggested the senator Mai Tokiha, an ally.

"She has all that money," opined the senator Yuuichi Tate, while hiding at a friend's house to escape some creditors.

"She has those pretty red eyes: a novelty," remarked one of the other elected praetors, Suguru Kashiwagi.

"She's a very pleasant woman, really," noted the present junior consul, Yukino Kikukawa.

"She's a shameless flirt!" said the previous senior consul, Haruka Armitage.

But she was not a shameless flirt. In fact, the people with whom Shizuru had only ever flirted obviously would be her friends-and that because there was no possibility of true innuendo there, for her friends flirted back in the same outrageous mood of *such fun because it means nothing*. With others, she was modulated, charming yet not overbearingly so, and correct in all attitude. That many of her peers viewed her with distrust as a possible cuckold

had never goaded her into behaving as one. She continued to let be the infatuated, love-struck women in her wake, unfailingly kind, yet giving them nothing that might be misconstrued as an invitation. Hardly speaking to them save to smile with a "well met" and "good day", Shizuru had to the present kept all her interactions blameless, and her reputation unimpeachable.

But she had still always had the satisfaction that, had she ever even propositioned any of her followers, each one would have leapt the pits of Tartarus to say yes.

So it was only understandable that her young woman now befuddled her, because she was the first young woman Shizuru had ever invited to anything, and because the invitation was not even one that could be considered so damning. Natsuki was not the wife of some other, being asked to play adulterer for Shizuru's sake and her own excitement. She was not some timid maiden, paling at the prospect of being stolen from her homeland by some foreign conqueror against her will. And there was the pity of it: there was the utter pity! Shizuru had since found in herself a great revulsion, a trembling disgust, for the idea of actually subjecting Natsuki to such a rape, or even such a deception.

Had it been merely a matter of lust, she would have done either, she thought; even, perhaps, had it merely been a matter of love. But the fact was—oh, what a problem!—it was not mere lust for the girl she felt, nor even mere love.

When it came to Natsuki, she also felt *like* .

She liked Natsuki immensely, she had come to realise, and more than she had ever liked anyone else. She liked her enough to find out any unsavoury aspect of the girl's character and not be disillusioned by it. She liked her enough to treat her not merely as one would a lover, who could be an object of affection but an object nonetheless. That is, she had come to like Natsuki to the point of seeing her as a friend .

Apprehending this, she saw she could not keep belabouring the query as she had formerly done so, when her passion had been so strong it nearly overcame her liking. She could not pressure her into

it by some subtle cunning, such as by telling the girl the true extent of her feelings and manipulating the fierce kindness and loyalty she already knew was in the Otomeian. She still tried to coax her into it when they bedded, yes; and she still tried to do all manner of things to persuade her, true; but no longer did she ask in a way that could be interpreted as menacing. That did not work anyway, from what she had seen, and it harmed Natsuki besides. While it could come easily to a person to harm a lover, it did not come so easily to harm a friend.

She included the question now in their banter instead of their brooding. Her attempts to entice Natsuki began to swing to the hilarious, partly because it amused her to make the girl laugh while asking the question, and partly because-having tried and failed with so many other things before, good sound reasoning included-she decided she never knew what might work. She made good humour out of all manner of incentives, from the promise of some greyhound pups (which bribe she even raised to an entire kennel, when she saw Natsuki's eyes glimmer) to a pledge of unendingly glorious sex - which word flustered the girl so badly she was unable to make even one of her usual wise-mouthed comebacks, resorting instead to calling Shizuru a 'fool' or 'idiot' in her native tongue.

To be so bothered by the mere citation of sex, Shizuru thought, was very much the Otomeian in her.

She worried sometimes about that too: the force of Otomeian cultural opinion and how much it could influence-or worse, affect-the girl. For instance, she had only just learned that the Otomeians were not a naturally sensual people. Coming from a sex-saturated society like Hime, it had been easy to think that Natsuki's culture was similar at first. So it had bemused her on those past occasions when, brushing the back of her hand against the girl's cheek, the sway in the lithe body would show Natsuki was in a state of passion-yet the face belonging to that body would also show something confused, as if Natsuki herself could not understand what was happening. There had been times when, while Shizuru traced the skin of her hips, Natsuki's face had seemed on the verge of some great outburst... while never actually exploding.

There was, too, that occasion which still made the Himean feel guilty

when she thought of it: a week after they first had carnal congress, when she had responded to one of Natsuki's half-hearted protests at modesty by saying laughingly that the girl was so like a blushing virgin. She had spoken it with tenderness, as a familiar jest between lovers, yet Natsuki had responded to that with a look that held faint injury . It had made her wonder.

Much later, after she deepened her studies of the Otomeian culture, she found out the reason for that expression. Natsuki's people were apparently far more taken with the thrill of war and hunting than sensual matters: they sang no songs of raging lust, painted no pornographies on their walls, had no myth stories of gods and goddesses playing cuckold or romancer. Indeed, she found their attitude such that some of the elders among them even considered it shameful to have fleshly knowledge of another before the twentieth year.

They had a belief that the physical body only grew stronger the longer one remained chaste. This was why some-often the warrior-nobles and most socially prominent-even passed their second decade without knowing a lover's embrace. They were lauded for it by their peers. How intriguing, thought Shizuru, that they applauded abstemiousness, where a Himean would often find it worthy of ridicule! In the candid words of one of the official interpreters, who were more familiar with the Otomeians: "They're less curious about *it* than an honest-to-goodness Vestal Virgin."

Shizuru herself had been abstemious as well, prior to meeting her Otomeian. Despite that, she had still understood well enough the attractions of the flesh, knew exactly what happened between lovers in bed. What was more, she was a gross exception. Most Himeans fantasised about the act, did the act, even, at the start of adolescence. Proper though they might claim to be, Shizuru knew most of her fellows had already soiled their virgin beds at ages far above the Otomeian *twenty* .

To think of Natsuki, then, whom she had taken at nineteen-was it nineteen? Close enough to the ideal age, true, but who really knew with such strange people? Now she was twenty, yes, and certainly not a virgin any longer. With their affair so public, every one of Natsuki's fellows had to know the young noble was no longer



chaste. How did they view that, she wondered. Did they see Natsuki as having been despoiled, violated? Did they think her stunted now from reaching her true potential, in terms of growth? If so, it was Shizuru's hands had done it. If any of them had ever looked down on the girl for such a thing, it had been she who had done it.

She could not ask Natsuki about it, of course. It seemed impossible to ask the girl if any accusations of disgrace had ever been thrown to her from their liaison, if what everyone knew they did each night was ever used against her by the others. It seemed equally impossible to ask Natsuki if her constant refusal to go along to Hime might be partly due to what the other Otomeians would think if she did so, as though in the sway of her lover-and the words *despoiler*, *violation* swam angrily in Shizuru's mind here-like a patsy played easily by a foreigner. Shizuru doubted very much that this was so, for she believed she could see the great esteem most of the Otomeians showed the girl. But what if, what if! And so she never asked Natsuki, because she was afraid of what could be the answer.

She could not bear the thought of having ever caused the girl sorrow. One day, reading some verse from a new poet the Argus governor had recommended to her, she had been struck by the writer's theme: a suitor doing his utmost to please his beloved, taking her demure reactions to his gifts as true pleasure. According to the poem, however, the beloved was only pretending for the sake of courtesy, actually feeling uneasy in the suitor's presence. It had spawned a new nagging thought: did she make Natsuki happy after all? She herself was happy with Natsuki, but was Natsuki really happy?

She had impulsively sent out for several bouquets of whatever early flowers could be found in the markets, having them sent to their room for her to present to the girl. Who had received it with her usual bashful surprise, sniffing at the spray with the avidity of one who enjoyed fragrances, her pretty face brightening. Shizuru had asked her anxiously then-perhaps even a little too anxiously, gauging from Natsuki's reaction-if she was happy. When she asked again even after the affirmative was given, mouth dry as she said "Truly?"-well, that was when Natsuki had asked her if she was feeling well, coming up close to hold her with a manner that was

almost protective. She had sighed at that moment, relieved that Natsuki truly seemed to be happy. And then, because she was thinking of Natsuki and Natsuki was the only thing in the world that could throw her off-kilter, she had begun to question next if she could *keep* Natsuki happy.

For the most part, however, she tried not to harbour such doubts. They made her morose, and she had since learned that if she was morose, Natsuki would be too.

But sometimes, late at night, she would think.

Because she was a person who, having had an avenue opened, simply had to scout it, she began to imagine what would happen if she did have to go without the girl. Her confidence having been shaken enough to consider it, she saw it was something to plan for as well. *In utrumque paratus, Shizuru* .

She had already begun, arranging for Natsuki to be in the care of Suou if such were the case. She would also have to extract a pledge from the girl not to entertain anyone else, though she had to save such a thing for the last moment, and only when she was certain of defeat. But these were things prepared for Natsuki. One day, waiting impatiently for the girl to come back from a meeting with her troopers, she realised she also had to prepare for herself.

How did one prepare for such a thing? For her, it was primarily a mental exercise. She forced herself to imagine how it might be without Natsuki. Unpleasant thing! Even a few moments of it fatigued her. It was true that she had lived with the girl for only half a year, but it was the kind of living together that not even married couples enjoyed: spending days cheek-by-jowl, so attached that her officers joked theirs was the only general who actually cast two shadows, from the morning to the night.

Sometimes she tried to imagine it, when she was waiting to drift off to sleep on late evenings. How would it feel again, she wondered, to be without Natsuki? To not feel the assuring warmth of her in the darkness, to know that no comforting breast would be ready if she found it hard to slumber? How would it be not to wake with the glide of Natsuki's fingers trying to feel the crystal-coloured down of her

cheeks without brushing her skin? Could she still wake smiling without the sound the girl made when she did that successfully, that laughing puff, as though the younger woman were delighted for having managed it? Or the stern face that seemed to fall on Natsuki like a veil when they had gone through morning ablutions and ventured out of their room, if someone else happened to run into them?

These questions invaded her only in the dark hours, when she was sure Natsuki was already asleep and could not witness her anxiety rising. She thought of the queries but rarely, astonished that she could hardly come up with the answers, and her chest radiating little waves: waves of tightness that made the hair on her arms stand. And, if she were sitting up instead of lying down, it would be her heart falling: down, down, past her ribs-down into a belly that felt like a vacant pit. She would not know if she wanted to retch, or maybe to rise and walk it out, or perhaps even just curl up on one side.

It was a little frightening.

She started to be even more covetous of her time with Natsuki, reluctant even to let the girl separate from her for a moment. She went so far as to frown when the Otomeian had to go to a meeting, mouth thinning fleetingly. And, when she felt the girl had been away for more than an hour, she would begin to fiddle and drive her staff into such a frenzy of work that they would wonder what was the matter.

One day she asked Akira Okuzaki, one of the military tribunes and an artist of marked talent, to make for her a palm-sized portrait of the girl. She asked for something small enough for her to carry in her pocket or on a chain, the one to which she tied her coin purses and which already had the little wooden wolf Natsuki had carved long ago. Why she tasked Akira to do this, she did not tell; but the tribune noted that the general looked so bothered in ordering it that it seemed almost to be against her will.

She spoke her fears only to the friend to whom she intended to entrust Natsuki, should the fears become real. She sought her during those rare times Natsuki was apart from her, or could not overhear. She thought she could not speak so candidly to anyone

else, and be spoken back to as frankly.

"I am afraid I should go mad," she would laugh dryly, face the closest it had ever been to being careworn-and, despite that, or even in consequence of that, looking handsomer a woman than ever. "I think of being so far from her and it seems I cannot think! Was it perhaps the same for your sister, when she had to go through the same thing? Was she so troubled?"

And Suou, pale aquamarine eyes softening, would say it had been.

"Then I must speak to her, if it so happens and I go... I go without Natsuki," Shizuru had continued one day, her voice catching at the last phrase. "I am so afraid it may be, Suou-chan. My god, I do believe I am *afraid*."

The other woman had looked at her with compassion.

"Do you remember?" she had asked. "Himeko actually refused my sister for quite a time before finally agreeing to marry."

Shizuru's head had snapped upwards from its contemplative pose then, and Suou had continued.

"Chikane was wretched during that time, really," she had spoken. "For nothing. Himeko told us later she had loved Chikane even then, but had hesitated for other reasons. Reasons she explained quite well, I believe, and which I deem quite fair."

"See," Suou had smiled gently. "They might seem irrational, even pigheaded when they refuse, but I do think they usually have their reasons. Women-and men-might love you, might completely love you, but are not incapable of denying you still, given a good reason."

And Shizuru, whose face had gained some life at her earlier words, had become haggard again and started sighing.

"I suppose they might, at that," she had whispered heavily. "Have actual *good reasons*, that is."

"The reason was not lack of affection, at least."

"Not for Himeko-chan."

"I think it isn't either for your Natsuki. Nor is it fickleness of fancy, either."

"I should hope it would not be," Shizuru had retorted balefully. "And certainly not with that man on his way here."

"Masashi? Has your girl ever expressed attraction to him?"

A bitter hiss. "Gods forbid!"

"Then that's interesting for you to get so worked up about him. After all, surely you're not blind to the fact that scores of others have been eyeing your girl so long, within mere feet of us for the longest time while Masashi has not even been here?"

Shizuru had not known what to say to that.

"Do you not trust her?" had come the question.

"Of course I do, but she has not even made an assurance for me to trust!" Shizuru would cry, goaded.

"Then what do you want, as an assurance?"

"I want..." She had taken a halting breath, voice flagging a little. "I need to know she is mine. Even if I am not here and she is. That everyone shall know it, and mark it, and respect it enough to steer clear even should I be away."

"Then seal her," Suou had advised with cold pragmatism. "If that is what you want, you need to do it. Make it so you know she can never forget you, nor would ever be willing to. Write yourself into her, until she belongs to you even before knowing it. Make her your property-"

And she had rushed to say the next part before Shizuru could protest, seeing the red eyes giving her that objecting glance: "But make it so that she wants to be."

She had added, when Shizuru did not immediately speak after: "I

think you're quite far in doing that already, actually."

A hollow laugh.

"So you say," Shizuru said. "Yet she refuses to come with me."

"Immaterial to this discussion right now," Suou had retorted, gaining a surprised look. "Yes, immaterial. Whether she comes with you or not, the true issue is still owning her." At Shizuru's expression of alarm: "Well, do you not want to own her?"

Shizuru's head had eventually dipped.

"Yes," had been the whisper.

"Oh, good! There, then," Suou had affirmed cheerfully, seeming very glad to establish that much. "As I said, the issue is that, and you can own a person even they are miles away from you. Besides which, if she did refuse to come to the end, it is not as though you'll be apart so very long: your plan with Chikane should bring you back in a few months, even. Maybe even less time than we expect, because Chikane's plans gather the force of a gale when she's angry, and given everything that's happened recently, she's absolutely livid. As for me, I would be watching over your property then, like I said."

A thoughtful pause as she assessed Shizuru before continuing.

"Focus on making her yours, Shizuru-san, and making her feel she should be yours: that will be winning the war instead of aiming for just a battle. Forget that little skirmish about going or not going with you! Whatever happens, when you get to Hime, if you still feel like asserting your ownership, why-why, I believe you should go and talk to my sister then!"

She had been quick to grasp the last part of the other patrician's advice, and thinking on it now, as hearing of it then, brought out a gasp. *The boldness of Suou-chan*, she thought. *The utter daring !*

To suggest that she talk to Chikane and begin to work out how to bestow the citizenship or Extended Rights to Natsuki... Even if she had long had it flying about it her head, it was still not something she expected anyone else to support. Especially not another patrician of

the patricians.

But it did give her newfound determination to hear it. Suou was was no use mincing about it any longer, when she knew what she really wanted. Respect Natsuki as she might, like Natsuki as she might, she also truly wanted to own her. Oh, she still quailed at the thought of forcing her into a thing, but she wanted to know she had possession of the girl, and that the world around them knew it too. The citizenship or Extended Rights would go a long way to helping her there, providing her with any number of ways she could use afterwards to publicly-officially-put the Otomeian in her hands. She could turn her status into one of her freedmen, for instance, which meant Natsuki would be under her tenure and influence forever... Or ask to adopt Natsuki into the family, perhaps, putting the girl under her official custody and ownership... Or she could even-and she shivered at her own mad audacity at this-own her by marriage.

Priorities thus shifting, she began to work more towards that end she had been forced to confess. She had to make Natsuki undeniably hers, no matter any possible future distance, no matter any possible problem. The issue of coming to Hime, while still important, had been relegated to a secondary place; Shizuru had branched out and begun to play for the greater game. What she had to ensure, whether she left with or without the girl for those few months, was that everyone understood where she had drawn the lines-Natsuki included.

She became aware that the girl of her thoughts was calling her and so turned her head in that direction, amused when the Otomeian greeted her with a puckering frown. It seemed Natsuki had been saying something, and she had missed it with all her ruminations.

"You do not listen," the young woman accused. Her eyes were wide with offence, and it was the sparkle of colour from them that alerted Shizuru, more than the words her mouth spoke.

"I do, I do!" the older woman cried, recovering quickly with an apologetic smile. "My mind merely drifted a moment, *meum mel*. Tell me again, please, for I am so sorry."

The Otomeian huffed, but told her anyway.

"I said about the legions you picked to take with you," she said, mouth still pouty. "The Fourteenth, the Eleventh, and the Ninth."

"Yes, correct. What did you say of them?"

"See, you did not listen?"

A laugh escaped the Himean.

"Natsuki," she said remorsefully, in a cadging tone. "My sweet Natsuki. My lovely Natsuki."

Her lovely Natsuki huffed again, crossly.

"Why them?" she asked Shizuru. "Why those legions? And why the Seventh and the Eighth to be left?"

"Good questions." Shizuru smiled warmly, in an attempt to soothe the ruffled girl. "It is since I expect that my replacement shall ask, specifically, for the Seventh, since it is not originally one of my legions but on loan from another general."

Natsuki said she understood that. Why the Eighth, however, when it was actually one of her veteran legions?

"Because of Argentum?" she ventured. "Because Argentum is closest to the Mentulae? You do not want it weak, so you want them to stay there and not go away?"

"Yes, that is part of it-but there is another thing," Shizuru said. "I expect that my replacement shall be a little more wary about what he does if he knows at least one of his legions is still, almost indubitably, on loan from me."

Her Otomeian companion suddenly chuckled, forgetting all about her sulk.

"He will not like to know that, I think," she submitted.

"But he should be grateful." Shizuru allowed the barest hint of disdain to lift her lip. "I am leaving him one of our most proven legions, with some of Hime's best centurions officering it. The



Seventh too, is excellently primed for any situation. What soldiers do remain with him shall be among the best our nation-and yours, of course, I do not forget it-has to offer. How could he complain?"

The younger woman seemed thoughtful, so Shizuru let her have a moment to muse over whatever gnat was still flying about her mind.

"But they-will they follow him?" she eventually asked the Himean.  
"They will?"

"Of course. It is still their duty."

"No," Natsuki told her. "Shizuru, I mean to say... they will follow him like they follow you?"

Shizuru smiled as she saw what the younger woman was hinting. The latter continued.

"They will follow him, Shizuru," she decided, offering an answer to her own query. "But not like-I think-not like they follow you. And I think, too, he will see it. They are loyal to you."

"About that, I can do nothing."

"Yes... but not so to him."

"Which would label him a fool, if he actually does believe it."

"Hmm. Not that, anyway." The Otomeian dipped her chin. "It is... that he will want to believe it."

Shizuru's eyes went to her.

"Perceptive," she said with obvious admiration.

Natsuki waved it away. "Also, Shizuru, about the Seventh, I think them loyal to you too. Even if they come from another general, you say. I am wrong or not?"

Shizuru smirked.

"Actually, you are not wrong, Natsuki," she confessed. "The Seventh

is actually... let us say, fond of me too. Added to which is the fact that they shall not love him at all once they get word that-as I expect him to do-he asked for them specifically, because by doing so he would have deprived them of the opportunity to be in my supposed triumph. Every legion, to its last legionary, wants to be in its general's triumph, since the glory on that day is for just as much for them as for me."

Natsuki hummed with a minute smile, taking in her commander's thinking.

"And so that will add to their grudge," she murmured. "Will he think of it, that one?"

"Even if he does, what other choice does he have but to keep the legions being left him? Where else would he get an army? I doubt the House gave him enough money to train and call in new recruits-they hate new expenses. As for all the other, already trained legions, they are abroad or being used."

"And you take three more away." She looked up. "Already prepared? The ships you will take?"

"I have already arranged transport, yes."

Natsuki tilted her head curiously. "How many do you take? How many ships for three legions?"

Shizuru widened her eyes comically.

"For three legions, Natsuki?" she said, miming surprise. "For one, you mean!"

She received a look of sheer perplexity, and repeated her answer for emphasis.

"For one legion," she said again. "Not three."

Natsuki gaped at her for a second, moved into speech when she only met that look with perfect equability.

"Buh-buh-but you said, Shizuru," the girl stammered out, clearly

perturbed. "You said-I heard-to bring three. What is- *one* ?"

Shizuru grinned, telling her to calm down, that she had heard everything correctly, and that it was Shizuru's fault for having failed to explain it.

"I am taking only one legion with me by ship. Either the Eleventh or the Fourteenth," she informed the girl. "As for the other two legions, they shall be going by land."

The explanation diffused the Otomeian's confusion, but only for a moment. It returned quickly, even stronger than before.

"But why?" she asked, frowning more deeply. "I do not see. Why by land?" She threw a doubtful glance at Shizuru. "And they will be slow. Spring floods passes, makes soil hard to walk on."

"True, it does that."

Natsuki took a few moments to think on it.

"Tell," she requested, looking faintly irked that she could not figure it out for herself. "Tell me why? Also, why only those two?"

"Because I must keep one legion with me. It would only be prudent as Hime expects to see me return with some troops actually by my side for the triumph-they do expect *to* see soldiers with me," she said, only her wiggling brows serving to remind Natsuki that there would actually be no triumph taking place. "As for those other two legions, I am sending them overland so that they may do a little roadwork."

The Otomeian's exquisitely tuned nasal apparatus sniffed, caught a whiff of something lurking in Shizuru's studiously bland tone. She tried to stare down the older woman, but soon realised that would not work, and pursued it differently.

"A road, Shizuru?" she asked, leaning forward. "You will make those two build a road from here to your country?"

"Yes-or rather, a better road than presently exists between these regions and the uppermost lands of Fuuka," Shizuru replied. "It

should make any further deployments to the North easier from then on, as well as vice versa, just in case travel becomes a necessity in the future between the territories. You know, if ever there should be a difficulty with the sea routes."

Natsuki nodded slowly, normally wide eyes thinned. She was still trying to find something.

"I cannot be accused of transgressing my authority afterwards since improvement of the land route is an essential part of fortification, any future transport of troops overland being greatly aided by it. I cannot be accused of trying to usurp authority either from the one who has usurped mine-ah, did I say 'usurped'? I meant 'been given', sorry! Let us do that again. I cannot be accused of usurping authority from the one who has *been given* my authority in this mission, because I very much doubt he would be willing to pull out yet another of the only two legions left him for the purpose of mere road-building. I imagine he would be quite glad, in fact, to let my legions do the dirty, hard work that benefits everybody."

The girl was now smiling, starting to see where the Himean was going. Shizuru winked at her and continued, still mimicking innocence.

"Furthermore, it is not merely for defence and military purposes. Being-" She cleared her throat delicately. "-an upstanding young senator, it should only be natural for me to be assiduously contributing to the public works. Why, it may even be considered my donation to my country, a gift I make of my own expense to the public! It should serve as an encouragement to Himeans and Fuukans alike, and those of our Northern territories, to have even better relations with each other."

"Once finished," she went on, "the new *via* should see a deal of traffic. Commerce and North-South trade would flourish; real estate along the new *via* would quickly start renting and undergo development. Quite a satisfying accomplishment-not to mention a fine opportunity for personal enhancement and enlargement of following-to whoever is patron of that road, no?"

She shrugged.

"I cannot be blamed if that immense stretch of new road should happen to bear my family's name, for obvious reasons," she said innocently, holding up her palms with assumed artlessness. "Nor can I be blamed, incidentally, if the construction of said road happens to delay two of my homecoming legions and officers in their progress back to Fuuka, thus unintentionally adding to the retardation of their discharge and my triumph. I cannot do anything if their task slows them so much that they are closer to these territories than if they had been marching as normal, making them easily transportable back here should unexpected incidents arise. Say, for instance, if I should-by some strange twist of fate!-be returned to my command without warning."

Natsuki shouted with laughter.

"Shizuru, no!" she cried, head shaking furiously. "Really? That?"

A winning smile. "Yes."

"You *are* funny!"

Shizuru laughed too, not having expected that remark.

"Why, thank you," she said. "I confess I thought you would say something more along the lines of me being 'scheming', though."

Natsuki nodded, trying to get her sniggers under control.

"You are. You scheme funny," she answered the older woman with a smirk. "Your friends will laugh."

"So they-and even my foes-should. Otherwise, you would prove more Himean than them," Shizuru said, drawing a questioning look from her. "If there is a trait held true of only the truest Himeans, it is the love of the ridiculous. In which respect you actually seem to do quite well, seeing how you can laugh with me at this."

Natsuki made a face, still too jollied to protest with solemnity.

"It is only for such things, Shizuru," she said, affable. "I only laugh when something is funny."

"As do most people, *meum mel*," Shizuru replied. "You laugh often enough when you are with me."

"Ah, that." Natsuki inhaled languidly, picking up her cup. "But that is different. Only with you."

She said it candidly, so much was certain, for she did not even notice the way Shizuru's face softened nor the faint warmth that blossomed on the older woman's cheeks out of pleasure. When she peeked out again from her cup, Shizuru's colour had already subsided. She poured more water for herself.

"Your plans, they are interesting," she said, eyes fixed on the clear jet issuing from the jug and into her beaker. "Will they take long, you think? To get you out of-of that?"

"I hope not too long. If everything is properly managed, however, it should not take long at all."

"And then you will not be urban praetor." Suddenly she was serious again, the businesslike attitude going back. "What will you be?"

"Merely just another of the other praetors, or so the aim goes," the older woman replied. All of a sudden she giggled, holding up four fingers to cover her mouth after her levity.

"Oh, it is so queer, you see," she told the girl. "This is perhaps the first-and maybe only!-time an elected urban praetor ever decided to invalidate her own election. It is hardly a position where one can complain, generally speaking."

Natsuki smiled a little at her admission, witchcraft eyes gleaming.

"So if not for this-" She made a vague, all-encompassing gesture with one hand, and Shizuru's attention pricked up when she saw that the girl was hiding something-Curiosity? Expectation?-about her answer. "You would not complain, Shizuru?"

Shizuru breathed deeply.

"I must admit I would not. But given present circumstances, that is purely academic." She waved a hand dismissively at the air.

"Timing, as the adage goes, is everything-and the timing for this happens to be grossly inopportune. Therefore I see no need to go along with it, even if I have been elected to that office already. I can still reach the consulship without becoming *praetor urbanus*, anyway, so there is no real urgency. It was merely an expectation, Natsuki, and not a necessity."

There, was that all right? She could only hope she had struck the right tone with her answer, even if she did not know what tone that should be. It was hard to tell, she thought, just what the girl was thinking at times like this. Sometimes she had the feeling of Natsuki testing her, weighing some inscrutable idea carefully after a random question, and it really did make her worry. Half of her girl was transparent, yes, and that she could easily understand and even see; but the other half was something she despaired of taming enough to read, and pure opacity.

Natsuki was murmuring thoughtfully.

"To be chosen," she said. "And to not want it."

"Natsuki?"

The emerald eyes met hers equably.

"I see it can be strange," Natsuki said. "How some will think it strange to refuse."

Shizuru's breath hitched.

"But your choice," the girl went on. "I see."

It took most of her control not to scowl at the words, for Natsuki had said them so nonchalantly she might not even have meant anything underneath, nothing of the sort of message Shizuru felt she was receiving. It was more like her-Shizuru herself-after all, to speak words with such skirting implication.

But then again, it would be a fool who would underestimate Natsuki and what Natsuki was capable of learning. Had she herself not been learning that recently?

"Essentially, yes, or I am trying to make it so," she said, just as casually as the girl had spoken. A finger came up, flicked away some hair over her brow. "Just because I have been chosen does not mean I must immediately submit to the choices of the many. *My* choice matters too. Is it not the same for you?"

That was acknowledging the shaft with a vengeance, though she cast it back without the intent to harm; there was still uncertainty over whether Natsuki had really intended there to be a sting earlier. Having established her own capacity to do the same, she now permitted herself to catch only the shortest glimpse of panic in the girl's eyes before going in another direction.

"What if you were elected queen suddenly, for example?" she asked, pretending she had been heading this way all along. "Would that not trouble you, as you once said to me? I know you believe it shall not happen, for one reason or another, but what if it actually did? Look at this odd mischance that has happened to me-never had I expected it, either."

She was speaking now of something that had alarmed her when she first learned it: the fact that Shizuru's Otomeian lover was actually-distantly, it was true, but still-eligible for their nation's chief regency. How it had shocked her when she first got wind of it! It was not even the thought that she had thus far been sleeping with and being attended by a possible future queen that stunned, but the idea of Natsuki becoming a ruler and thus forbidden from ever coming to Hime. The sacred *pomerium* of that great city did not only forbid generals with *imperium* from crossing it, but did so all kings and queens as well, no matter their power or diplomacy. No foreign ruler had ever crossed the city's boundary and no foreign ruler would ever be permitted to do it. The most he could do was to send ambassadors, princes or barons, but never could he step inside himself.

Natsuki had laughed at her concerns then, though not out of any spiteful desire to drive home that she would never agree to come to Hime anyway. Rather, the girl had explained, she could never be elected to the Otomeian throne-for the Otomeians, curiously enough, actually elected their rulers from among the eligible: all those high enough in the royal family so as to more or less keep the



blood consistent. She insisted on it again now, as tickled by the notion as Shizuru was alarmed.

"It will not happen," Natsuki laughed to her face. "I tell you again. It will not happen, there is no chance."

"I remember what you said to me," Shizuru replied. "You said it is because you are too far from the actual bloodline and they would prefer someone more closely related to the ruling family?"

"And I am not even Otomeian, really!" Natsuki actually giggled, seeming to find the discussion extremely droll. "Everyone knows it. Also..."

"Also?"

Natsuki flapped a hand good-naturedly.

"Oh, many things also," she said, face glowing in the morning sunlight coming from their window. "I am too young, not like the king's sons and daughters. They are all very much older than me."

"Yes. So I see. Where are his offspring again?" Shizuru thought of it. "Installed in the other citadels, reigning over the other Otomeian territories, I believe?"

"Mm. In the lower cities, the plains and valleys. A little far from where His Majesty is."

"I see. So they would be preferred, not least because I suppose they already have experience in ruling their own districts."

Natsuki nodded.

"They are proven, ah, proven fruitful, too," she added. "They have children and are paired. And me? Not even married."

Shizuru was surprised.

"That is a consideration as well?" she asked, pulse pounding.

"Yes," Natsuki told her. "They like for the ruler to be married. Settled,

I think they call it. It is good because it will mean, uh, I think they say it means stability. They also like them to have children, but it is not as important. They can adopt."

But the older woman had a question, which she could not help but put to Natsuki immediately.

"You are in no danger of being married?" she asked somewhat harshly. "The king would not arrange for you to be married, Natsuki?"

This time, it was Natsuki who was surprised.

"He will not," she said sharply, looking shocked. "Not for him to say. He will not make me marry."

"Are you sure? He is your king, as well as the closest thing you have to a guardian. What if he orders it? Must you not follow?"

Natsuki hesitated only a second, but for that second Shizuru's heart stopped beating.

"He will not do that," she insisted nonetheless. "He will not. Shizuru."

But Shizuru asked again, belly still turning over.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "Are you really sure, Natsuki? Because it would not be the first time, you know. Even in our nation we have guardians arranging marriages for their children purely on the basis of profit, political or otherwise."

"Yes," Natsuki told her. "Sure."

"Not as a tool of diplomacy, to cement an alliance?"

"He will not. I am not so good a, um, a guarantee. Not even a child of His Majesty."

"But if he did do it, if it so happened? Would you? Just... if he did." Shizuru had to pause and swallow: her mouth felt drier than an Egyptian desert. "Would you be bound to obey, Natsuki, if he ordered it?"

Natsuki stared back into the older woman's eyes, which bored into hers.

"But Shizuru," she started uncertainly. "I am not-"

"His daughter, I know." Shizuru nodded to show she understood that point already. "But you still have the blood sufficient. So, if it happened, would you?"

"Shizuru, he will not do-"

"Would you do it if the king ordered you?"

"But he will not-"

"Good gods, Child, answer the question!"

The girl bit her lip at the curtness of the order, teeth drawing a red fleck.

"I would not do it," she muttered, adding later with a flashing look of rebellion: "And he will not do that!"

But Shizuru had other concerns more pressing than Natsuki's paltry attempt at revolt. She was too busy thinking of the possibilities. Would the Otomeian King really not do it? *If he wants to keep his hide*, she thought, *he had better not*. Time, she saw, to send another missive to the king, perhaps with someone she trusted to convince him should it prove necessary: *Do not marry off Natsuki, do not engage her to any other, under any circumstances, else you shall have to deal with Hime's wrath through me*.

Although that would have to be worded more diplomatically, when she was calmer and more politic.

She sighed, pushing away her plate and looking up at Natsuki. The latter refused to meet her eyes, and she immediately felt sorry.

"Oh," she breathed, fingers curling into her palms. "Natsuki, I am sorry."

The green eyes flickered up, looking away just as swiftly. She tried

again, knowing that was a sign the girl was not actually that vexed.

"Truly, Natsuki, I am sorry," she said, slanting her head to one side and trying to catch the young woman's eye. "Please look at me? I did not intend to be so terse."

The sullen face lifted and turned her way reluctantly. But still the green eyes would not look at her, and still Natsuki said nothing.

"Please, Natsuki?" Shizuru asked soothingly. "I did not mean it, I promise."

The pink lips twisted, and she saw it.

"Please, Natsuki?" she cooed. "Look at me?"

And Natsuki, feathery dark brows still aslant, did.

Shizuru smiled at her. "Thank you."

But the younger woman did not respond, save for a narrowing of the eyes that caught Shizuru off-guard. The Otomeian wanted more and was silently demanding it, so much was clear.

*Daring girl*, Shizuru thought, challenged by the head-on glare as she began to explain.

"I know that I must have seemed hard-headed, refusing to listen to what you were saying," she told the younger woman, trying not to be thrown off by the cool expression in those emerald eyes. "I must have. But, I am sorry. It was... I was just..."

She exhaled a protracted sigh.

"I would not like you to be forced into being married," she confessed. "It was just that I could not stand the idea of it, so very badly."

Gradually and with effort, as though the girl were trying to prevent it from coming, a smile built on Natsuki's lips. Her cheeks, too, were bathed with sudden warmth, and Shizuru took the change with the helpless silence of a woman too smitten to do anything other than stare.

"What a silly you are, Shizuru," the young woman rebuked her, still having that pleased little smile. Shizuru, ogling her frankly, imagined she saw a spark of victory in that expression, and was engrossed in it. "I think now... yes... too much worry in you. Tsk."

Shizuru smiled back slowly.

"'Tsk' indeed. Though you may be right," she answered. "But I cannot help it."

"Hmm." Natsuki squinted. "But, there is not any worry. The king will not marry me to somebody. I will not be queen. It is just said I can be, because I am a last-a last-scion, I think, is the word? It's just a, uhm-oh, what is it?"

"What is the word? Do you mean-"

"No, Shizuru, wait. Please. I will think of it."

Shizuru waited obediently.

"Ah! A formality." She beamed at having found the term. "A formality."

"It is a formality? To deem you worthy of entry into the register of eligibles?"

"Yes. Only that. You see? There is no worry. No worry for anything, Shizuru. See?"

The older woman took a moment's pause, looking into two shining eyes that willed her *to believe*.

"Then I am glad," she said at length. "I see."

After that, two red eyes swept the Otomeian up and down calculatingly.

"You know," Shizuru remarked. "I do believe I am glad too that you do not fear me."

There was only an instant of astonishment before Natsuki's

eyebrows shot upwards, a surprised grin on her lips.

"No, Shizuru?" she asked provocatively. "I do not fear you?"

Shizuru smirked. "Not enough to withhold your rebuke, at any rate, when I do something that deserves it."

Natsuki pinked with enjoyment; she liked to be thought brave, Shizuru had noticed even before, and that was both a facet of her nature as well as the culture informing it.

"And others?" the Otomeian asked with some provocation again, speaking more as the young lover now than as the subordinate. "They do, Shizuru?"

"Oh, assuredly they do."

"They think you are so scary?"

The red eyes were now twinkling. "Most definitely. I am so very scary."

To her wonder, Natsuki suddenly shuffled to her side and began to nuzzle, chortling while digging her face into Shizuru's fair hair. Shizuru giggled too, ticklish where the tip of the Otomeian's nose brushed her scalp.

"Ah, so very scary," the other growled. "This is the silly Shizuru who is scary?"

"Cheeky!" Shizuru laughed, trying to grab the other woman but failing when Natsuki slid away. "What a rascal you can be, Natsuki. So you really do not want to be your people's Rascal Queen?"

Up tilted Natsuki's head, proud and pretty and surprisingly coquettish.

"I stay only a Rascal Captain," she declared.

"Excellent," Shizuru chuckled. "If you do not become queen, it will be proof I am lucky."

Natsuki shot her a comical look of puzzlement, mouth going open in mute query. She herself merely laughed again.

"Since you can be my pet then," she said. "My sweet little cub. And I shall not risk troubling any nation by calling their oh-so-majestic queen my precious little cub."

The Otomeian snorted disdainfully.

"There is already Shizuki," she noted. "There is the cub."

"Ah, but she is no longer such a cub and she was always more yours than mine, to begin with," Shizuru answered. "But speaking of Shizuki, come, let us fetch her. I want to see her this morning." She had another reason for that, but she did not yet tell it. "Are you finished?"

Natsuki replied positively.

"Let us wash our hands," Shizuru told her, rising from the table. "And then I have something to tell you."

After both had cleansed their hands and stood drying their hands on a towel depending from a wall peg, Shizuru turned to the girl and squeezed her arms.

"You remember what I have to do first today?" she asked, at which the Otomeian gave a nod. She was talking about her meeting with her replacement, who had requested an interview with her the night before, upon his arrival, and had set it for this morning. It had actually been an invitation for breakfast, but Shizuru had chosen to spurn that and reply that she would prefer it to be afterwards-not mentioning that she was afraid it would ruin her appetite to have to share the first meal of the day with him.

Besides which, she also explained to her amused lover, she would much rather start her day with an intelligent beauty than an arrant nincompoop. How Natsuki had laughed!

Now she smoothed her hands over the cloth of the Otomeian's dress, behind the raised wings of the pointed scapulae. When she reached the small of her back, Natsuki moved closer again, and she

permitted it.

"I am going to see him for a private interview now," she said, when they were in an embrace. "It is customary, as I told you."

She felt the other woman nuzzle her neck. She continued.

"We shall speak to each other alone..."

She paused before delivering the blow.

"And you shall not be there."

A low huff brought Natsuki's surprise, made even clearer when two hands grabbed the soft cloth of her dress.

"Please do not protest," she said, holding the alarmed body tighter. "It is better if you stay here, if you do not come with me."

Natsuki all but gasped.

"Stay?" she said, obviously struggling with the idea. "Here? Not... come?"

"Yes." Shizuru pulled away enough so that she could look at her. "I want you to stay here."

"Buh-but who will-with you?"

"I shall go alone. The two of us shall be alone."

"Alone? You... two?"

"Yes."

"Only you?"

"Yes."

The green eyes shot to their widest circumference.

" No !" she cried, to Shizuru's astonishment.



She tried to wrench away.

"Natsuki, wait." The older woman held on and tried to stay her, wondering what to make of this unexpected fury. "Wait-please."

But Natsuki continued to writhe in her grasp, pulling again and again on her dress. How slender she was, Shizuru thought distantly, able to feel every sharp and shifting bone. How easy to enfold her this way, even if she put up such resistance, the sweet savage girl. Though, if Shizuru did not get her calm soon, she suspected she might come out of this unforeseen situation a touch bruised, the way Natsuki was struggling.

She spoke, her voice firm.

"Natsuki, be still." She took the other's wrists and pulled them away from her chest, so that she might step back to look the other woman in the eye. "Hear me first, for I do have reasons for this."

Surprisingly, Natsuki replied to that.

"Don't like him!" Natsuki said excitedly, the anger whittling lines on her brow. "Reasons why? You two alone? Shizuru. *Shizuru*."

Shizuru could not suppress a faint smile at the way the young woman whined her name.

"As well you should not like him-he is from the enemy," she answered, hushing the girl again quickly when she saw Natsuki open her mouth for another protest. Oh, but it was some comfort at least that Natsuki really did not like him! "Here, do sit. Please listen to me first."

She herded her back to the chairs, to the table with the remains of their breakfast. When the Otomeian had begun to at least attempt a semblance of tolerance-glowing still, admittedly-she proceeded through her explanation.

She began with a question.

"First, why do you not want me to see him without you present?"

The younger woman sulked further, bowing her head until a curtain of raven hair veiled her away. Shizuru moved it aside, however, and tucked it behind an ear.

"Natsuki."

She watched the sensitive lips tremble as they parted.

"Not just without me," Natsuki said suddenly. "You said... you two alone. Without anyone else, I think."

"Yes. Well then, why do you not want me to see him without you or anyone else present?"

Natsuki's glance was plaintive.

"You know." It was hissed angrily. "Why ask?"

"Because, even if I did have suspicions, I would prefer to be certain. Hearing it from your lips is still more ironclad than assuming something."

Shizuru smiled patiently as she said this, thinking that this was perhaps the closest she had come to seeing the Otomeian throw a full-blown tantrum. Natsuki had come several times near it before, but never this far, or not yet before her. As she suspected, there still was a youngster's hot temper under those layers of coolness. Of any other she would have criticised this as a sigh of immaturity, but as it was Natsuki, she did not even think to perceive it as a fault. She saw it immediately as merely another thing to adore, to shelter. Thus she was able to speak tenderly to her, and with great sincerity.

"I would like to hear you say it. After all, even if I know you better by now, I would still not dare to put words into your mouth, for I cannot claim to know what you are thinking. If you would bear with me, please answer my question as best as you can. I would be very glad to know, really."

Something in her plea finally seemed to get through, and Natsuki answered grumpily.

"For last time," the girl mumbled, refusing to meet her eyes. "You

remember? Wuh-when you fought."

"Here?"

"Mm!"

"I see. For clarification, though, we did not actually fight. We merely quarrelled with words."

That earned her a wide-eyed glare.

"Words?" the girl asked her, sounding exasperated. "He pulled the sword!"

Shizuru nodded a few times, conceding that fact.

"Yes he did," she answered smoothly. "Yes. But that was all: a naked blade to wave around. Trust me, Darling, when I say that blade was still an empty threat. Setting aside the matter for now of my own ability, do you actually think he would have done it? Do you actually think he would have been so foolish as to hit me? In all seriousness?"

Two eyes stared back at her, looking perilously close to tears out of the frustration the other woman could not express properly. She actually heard the Otomeian's teeth grinding, saw the rage-flush suffuse the neck she so often kissed.

*Oh, my-that is a temper, isn't it?*

The temper exploded.

"You tell me, Shizuru!" Natsuki burst out, shaking with both anger and a sense of her own daring, to speak like this to the older woman. "Is he so foolish to do that, you ask me? Tchah! Is he foolish enough? *You* always call him 'fool'! There!"

Shizuru opened her mouth to protest, but had to swallow that original intention in favour of choking down a laugh. Really, this girl!

"Very well, so I do call him that," she agreed, holding up both hands in surrender to that point. "Still, that is not what I meant. You see,

what I was trying to tell you, Natsuki, is that if you are afraid of him hurting me that blatantly, you need not be. The reason for this assurance is written in our society."

The tempestuous eyes narrowed.

"In... society?" Natsuki echoed haltingly, temper subsiding as she was faced with something she could not easily parry. Her eyes showed some resentment for this unexpected counter, but her tone indicated she was still willing to listen. "Your society?"

"Yes."

"Um..."

She frowned again and it was clear she was discomfited by this turn their argument had taken.

"What is..." She paused. "How? Written?"

"It is written." Shizuru nodded. "In how we are. In who he is. In what I am."

She rose from her seat and knelt before the younger woman, ignoring the unkindness of the cold floor to her knees. She thought it would help calm the Otomeian if she took a slightly lower position, so as to avoid intimidating her further with this onslaught of alien sense, something easily understood by a Himean but generally unfathomable to any other. Shizuru could only hope Natsuki would be an exception in that respect.

"I am a Himean, Natsuki, and so is he," she began, taking Natsuki's twisting hands and calming them with hers atop the girl's lap. She brushed her lips across the knuckles. "I may detest him, yes, but this cannot change the fact that he is a Himean of much the same Class and much the same rank as me. We are both Himeans."

She could see her girl wrestle terribly with the words, it prompted her to open the Otomeian's hands gently with her fingers, trying to calm their tension.

"There is more," she continued. "We are Himeans above other

Himeans, products of the most ancient and noble families: patrician on my side, and plebeian on his, but both still belonging to the highest ranks of our nation. Both of us have the predecessors for it, and that is what is most important here. It is because of our heritage that either of us may take part in Hime's affairs like this, that we even have the right to any authority. It is only because of this that we are so important, that we are permitted to take our ancestors' places as the pillars upholding our nation and world, and thus become inviolate lest the whole come down crashing. Yes... think of us as pillars, Darling. Pillars on opposite colonnades but supporting one structure."

She drew the imaginary row of columns on Natsuki's palm with a finger, dotting two places where she imagined she and her foe would be.

"You see?" she asked. "We face each other, we are on different-opposite or opposing-sides, but we are still upholding only one roof, one building." She gazed softly into the emerald eyes and saw some uncertainty. "Do you begin to see this, at least? Can you conjure the image?"

The girl looked down at their linked hands, and nodded somewhat miserably. Shizuru drew her face closer for a kiss. It was Natsuki who actually ended the gesture earlier, tipping her head solemnly.

"Cuh-continue," she pronounced with tattered hauteur, looking suddenly like a forlorn little princess trying to grab at some foreign understanding that kept resisting. Shizuru gave her another kiss, feeling guilty for what she was doing. The avenue she had taken, after all, was the only one where Natsuki could not hope to counter.

"What I meant to demonstrate is this," she said afterwards. "In the sense of which I am talking, that man and I are actually still bound by a... something of a camaraderie, symbolised by the roof of that building, which covers all of us and our other fellow 'pillars'. The same roof, the roof we both uphold, is the one that also shields both of us. We are enemies, no doubt, as are many of the Traditionalists and I enemies, but we are still sheltered by that same roof. Do you see how this could be?"

A slow nod, the eyes unblinking.

"When I say we are sheltered by that roof, I must return to what I said earlier," she went on. "It is primarily by virtue of our ancestry, our heritage, that we are even pillars at all. As often as I have deplored this facet of our culture in the past-for the simple reason that so many incompetent simpletons with the blood but not the capability have been given so many demanding and delicate offices because of it-I cannot get away from the fact that I myself gained what I have partly due to my ancestry. My status, my blood, my heritage gives me the right to everything I demand and everything I could hope to gain... more than through pure skill. It gives me the right to be above and over those who may have the skill, but not the ancestry."

She paused and looked at the girl searchingly. After a few moments of this, Natsuki murmured.

"Mm," she answered simply. "And him?"

"He is also one of those with the ancestry. Not ancestry like mine, but significant nonetheless." She smirked. "He is allied to the Traditionalists. He would have to have the ancestry."

Natsuki slanted her head curiously. Shizuru would have explained had she not suddenly opened her mouth and released a soft, foreign exclamation.

"Yes," the girl said, looking at her with a little more animation. "I see why. The Traditionalists. Tradition. Dynasty is a tradition. The pillars, they stand for the dynasties?"

Shizuru grinned, almost unbearably proud of her.

"Exactly," she said. "Now, this is related to our discussion. Precisely because he is of the conservative sensibility, because he believes in tradition... and precisely because the greatest tradition in our culture is that of those who rule, who must always have the ancestry... he could never actually hope to lay a hand on me. Nay, not a finger, even."

That was exaggerating it, of course, but she saw it necessary if she would persuade Natsuki.

"Even my staunchest foe among the pack, Haruka Armitage, would never actually seek to do anything such as order a sword put to my throat-unless I did something utterly mad like seeking to overthrow the Republic, naturally, but that I would not do. My foes would even seek, in fact, to protect me against many things. Me more than most, and them more than most others, because of their principles."

The Otomeian's brow asked the question.

"Because there would be a message in it," Shizuru explained. "Let us say-purely as an imaginary situation-that something were to happen to me, or that some assassin did happen to murder me. No, please, it is purely imaginary."

She kissed the girl's lips over and over, firmly, to silence the protests.

"I shall explain why it cannot happen, Natsuki, if you shall bear with me."

Natsuki demanded her to explain.

"If that happened, think about what the message in it would be," Shizuru told her. "If I-descended from kings and queens, Hime's oldest nobility, even from Venus and Mars themselves!-if I were to be slain by some petty assassin, then what could that mean for the rest of them? If not even a descendant of Hime's most august founders is inviolate, how much less would they be? If everything they seek to protect, everything they stand for is tradition-and think of their faction's name here, My Darling-then how could they possibly risk eroding the greatest tradition of Hime by harming me?"

At Natsuki's expression, she went a little further.

"This is the same reason the House does not expel those senators who are heavily in debt, even though there is an actual law stating that a senator should be expelled for such a thing. How many senators have actually refrained from taking measures to have their

arch-enemies expelled for that, over the centuries? You see, *meum mel*, the senatorial ranks or upper classes must have a million grudges amongst the lot of them, myself included... yet they still protect each other."

The Otomeian was deep in thought, exerting all her effort to digest everything Shizuru was saying. She still had qualms about it, however.

"But you fight?" she asked. "Sometimes you fight. You try to defeat each other. You try to harm . To defeat is to harm . What is it then? How does-what happens then?"

Shizuru smiled wryly.

"Oh, we harm each other, certainly," she said. "But we harm each other in ways different from the lower castes, for we are of a world beyond theirs, with different rules and different players. We do not harm each other blatantly, unless forced to do so by a situation. Say, in battle, in a civil war. Otherwise, we do not resort to things like an assassin's treachery."

She held the large emerald eyes with hers as she went on, to impress upon the girl her meaning.

"Treachery, for us, is at the end of a passed bill, or an ally's betrayal, or a fateful speech. It is *not* at the point of an assassin's knife. If Hime breeds assassins, it is manifestly for use against those of low birth, the common, and... and the foreign. If Hime has ever had assassins, these assassins have never been used against a noble plebeian or patrician. Spies, perhaps, have been used by those of my rank against each other. But never assassins."

A stretch, but those few occasions had been gross exceptions, anyway, and universally deplored.

"We are pillars, not to be slain by a poisonous snake in hiding. We are brought down in other ways, ways beyond those of simple violence, and only after a persistent and long-standing hammering."

Thus did she explain to Natsuki why her person was even to her



foes an inviolate thing, inviting the girl to imagine it as one of the largest pillars of their society and one of the most resilient. Thus did she soothe her lover enough into accepting quietly her decision to see her replacement unattended. At the end of their talk, she noted how Natsuki not only became subdued, but also extremely meditative, like a person having been given much on which to think. Perhaps it was so: she had given the girl a great deal of information that could not so easily be placed into a simple exposition or one of those scholarly texts the girl was so fond of perusing. It had been an attempt to break down their culture she had spoken, and if Natsuki's discerning questions afterwards were to be any indication, she had spoken well. It took some time, but she did not mind sparing it. What mattered it to her that her foe was waiting? It was Natsuki who mattered, always Natsuki.

When the girl finally agreed, she sighed with relief that the Otomeian seemed to understand her reasoning. What she could not understand was why the same girl, while calmed immensely by that reasoning, seemed nonetheless to grow the more sombre after it. Still, it was perhaps only to be expected, given the onslaught of foreignness Natsuki had just been forced to digest. So she did not belabour her with more when they finally concluded, and left to fetch Natsuki's pet to keep the girl company.

Later, when they had fetched the panther and had gone to the place where Shizuru and her replacement would meet, the girl demonstrated her understanding by addressing the older woman very calmly.

"I will wait," she said, perching on a bench in the atrium that adjoined the corridor Shizuru would be taking. She was still rather quiet and composed, and even quite solemn. But when Shizuru peered at her with concern she smiled kindly.

"I will wait here, for you," she continued, a hand stroking the head of the black feline beside her. "You will know I am here and Shizuki too, Shizuru. We will not go away until you come."

Shizuru looked at the pair with gentle eyes.

"I shall come," she replied. "And I shall do my best to finish as soon

as possible, because I shall know you are here, waiting for me."

Natsuki nodded.

"Do not worry."

Again Natsuki nodded.

"I will try not to miss you... if I can," Shizuru said, head already beginning its descent. When they kissed then, she took even more care than usual in running her tongue over the other's smooth lip, in fondling the soft blade of her tongue. She did that because she thought it was only appropriate: to map so seriously the girl's mouth that she still felt its texture later, when she would speak to the man who still wanted that girl.

# Chapter 44

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Animus** (L.) - *The mind or the spirit half of a person, as opposed to the body.*
2. **Carbunculus** (L.) - *Ruby.*
3. **Corona aurea** (L.) - *One of the minor crowns, awarded to a man who slew an enemy in single combat and held his ground until the battle's conclusion.*
4. **Domine/domina** (L.) - *Master/mistress*
5. " **Ercle!**" (L.) - *"By Hercules!" A Latin expression.*
6. " **Gerrae!**" (L.) - *"Rubbish!" or "Nonsense!"*
7. **Hay on that horn** - *A Roman expression. It was the ancient practice to wrap hay around the horns of oxen that gored.*
- 8 . **Ineptus/Ineptes** - *See note below for "**Quin taces, ineptus!**"*
- 9 . **Literatus** (L.) - *Singular of "literati"; a person of letters.*
10. **Ludi Megalenses** (L.) - *Games (in Latin, ludi ) held around the end of March or the beginning of April, in honour of the Great Mother goddess, Cybele.*
11. " **Quin taces, ineptus!**" - (L.) *"Shut up, fool!" or "Shut up, incompetent!"*
12. **Tubilustrium** (L.) - *Held on the 23rd of March (or Martius, obviously the month of Mars), when the war trumpets were cleaned to bring success in coming campaigns.*

When Takeda Masashi accepted the role of supplanting Shizuru Fujino in the Northern command, he did it without reservation. He did not dwell on the disadvantages that appointment would hold or the lack of career opportunities it could deliver. He was, as the woman he would replace had predicted, neither imaginative nor audacious enough to contemplate ideas of marching upon the Mentulae, in order to sprinkle zest on an otherwise flat dish. He did not pause to think either, beyond instructing his steward to pack warmly, on the chilly climate he already knew disagreed with him; spring and milder conditions were coming, anyway, and that was apt even past preferences of weather.

Spring, after all, was the season of gentler things-and he would be bringing to the Northern mission what he fancied was a *gentler touch*. It was also the season of optimism, and he tried to be a follower of that school. A believer in the positive view, was Takeda Masasi. Hence, from the moment his co-conspirator Tomoe suggested to him the idea of taking over her cousin's command, he had bent most his feelings on the appointment to only the sweet relish of vindication.

About five months past, he had had an altercation with Shizuru Fujino. About five months past, he had left that altercation smarting, a little in body (witness the scar on his cheek) and a lot in dignity. It had been a long five months to Takeda, who had not been able to forget even when he returned to Hime. How could he, when the enemy he had thought to leave had followed him? She was at work, in the Forum, where the chatter always seemed to have her in it, whether as hero or villain of the moment. She was in his walks, when he passed the markets near his street and saw the stalls selling little plaster busts of her that girls-who obviously knew no better-bought by the dozen. She was even in his home, in his dreams, repeating her insults to him. What could be more evil than such a persistent intruder? He had put stretches of land and an entire sea between them, but she would not remove her claws from him.

And he could not turn to a friend for solace. The source of it all was not a story to tell others without diminishing the Self-and he thought he had suffered enough of that from her, without him adding to it. The sorrow was a lonely thing he kept hidden, his only company during those rare moments of rupture being a wine flagon and the empty breeze of the evening. He would send his steward away along with all the other slaves, ensconce himself in his study, and pour out his pains to a tooled silver chalice. Begin the fermenting cycle: pressed from his heart and through his muttering lips, into the wine and the cup where it swished, back through his mouth and into the gut-where it roiled so angrily he boiled off all flavour. All that was left would be vinegar. Sometimes, during the third or fourth repetition, his eyes would start stinging, and that was yet another thing to keep to himself, because he was of the old school that thought it unmanly to cry save in moments where duty required it. Ah, but he argued that this could not be considered unmanly! It was his dignity being hurt, the most precious part of his being. Impossible to stop the tears when the humiliation just squeezed it out of him.

He often thought of their quarrel, and always came to the same conclusion: that it was Fujino's fault, absolutely! *She* was the one who had reacted outrageously to what had been no more than an honest mistake on his part; *she* was the one who had goaded him undeservedly to the point of sword-draw. He had regretted that, though. He cursed himself nearly as much as he did her when he thought of his thoughtlessness in that action, loving even more the dark-haired Otomeian who had stopped him from doing anything more. He had never planned to do anything more, of course, save to put the blade back in its sheath... but *Edepol* ! That would have been dead embarrassing. Fujino would surely have added to her ridicule of him had he been forced to put it away by himself, as he had fully intended. *Never should have drawn it, looked more of a fool.* Yes, he could freely admit that: pulling it out had been quite stupid of him.

It was a good part of why he could not tell anyone what had passed between them. He could only hope his foe would not tell anyone either-she had not yet done so, it seemed-because it would tarnish both his career and his reputation irreparably. Past the fact that a sportsman did not draw on an unarmed person, there was also the

more important prohibition: no matter the provocation, no matter the circumstances, one simply did not- *could not* -think of cutting down a patrician Fujino. It was nearly on a par with thoughts of assassinating holy Jupiter. Sheer anathema, pure impracticability. He knew it. He had always known it.

So why, with that awareness, had he even drawn the sword? What was it that had blinded him enough to do that much, even if it had not blinded him enough to go further? It had to be something in the woman herself. For he could not believe that it was his entirely his fault, and blamed the act rather on the woman who had provoked it. A woman who had been more angrily amused than afraid, knowing her immunity as well as he did. To think of the disdain her eyes had spoken as she looked at him, the contemptuous laughter in those abnormal red rings...

*Pathetic*, they said, when taunting him on the nights spent with the wine flagon. *Ghost-blade for a ghost-threat. Oh, you poor, posturing weakling.*

Ah, there were his eyes again. Tears of rancour and recoil. Wound to his *animus*. Something that did not heal, only kept deteriorating. All the more as the root of their animosity was with her, not with him. And carrying out an affair so famous it reached even Hime, where people asked him to verify it incessantly, not knowing the resentment he carried.

*So Fujino does indulge in human urges after all? they would ask, atwitter and giggling. Was she really carrying on with a foreigner, Takeda-san? Tell us if you know anything!*

He would curse his luck then, and his own approachability. Why, by all the gods, did they have to ask him, out of everyone come from that benighted area? Why was it he who had to shrug, say he did not know? When the truth was that he knew, he knew the truth and he hated it!

He knew it was true because he had seen the pair before leaving Argus. He had seen the intimacy of Fujino's hand on the Otomeian, and their heads bent together, like lovers whispering. These added to the memories keeping him bitter throughout the friendless

evenings. But all the bitterness was reserved for his fellow Himean; the Otomeian he counted free of blame. For him the girl was a victim, an impressionable and innocent thing the Otomeians had sacrificed to a snake. What else could she have done but submit to that snake's authority, its lecherous avarice? How could one put any of the blame on that green-eyed creature whose face one only had to see to understand purity? Such was the depth of his amour! For, from the moment he had seen that young woman, he had been rolled up and known himself killed: he had described perfection in emerald eyes and black hair, and saw everything else grossly wanting. The optimist in him was also a romantic; he had always hoped to be struck dumb by a single look. At long last, it was that Otomeian who had finally struck him.

So when he attempted to buy her from the other Himean, he had done it in a fever of desire and longing. It had been a straightforward approach, and in love, as with the sword, he preferred straightforward approaches. But the fever had proven to have a touch of delirium, for he had committed a slight blunder and, to his chagrin, had unintentionally insulted her. Yet his intentions, his *wanting*, had been sincere. He had wanted her flesh-what man would not, he asked himself-but he had also wanted more. He had wanted to hear her voice speaking to him and telling him the soft things women said so mysteriously. He had wanted to see her face changing, coming alive because of things that he did. He had wanted to learn everything there was to learn, couched in depths of enigmatic green. Oh, her shut-up, bafflingly inward-looking feel! He wanted all of it opened and made known to him.

But Fujino had stepped in.

It always came back to the woman, didn't it? Why did she have to get everything? No-not get: rather, she *took* it. What right had she to do that? Not a patrician right, for the age of patricians was over. Their star was on the wane. But some of them, like her, still remained: privileged anachronisms reared on a diet of entitlement and snobbery. People who went their way without regard for what they considered lesser beings. His Traditionalist friends were right in saying such people had to be stopped, else they start to think they could return to being queens and kings. They needed to learn that,

in these times, even their privileges had a limit. That they could only take so much; that from them things could also be taken.

Enter him.

*This is where I come in*, he thought with satisfaction, inhaling luxuriously the sea-salt smell of Argus without disliking it, for once. What mattered it that this place was so cold, so wet and so chilling? He was here on a mission, as personal as it was public. He was here to defend both his pride and the ideals of the Republic by driving home a lesson to Shizuru Fujino, whose command he was taking.

*Ironically thanks to her cousin*, he mused, thinking of his enemy's relative, who was his friend. Tomoe was the one who had started all of this with a request, and had been the one as well to suggest that he take over for Fujino at the end of their scheme. How glad he had been to comply with that plan! It was a pleasure to do a friend a favour and get something for oneself too, in the doing. Tomoe would have her cousin back, he would have the satisfaction of knowing he had supplanted Fujino in at least one respect... and perhaps another, very soon.

He had every intention of, before long, going a-courting.

"Life is good," he said aloud, happy that the words on his lips were unsoured. "Ahhh."

His steward, whom he had brought with him this time, looked attentive.

"More wine, domine?"

"Yes, Aristion."

The bubbling sound of a first-rate vintage being poured, Takeda's lips smiling as he reflected that he could actually enjoy wine again without needing to see it as an attendant in misery. He took the refilled goblet and Aristion stepped back.

*Here's to my triumph*, he told himself, while putting the cool rim to his lips. *Here's to my victory march. Fujino may be getting hers*



*when she goes back to the city, but it's a triumph will fall short of what she wants. Because I'll be here, and that beauty will be here, and Fujino'll always, always know she's lost those things to me. After all, he was the one chosen worthy enough to take over for her. He was the one who would conclude something she had not been able to finish.*

His was the true triumph. His was the true victory.

*Although...*

He pulled away cup from his mouth, which was again turning down. There was that one little thing, was there not? That thing that slightly dampened his win, for all that he could not place it. Because he was not even sure what that thing was, beyond a ghostly niggling. If he had to describe it, he would say it was a small itch or feeling of unease, a peculiar restlessness that sometimes made him feel that a black shadow was riding him. But every time he turned around to find it or what cast it, there was nothing.

*A queer thing.*

It was not that this unseen shadow caused him much grief. How could it, with the near-completeness of his victory? Yet there was the very thing of it that made him fret: whatever that unexplainable unease was, whatever the unapparent reason, he felt as though something was still lacking. He felt, oddly, that he was still not enjoying everything as much as he should be.

It had been bothering him of late.

*Nothing's gone wrong, or hardly anything, anyway, he told himself, trying to dislodge that unknown burr riding him. All's done, I'm here and in command. What's the matter with me? Why was he letting himself be nudged by something he could not see?*

He tried to think on it, but it was especially difficult. Like other men of his variety, he was far more at ease with doing than thinking. He had not yet realised the secret of people like his enemy, who knew it was possible to do both things at once, and optimise results with that combination. For him the operational principle was focus as

much as straightforwardness: why tax his mind too when it would be simpler and more economical to fix things by hand? It was impossible to do that in this case, though, when he hadn't found what needed fixing yet. *Think, Masashi, Think.* What was it?

*I bet it's Fujino*, he decided, falling back on the usual source of trouble these days. It was probably what she had been saying to him in their few meetings, particularly in the first one since his arrival. Oh, that was another encounter with her that gave him scant pleasure to recall! Amazing how the woman managed to spoil every second spent with her. To be sure, it had not been a reunion he had expected to relish, but it had still left a few more bitter spots than he had thought it would. Was it due to her manner, which was still far too superior considering she was actually the one beaten? Or her words, which had been tartly acid, safe as poisoned honey? Might it even have been because she had not brought the one thing he had been looking forward to in that conference, which was her attendant, the Otomeian Natsuki? *Such a pretty name, Natsuki.* He had been so eager to see the girl again, after so many craving nights, unsatisfied by the occasional slave girl he used for his sexual needs. Fujino had not even brought her and had smirked upon seeing his disappointment. Though, of course, she could hardly hide her away forever. He had been sure to run into the girl later that day, in a less intimate setting. And she was everything he had remembered, he thought, everything...

He sighed, trying not to be diverted by a pair of spell-binding eyes, a face so beautiful it could cause a calamity. He was thinking of what Fujino said in their first meeting. *Yes, focus on it.*

Well, then. That first meeting. The more he thought on it, the more convinced he was that whatever was nagging at him had been there. Try as he might, he could not completely deny that something in their reunion had thrown him off-balance, even if he had entered it with all the confidence of a man marching in his triumph. Only to discover his joy in that triumph diminished by the vanquished, who acted more like an invader. She just had to set all plans askew, didn't she? So many of her words and so much of her conduct had been unforeseen to him, who found it galling because he had spent the better part of his journey to the North trying to foresee how she

would react to each little thing. *Not that way.* She *had not* acted entirely as he had expected. It had thrown him off awfully, several times. Even the opening of their interview had been different from his expectations, her first action so unpredicted it had frozen him.

She had held out a hand amiably.

"I washed just now," she said then, seeming amused when he stared at it. "I assure you it is clean."

He took the proffered hand and shook it briefly, too surprised to be irritated. The truth was, he had expected her to be a little less civil from the beginning, especially as she had refused his invitation to breakfast and moved him to a time she claimed more opportune. *Throwing her weight around*, he had thought when he received the message saying it. *Bloody irritating.*

Thus, expecting her to attempt to be even more irritating once they finally met, he had not expected her to even deign to hold a hand out to him. Yet she had done it, and had not even tried to turn it into a contest of strength-as he had been half-expecting her to do. But that was where his lack of familiarity with her showed: had he known her just a little better, he would have realised that she was too intelligent to do such a thing.

Once he got over the shock of her graciousness, instinct kicked in. He sized her up as he would one of his sword-fighting opponents. And found himself astonished again, by what he perceived as her immensity. Nothing physical in that, in spite of her literal tallness over him: it was purely a matter of presence. But what a presence it was! She felt gigantic, was gigantic. It had nothing to do, even, with the dreadfulness of her pedigree. Whatever rendered her so massive, it was purely something of the atmosphere.

*But I will not be intimidated by you*, he vowed silently, summoning the fortitude given only by dislike, of which he had stored up a great deal. *Monster though you may be, I will not be intimidated.* He reminded himself of the circumstances, of the fact that this was not her triumph, but his. He reminded himself that he was here to take away, and was not the one to be deprived. It worked, but some little voice in his mind continued to wonder, asking him how he had

forgotten this. All those times he had imagined her in Hime, had his memory been playing tricks?

During his musings, his enemy had seated herself. She looked curiously at him.

"Masashi-han?" she prompted, smoothly enough. "You do not care to sit?"

He slowly lowered himself to his couch at the question. Not only was her presence distressing him, but so was her serenity. They might have been meeting for the first time, the way she looked at him. How emotionless she could seem! It was like staring down a statue where you had expected to face something a little more feeling.

"I guess we should get right on," he finally said, unable to find the sociability for the usual chatty preface: the circumstances between them did not merit pleasantries.

"I guess we should, at that," was all she said.

"Protocol dictates I should see you first of everyone," he continued neutrally, envying her the calm and self-mastery he was painfully aware he did not possess, or not by nature. "We have to sort out some things."

"Just so."

"I am supposed to give you this, too."

"Then I shall receive it."

She took the scroll, which he explained was the official directive from Senate concerning the details of his assignment. She unrolled it and he got ready.

"Of course I will tell you its contents," he said.

"There is no need to do so."

An instant of silence, which she spent with her eyes on the parchment, and he with his eyes on her.

"What?" he sounded.

She did not even look up.

"I thank you, but I require no assistance," came her voice again, so modulated it was toneless. "I shall read it myself."

*What does she mean "read it herself"?* He frowned at the proposition, while inwardly a little comforted by it: she was being childish by refusing his help even here, in so small a matter. It showed he was not the only one affected by the heavy air between them. Even with the relief he felt at this proof of her humanity, however, he was reluctant what she suggested. The scroll was not too thin and reading took a while besides, for the separation of letters and words from each other was always gruelling, and the sorting of them into proper sentences with meaning, piecemeal. Therefore, he was only being reasonable when he protested with cool civility.

"It would be simpler to have me say it," he told her, as she continued to scan the parchment. "It's long, and I already know what's inside. I can sum it up for you."

She answered with greater coolness than his.

"How kind of you to offer that service," she said. "Does protocol dictate too to read and restate the contents of a letter intended for another?"

"Uh..." His lips thinned. "No."

"Then I shall decline the offer." A level glance of her bizarre eyes. "Very politely."

Jupiter, he cried to himself, was the woman ever annoying! Well, not his concern if she wanted to act immaturely. Let her take her time then, and look a brat for having refused the assistance.

"Do as you want," he shrugged.

She only tilted her head.

While she continued to peruse the dispatch, he remembered the wine the governor's slaves had poured for them before being sent away. Picking up his chalice, he sipped some of it while settling in for the wait. It was good, being of the very best vintage... but a few more sips made him realise that the company soured it for him. Back went the goblet on the console table between them, which he noted was of beautifully-tooled chryselephantine. *Argus is a rich province, its governor fortunate.* He had not stayed long enough to sample its delights during his last visit, unfortunately, having been in a rush to get away. Perhaps he should establish his base here, for this stay?

It was with frank surprise that he gaped when his companion announced she was done.

"You've read it?" he said incredulously, gaining an amused smile in response. Was she joking? But she was rolling up the scroll again, putting it away. So was she serious? No, impossible, she could not have just read the whole thing. For one, her lips had not even been moving, as was the case for most people when they sorted out the words while reading. There was also the matter of speed. No matter what they said about her being a genius: nobody read at a glance! She must have received the news in that scroll from another prior, he that was it.

*Yet Senate sent only one official copy, and it travelled with me.*

Feeling discomfited by this puzzle, he asked how much she had read.

"Should I recite its contents, to check?" she asked.

"I-no." He frowned, not liking the glint in her eye. "No need."

"Lovely. Now, then..."

She seemed to relax in her couch while retaining an odd and off-putting dignity. His hackles rose at it as well as the appraisal in her eyes, which seemed to murmur a blasé evaluation about him. Everything about her, he thought, was just so insufferably arrogant! The impression was verified by her next words.

"You are to warm the seat while I am away, it seems."

Blood crashing to his head. As for the patrician-hateful, blasted, inbred aristocrat!-she merely sat further back in her seat, appearing to admire his fury.

"You-you-how dare you say that to me?" he ground out, conscious of his face going puce with anger but unable to prevent it. Had he been fairer of complexion, he knew he would be bright crimson already. "I'm not your damned seat-warmer or anything of that kind! If you think-"

"I think that you should calm down," she interrupted, aping astonishment. "I must say I did not expect such a reaction at a mere figure of speech, and one so commonly used for these situations, at that."

He glowered, willing her to see that he was not falling for it.

"That *mere figure of speech* had an implication in it," he snapped in affront. "One I don't think too pleasant!"

"Actually, some might contend it had more than one," she said cheerfully. "But do tell. What was it you found?"

"That I'm just your temporary replacement!" he roared, goaded.

"I see."

She laced her fingers on her lap and smiled, deliberately infuriating. He glowered again, silently.

Until she said something more: "Yes, that would be right."

"What-How dare you say that to me?!" he howled, shuddering with the strength of a five-month-old fury. It bubbled through his limbs and broke, splashing, on a tongue that had rehearsed that other confrontation several hundred times already, always to the end of putting her in defeat. As he would now, he promised, while pulling himself and all his courage up in the Argus governor's luxuriously padded seat.

"You watch it, Fujino!" he barked. "It's you arrogant lot needs to be told something! If you think I'm going to sit here and let you speak your smart-cracking shit-"

He was unable to continue, for her own rage suddenly struck out at him. The heretofore iron calm he had been envying in the woman snapped.

"*Quin taces, ineptus* !" she snapped, biting off the words with supercilious venom. "Shut up and recollect yourself! Who do you think you are? How dare you talk to me that way-and without due cause for it? Do not even think of trying to continue it, do you hear me?"

He opened his mouth to answer, and she rounded on him in a flash.

"I mean it, Man!" she growled crisply. "Do - not - try it! Do it and I swear you shall find yourself before the army-singing soprano! I swear to the gods you shall live in regret! Do the wise thing, park yourself on that accursed seat, and be quiet!"

Oh, he gasped, shock stripping the moisture from his mouth. *What a temper-she should put hay on that horn!* Though he hated himself for it, he did exactly what she said, for there was nothing else to do. His tongue had failed him and gone limp, and all the wind knocked from his chest. Not because of her words: or he thought not, because he could not admit to having ever been felled by just that, even to himself. Rather, it was her face that had slapped him into muteness. What an extraordinary change her face had! It went beyond the lips pulled back, the powerful teeth ready to crunch into flesh. It was pure deformation, the warped becoming of a monster he had only ever seen once before. It had shocked him that time too, and now he shuddered at its return, having never had the faculty of conjuring the exact lineaments of a face, recalling the details of shape from memory. Oh, that he would never see this again, this ghastly horror!

The monster put away her fangs again, though not before smiling nastily.

"If you did read such an implication there, then what of it?" she



asked him, speaking in a soft voice he had learned could be more ominous than a roar. "I was merely hinting of something that shall happen in the future, in case it should take place before you are able to finish your supposed custody of this undertaking. How can it affect you so adversely if I express a desire to return in the future and possibly relieve you of this duty that-you would do well to remember!-is truly *temporary* ? Did you expect to quarter here forever, to stay twiddling your thumbs in the North in perpetuity? Do your directives require that? No? Then please put aside the histrionic pomposity for a situation when it actually may be warranted!"

An oppressive silence, during which time they merely tried to murder each other with their glares. She was the one who spoke again, eyes still stabbing daggers.

"We did not part on genial circumstances last we met," the woman told him. "And while I believe us both aware that we are not enamoured of each other due to that, I also believe that it is hardly sufficient cause for our meeting to degenerate to this manner of trivial quarrel. We are here to meet as representatives of our nation. Therefore it behoves us to act in such a way, instead of behaving like common riff-raff having a squabble. Unless you are truly bent on making this harder than it need be."

He coughed brutishly, hoping to dislodge his fear with that dollop of phlegm.

"That's it, is it?" he growled. "So you do find *this* hard after all."

"Yes," she admitted with startling honesty. He blinked, some of his heat dampened by astonishment. "Because we do not like each other. I do not like you, Masashi-han, any more than you like me."

"Believe me, I know it," he managed to retort.

But she inclined her head to that.

"Good," she said bafflingly. "Feelings are generally more savoury when they are mutual. While we are being so forthcoming, permit me to say one more thing openly."

She did not wait for permission, however.

"I shall remember this," the woman actually said, face contriving again to look almost ugly. *Almost*. "It may be in the future that you shall think-or hope to think-I shall not remember, but that is a vain hope. Even so, I shall set my personal feelings to the side for this moment, that I may advise you properly in whatever you need ask of me, as the one taking over for a task securing something that is in our nation's interests to hold safe and dear. I am Himean enough to put this first, Himean enough to do this. I now challenge you to prove that you are the same in that respect, at the very least. Can you possibly diminish the hysterics enough to be capable of it?"

He scowled at her query, his spirit raw from the lashing. It cast the salt on him to know, uncomfortably, that she was right in part. They did need to be calm, to interact with each other professionally. It had been silly of him to think he could talk down to her as any commoner, because he had to admit-since they were being *so forthcoming*- he knew he had no right to that. Hate it as he would, he still understood and knew that she was a woman whose warnings would have to be taken seriously. Whatever attacks he had for her would have to be phrased in a different way, and not in the manner he had just attempted.

"The sooner we finish our business, the sooner we may part," she told him, when he failed to speak. "I imagine that prospect is much welcome?"

He summoned the best sneer in his arsenal, and then felt a bit foolish, because he was not a man who often sneered, so it felt uncomfortable on his lips.

He replaced the expression with a far more natural glower.

"It would be *very* welcome," he told her, injecting poison into the phrase. His auditor seemed indifferent, however, for she had already returned to her former demeanour: cool, calm, frustratingly controlled. How in the world did she do that, he asked jealously. What mask was it in her hands, that could swing to place in an instant?

"Very well," she agreed, with a relaxed little wave of the hand that strengthened her already formidable air of aristocracy. "Let us get on with it."

Again he sucked in his lips, exerting Herculean effort to find that mastery of the self every true sportsman held. The trouble was, he doubted few sportsmen had ever needed to test their cool before a fire of this calibre. What a trial the woman could be! But there it was: she had challenged him, and he was not a pitiful man who would back away from a challenge.

*Of course I'm a true Himean too, Fujino.*

And recalling the look on her face an instant ago, the monstrous thing which had peeked out: *Maybe more so than you are.*

"Fine," he said gruffly, speaking against the knot in his throat which had threatened to asphyxiate him earlier. "You've a point."

She was content to incline her head. Ignoring the again-aristocratic gesture, he braced himself and started the discussion.

"The Senate has assigned me to take over this mission, which will still retain its original first principles," he recited, speaking verbatim from the text he had prepared and painstakingly memorised before the meeting. "But with a change of leadership, which means there will have to be some changes in approach, and-yes?"

He looked at her witheringly, angry for being interrupted. He might forget the rest of his speech!

"If you please, let us save on the rhetoric," she said blithely. "That is for the army when you address them, not for their present and would-be commanders in private discussion. We are here to speak of practicalities on running this operation. Please excuse me when I say any formal speech now would be quite wasted on me, particularly as I am more likely to dissect it as a *literatus* than a normal audience." She actually looked self-deprecating. "One of my failings-it is a compulsion I have, you understand."

Impossible not to glare at her and at the same time withdraw. She

was renowned for her oratory and literary skill, and he just might come out of one of her analyses battered. He had no expectations that she would spare him that, especially as she had just said it herself. Yet he was reluctant to leave out the speech he had already prepared, for he had devoted so much time and effort to its making, not being a man who found much pleasure in the arts of language. Not like her, who seemed to spew crafty and rhetorically superb lines without giving a thought to it. Again something that gave him occasion for jealousy. Why could he not be like that? Why was it that what came naturally to her had to be that a costly, effort-laden thing to him?

But there was the smirk in her eyes, taunting him, almost pleading him to go ahead and say what he had prepared. No, he would not give her the satisfaction of it. He made up his mind.

His old sword-master used to say that there were times when the only way not to lose was to let go.

"No," he said, swallowed. "Let's skip that, then. I'm sure you've *just now read* all about it, anyway," he retorted, with a meaningfully wicked glance at the scroll between them. She showed no sign of being fazed by the insinuation, however.

"I'm to keep two legions from the ones you have when I take over," he reminded her, permitting some victory in it. "The rest will be going away when you do."

She merely nodded.

He came out with it. "I'd like the Seventh."

"Done."

So easy! So she had expected it. "As for the other legion to stay..." He cleared his throat. "You have any in mind?"

"I thought to leave the other legion currently in Argentum, if you are amenable to it. The Eighth. Veteran, and very well-decorated. I imagine you may have heard of them before, for they still have the same number as the last time I used them in another mission,

another land."

Out swelled his lungs, expanding in a deep breath; he *had* been meaning to request one legion of her more experienced troops, afraid she would try to leave him with a greener one. Instead, it appeared she was willing to give him one of her best. Of course he had heard of the Eighth! It was the one she had with her during a famous march in her previous campaign, where she tore down three enemy fortresses in the space of only two months. Excellent! Oh, one could hate the woman, yes; but even he was not about to deny that she was a phenom in the field... and thus produced the most experienced and confident troops in the nation.

"That's good," he said, a little mollified by her generosity. "I'll take them."

She angled her head, wine-glass in hand and its contents swishing idly. "Are there any other specific requests?"

They were talking more smoothly now, characters having shifted to state officials discussing a matter.

"That's it as far as the troops go. All items belonging to them will stay here, of course."

"Hm."

He frowned, though not at her-or not entirely. "Another thing. Some Treasury officials came over with me, if you know."

"I do."

"They say you've already done the sums and passed out the notes for booty distribution?"

"I have."

"I have to say that's irregular."

"And none of your concern." She said this very mildly, so he was not quick to take umbrage. "I am aware you intend to argue for the traditional practice of letting the Treasury officials distribute booty

only after the campaign is over, which is understandable given your political inclinations. However, this matter is already settled and not up for discussion."

Up shot his peaked eyebrows.

"I don't see why not," he said coolly, lifting his chin. "They're my troops now, and that's the booty they've won."

"The key word being *they* ." Her lips turned up a little, almost smirking. " *You* won nothing. Keep out of it."

"Maybe I should say the same to you," he said menacingly, pushed by her directness. "You've meddled with what's naturally the prerogative of the State by dividing it before the Treasury officers could get here."

"The prerogative of the State is that of a few crooked officials, who skim enough off the top to ensure that Hime is cheated out of its proper share and the legionaries who fought in its name are similarly injured." She paused, wiggled her eyebrows. "Or, perhaps, you were actually more concerned about getting your own share-"

"How could I!?" He was red to the neck in outrage. "Of course not! I'm just talking about doing things properly here! In the *right* way."

"And the right way is the old one, I assume?"

He could not resist quoting the platitude. "The old ways are the best."

She shook her head and gave him a bored look. "Which saying is neither true, nor strictly logical."

"Your devotion to the traditional practice may be minutely notable, but the blindness of it fails to impress," she continued on the subject. "That is a much-corrupted practice you are defending, and I have no intent of humouring you or the other hidebound conservatives by letting a stale custom cheat several thousand soldiers who have only ever given the State honest service. Besides, your command has no retroactive power over my decisions. The most you may do is ask the Treasury accountants later if my books are correct, and

you shall find they shall agree with me-five times, at least, since I accomplished all necessary forms in quintuplicate. Aside from that, please save yourself the fruitless trouble . *Keep out of it* ."

He sat for a moment in silence. He really was concerned about the way she had so casually doled out the spoils herself, eschewing the traditional machinery of the Treasury. Avarice entered no part of his worries for, her impertinent little suggestion aside, he was truly not so thick-skinned that he would consider himself entitled to a part of that booty. Still, all things considered, this was just a little pebble on the road: it did not really matter all that much to his agenda. What to do here? Should he press it?

Eventually, he decided it was best to let it be. He could afford to be the bigger man now, after all, since he was the one who had already won. That was right, was it not? He was the one who had come here in victory, not she. The past few minutes had been so chaotic that he had nearly forgotten that. This was his triumph, and her defeat.

He reminded himself of it.

"Fine!" he said, managing to look very ironic. "Excuse me for keeping my concern for time-honoured custom and due process."

The damnable woman actually replied. "Certainly, you are excused."

He gave her a cautionary glare. "Moving on. Are there any particulars I would be better off knowing?"

"Hmm." She looked, he thought, bored again. "Oh... thousands, I imagine."

He did not immediately catch the gibe there, though he did know from her tone that he was being mocked, and so was immediately annoyed.

"Essential things," he clarified, summoning every ounce of effort to remain civil. "Things relevant to *my* mission and things *your duty* to tell me. Whatever I need know so I'll be able to put all things aright."

Ah, that gave him satisfaction! He might be the bigger man, yes, but that did not mean he would hold back on a sting or two. Gods knew

she had not done that either, anyway, so fair was fair.

*I can put the hate to the side, like you say*, he told her silently. *But it doesn't mean I forget it.*

He smiled at her flinty expression, finally beginning to feel more relaxed.

"Is there anything you can tell me?" he asked comfortably. "If not, I guess we finished faster than I'd expected."

Her lip lifted.

"Oh, there is a great deal I can tell you," she said frostily. "But here is the gist of it: you are in far over your head; your troops' numbers are grossly insufficient, their lives possibly in jeopardy under your leadership; you are unfamiliar and summon little-to-no trust from the foreign auxiliaries; and you are currently undergoing a most peculiar facial twitch around the jaw. Are you well?"

He clenched his teeth and showed them to her.

"You're incredible, Fujino," he said, the tone making it clear it was not complimentary. "You've the nerve to tell me I have to keep our quarrels out of this meeting, but you're the one who keeps giving me reason to. If that's what you really want, stop it with the insults!"

She raised her bisected eyebrow at him; he was beginning to hate that habit.

"Insults?" she echoed. "If you are talking about what I just said, then perhaps you had best think again. Those were not insults. Keep both feet on the ground, if you please, and do not be so quick to get your wind up when no one is insulting you."

She explained: "I was establishing the position. Your position. Surely you did not expect me to lie about it? You were the one who asked what I should tell you, and there it is. I was speaking candidly, since such matters are best spoken without much ado over the polite euphemisms. I mean no insult when I said those things. You are inheriting what is, in my personal opinion, an invidious situation. You must be informed of your weaknesses-if you have not yet been-so



that you may address them in whatever manner you wish, directly." Out waved a hand, the palm facing upwards. "Naturally, I shall not presume to tell you how to do that. My only purpose there was to inform, according to the request."

"All right, all right already!" he said angrily. "So you've informed me so kindly. Thanks very much!"

"You are welcome."

He bit the inside of his cheek. "Anything else?"

"Everything else can be settled outside of this meeting. My staff will assist yours in getting settled." She tapped her jaw thoughtfully. "Oh, and I should inform you that three of my legates are asking for permission to stay on, under your command."

Now that was news, thought Takeda, inwardly grinning. So three of her officers were willing to work for him? Smart people, then! Obviously those with discernment, able to see the potential in him.

"Who?" he asked.

"You are acquainted with all of them, I believe. Aidou Yuji in Argentum, Toshi Katou in Sosia, and Suou Himemiya, here."

His face lit up. "Suou-kun! I'd be glad to have her."

"And the others?"

He shrugged, not really caring about the lesser fish after snagging a whale like Suou. A Himemiya serving under him!

"Them too. I'll take them on if you recommend them," he said magnanimously.

"I do, as they are all most able. I expect them to get in touch with you soon, so you may inform them yourself, as you would perhaps wish."

A satisfied nod. "Anything else to tell me?"

"Only this, which I tender to you as the outgoing general, in courtesy: beware the wolf about to bite you in the heel."

He sat up, having waited all this time for the topic.

"Ah! The Mentulae," he declared.

"Yes."

"Hrm!" He cleared his throat, remembered what he had to say on this. He had consulted with some of his allies in Senate, as well as her cousin, and had worked it all out ahead of time. "I don't think much of that threat anymore, actually."

Her voice was suddenly remarkably dry: "Oh, really?"

He nodded at the scroll on the table.

"They sent ambassadors to us while you were here, left before I did. Some big rush, and they said they were sorry for it. But they left a message asking that we send ambassadors to them too-to fix the peace talks. They were going pretty well, it seems," he told her, speaking more casually now that he was feeling comfy. "I met their Prince Nagi. He's one of the king's own sons, and seemed like a decent enough fellow for a Mentulaean. Very courtly and educated."

She made a noncommittal sound, though her face was unconvinced. He made a point of ignoring it, having expected her prejudice.

"Since this mission is about strengthening defence and preventing any more incidents, I think I will meet with them sometime, or send a worthy representative," he continued, warming to the topic. "The Senate agrees with it. We've had our run-ins-" He glanced at her to show he remembered her battles. "But it's about time that stopped. Why keep it going when it's so unnecessary and costly? They already understand now that we can't be pushed around... especially the way you've dealt with their last threat, which put them down pretty good."

Some reluctance in that, it took some effort from him.

"So they've got the message good and learned already," he

concluded.

"One wonders," she said impassively. He searched for some more indication of how she was feeling, met that formidable Fujino wall again, and swerved away to continue.

"We need stability now," he said sincerely, leaning forward and resting both elbows on his knees. Only he would know what it cost to do that, to move closer to her instead of keep his distance. "What we need is peace, a fair settlement. The prince himself said it was what they also wanted, and only left without getting the treaty because Senate was dithering so long about other issues that we couldn't give him the time of day-and he was already being summoned back, I guess, having been away so long. A pity we didn't get the treaty done there and then. But I'll make it one of the priorities in my mission. The best defence is to get in quick, while they're still reeling from their defeat, and offer them the bait. Jupiter knows they've taken a spanking from the stick already. Not a good feeling. They'd have to be stupid to try it again! So they'll take the offer, I'm positive."

He stopped there, and was followed by a brief silence, where he supposed she was taking in his speech. But how to read what she thought of it, when her face was so unspeaking? He could only wait patiently.

The accented voice was colourless when it finally made itself heard to him. "A treaty with the Mentulae."

"Yes."

"After our *run-ins* ."

"Yes."

"Really?"

He answered affirmatively again, mindful of keeping his face stoic as hers. He could already tell from her words which way her wind was blowing though, and was not surprised. *Of course she wouldn't like it*

.

This was only to be expected: she had been the one to battle with them, the one to send the Mentulaeen King off with a flea in his ear. Yet she would not be the one to permanently remove their threat. In her eyes, he had probably cheated her of that politically defining event she had not yet accomplished. He would be riding on the tail of her scarlet cape, using what she had already gained to achieve the more final solution to this overseas conflict. Natural for her to dislike the idea. Yet what else could he do? It was now his duty, the thing she had started devolved to him. He was not about to humour her by refraining from what needed to be done, and thus take the credit for the conflict's conclusion.

*Besides, she already got those victories over them, he thought resentfully. More than enough credit for one person. Why should she grudge this to me too?*

" *Ecastor* !"

He started at her exclamation, the sharpness of her voice. There it was: she was going to carp about being deprived of it. He would much rather she would not, and would take this elegantly, but he supposed that had been hoping for too much. How ambitious was the woman that she could not leave it alone? Well, she did not have a choice in the matter. This was his task now, and he would be the one to finish it!

But the look she was giving him was not one of bitterness, but amazement.

"A treaty?" she said wonderingly. "You are saying you shall make a treaty of peace with them? After what happened?"

He bridled, but nodded quickly.

"And you had one of the royal princes and let him leave?" she asked, eyebrows high on her forehead. "The Senate permitted them to go? What was Kanzaki Princeps Senatus doing? Should he not have been handling it? Should he not have prevented them from leaving?"

He continued to stare at her, mystified by this flurry of interrogation.

Where was she going with this, he wondered. He could not yet see it, and he wished he could. He hated not knowing what was going on in her head-which, unfortunately, was usually the case.

"The Princeps was the one dealing with them," he admitted guardedly. "But they just up and left one day-Senate couldn't do anything about it, time we found out. The message was something they just left behind."

And that was when she did something very unexpected.

She started laughing.

"Oh, of course!" she said, still bearing that odd amazement in her eyes. He felt uncomfortably that she was laughing at him. "Of course the Senate could not do anything about it-though I had expected Reito-han to be more careful. *Ineptes!* How Obsidian would laugh!"

As he was not really sure for whom the "*ineptes*" was, nor even where she was really heading, he said nothing to that, and waited for her laughter to subside. She quirked an eyebrow at his stiff posture.

"It was frankly stupid to let them go," she remarked, composed again. "Even by negligence-which might be all the more unpardonable, now that I think of it. Agents should have been set to watch over them at all times, so that they could not leave the city without our knowledge. Nay, even so that they could not set a finger out of their quarters without a pair of *lictors* ready to chop it off if needed. Do you not agree?"

He let his jaw drop as far as it would go.

"Have you gone insane?" he demanded, shocked by her lack of diplomacy. And to think they said she was a politic woman! "By Jupiter, you *must be* insane. They were ambassadors, diplomats suing for peace! What are you saying?"

She sighed, giving him a look that told him she considered this another instance of unwarranted hysteria.

"What I am saying is that you should have detained the prince and held him hostage," she told him. "Then perhaps these silly dreams about making treaties with them might have been a little less impossible... But no, that is silly, my apologies. After all, a smaller measure of the impossible is still impossible, and no less definite a state than it is as an abstract quantity."

She sighed and looked terribly patient with him.

"Not that I could get many to understand that," she said, "as I am beginning to see."

His lips thinned, pressed very tightly. His cheeks were warm, too, because he felt she had been insulting his intelligence with that bizarre little aside on the impossible and quantities,. He did not really understand it and so felt patronised.

"I'd not thought you to be a warmonger before," he said damningly, making an effort to keep the attention on their real topic. "But I was wrong."

"And even now, you are that. But I imagine the experience is nothing new." She looked weary, closed her eyes for a second. "Permit me to say the truth here: I care little for what their ambassador said, since their king's actions speak much louder and hold more authority. It is not that I am being spiteful, but being cautious. The berth is wide between the two indicators, and needs must discern which is the truer."

She opened her eyes wide at him.

"And we need to remember two things, Masashi-han," she finished. "Diplomats can lie . Whereas a naked blade is-generally, though not always, hm? - true."

He ignored the allusion to their earlier encounter, not willing to be drawn into it.

"So what... are you saying we should've held them prisoner?" he said incredulously. "Gone and put them to the sword? Started a war immediately? That would've been a good job, wouldn't it? *Ercle!*"

She turned her eyes to him.

"No, please do not be so deliberately obtuse," she said innocently. "That is not what I meant. But, if you would like the condensed moral here, then very well." She crossed her legs at the knee. "All I was saying is that we should not be so quick to put our faith in ambassadors who speak contrarily to how their armies act."

A pause; he gave her a steady, probing look.

"You think they're going to attack again," he said.

"Yes."

He expelled a long-suffering breath, giving her the wry smile one would give a person with a bad joke already heard.

"Crying wolf gets old," he said dampeningly.

She grinned.

"So the villagers said, right before they were eaten," came her retort, her shoulders undertaking a small heave. "Oh well! I can see you are intent on suing for peace, so I shall simply wish you luck, though I doubt it shall come to anything." A pointed glance. "I hope, at least, that you shall do nothing so reckless as to meet them on their own ground, when you look for that treaty. That would be walking straight into the monster's mouth."

He shifted uneasily on his supple seat.

"Of course not," he told her, smarting because he *had* been considering it. But certainly not unprotected! That foolish he was not, though the hateful woman seemed to think it. "But if I do, I'd do it with the army with me," he said challengingly.

"Even then, it would be foolhardy," she said, bent on being contrary. "You have only two legions directly under your disposal, combined with a few foreign auxiliaries. Whereas the Mentulae can field a hundred thousand if they wished it."

It came out before he could stop it: "You won Argentum with two

legions and the cavalry."

She smirked, and he thought, *Shit me.*

"Yes," she agreed. " / did."

The unspoken question was clear: did he think he could have done it too, with only those troops?

While he was searching his mind for an appropriate retort, some rejoinder that would preserve his dignity without letting on his self-doubts, she seemed to remember something.

"Most of the troops I am actually leaving are not here, by the way," she said. "The Eighth is in Argentum with half of the Seventh. Only the other half of the latter legion is here with me."

He sucked on his teeth, grateful for the change of topic. He seized the opportunity.

"I heard there's one legion of Otomeian infantry there too," he said quickly. "Argentum."

"Yes."

He shook his head. "They'll have to go."

She shook her head too, seeming surprised. "Unwise. Unless you intend to send other troops to hold Argentum with the Eighth?"

"No, the Eighth can take care of Argentum by itself." He paused, bent an elbow to get some of the stiffness out of it. "I think I'll actually send for the other half of the Seventh that's there, and have them march here to join me."

"And why, pray tell, would you do that?"

"To avoid burdening that city with all those mouths, of course," he told her quite importantly, opening his dark eyes. He could scarcely believe she was asking about such an obvious thing. "Feeding legions is tough. They'll have been eating out that city's food for a while now."



She made a sound in opposition. "Besides, Argentum is being paid handsomely for it."

"Right," he said. "I've just seen the bills this morning, and they're maybe being paid *too well* for it."

"The area around Argentum does not farm," she reminded him. "So they must import their grain, which makes it perhaps a little less inexpensive."

He agreed.

"But it's still too costly," he told her. "If I move them here, where grain caravans and ships go every week before being sent to other areas, we can have a better time of it and cheaper, I expect, if we buy direct from the warehouses. And that'll be much easier than having to load and send off caravans of oxen bearing Argus-bought grain to Argentum, too. It's the melting snow will make it troublesome to do that. So, better to have the mouths here, where the stuff will be cheap."

He paused: he was pleased with himself, for he had given quite a bit of thought to this, and it was apparent she had not considered it. How *had* she been handling finances so far, with this army? She probably left everything to the officer in charge of procuring supplies, the *praefectus fabrum*.

"I hope that'll be enough, though, since two legions are still ten thousand mouths, plus what the cavalry eats. The Senate didn't give me that big a purse."

She said something that rather startled him.

"Then solicit funds for it among the local gentry." Up went that superior eyebrow he wanted to collapse so badly. "Or pay for them yourself."

He glared, unable to believe someone so famous for being tactful had just suggested such a thing. Then again, she had just spoken in favour of detaining a diplomatic party unlawfully, when they were suing for peace. Perhaps she was not really so tactful after all, he

reflected, given the number of times she had shocked him already.

"Pay, myself?" he said in disbelief. "I can't!"

"Whyever not?" She smirked faintly. "Pardon me for mentioning it, but I do believe you are hardly impoverished." And though she did not say it, he could hear her inner voice whispering: *though not of my league*. "It would surely not dent your coffers too badly to pay?"

She stopped then and suddenly looked displeased.

"Or is it that any dent, no matter how insignificant, would see you grudging it?" she asked softly.

He shook his head several times, stunned by the thickness of the woman. And why did she keep insinuating such distasteful things of him? Surely she had to see the measure of his character by now, else she was definitely not as good a politician as she seemed to think.

"That's not the point," he said with frustration. "I don't grudge them anything-I'd pay if I could! But the simple fact is I can't. They're legions of Hime. Soldiers of the Senate and the People. They're not some private army for me to feed with my money and I'm not some kind of... of... ancient feudal lord to keep them beholden to me that way. / know where *my* place is."

He met her eyes pointedly, hoping she would get the message.

"If the State empowers me to go on a mission like this, and orders me to use its soldiers as I see fit, it's still the one with the greater authority, the real master, and not me," he told her gravely. "It's the one pays for the bills, the one legitimises everything I do. It owns the army, not me. So it's only right that I follow its instructions to the letter, like a dutiful servant does his master. The State is *our* master, Fujino."

That finally got a reaction: an eyebrow twitched. He grinned to himself and continued it.

"Our armies are its armies, in the end. It's not right to act like they're ours, or trick them into thinking they're personally ours by giving

them all sorts of cash gifts or bonuses." He had been told about the unsanctioned raise she had given the army, of course, and the bonus she had given the legionaries. "To do that would be corrupt! It's a dangerous man pays for the nation's army himself and does it with the soldiers' knowledge, as though to tell them they're not the State's concern anymore but his. It'd be turning our honest legionaries into mercenaries... or cheap soldiers-for-rent! So when the State gives me this much, and tells me to make do with it, it's my duty to see to it that it stretches far enough. That means being economical. If I can do that, I'll have done my job well, kept the soldiers fed, and stayed off the temptation to be corrupt. I know what you think of me, but you're wrong: I'm not and I'll never be corrupt."

Having finished his peroration successfully, he eyed his audience like an actor waiting for the gasp. Had it sunk in, what he was saying? Did she understand the lesson he had been giving? What he saw in her face was something that made him believe the answers were positive, for she looked at him as though this were her first time to see him. Yes, he thought triumphantly, swelling. He gloried in her appraisal with cool dignity, feeling a great and wonderful satisfaction suffuse him, from the ends of his toes to the roots of his incorruptible hair.

Yes, he told her, watching the astonishment growing in her eyes. *Now you see me. Now you see how different I am from you, how there are still people uncorrupted enough to be like this.*

She said his name strangely. He nodded complacently at it, expecting that something in an awestruck tone was coming.

What came disappointed him.

"Correct me if I am wrong, please," she said, her voice deathly quiet. "This is your first time wearing the general's cape?"

Surprise at the query: he stiffened, diminished a little. Oh, so she planned to use that form of snobbery, did she? Not that she had refrained from using every other form of it. Still, she was the one who had said that they should not allow their personal tiff to colour this. For such a rational woman, then, didn't she see? Didn't she understand what he had just said, his moment of glory?

"Yes," he admitted defensively. "But I've done work as legate, among other offices."

"I see." She nodded, and he waited for the insult. "Then you must be aware it is generally conceded that generals do as I have suggested without censure. It is not... such a terrible thing." And her voice softened a little more, turning almost friendly. "It is not so dishonest as it seems. Truly."

*Eh?* He blinked several times, not knowing what to make of that odd statement. Once again, she was not doing what he had expected. Why would she say that? And in such a way to him? Unable to plumb her intentions, his caution was ignited. What was Fujino's agenda now?

"It is not symptomatic of corruption or power-madness to pay for your own legions," she said, still with that strange gentleness. "Many people have done it—perhaps majority of those who have ever held an army, in fact. There is no shame in doing so. Perhaps this would appeal to your sense of tradition as well. Do think about it."

Suddenly he caught on to it. *Edepol*, he thought, the woman had nerve! He scoffed at her, amazed by the realisation that she was trying to push him into what both of them knew was corrupt practice, into ambitiously crooked means. Suddenly whatever little esteem he had formerly harboured for her dropped and was whittled down to a splinter: to think she would even try to trick him into this, to turn him into yet another of the crooked politicians it had been Hime's shame to produce. To think she had even pretended to be friendly, just so she could drag him down to that level.

*Oh, Fujino!* he cried inwardly. *I can't believe you'd be so dastardly. I'd never have believed it if someone else told me, if I'd not seen you for what you are myself. I'm not as simple as you think; I'm not as pathetic. What you're doing now is pathetic. I can't believe you'd turn to this just to destroy me, that a Fujino would do it.*

Suddenly he felt angry with her again, but not for himself. He was thinking of all those people in Hime, back in their beloved city, who thought so much of her. He was thinking of those girls in the markets who giggled over the plaster busts in her likeness and worshipped

them, offered their pure girlish dreams to the silly things. Undeservedly. He was almost glad they were not here to see and be disappointed in their idol. He could only imagine how their dreams would fall, sullied.

"I *have* thought about it, as you should see if you'd been listening to me," he told her determinedly, setting his face into its stoniest configuration. "And I'll not be that sort of man."

"What sort of man would that be?"

He eyed her darkly. "A power-hungry hound. A man who uses an opportunity to pretend generosity when he's actually usurping the rights of the State, buying off his troops. A man whose ambitions would maybe *eat* the nation, the country."

She countered. "That is not how I interpret it, nor would it be how most would interpret it. Consider it as a donation to the State. A charitable act to the nation."

"No."

There was a moment of silence. When she spoke again, her voice had lost its attempt at amiability and was hard again.

He was surprised to find he preferred it that way.

"Please reconsider," she said.

"One should never consider dishonest practice."

She did that haughty brow-lift, and again he wished he could shave the offending body-part. "The dishonesty often lies not in the practice but the intent."

"I won't do it," he said, just as haughty.

Another indrawn breath from her, signal of growing impatience. Oh, but he was beginning to enjoy this! How wonderful to annoy someone while constantly retaining the high ground! Had he only known this would happen, he would have brought up this topic earlier, to have much longer to annoy her with it.

"That is a lame horse you are climbing, and it is ready for a fall," she said, making of it a warning. "Climb off it! Forget our petty differences for the moment and listen to fair, sound advice when it is given. I ask you in earnest."

But he was steadfast, unshaken. "I won't do it."

She set her teeth, and he could see her resolve to maintain what was left of what was proving to be a formidable temper. Would she unleash it? He found he was not looking forward to the prospect.

But just when he thought she would bare her fangs again, she merely eyed him quietly, looking vexed.

"Then may all the gods help the good men and women I am leaving in your care," she said in a whisper. "Because it seems you will not do so yourself."

He scoffed. "They'll be fine."

"Not when the Mentulae come to battle."

He frowned, irritated by the oddly chilling feel of her prognostication.

"*Gerrae!*" he exclaimed, brushing off the strange shiver that had crept on the back of his neck; surely it was just because of the way she had said it! "I don't know why you have to keep being such a doomsayer all the time. I'll take care of them fine, you'll see, and without resorting to that kind of dirty tactic you'd like me to do. I don't owe it to you to do that, but I do owe it to the Senate and the People to act as they see fit."

He received another withering glance.

"Your club-footed sense of conscience should be hidden, not flaunted," she said wryly. "I wish you would stop being hampered by that mash the Senate conservatives would serve up to you as meat. Why, even some of the Traditionalists understand that there is a difference between what is the official line and the official practice!"

"Maybe for corrupt people."

That did it: she bowed and began massaging the sharp line of her nose.

"I ask for the last time-not about the funding any longer, but for the legions' placements," she said wearily. "The Eighth must not be alone in Argentum. It must have on more legion with it. Make it a foreign auxiliary one, if you must, but it must have company."

"I thought you said the Eighth was an excellent legion?" he said, glad to find an opportunity for being sarcastic. "Or you don't believe in the soldiers you're leaving me, so much that you think they'd need support for just that one city?"

"The Eighth is an excellent legion, as is the Seventh."

He interrupted before she could say any more. "Then I don't see why you have to be worried."

"Well, the observer *is* part of the system," she said dryly, before exhaling with a sound of patent resignation; what pleasure it gave him to hear it! "Have it as you wish then. Do as you will, for it is now your army. Your responsibility."

She narrowed her eyes at him.

"But be sure to keep in mind what you said," she added. "That you would take care of the legionaries. You had best be sure that your marvellously upright ways do not fail them, because they need to be in fine fettle to guard against what could be coming."

It was his turn to speak tiredly.

"My god. This again?" he asked, running a hand through his recently-trimmed hair; he had been sure to get his barber to cut it to perfection before coming here. "I already said we'd be getting a peace treaty with the Mentulae."

"And I already said to watch out for them forgetting about it, just in case."

He threw up both hands, as exasperated by her as she seemed to be with him.

"Why?" he demanded. "Why can't you accept *your* war is over, *your* battles here finished? You've rammed it up their arses at Argentum! They've been chewed up, taught who's the authority! Crushed and bugged, by god! Even I will say it, and you already said before that there's no love lost between you and me! Why do you want a war with them so badly?"

She was unruffled when she answered.

"It is not a matter of my want," she said. "But it is because they want it. They want to expand, Masashi-han. They want these lands, the lands of our allies, the lands Hime has, these territories. They might content themselves with pushing to their other borders for now, but it is clear that the next logical place for them to hit, the nearest place for them to hit, shall be these. And why should they refrain from doing it? Perhaps they were defeated once, at Argentum, but even I-the general in that victory-can see that it was not final. Whatever was settled there was a small chat, not the full conversation! Not the final argument. Which is an argument we must win."

"I adjure you to think of it in terms of pure martial strategy for a moment," she went on. "Think like the general you must be, the legate you have been. Think of how many victories Obsidian has been having in his other exploits and how many other armies he has under his command, now that the tribes of the Mentulae are fully united under him. Do you think a loss like Argentum would be final for a man like that, who can still send another hundred thousand to match the ones he lost, and another hundred thousand after, to reinforce that? Perhaps not now-not immediately, because he will still be smarting. But soon, eventually, it should come to him. Think about it. Is it not clear we should be so wary?"

She gazed at him earnestly, her *carbunculus* eyes no longer scathing, but earnestly asking for his understanding, for him to agree. Even her tone was so sincere and desperate to be heard that he nearly gave in.

He frowned unsteadily as he started to get back his steel.

"Be that as it is," he answered, trying not to be taken in by her speech. "It can't be that bad. Even you say it's not now. And



'eventually' in these things takes several years." He shook his head, growing more firm as he listened to himself. "He won't come back so easily from it. He'll still be cringing at the thought of one of our armies for a good time. And that's why it's the perfect time to make a treaty with them. They can't refuse because they'll not dare it."

Her eyes, it seemed, were sad as she regarded him.

"So you say," she said flatly. "So you think."

"Yes." His voice was strong. "I'm positive."

She just shook her head this time. Because he had been expecting something more, perhaps another attempt to convince him, it again disturbed him.

Awkwardly, he tried to give her reason to believe.

"Look here, Fujino," he said sternly. "I'm in charge of defending this place and keeping it safe, so I'll do my best and do right by it. I don't believe the Mentulae will attack us any more, but I'll tell you now: I'll make sure they don't. I'll bind up that treaty so tight even you won't have a problem with it. I'll keep the soldiers safe. I'll take care of the North, as is my duty. *I can handle it.*"

She was sipping at her wine very slowly, and he had to wait a while before she answered him.

"I hope you are right in what you say." Her beautifully-shaped mouth thinned. "Hime... *We* cannot condone incursions into our territory."

"I know, and I will handle it," he replied tersely. "I'm not afraid of anything."

She smiled, but it never reached her eyes.

"Oh, really, Masashi-han?" she drawled. "I wonder if you have ever heard of that saying: a certain measure of fear is a necessary part of wisdom."

*A necessary part of wisdom. Fear.* There we are then, he decided, finishing his remembrance. There was the crux of her arguments to

him, it seemed. The woman liked to use fear, liked to manipulate it as part of her argument. She was one to talk about logic! Her last words, he now suspected after having thought on it, were not even really related to her initial topic: they were probably a warning to him to stay away from her Natsuki. Who would not be her Natsuki soon, certainly. Who was the territory she could not condone losing.

Good, he thought, let her be worried about it! He was certain-would make certain-the girl would go to him once she left. She would see he was a much better master, a far kinder lover than Fujino. Why, he only had to think of last night's dinner party, where they had been present, to prove it. Did not last night prove Fujino's rudeness to the girl, how shabbily she treated Natsuki? Did it not prove she herself would be the one to push the Otomeian away, to be her own undoing with her arrogance and cruelty?

*The girl deserves better... and that will be me*, he vowed, scowling at the memories. *If only Fujino'd go away already.*

But she would have to wait for the Eleventh and Fourteenth to arrive in the city, which meant anything from a few days to a week. No matter: he could be patient. What was one more week, when he had suffered for five months? Only one more week of putting up with her horrid attitude to Natsuki and to him, her annoyingly superior criticisms, her pitying glance during meetings when he told the officers something with which she disagreed. She did not restrict herself to those glances, either: she had no qualms about telling him what she thought wrong in his decisions. Ye gods, he thought, the woman was just so full of it. She was just so full of herself and her unmatched pedigree.

The men still called her 'the general', too. And called him by his name instead, though they did remember to add the honorific. Still, that was more than a little galling, especially when she had already officially turned over her position to him. He was aware that she was the one with the fabulous aura of an unmatched military career, but that did not mean he could never measure up to it, did it? It was just that he had never been given a command like this before, and never had the opportunity to lead a full army.

Well, that would change in the future. Someday he would be given

something that would permit him to prove himself. After he was done with this mission, perhaps, when he might seek election as praetor-and here he spared a giggle, thinking of how he had actually unseated his foe by helping her to that office-and then try to get a governorship in one of the more interesting provinces, one with a certain degree of unrest. He might earn repute for martial prowess then! Who was to say he would not turn out to be another legendary commander? They would see soon, by Jupiter. But at this moment, he just had to focus on proving himself to this new army. Which seemed resentful that he would be taking over it. They could not see his light, seeing only the shadow of their former commander over him.

"Oh." He clenched his free hand. "That's it."

He stopped before he could drain his cup entirely, thinking on what he had just apprehended, the nature of the thing that had been bothering him. Just as he had thought: it had been her fault again. Her shadow was the thing that sometimes obscured the light meant for him, a light he deserved and was being robbed of by this Himean version of Iskander on his high horse. Time to tell her what Iskander had been told, that she was blocking his sun. Time to get rid of the only thing holding him back from achieving his perfect victory. How to do that? How to get her evil away from him?

*I guess all I really have to do is wait*, he comforted himself, taking solace in the fact she that was just about to leave. Just a little more...

*Her ship's going out, mine's the one coming in. Mine's the luck.*

He impulsively threw the dregs of wine onto a dirty sheet of paper before him, feeling like indulging in some superstition, like a true Himean would do. He looked at the splatter of the lees and counted the branches in the splash pattern, nodding contentedly.

"I say! A six."

The voice beside him: "Domine ?"

A genuine smile, which he directed to his faithful steward.

"More wine," he demanded. "Water it a little, Aristion. I've got to meet Sugiura-san later, don't I?"

"Yes, Domine . "

While Aristion was mixing his drink, he rapped his foot thoughtfully.

"You know, I think I'd better ask her to invite the other, lower-ranked officers too, when she throws her next party." He fingered his chin, making a note to trim the shadowy stubble on it. "I don't like the way they look at me-it's not too trusting, you know? Like they still don't understand I'm the commander of the army. *Me*. Maybe if they get to know me better they'll understand it."

Aristion handed him the refilled cup. "Yes, Domine . "

"You think maybe I can ask her not to invite Fujino?" He stopped mid-sip, thought better of it. "No, that'd be stupid, she can't not do it. Hmm."

His steward cleared his throat delicately.

"If I may, Domine, " he began. "Perhaps it would be possible to ask the governor to have a party *after* the Hime-bound legions have set out? *Tubilustrum* is coming."

Takeda grinned, clapped him on the arm and squeezed, laughing wholeheartedly.

"Good man," he told Aristion. "That's a good idea, Aristion! It's perfect. She'll have a reason for having the party and Fujino'll have gone by then, I hope. If not, there's always the *Ludi Megalenses* in April."

Aristion nodded in agreement. "Yes, Domine . "

Takeda swung both legs up on the table, humming contentedly now he had another thing settled. He took an occasional sip. After a while, his gaze drifted again to the spatter of the lees on the paper near his feet.

"See it, Aristion?" he mused loudly. "It's a six."

"Yes, Domine ? "

"Six is lucky for me." He grinned. "Wouldn't you say my luck is coming in?"

Aristion nodded dutifully.

"Yes, Domine, " he told him.

While Takeda was thinking about these things, his opponent was at the Argus port with her senior legate, inspecting the ships one of the legions would be taking. Inspection was their supposed purpose, but when they stood at the bow of one of the vessels, it was Takeda they were discussing.

"... thought him vapid before, and venal into the bargain," were Shizuru's words about him.

Her friend, no longer sniffing from the cold which had afflicted her for nearly two weeks, grinned jokily.

"And that's changed?" she asked.

"Yes, to some extent. I can only hold on to the first opinion."

Theatrical surprise. "What, do you think he's straight after all, Shizuru-san?"

Shizuru met her companion's eyes coolly. "What an odd term to use, Chie-han. Straight is a relative term in politics, if not an entirely foreign one."

The senior legate threw back her handsome head and laughed in the breeze.

"Isn't that the truth." She nodded at her general. "So then, you think he's a bit less crooked?"

The general nodded with a frown. It seemed the idea did not please her one bit.

"I do."

A pause after this admission, as though to reaffirm it.

"He lacks the character for it. One cannot describe him as mercenary, not even the way most of us can be... not the sort of man who would ever be a major player in a game, because he shall lack the initiative and courage to go after the greatest prize. Oh, he is not entirely without his fair points, I shall admit," Shizuru said, and Chie smiled at the faint dislike that tainted the admission. "But they are not points that would ever make him a *great man*. Not without clout, but a follower rather than a leader. He shall never make his own faction, but will be the sort to join another's. He might reach the consulship during his time, fill it just as his ancestors have done, but he would not be the kind to be remembered for it."

Her eyes focused on the docks below as she spoke, and Chie knew she was looking for her young woman, who had left them in order to fetch the pet named after the two of them.

"On second thought," Shizuru suddenly corrected. "He may not even reach the consulship."

Her friend was curious. "Oh?"

"Do you remember that delirious little speech I told you about after our first meeting-the one he made over refusing to fund the army with his private moneys, should Senate's stipend run a little short of comfort?"

Chie swore, actually hooting from the incredulity.

"I wish I didn't remember it," she laughed, raising both shoulders and wriggling as though she could shake off the irritation that way. "Self-righteous *cunnus*, isn't he?"

"He meant every word of it."

"The delusion!"

"Really. Remember that he has never held the high command before, either."

"Oh, it shows!" Chie laughed again, savagely. "He doesn't seem to

know how the army really works, or how much commanders have to get themselves dirty for the sake of the army. Ye gods, Shizuru-san, what a shambles-" She grasped her friend by the wrist, exerting just enough pressure to show her feelings. "They've gone and stepped in it this time, they really have. The one they sent to replace you isn't worth your little finger-or the nail on it!"

Shizuru met her look gratefully, some of the coolness in her eyes melting away.

"Thank you, Chie-han," she said, before adding: "I know it."

Chie nodded, releasing her and resting one side against the rail. "But what's that got to do with him never making consul?"

Shizuru raised her hand and used it to tuck back some of her hair under her cape, because it was flying all about her face. She wished she had tied it back today, because the sea air was stiff with the breeze, and besides made her mane tougher to comb through until she washed it.

"I meant that he seems truly serious about it-making a name for being terrifically incorruptible. I admit it may give him some fame should he brandish that image in Hime, but fame cannot vote for you, whereas the Centuries can and do," she said mockingly. "They would *never* vote for him."

Chie smirked as she gave the reason. "Because the voters of the Centuries, who elect the consuls, like to know they can bribe their officials into a little something when they need it."

Shizuru agreed.

"Well, whatever the case, I wish I had tried to talk to him a little more gently," she confessed. "Perhaps I should not have tried to be sarcastic. I now doubt anything phrased as wit manages to percolate through that much density." She shook her head in self-criticism. "I do believe I lost that one, Chie-han."

But her friend denied her the culpability.

"I don't think he'd have listened anyway, Shizuru-san," she

volunteered. "Just as he refused to listen to what you told him about the Mentulae." A snort of disgust. "Making peace with them! That prince of theirs must have done some talking, all right. I can't believe they bought it."

"The prince was probably the one doing the buying."

"True." She clawed the air angrily, a gesture of impotence "Oh, I can't get over it! I can't believe the man about to replace you is such a... a spineless bastard!"

But the woman who loathed that bastard shook her head.

"No," she said. "He is not spineless."

A sudden dry laugh from her, echoed by some seagulls overhead.

" *Bastard* enough, though. He had enough spine to try and answer back to me when we first met again, you remember. Though I could see his heart was pounding in his chest as he did it, poor fool! Besides, he also has a few military decorations to his credit, among them being-if I remember aright-a *Corona Aurea* ."

Her chief legate, also a winner of that *corona* and quite a number of other decorations, grunted disdainfully. Shizuru held back her own smile: she had won that award too.

"At any rate, I would not call him uncourageous," she finished, knowing full well she could afford to be gracious since she was one of only seven Himeans to ever be awarded a decoration that reduced the *Aurea* to insignificance: the legendary *corona obsidionalis* . "He is not a coward."

"What is he then, General?"

"I do not know. Somewhat... deficient, perhaps? No, that is not the word." Chie dissolved into sniggers as Shizuru frowned at the drab sky, and looked puzzled. "Headstrong, maybe, and a little clumsy. Not entirely stupid, but not too intelligent either. Oh, what *is* the word for it?"

The short-haired woman had a suggestion: "Average?"



Her general's eyes went wide.

"By god, I believe that is it," Shizuru said, chuckling. "That would be the word. Average to a farce."

She leaned both elbows on the wooden railing, imagining the also-average face that was not unattractive, but only due to simple regularity. Only the pointed eyebrows could be considered unordinary. A regular body, muscular but not stocky, and encased in clear, dark brown skin-perhaps his best feature. A picture, she thought, of what might well be called 'The Average Man'.

She nodded. "You are right, Chie-han. Average and an idealist, besides. How dismal he is."

"And, to use Nao's words, useful as a trickle of piss."

The general's eyes danced. "Well-to consider the pain of those holding it in-sometimes, *that* might be useful."

"Not when what you face is a blaze the size of a forest fire," Chie followed, looking nasty. "It's no average mission we have here and that's the reason they sent *you* in the first place. All he has to do is remember what the Princeps said, or Mai, or all the others when they gave the speeches that got us here. The man is out of his depth."

"I know, and so did I try to tell him."

"Wish I could've seen it."

"Oh, he did not impress me," Shizuru said in dismissal.

Chie laughed, but was quickly serious again.

"So you really do think something could happen?" she asked.

"Do you not?"

"Maybe. Probably. Oh, who am I kidding? Yes, I believe you're right about it." The legate heaved a deep breath. "But not right away, I would think. The rivers will be flooding, and I doubt they would cross

the borders with all that trouble. I'm thinking summer."

Shizuru nodded. "My thoughts exactly. By that time we should have returned-or so the intent would be."

"Which means we... no, I mean you, more specifically, since my job is to be dawdling along the road," she grinned, recalling that she was in charge of the other part of the army that would be going overland. " *You* should be going as soon as possible, so you can also be reassigned to this place as soon as possible. I'd say in six days or so, going from the dispatch the marching Fourteenth and Eleventh just sent here. That's what they said, right?"

"Yes."

"So it's only six more days here-a week at most."

"Yes."

"And, in the meantime, you'll have to humour a dozen and one invitations." This was said with a laugh. "What a way to 'end' your mission. No-one who's anyone in Argus wants you to leave without having attended at least one of their parties."

Shizuru's answer was tired, showing she did not think this social task as cushy as others would.

"I must humour them," she told Chie. "After all, these are the same people writing letters daily to Hime, in support of me."

Chie was waiting for something else, and answered only briefly.

"Yes, of course you'll have to attend."

"Indeed." There was a sudden flicker of the red eyes. "I attended one last night."

*Oho, there we are!* Chie thought in excitement, girding herself for the topic of the week. *Here we go.*

"I heard about it," she told Shizuru gently, knowing the younger woman would never believe she was not already aware of the

gossip.

"Masashi-han was there."

"I heard that too."

Another flicker, with a clearer message: *And is that all you heard, you who hear almost everything?*

She answered that candidly. "Something interesting happened between the two of you, right?"

Shizuru nodded, distractedly touching her tongue to her teeth. Chie was forced to be patient, though she was already suffocated by the curiosity. How much she regretted having been unable to attend that party! Thus had she missed what was currently the talk of all the other legates, both Masashi's and Shizuru's: the animosity between the two generals, whose coolness to each other had suddenly cracked to life over a sybaritic table-spread of oyster, snail and shrimp.

"I had something of a disagreement with Masashi," Shizuru said with feigned indifference, after a while. "Nothing so dramatic as a screaming fight, or any such thing some might tell you, but we rather argued a bit in conversation. From whom did you hear it?"

Chie named her source: "I had the story from Suou-san this morning, at breakfast. She was there at that party, after all, so it was direct enough to be free of embellishment."

A sidelong smirk from Shizuru. "Not that Suou-han is the type to refrain from being literary."

"Ye-es, but she doesn't exaggerate or add to important things. I trust her instincts in story-telling."

Shizuru shrugged, still seeming very casual. Chie took that as permission to continue.

"Just so I have it from your lips, though..."

"What actually happened?" Shizuru finished for her smoothly,

demonstrating she was not entirely averse to taking the initiative in this dialogue. "He was making an ass of himself at dinner and troubling the host badly. I cut him down to size. He left a little early-though not as early as I would have wished. That was all."

Chie wilted secretly at the dryly concise depiction of something she considered so juicy and thanked her lucky stars again that Suou had been present at the event to tell her about it. It was not as though she could demand of Shizuru now to retell the story, after all, once the younger woman had delivered such a terse version: a laconic Shizuru was always somewhat menacing.

But she just had to risk a little tendril by putting it out, did she not? Just for a little probe, a little feel.

"Was it because of-" She hesitated, but finished the question, albeit tentatively. "Natsuki-san, I think?"

Shizuru answered without hesitation, because she understood her friend and understood her friend's need to ask her that thing.

"He was bothering her."

The legate let go of her earlier worries, immensely relieved that Shizuru was of a mind to respond.

"Suou-san told me that too," she admitted carefully. "Though the way she phrased it was more to the point, to be honest. She said he was 'harassing' her."

The younger woman smiled without a trace of amusement.

"He was," she concurred. "Asking so many questions of her across the table, turning the topic insistently in order that he could direct a query her way... The clumsy fool," she uttered softly. "I wonder if he actually thought to ingratiate himself to her with such a ham-fisted method. What a lack of finesse!"

She mentioned what Chie had been thinking.

"If Suou-han told you that he actually tried to berate me for answering his interrogations on her behalf, it is true," she affirmed

flatly. "And that was when the argument began. But just so it is clear, I only answered for her because she wanted it of me."

Her eyes, still raking through the people on the docks, narrowed to a mere glitter under the lashes.

"Believe me, Chie-han, Natsuki wanted it of me. I know her enough to know when she requests- *pleads* something from me. Even without her needing to do any talking."

"Which was exactly what she didn't want to do before all those people, I guess-talking, I mean," Chie agreed wholeheartedly, having seen the same thing before from Shizuru and the Otomeian in question. She could easily picture the begging glance the girl gave her friend when she did not want to answer something, silently asking Shizuru to save her by doing it. And what lover could refuse such a request for salvation when it was done with that face, and that artlessly?

"I know, Shizuru-san," she affirmed. "I don't doubt she wanted you to."

"Masashi did."

The legate was derisive.

"Even I know she doesn't like to talk in front of so many, especially if she doesn't know them," she said. "You're right. That was plainly stupid of him."

"I did try to divert him at first. But the man's persistence was legendary."

"Suou-san said the other legates thought it was amazing."

"It rather was, if you count rank stupidity and lack of refinement amazing." Her gentle accents rode on the rise and fall of a salt wind: "He could not even see how uncomfortable he made my Natsuki."

Chie did not even comment on the unambiguous possessive, knowing the legitimacy of it.

"Poor Natsuki-san," she settled for saying. "How was she feeling?"

"Terrible," Shizuru told her, looking ferocious. "She hates being the centre of conversation at such meetings, and she had to suffer his barefaced attention all evening-which rather directed everyone else's to her as well. Suou-han may have already told you."

Harshness crept into her tone for the first time. "She was miserable about it all night, you know... all the more as he had to start such a scene over it, with me. It hurt her to know people would be talking."

She paused, expression powerless for an instant, and then repeated it.

*" It hurt her. "*

The legate knew of nothing to say to that, and wisely did not try to come up with something.

"She blamed herself for it," Shizuru concluded, face impassive again. "I blame him."

Chie's brow puckered: she was imagining herself and the woman she loved in the same situation, and was comparing her hypothetical reactions to those of her friend in reality.

"He's the one at fault," she concurred. "He acted like a fool, based on what I've heard."

"You heard right. I agree."

"Well, at least this makes sure she won't be liable to like him," she said, drawing a look from the other woman that made her flinch.

"Does that imply you believe she could have been liable before?" Shizuru asked tonelessly, which the legate was smart enough to take as a lethal warning.

"No, never," she answered quickly, adding a charming smile to the apology. "I'm sorry about that, Shizuru-san, really. It's not what I meant. My stupid tongue's to blame for it, since I wasn't thinking that at all. I just meant that the man was only killing himself further in front of your Natsuki."

The acknowledgement of ownership seemed to work, and Shizuru nodded, inclining her head silently. Chie, well aware of how many things were weighing on her friend's mind, did not tax the younger woman for her severity.

Suddenly Shizuru bolted away from the railing.

"Come, Chie-han," she said, already stalking across the oaken deck of the ship. "I am satisfied with the inspection. Let us go now, if you please."

Chie ran to catch up, knowing the other woman had sighted the girl for whom she had been waiting. Stopping only briefly for a word to the captain and his company, they made their way off the vessel and to wherever Shizuru had seen *her Natsuki*.

"Oh, there," the legate murmured, when she saw the Otomeian from a distance, even more easily identifiable because of the panther at her side. There were more familiar faces with them: the centurion's body-servant, Erstin, and Nina, Natsuki's cousin.

Shizuru headed for the party like a sight-hound hot on its prey, and Chie had a private giggle over the way people instinctively scurried aside when she approached. Why should they not? The look on the woman's face as she bore down on them was so intent it came across as minatory.

"I always wonder," the fair-haired Himean suddenly remarked, not even breaking stride. "How Natsuki sounds when she is speaking. In her native language, I mean."

Chie was puzzled. "But you've heard it, haven't you?"

"Yes, but I am talking about the feel of her speech, her diction, how she seems. It is hard to get the same effect when we communicate in Himean, since her patterns are changed by the effort of translation. As for her Greek, I think the form of her education affects the speech, since she speaks it so formally-like a philosopher or scholar. I cannot be sure that is her normal way of speaking, since I suspect she is heavily influenced by the chief exposure she has had to that language, which is through literary or scholarly texts."

"I thought she was teaching you a bit of Otomeian, though."

"Yes, but only a bit. We have been so busy lately that I have not been able to continue much of my lessons." She glanced at the other woman. "Not even the interpreters can tell me, since they do not normally hear her speaking, or not in a casual setting."

The legate lifted her eyebrows and suggested a better source of opinion: "Nina-san!"

But Shizuru grinned at that. "I already asked her. And all the girl could tell me was: *She talks seriously*."

They laughed.

"You can't deny that is a truth, Shizuru-san," Chie said, still grinning. "I suppose you'll be going back to the mansion?"

She did not even say 'office', because she could tell from the look of her friend as she eyed Natsuki that it was not the office to which they would be returning.

"Yes," Shizuru said. "If you would excuse me."

"Of course." They reached their destination, and the legate greeted the pair with Natsuki. "Good day, girls. Did Nao send you for me?"

Meanwhile, Shizuru faced her lover and took her aside.

"You are just in time. I just finished," she said, bending down and turning her head to show she expected a kiss to the cheek. She did it twice, so that both sides would receive the same attention. But she paused when her hand came upon the girl's back and felt damp. "What happened?"

She twirled her so that she could see it, but Natsuki's cloak was midnight blue, the shade near black, and the dress the Otomeian wore underneath was just as dark. "Why is your clothing sodden, Natsuki?"

Natsuki wet her lips. "Just a little."



She felt the thin back once more, displeased by the patches of wet she found all over.

"Still," she said, before it came to her. "Oh. Did you pass through the brush again?"

An embarrassed grin confirmed it; Shizuru sighed.

"I do wish you would stop taking such shortcuts," she said feebly, knowing it was partly because of her impatience of late that the girl made a point of such promptitude. She slung off her own cloak and used it to replace Natsuki's, throwing the Otomeian's soggy one over her shoulder. "No protests, please. I know your feet are wet too if your back is like this. Let us hurry back and get you changed."

Natsuki drew the fresher, drier cloak tighter and huffed contrarily. "Aaah. Don't need to hurry."

"Oh, yes we do: I shall not have you getting sick. Come on, Shizuki!" she called, looking over at her companion's pet, which had been happily getting attention from the other two girls. It ran up excitedly, and she scratched its head before it moved over to Natsuki. "Well, now. She seems happy."

They waved to the others, who bade them farewell.

"We saw a nice pup," the Otomeian explained, while walking. "Shizuki played with it."

"Ah." Yes, she had meant to talk to her about that, did she not? It was as good an opening as she could get, and she decided to take it. "Shizuki did not harm it, Natsuki?"

The younger woman was affronted.

"No!" She was earnest. "Shizuki will not do that. She does not harm things."

*And what would we call what she did with my helmet's plume,*  
Shizuru nearly responded, but did not say.

"And not people too," Natsuki told her.

The Himean nodded slowly.

"A good thing," she said, watching the young woman's pet, which walked beside Natsuki like a fiendish familiar. It was that lazy time after most people had their midday meal, and the day was damp and very grey. There were not many persons on the street at this hour, but the few that were there were obviously stiffening or moving away from their path.

*Three guesses why*, she thought, noting the nervous glances at their feline company.

She came out with it: "She is getting large, Natsuki. I should not like her to get into a frenzy by accident and imperil some innocent in passing."

The panther's owner was offended again, ignoring the gasps of two passers-by who had just done a double-take at Shizuki, probably having initially mistaken her as an overlarge dog.

"She does not go into frenzy," she said, nostrils flaring for an instant. "Shizuki is nice. She is so-so-so *good*. She is good with you too, no?"

Shizuru nodded dutifully, unable to gainsay that.

"She never struggles with me," Natsuki continued. "You will see how good she is, also, if you watch her now with the bath. Ask Hermee."

She was talking about the head of Shizuru's personal staff, the Greek Hermias, whose name she had thus abbreviated because Shizuru had been interrupted the first time she introduced him, and been unable to finish the final syllable of his name. The cut-off version stuck, and even when Natsuki found out that it had merely been a mistake, it had gone too long for the girl to replace it.

Shizuru had once asked Hermias why he did not immediately correct Natsuki.

"It is not my place to question the young captain," he had replied, eyes twinkling. "I thought, Domina, that she was within her rights to call me whatever she wished. I thought too, if I may be so bold, that

you would yourself permit it."

Whenever she asked Natsuki to call the Greek, Shizuru would see him smile secretly, his expression warm. Natsuki also seemed not to dislike him, perhaps because he always made sure her panther was cared for properly, without her needing to ask. He was never cool to her, for he treated her with the same deference he did his domina . And, while Hermias was beautifully slender and well-built, with sweet doe-eyes and curly hair thick as the bush of a hyacinth, Shizuru was not at all worried by this partiality.

Her pretty Athenian steward just happened to be a dedicated follower of pederasty.

"She does not hurt people," Natsuki was saying again. "She never scratches, and does-she does-lets you get her clean. She is well-behaved and quiet, even when she is hungry. And she is very smart."

It felt as though she were peddling the animal, thought Shizuru, entertained.

"And she never strays from me too far. She stays near, and behaves well. Too, she can fetch if I make her do it. She is also very clean... as you like. A good pet."

"Oh, very well!" Shizuru laughed, holding up her free hand in surrender. "I am buying it!"

"Huh?"

She put her hand on the crown of the younger woman's head.

"I see what you mean, *meum mel*, " she told her. "And I admit what you say is not without justice. The problem remains, however, that a great deal of people cannot see it, and will have difficulty believing what you know and believe. You remember how Chie-han stiffens each time Shizuki goes sniffing about her toes? That happened just now, if you noticed. Or what about when Aisuka-han and my other scribes turn into statues?"

Natsuki's brow wrinkled.

"I am not asking you to leash Shizuki perpetually," Shizuru went on. "But I am asking you to *familiarise* her with one again, so that when the situation requires it, she may not grow agitated should you put it on her. You used to put one on her recently, anyway."

"But she was not used to going out then," Natsuki rebutted. "And now she is, and does not need it."

"I know, Natsuki, I know." She tried again. "It is merely a farce, I know, for she does not need it, but it may be a necessary one on some occasions... say if we must go about a busy street, for instance, and more persons would be likely to be alarmed at the sight of her. Perceived precautions sometimes prevent accidents. We do not want Shizuki to be roused by some fool panicking, do we? It would not be her fault, but if she harms anyone accidentally due to that, if she gets frightened and happens to accidentally hurt anyone due to that-why, people would not be quick to blame the one who panicked in the first place. They would set on the mute creature instead."

Natsuki was still pouting, but could not resist contributing a touch of humour to the discussion.

"Who?" she said. "Me or Shizuki?"

Shizuru laughed.

"That depends," she said. "On which one of you happens to be more talkative that day."

The dark-haired woman nodded.

"All right," she said, after a moment's thought. "I will put on her a leash."

Shizuru pecked her forehead swiftly.

"Thank you," she said. "I am glad. I only want her to be safe as well, of course."

"Um."

They walked a little faster at Shizuru's urging and passed through the markets, where they saw a black man with an Egyptian merchant. It was Natsuki's first time to see so dark a person, so Shizuru slowed her walk a little there, to give the girl more time to see. Afterwards, they quickened their pace again, for she was impatient to get to their quarters: not just to get the Otomeian changed, but also since she had something else about which she wanted to speak. They entered the governor's grounds by way of one of the minor gates which led to a path through the gardens. No one else was present, and Natsuki bounded a little way ahead, calling to her panther to follow.

"Keep to the path," Shizuru cautioned, smiling. "The soil here too is soggy. You shall be getting even more water in your boots."

The Otomeian, bent over her scuffling pet, looked up. Her face was animated, and Shizuru saw that she had been keeping it in until there were no others to see.

"Black men," she said excitably, when her general had caught up. "He was from Egypt?"

"Yes, I believe. His master seemed Egyptian, and there are many such persons-people with black skin-in that country. I remember from my visit there." She looked down at her companion's bright face and remembered then how amazed she had been too the first time she saw them, when she was younger. "It must be a shock to you, especially when every one of your people has such pale skin. What do you think?"

Natsuki got the look she had when she was searching for a word.

"Whew!" she finally decided, to Shizuru's mirth.

"Should I be jealous?" asked the older woman cheerfully.

"No. Shizuru. They have many in Egypt?" she asked. "Of them, you said?"

"Yes. Waving palm-fronds and carrying litters the size of a barge, ever-trailing after the nobles or potentates." Shizuru painted the

picture for her, since it was not something she had ever seen. "Some of their potentates are dark too, of course, but only along Egypt proper. Not so much in Alexandria, where the pale descendants of the Macedonians have a stranglehold on high positions. Nevertheless, the darker people are the true Egyptians. They have such skin, their complexions dark as jet, some so dark they approach the colour of your hair. Some are soft of sheen, and some glisten shiny-black. The dusk of their complexion is a wonder."

Natsuki screwed up her eyes.

"I have heard of them but not seen," she said. "I-I did not think they would be so dark."

" *He* was quite dark. There are others of lighter shades."

"He was like Shizuki."

Shizuru giggled. "Quite."

"Do they have black panthers too?"

"I do not know about that. I do not recall any, although I do remember that some of the royals keep lions."

Natsuki digested this.

"Egypt," she sighed almost longingly. "I have some things from there."

The Himean was surprised: her steps slowed a little. "You do?"

"Mm. Some traders passed, before, in Otomeia. Dark men too, but not so dark. Arabs." She glanced at Shizuru. "Arabs go everywhere, I think."

Shizuru grinned and asked what were her purchases.

"Some books. A big painted pot. Glass jars..." She broke off and turned to Shizuru with wide eyes, animated again. " *Such* glass!"

Shizuru smiled, honestly agreeing. "Egyptian glassware. It is

beautiful."

She asked then, out of curiosity: "What made you buy them, Darling? You do not really strike me as the sort of person who comes to a market and goes haggling for the goods with the crowd."

Natsuki grinned, making no attempt to deny it.

"No-and I do not haggle, Shizuru," she said, eliciting a chuckle. "But they did not come to the market first. They went first to the palace, to show the King what they brought from far away, because their leader knows His Majesty. He always goes to show the King first." She squinted her eyes. "So I see them first, because I am often beside him."

"Ah, I see."

"Those, I bought. Because it was so-so different." She paused, trying to give more meaning to it. "I thought it was good to buy because... Shizuru, I think it was *art*."

"I am sure it was," her lover agreed. "What colours were they, the pottery you chose? The Egyptians are famed for the range and beauty of colour they produce with their faience."

"A lot of pretty blue and yellow ones. Violet too."

"Lapis lazuli, gold, and Tyrian purple? A *royal* sensibility indeed!" Shizuru said as she laughed. "And here I thought you would go with something more understated."

Natsuki was quick to defend her choices, since Shizuru had been teasing her more and more lately about her own aristocracy.

"I liked them," she said.

Shizuru whistled teasingly. "At least you have taste, imperial as it may be."

She received a dirty look.

"I am often with you," the girl reminded her testily. "Good for you to

think I have taste."

"Indeed. You do pick great company." She smoothed the dark hair, which did not really need that attention. It was so flat and straight that it always described the shape of Natsuki's head, which was actually lovely, and so needed no camouflage in hairstyle. "I am always honoured to be in yours, Natsuki."

"Hmm!"

Then they were at their rooms, and Shizuru shut the door behind them and locked it. When she turned again, she found a rapidly undressing Natsuki removing her clothes. She stalked after her quickly, and saw the gooseflesh come up on the skin of Natsuki's back even before the dress was off. She bade the girl sit on the bed and wrap herself in a sheet.

"Even you can get cold," she said as she helped undo the Otomeian's boots, seeing the gooseflesh spread to the pale thin legs. She frowned when she removed a damp sock and touched icy feet.

"I keep telling you to avoid getting your feet wet," she scolded. "They are already so cold normally and now you are just tempting a chill. Colds have been going around, if you have not noticed."

"I never get colds."

"Even so. Take off the other boot now, please. I shall fetch some water and a cloth for it."

When she returned with the items, Natsuki had already divested herself of the other sock and boot. Shizuru washed and dried the girl's feet, refusing when Natsuki proposed to return the favour.

"No, just get in the bed and under the covers," she ordered, sitting on the edge of the mattress too when she was finished. She removed her own shoes and did the same to her feet as she had for Natsuki's. "Besides, I have something I need to talk you about and I must do it with a clear head."

She tossed the rag away and shrugged off cloak and tunic: every



piece of clothing to the one around her hips. Natsuki watched her actions with confusion at first, but blushed knowingly when she lay on the bed, making no move to pick up all the items she had just thrown uncharacteristically to the floor.

"Now, *meum mel*," she said, taking off the last item of clothing on Natsuki. "Kiss me again, and properly, not on the cheek."

They moved under the heavy warm sheets and started, the two of them heavy and warm too and getting heavier and warmer with each passing second.

"But Shizuru," Natsuki gasped, moaning when she felt a hungry tongue swirl in her ear. "Said... talk?"

"Yes," the older woman agreed. "But I also said I needed a clear head."

"The-oh, wait-ah!"

"Forgive me." She looked up penitently, wheezing. "Did it hurt?"

"I... no."

"Then do you object to it?"

A blush, another mumble: "No."

Shizuru laughed shortly.

"Then be quiet and let us finish . No, on second thought: do not be quiet." She crawled down and got a cry for her pains. " *Ecastor*, but you're sweet, Natsuki!"

Later, when the urgency had been sated and the girl's scent was already evaporating from her mouth and her fingertips, she sat up against the wall and explained.

"It is hard to think clearly, sometimes, when you are with me," she said seriously, with no trace of jest. "I keep thinking how much I want you, and every other thought is about it. This way, it is not so insistent that I can no longer talk so coherently. But make no

mistake-even now, moments after having you, I still want you. And that is why we need to talk, Natsuki. I know we need to talk about it."

The dark-haired woman was still catching her breath, head tossed carelessly back against a soft pillow. Her eyes slid slowly to Shizuru, the whites rolling into green.

"I just received a dispatch while I was inspecting the ship, and it said the other two legions should be here soon-in five days, in fact," Shizuru informed her restlessly. "That means I should be going in seven days, or in a week. I should be leaving in a week, Natsuki."

She saw the other's neck move and swallow.

"Shizuru-" Natsuki began, only to be cut short.

"No, not 'Shizuru', not with that tone, not again," Shizuru warned softly, arched brows closing. "Especially not after last night, with what that fool did."

She saw the embarrassment of last night return to Natsuki.

"My god," Shizuru whispered, aggrieved by the sight of her lover's pain. "I should have laid him out!"

"No, no." A calming hand touched her side briefly. "Just..."

"It was not your fault," Shizuru told her, repeating what she had been saying the previous evening. "It was his. Are you not angry with him for it?"

Natsuki answered with feeling: " Yes ."

"So am I. All the more as I know the reason he did it." Her forehead creased, face darkening. "You were too distraught to talk about it then, as was the case too for this morning. But I must tell you now, since I am sure you are aware of it. His reason, darling. You must now be aware of it."

The husky voice was lower than ever, a mere whisper: "It?"

Shizuru said it without pause and a little crossly: "The fact that he

wants you."

Natsuki's eyes shut miserably, as though the very thought of being wanted by him were a blight upon her being.

"He did that because he wants you-and will do more than that because he wants you," the older woman said unheeding. Merely saying it aloud made her blood chill with rage. "I am not about to fault his taste, but I do fault his temerity. To try to-even while you are with me. He dared to do that *while you were with me*."

She snarled, not bothering to hide the feeling.

"You must be aware of what I am saying here. Are you, Natsuki?"

Again the thin neck convulsed.

"Yes," said the low voice, drawn out by her intensity.

Shizuru nodded, satisfied.

"This changes-may change-in a week," she told the girl. "You know I am leaving in a week, whether or not you come with me. You understand? Please answer me."

"Yes."

"Good. That is good." Her timbre softened, as did her eyes. "I am not trying to make it hard for you. I only want to talk about it, Natsuki, because I no longer have the luxury of treating it as a game." She took a moment to clear the lump in her throat. "But I have never thought of you as a game. You should know that, and how I feel."

Another brush of Natsuki's hand told her the girl did, and appreciated it.

"I want to talk now," she continued. "Because all this advance and retreat is making me crazy. I need to settle some things. A week, *meum mel*, is all I may have left with you."

The lump returned, and she had to groan to dislodge it. She looked nervously at her young woman.

"Is it wrong that I should want to talk about it? That I should want to sit down for a moment, just to talk with you?"

Her companion said nothing, but there were things in the green eyes that detailed what Natsuki found objectionable in the notion. Shizuru leapt to address them, her own eyes taken over by worries.

"I shall not be angry, darling," she promised in earnest, body twisted so she could look better at her companion. "Upon my life, I swear I shall not... fly at you, or... or anything of the like."

She shook her head despondently, suddenly wanting to kick herself for that past mistake, or slam her skull into the wall.

"And I swear to you that I am sorry I have ever given you cause to be wary of such a thing," she said, "for I never meant to do it. I never meant to hurt you before, Natsuki. Or now. Part of the very reason I want to talk is because I do not - I cannot stand the thought of someone hurting you, or doing something to trouble you. I never-please believe me."

There was a rustle as the girl rolled closer, kissing her where the sheets did not cover her hip. She put her hand on the Otomeian's shoulder and caressed it in response.

"I believe you," the girl told her, punctuating it in the way she did whenever she wished to lend her words added power, or final meaning. "I believe you. *Shizuru*."

The older woman bit her lip, reaching down to pull Natsuki to her body carefully. The younger woman's legs went across her lap.

"I shall not be angry," she promised again.

"Mm."

"I shall never hurt you."

"Mm."

"Do you really believe me?"

"I do." A steady look. "Shizuru."

They regarded each other tenderly, both afraid of the waters they were going to be treading.

"Is it all right?" Shizuru asked her, curling one hand over a naked thigh. "Do you think we could perhaps talk just like this?"

She earned herself a wicked little smile for that.

"Just talk?" Natsuki asked shrewdly. "Really?"

She smiled too. "Yes, for perhaps an hour, or however long I can manage not to be distracted by thoughts of assaulting you with a kiss."

She was surprised by a soft peck on her lips.

"All right," the girl told her, ignoring her wide eyes and resting against her shoulder.

Shizuru was in shock, not actually having expected the girl to finally give in.

"Really?" she asked stupidly, receiving a breath against her neck in response.

"We can talk," Natsuki repeated, her voice firm. "Shizuru."

## Chapter 45

*There is not much to be said, other than that this is the end of the first arc, but the story shall continue.*

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### **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Amo te** (L.) - "I love you."
2. **Andromache** - Wife of Hector, Achilles' noble foe from the Iliad. The blind poet referred to in the text is Homer.
3. **Augur** - A Roman priest of divination, belonging to the College of Augurs. In the present setting, members are co-opted by their fellows, not elected by popular vote.
4. **Bellerophon** - See note for **Chimaira**
5. **Cataphract** - A military unit made up of a heavily armoured man on an equally heavily-armoured horse.
6. **Chaire!** (Gk.) - "Hail!"
7. **Chimaira** - The original chimaera was lion in front, goat in the middle, and serpent behind. Natsuki is written as using the Greek form (*chima i ra*, as opposed to the Latin *chima e ra*), though there is hardly a pronunciation difference. **Bellerophon** was the one to slay this mythical beast. Incidentally, the reference made to a lion and a snake is due to Shizuru's family seal in the story, which consists of a lion's head with a snake integrated into the halo of the mane.
8. **Et cedro digna locuti** (L.) - A well-known ancient expression, one of the highest tributes to a literary/written work; translated, it means that the work is worthy of being written on cedar. This alludes, of course, to oil of cedar, which was used to anoint valuable pieces of parchment to protect them from corruption.

9. **Hector** - See note for **Andromache** .

10. **Mater** (L.) - "Mother", just as Pater is "Father".

11. **Mirabile visu** (L.) - "Wonderful to behold."

12. **NON AVROT SED AVROCHS** - In miniscule letters: **non aurot, sed aurochs** . This is the "modern" way of writing it, by the way, but assume that within the reality of the story, it is written as all Ancient Latin used to be, i.e. without spaces in between words (NONAVROTSEDAVROCHS). The line recalls one of their conversations, found towards the end of **Chapter 41**, where Natsuki laughed at Shizuru for calling what should be "aurochs" (ancient oxen as tall as a man) "aurot" during some linguistic confusion. The meaning is: "not aurot, but aurochs."

13. **Popa** (L.) - A public servant assigned to the stunning hammer during sacrifice involving an animal.

14. **Princeps Senatus** (L.) - The head of the Senate or Leader of the House.

15. **Quaestor** (L.) - The lowest rung on the Roman Cursus Honorum or Way of Honour (the standard political track ascending to the office of consul). Quaestors for provinces were assigned to the arrangement of financial affairs.

16. **Resurgam** (L.) - "I shall rise again."

17. **Sal Atticum** (L.) - Attic salt: that is, wit.

18. **Verpa** (L.) - A verbal insult referring to the penis with the foreskin drawn back (in a state of erection).

19. **Vestal, or vestal virgin** - One of the women assigned to the priesthood of Vesta. Their chastity constituted the luck of Rome.

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**Inter Nos**

*par ethnewinter*

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Time, so the adage went, devoured all things. Shizuru found to her chagrin that crises could strip the literary triteness off adages like that. The week she had wanted to savour flew past, and left her feeling short-changed by Time, the Great Devourer. Too short, she wanted to complain, much too short! But what could any mortal do—even a mortal descended from Venus?—once *tempus* crunched its jaws?

Part of the reason time had been so hungry was that she had had so much to occupy her. Even setting aside the duties she had for the army, there had been so many other things left that she could not easily delegate. A master of organisational allotment, she nonetheless understood that there were items best handled by herself, and only left to another after having been properly founded. She had to settle arrangements with her local communications officer—or intelligence head—Yamada, such that the functions of his network would interlink with the core web she would be taking with her back home. She had to keep working on her letters campaign, gathering more supporters. She had to consult with those of her officers who had chosen to seek office with her replacement, seeking out those who were loyal to her and informing them of her plans to reassume the command.

She had to make arrangements for Natsuki, who would not be coming with her.

By rights this should make her bitter: certainly it had soured her mood during the beginning. But she had begun to view this rejection with acceptance. This resignation was the consequence of something that happened towards the beginning of the week, when she and Natsuki had their final discussion on the issue. That discussion ended with the refusal unchanged, but the acrimony over it gone: this because of a certain salve, which the younger woman kept applying to Shizuru in the rest of their time together.

The salve came, in part, in the guise of myriad attentions and favours, all of which the Himean received with delight. Each day of that last week seemed to greet Shizuru with a new offering, and while it made her so happy she thought she would explode, it also



bewildered her a little. She had grown so used to indulging the younger woman that it continued to stun her, even after six days had passed, whenever it was the younger woman doing the indulging.

She said this to Natsuki the sixth night, after receiving yet another present: a chryselephantine jewellery box with her name carved into the lid.

"Oh, but this is too much now!" she exclaimed then, thinking of the other gifts the younger woman had thrown at her so recently.

"Already you have caparisoned dear Albinus almost to becoming a bejewelled cataphract! And you presented me with that set of cups and flagon just yesterday."

Her simple words did not do justice to the latter set of gifts, for the mentioned cups and flagon were huge-enough to make Shizuru wonder if it was intended to be a subtle comment on her alcoholic consumption-and cut from the clearest rock-crystal. Given the difficulty of finding chunks of this material big and pure enough for such use, said items were quite costly, and far more precious than if they had been made of pure gold. No stranger to fine things, Shizuru knew that. She knew, too, that the rest of the gifts Natsuki had showered upon her were equally absurd in expense. Playing the hypocrite for once, she clucked.

In her defence, she truly was overwhelmed. The streak of grandness the girl had been keeping under wraps had suddenly exploded, revealing the Otomeian as liberal with gifts as she was: there was a golden signet ring bearing Shizuru's arms and initials, along with an assortment of nine other bands, one for each finger and all inscribed with the weave pattern of the Otomeians; swords in electrum sheaths so heavily studded that they might have been rolled in gems before the metal cooled, leaving them encrusted with dozens of perfect little rubies and sapphires; a set of furs for both her furniture and person, including a lion-skin cloak infused with sweet-smelling unguents; and one of her favourite things in this impressive list, a tapestry heavy with gold and silver thread, depicting a hunting party chasing gigantic oxen under a banner that said NON AVROT SED AVROCHS. The mischief of the little monster, to actually give her this token of her gaffe! She had laughed herself to tears with that one, in particular.

"All that," she said, striving mightily not to giggle now as she traced the patterns on the box. Ah, but the richness of all these things-this was one relationship where parsimony would never be an issue, at least! Especially if what this onslaught of favour validated among her suspicions of Natsuki's past was true. Of course, it did raise some other queries. The evidence already stood to support her inkling that the Ortygian fortune had not been lost; however, she had to wonder exactly how large that fortune was. And how was it that Natsuki had retained access to it, if what she thought was right?

"Now this. I am becoming atrociously pampered!" she said, easily putting aside curiosity for now. She was too much of a legacy-bearer herself to go legacy-chasing, as another would have. "You spoil me, Natsuki . "

Natsuki merely smiled and pointed out that Shizuru had not ceased in gift-giving either, and had actually started her own activity much earlier in their acquaintance.

"Oh, but that is different," the Himean replied. "Of course I should continue to dower you with presents. You know I am courting you."

A blink. "Eh?"

She echoed that playfully, tipping her head to one side. "Eh?"

"Eh-wuh-why?" Natsuki obviously found it ludicrous. " *Court*, Shizuru? Why?"

"Why not?"

The Otomeian swallowed, gulping air like a fish out of the water. Indeed, she felt very much like one.

"Shizuru," she said. "I said already thuh-that... that..."

She could not continue it, and Shizuru had to say it again for her, very warmly.

"That you love me? I remember."

Of course she remembered. How could she forget that? The day

she told the Otomeian about her feelings was also the day she surrendered to the inexorable will that permitted Natsuki to deny her invitation to see Hime and Fuuka. Only a week ago, when she had drained all exhortations trying to persuade her, and only after receiving the final and unalterable 'no' had she decided to unmask the depth of her sentiments. She had told the girl that she said it only then because she had not wanted it to guilt her into changing her answer earlier.

Natsuki had not responded, or not verbally. Shizuru had expected that, for she understood that her girl was simply not a talker. So she was contented instead to read the wet in Natsuki's eyes and the outburst of affection Natsuki had exhibited at the time. Or, at least, she had tried to be content with it... because she truly did love her and could not stomach the notion of pushing for a reply when she understood so well how difficult speech was for Natsuki's tongue. As for asking the question itself-whether Natsuki felt the same way-well, she balked at the idea. That would be putting the girl too much on the spot, she decided, and she really did not care to have a confession in that manner, anyway. It was not until the next day that she apprehended how much she had internally *sweated* over the fact of not receiving a definite answer, for it was also that day any doubts were assuaged.

That day, the one after her confession, Natsuki had given her a necklace. It had been her mother's, said the girl, and she always carried it with her in a tiny cloth pouch, sometimes tucked into her pocket and sometimes between her breasts. Shizuru was not such a fool as to belittle what the relatively simple-looking item was worth, for she knew its value lay beyond the plain silver chain with the exquisite piece of chalcedony at its end. She had seen the pouch holding it several times before, but had also assumed that the drably brown bag was merely a normal purse. She had not thought this treasure to be inside, and had certainly not expected this keepsake of Natsuki's mother. She had never imagined that unremarkable thing had contained something as precious as this.

And to think Natsuki yielded it to her.

Oh, her joy at that moment! It had been so great not even she could believe it, and had whispered out, voice shaky because she knew

the answer to this already, if that act meant what she thought it did. Whereupon she was met with an equally anxious, frightened reply.

Two women famed for their bravery in battle: both reduced to quivering, knock-kneed girls at the subject. And even more curiously, ecstatic in that moment of weakness. Natsuki certainly seemed happy-though she also seemed frightened-and Shizuru herself had gone into silent rapture. Outwardly, she had done nothing more than embrace the girl and kiss her and caress her every way she knew how, uttering her name. Inwardly, she had crowed like a lunatic.

Why not crow, she asked herself later, when finally able to settle a little and enjoy the thought with some calm. Natsuki loved her! How wonderful was that? How glorious? All other loves that had been offered up to her were suddenly moot. She cast them from that tiny part of her ego where they had been stored before. In this Natsuki's confession changed her, as much as her own confession had. She felt like a woman having been made to settle for vinegar all her life, suddenly given a taste of true wine. The difference between Natsuki's love and all those others could not even be reduced to only the girl's looks and nature, nor even to the force of Shizuru's feelings. Put very simply, it was this that caused her to value that love so deeply: of all those who had offered her their hearts, only Natsuki who had known her.

Natsuki knew a Shizuru few others did, a Shizuru that (by her own admission, it must be said) could be immensely trying to love. She did not see Shizuru with illusions because-and this was something Shizuru had begun to appreciate only through these later days of their acquaintance-Natsuki had little-to-no illusions to shade her sight. That recondite mind in the girl made its own assessments autonomously and with ruthlessness, as shown in how her eyes seemed to say, after receiving an outside evaluation for a thing, *Yes, thank you for that, but of course I shall decide fully once I see it for myself.* She rarely made the mistake of thinking an opinion was a fact, nor cherished hopes so overwhelming that they convinced her a desire would become a fact: she was too naturally practical for the first and too historically tragic for the second. In her were combined the enigma of the Arabian attitude with the science of the Grecian

mind; if there was anything in which she could be lost, it was not a mist of fantasy, but a maze of thought.

So Natsuki had begun her true evaluations of Shizuru almost independent of public opinion, and they were evaluations based on nearly six months of unparalleled observation. The girl had seen enough by then to know that under the subtlety of Shizuru's veneer was a frightful intensity, and knew also that this intensity rode astride a murderous temper. She knew the Shizuru who lay beyond the farce of endless patience, a Shizuru who could claw as well as any harpy when pushed, and who did not even need so great a push, in fact. She knew a Shizuru who could be strangely and obsessively egocentric at times, so jealous of what she considered part of her being and *dignitas* that she would destroy a hundred other beings completely for it. She knew the evils residing in the older woman, for she had seen them and seen how many they were. Yet she still loved her!

*Which means, Mater, that it turns out to be my triumph after all!* Shizuru concluded vengefully, brought to remember one of the admonitions her mother had given her on life. Many years into the past, that formidable woman had cautioned Shizuru not to expect too much from her lovers, or even her wives, when she took any of either. She had warned Shizuru not to let them know all of her.

"They shall not love you for what you are," she had told Shizuru, ignoring the flash of anger this caused in her daughter. "They shall love you for what they think you are. The true you is, regrettably, difficult to love. Looking at you now, I see too that you shall be difficult *in* love. You shall want to protect so badly that you shall consume. Passion is as much a gift as a shortcoming, daughter, and when it is like yours, it is extreme in both aspects. Oh, I know it makes you attractive to people! But in the end it can only either drive away or destroy, and I fear it is far more likely to turn out the latter, because they shall not have the strength to break free. You will scar the women in your life, Shizuru... and you do not need to hate them to do so, remember that. There are things that scar far more deeply than hate."

*You thought my love would scar*, Shizuru echoed in her head, still gritting her teeth at the predictions the woman had left: the woman

who had known her; the only woman who had been capable of cutting her like no one else-until Natsuki, that is. But Natsuki never willingly cut her, whereas her mother often had. Not out of hate! To paraphrase what the woman herself said, there were things which cut more deeply than that. Sometimes she actually wished her mother were still alive, just so she could see what Shizuru had found. She wanted to show her mother this unique and wondrous creature who both knew and loved her.

*You would see your prophecies given the lie, Mater, she thought in vindication. You had not foreseen this, nor did I: that the one I would find would not be a Himean pearl, but a foreign diamond... for this is the shining thing in Natsuki, the one that used to frighten me so much. It is what I cannot even scar, though I know I can touch it. And in the future, it is what I shall hold, safely and without marring its brightness, in my two hands.*

It tempered her resentment to know that her mother had been right in at least one thing, however: that it would be a queer fish who could know Shizuru for what she was and love her for it, not just *in spite of it*. Her mother had even gone so far as to specify that it was likely not just to be a queer fish, but a blighted one too. Shizuru could not deny Natsuki was blighted. But she believed that she would be the one to soothe that blight, and possibly even remedy it.

Returning to the moment, she smiled and took the other's hands. "I know. I remember. I prize that knowledge." She laughed, still unable to get over her happiness over it. "Do I ever! Natsuki... dear, dear Natsuki."

"Then..." Natsuki shook her head again, flustered and flummoxed by the woman before her. "Why court? Me?"

Shizuru held her by the shoulders.

"I feel I must," she answered. "Because I am leaving now and though I love you and you say you love me you will not come along. I know, I remember your reasons as you gave them to me-that you cannot come because of your duties and because you truly do not wish to leave said duties so haphazardly. I understand your dedication, your sense of responsibility..."

She put her hand on the back of Natsuki's neck and went on: "But only a fool thinks that there are things which do not change, and takes these things for granted. I am a selfish person and when I return... I want your affection for me to have changed *for the better*, so that I may actually stand a chance of getting the answer from you that I really want. I said seven days ago that it would be the last time I asked you, for now; however, there is nothing to stop me from asking again when I return, since that shall be another time. My love is not so light that it would surrender so quickly."

Though Natsuki's face was bewildered for the most part, Shizuru thought it also held a gleam of pleasure at her declaration. She would not be able to confirm anything beyond that gleam, though: she knew happiness still caught Natsuki by surprise sometimes, so much so the girl would flee at its onset, to hug it by herself. The thought of Natsuki doing that made her feel very tender.

Sometimes, it also made her sad.

But she put away sadness for now, because she knew that they had only a little time together, and there would be time enough to be sad once they were apart. In the final days before she left Argus, Shizuru made heroic effort to avoid the gloom, doing it with a mixture of work and play. She blended the two with alchemical genius, travelling all about the province taking Natsuki for outings-while also gathering more clients by stopping at nearly ever house or villa of note that they passed. It was a most effective balance.

She was not above asking Natsuki to do her part as well. "For," she explained to the Otomeian, "I have never forgotten that you are a person of great stature amongst your people, as I am." She did not say that the other reason she asked this of her was that she knew Natsuki *liked* to have it asked. Shizuru was not fool enough to think that, just because Natsuki often acted submissive, the girl ever lost sight of her own importance. She had both the influence and willingness to help Shizuru in her task: she preferred to have Shizuru acknowledge that first. The tight-lipped princess without a nation was Shizuru's equal when it came to pride, if not ambition.

Whatever ambitions Natsuki possessed, Shizuru had yet to discover.

So Shizuru laboured and loved in one week, with hardly any interruption. Perhaps the only intrusions on her rhythm were the encounters with Takeda, who often succeeded in galling her during those brief meetings but never succeeded in putting her down. He often tried: he always failed. He shot a barb: she returned a boulder. This was not to say that Shizuru's retorts to his many quips were ever crude, of course. Rather, they were so wickedly acute that they pulverised his points to the dot. As indeed she had done when he asked why she had booked ships sufficient only for a legion when she had three to bring back. She had replied, as though in surprise,

"Masashi-han, I cannot believe you ask me that! Obviously, it is because I am honour-bound to use only the moneys allocated by Senate for the task, and the allocated amount comes to only a legion's worth of transport. I fear I shall have to take the rest overland, because it is not my right to spend lavishly my own money for legions that do not strictly belong to me, yes? Gods forbid I should be so corrupt!"

Which reduced him to red-faced silence, his chagrin the greater because the girl both of them wanted had been present at the time. And smirking with distinct amusement.

He had stopped bothering them after that incident, consoling himself with the crux of his triumph, which was that she would leave and the Otomeian would stay. He could afford to be poised, he thought. Thus it was that, on the last night before her departure, he behaved himself very nicely during the farewell dinner party held by the governor of Argus in her residence, smiling so serenely at everyone and everything that Shizuru was alarmed that some change had worked on him without her knowledge... until she realised he was already imagining her absence. She shrugged it away, unwilling to be bothered by the man any more than a fleeting second.

Besides, Natsuki was holding her right hand under the table. For nearly the full duration of the meal, she made do with her left.

There were, besides her legates and Takeda's, several other personages at the table. First were two new quaestors to replace the current ones in both Sosia and Argus, and there was a new governor as well, for the former province. His name was Ikita



Senjou, one of last year's praetors.

He approached Shizuru after the dinner.

"I'm also coming with a summons for Suda Yuuji," he said, naming the man he was about to replace in the governorship of Sosia, and whom Shizuru had confronted for his indiscriminate sales of the Himean citizenship to aliens. "Tokiha-san told me all about it. He's to be arraigned for his crimes."

"Lovely," she said, voice as low as his; they were still in the Argus governor's atrium, even if they were distanced from the rest of the people. "But I doubt he shall return if you serve him those summons. Any attempt to call him back to the city shall have him smelling a rat."

"Oh, he won't. The summons is unusually phrased this time."

"How so?"

He smirked. "You've had the news, of course, that one of your fellows in the College of Augurs passed away?"

She nodded, as it had been mentioned in several of the letters she had received.

"Akko Morinaga Augur," she said, not averse to taking the roundabout way to his point. "She will be much missed."

He nodded. "She was getting old, however, so it was not a surprise. And her husband died a few months ago; she missed him badly. Everyone could tell."

"Indeed." She lifted an eyebrow, seeing what he was about to say. "Do you mean to tell me you are planning to summon Suda Yuuji to Hime by offering him an augurship?"

He smiled, enjoying her quickness.

"Not precisely offering," he clarified. "More like telling him he is under consideration and at the top of the list. No reason he shouldn't believe it. His family's distantly related to the Morinaga, and he's

also well on in both age and political experience. No matter that it would be more logical for the College of Augurs to co-opt someone actually from the Morinaga family-which is what they really intend to do: they're discussing giving it to one of Akko Morinaga's nephews-Yuuji'll believe it because he'll want to! No one refuses an augurship, and everyone wants it."

She agreed. It was a distinction to be a member of one of the priestly colleges.

"No one knows about the case being prepared against him, since it's all kept tightly under wraps by the few who know it. He won't know it's a trick until he gets back home, all eager to get one of the elite augurships-and then, whack!"

She chuckled. "The sacrificial bull, unaware of the hammer until it drops him."

Ikita snorted. "The sacrificial bulls are clean. This one's dirty all over."

"A cockroach, then, unaware of a descending boot," Shizuru amended, choosing an insect she found especially loathsome because it was so *unclean*. "I am so pleased things moved so swiftly. May I know which *papa* shall be pounding him?"

His smile was sly.

"Our Princeps Senatus," he purred.

Shizuru laughed, guessing that Senator Tokiha was responsible for this coup; securing Reito Kanzaki as a prosecuting advocate was as good as a bill of conviction. She had to remember to thank Mai for talking him into it, as she had no doubt the female senator had done.

"Good luck to the defending advocates!" she said.

"Not all the luck in the world could help them," Ikita scoffed. "No advocate could defeat the Princeps given a fair jury."

"I know at least one advocate who could, as a certainty."

"Who?"

*Me.* She did not say it and changed the subject, however, by asking him how they found the evidence she had supplied.

"Solid," was his verdict. "Aside from the mass sales of citizenship, there were the notes on his peculations and connivance with the tax-farmers. Of course they don't really matter: they're just kindling to the real fire that will burn the senatorial arses. We know it's normal for a governor to make a little money on the side by selling some citizenship here and there for an incredible price. But selling citizenship on the scale Yuuji did, by the hundreds?" He whooped, sounding like a boy. "Half of them will be so envious they'll push for a conviction."

"True: he would have been absolved had he done it in moderation," Shizuru said, grinning. "As for the knights of the jury itself, I suppose their concern shall be more for the elitist principle, however. The *Ordo Equester* is essentially conservative, and thus against all notions of diminishing the exclusivity of the Himean citizenship by bestowing it so freely to foreigners... unless there lies some significant profit for them in the act, of course. But what Suda Yuuji did benefited only him."

She paused, considered it, and nodded: "They shall convict. But I imagine he would prefer to go into voluntary exile instead of wait for that, once he sees how the odds are stacked. If he stays to the end of the trial you have planned, the sentence shall likely be one of exile anyway."

"Quite right, so you're right that he'll do the smart thing and leave quickly," he answered. "But what we're after isn't so much to punish him directly as to make an example for future governors who might be tempted into doing what he has-and for that, we need him to at least make an appearance in the courts. Public humiliation. After that, he can go running off into gods-know-what backwater. The point will have been made."

"Very well then." She inhaled languorously, looking contented. "Yes, I like it."

"We knew you would," he answered complacently. He had been in on the scheming for the capture of Yuuji, as his brother was a regular prosecutor on the Bribery Court and one of those in on the matter. That brother, the elder Ikita, had been the one to whisper in a few senatorial ears about Yuuji's misdemeanours, convincing those who mattered that it was time to replace the governor of Sosia with someone more savoury—who just happened to be his brother, the younger Ikita. All in all, he thought, working with Senator Tokiha was proving to be a very profitable association. Ikita had been afraid of getting his own version of a backwater for his provincial governorship this year, but Sosia was definitely better than what he had feared, even if it was in this wretchedly damp, cold land. He would have ample opportunity to enhance his purse... but would be certain not to include selling the citizenship as one of them.

"I take it one of my fellow augurs is part of this?" Shizuru asked him.

He answered the real question behind it, naming the augur who had started the gossip about considering him for membership.

"The Princeps also intends to file the accusations as soon as Yuuji arrives," he continued. "The man will no sooner have set foot on our city again than he'll be scouring the list of advocates for someone to defend him. Pah! Nothing to defend. You said it earlier: the conviction is practically assured. Even if he's a Yuuji, they're not a power these days. Too impoverished, too long since one of them got in the consul's chair. That's a family that's used up its clout."

Shizuru touched a tapered finger to her chin.

"They are related to the Terauchi," she noted, naming another Famous Family that was not impoverished, and not without clout either: the last Terauchi in the consul's seat had been only five years ago. "And related by marriage to the Akagi." A staunchly conservative family, long-standing members of the Traditionalists. Also not without clout. "I wonder if that shall present problems."

Even if she said that, she did not look at all worried. Ikita wondered if she was even capable of it.

"It won't be a problem," he replied, smiling at her with genuine liking.

Surprising to find that he liked her confidence. It was often something he found grating on others, but not on her. Now why was that? She was so young! And yet none of her confidence came off to him as the arrogance of youth. He suspected she could back it up firmly.

"I'm beginning to suspect one of the few lacks you have, Fujino-san, if not the only one. You don't chinwag as much as you should!" he told her, softening the friendly criticism with a laugh. "If you'd been reading the letters your more gossipy friends back home have surely been sending you, you'd know that the Akagi have recently cut ties with the Yuuji."

"Oh?"

"Yes, ever since a row between our Yuuji's first cousin and that cousin's wife-an Akagi-whom he's divorced rather bitterly. As for the plebeian Terauchi, they might be popular among the masses. Always were, after that lunatic one of them who tried to stir up a popular revolt. But they've no clout with the upper classes, precisely because of that reputation. The only reason Ryu Terauchi got elected consul a few years ago-five years past, I think?-was because-

"He's actually a Terauchi only by adoption, but really a *conservative* Higurashi by birth as well as loyalty," she said, laughing too at the intricacies of Himean society. "They let him be adopted by the Terauchi because the Higurashi family fortune was too small to pay for more children to go into a political career. However, they also adopted him out too late for him to grow up naturally aligned to the Terauchi's plebeian cause: he was already past adolescence when it happened. Thus, Ryu Terauchi by law was actually Ryu Higurashi by allegiance. Or so it was said. Yes, now I remember!"

"Not enough, you don't, or you forgot to mention it if you do. Ryu Terauchi, really a Higurashi, was also under the thumb of his mistress, who was a Wang-another conservative family, take note!"

"Duly noted," she giggled, honestly entertained by the intricacies of Himean social alliances. "Oh, you are right, Ikita-han. I should indulge in gossip more often. I do believe I rather enjoy it too."

"Should," he agreed. "It's un-Himean not to. Don't worry, Fujino-san, he'll go down."

She nodded, pleased by *this* Senate-sent replacement.

"I hope he does," she agreed. "At any rate, my thanks for the information, Ikita-han. I wish you well in your new province."

"Only regret that I couldn't have been here earlier to work with you. No insult to your replacement, but I just wish you weren't going yet." He stopped, remembered something. "You're going tomorrow."

"Yes?"

"Word to the wise. The conservatives are waiting for you." He nodded to her. "Don't know what they'll try, but they're boiling, all right. Armitage in particular is sore."

Shizuru smiled back, imagining the prognathous set of her old foe's countenance.

"Is she ever not?" she said. "I expected it."

He grinned. "She'll be grudging that you'll get a triumph aside from having been returned at the top of the praetors' poll in the elections. She was denied her triumph recently, if you know."

"Oh, I do!" she laughed lightly. "That piece of gossip I simply had to learn."

He laughed too, and they concluded their talk. He left her with an affable reminder.

"If you ever have a question about what's going round the rumour mills," he grinned. "Just ask me!"

After he had left, Shizuru found herself ranged alongside her friend, Suou.

"I see you've met Ikita-san," the younger woman said.

"I like him. Sharp. Not as venal as the man he is replacing."

"Oh, yes, he's honourable. His family's hard up for money, though."

"Ah?" Shizuru smiled, understanding the suggestion. "Then let us hope he considers me worthy of an application for a loan."

Suou nodded and began to step a little further away from the others. Shizuru followed her.

"A quick word," the Himemiya said, as they stopped beside an open window.

The two tall women moved closer together, bestowing open smiles upon each other at the same time to confuse anyone watching into thinking they were merely having a casual after-dinner chat.

"This is your first time to meet Masashi's senior legate too," the blue-eyed woman said.

"Yes, indeed."

She caught sight of him from the corner of an eye, talking to the Argus governor and Takeda. Masashi's senior legate was a man of noble family, one of those that had also recently suffered deficiencies in the purse-so many of the Famous Families were skirting penury!-but had suffered no deficiencies in the countenance. The Ushida were famous for producing good-looking men and women, and this one was a specimen, a rich brown beauty from russet hair to honeyed skin. He was quite chummy with Takeda too, Shizuru thought, from the way they slapped each other's shoulders.

Suou spoke. "And?"

A pause from Shizuru at this invitation to assess the man, whom she thought an abrasive and stuck-up xenophobe. She said, however, with some conciliation: "He seems an interesting one."

"He's a stuck-up, xenophobic ass," said Suou.

Shizuru's eyes danced.

"I'm worried about him."

"So am I," Shizuru admitted, grave again. They were talking very quietly now, their voices hardly more than breath. "No doubt the man knows his warfare. I can see that, and someone told me about his record earlier. He would command troops well."

Suou said the rest: "But wouldn't do the same for foreign auxiliaries, which brings up a problem with the Otomeian auxiliaries."

"He would be likely to antagonise them," Shizuru answered. "Cannot be let happen."

"I'll keep them apart," Suou promised, letting a touch of anxiety into her voice. "I'm angling Masashi into giving me leadership of the cavalry, since I have more experience with horse than most of the officers on his staff, and the Otomeians know me. I think he will give me that, but it's better to be sure. So, I wanted to ask if you could talk to Natsuki-san for me tonight about conferring with the other Otomeian barons to support my bid for the cavalry headship. I intend to follow up myself, of course, but I imagine it would be better if *you* were the one to ask her first."

Shizuru agreed readily.

"I've also been working on him about that idea he has about leaving the Eighth to garrison Argentum alone," Suou continued. "You know he's also getting rid of the rest of the cavalry, right?"

The former general of the expedition heaved a frustrated sigh, making it apparent she did not care at all for her successor's decisions.

"And keeping only the Lupine and archery divisions, so I hear," she grinned, her eyes remaining cold. "Interesting decision."

"He's saying the cataphracts eat too much," Suou answered. "I have to admit they do eat quite a lot, what with those hulking beasts they have for horses-not to mention riders!-but I'm irked to lose them. They have so much stun power! Aside from the Lupine division, those units have the greatest shock effect on the Mentulae."

"If that is his reason, he might as well dispense with the Lupine



warriors and keep the light cavalry instead," Shizuru replied contemptuously. "Most of the Lupine troopers' horses are as enormous and costly to feed as the cataphracts."

"You know why he's keeping the Lupine unit."

"Yes," Shizuru said flatly. "I do know why."

They smirked humourlessly at each other.

"I shall talk to Natsuki," said Shizuru. "Please talk to him about his unwise arrangements."

"Yes, but it's hard. He's surprisingly mulish."

Shizuru nodded, not finding it as surprising. "Nonetheless, please keep trying."

"I will do my best." The other Himean tossed a lightning glance at the man himself, who had approached Shizuru's bodyguard. "You had better fetch her now."

Shizuru, who had noticed him the moment he headed for the Otomeian, actually shrugged. Suou was astonished.

"Only if you are finished," was all the crimson-eyed woman said.

Suou stared at her, almost-grey eyes wide.

"You're not concerned about that?" she asked, hardly able to believe her friend's nonchalance.

"I do not imagine he is too comfortable," Shizuru answered, looking out the window to watch the spires of smoke from houses, ghostly fingers reaching up into the dark vault of the sky. "There is a reason I left Natsuki with Nao-han, anyway."

Suou hid a grin behind one hand, for Takeda was turning a purple glare to the primipilus at that very second, shooting a mortified look at Shizuru's girl before that.

*Of course*, she thought. Nao *would* despise him.

"So I see," she agreed. "Although I still thought you'd be concerned that he's within Natsuki-san's immediate vicinity."

"It had to happen some time, much though I do not like it," Shizuru replied, finally turning away from the window to give Natsuki a beckoning nod. "After all, I am leaving tomorrow. She is not."

Suou nodded to that.

"But I'll be on hand to watch over her, as promised," she stated. "Any last instructions?"

"No, I believe I have already about exhausted you from them." She tilted her head. "Unless you have changed your mind about my request to read to her from time to time?"

"And disappoint her by being unable to read at a glance? No thank you, I would rather not be compared to you and found wanting!"

They were smiling when Natsuki arrived.

"I'm sorry for taking up her time, Natsuki-san," Suou said, addressing the girl pleasantly. She concealed her smirk effectively as her eyes brushed over the Otomeian's fashion for tonight, specifically the way she had chosen-or been made, Suou amended-to wear her mane. The crow-black hair was pulled up, swept severely away from her face in a bun held up with golden pleats.

Suou understood and divined the purposes in an instant, for this point was actually one of warfare and she had a natural touch there. *Aggressive action.* The upswept style revealed the foreigner's beauty in one definitive shock, removing any mundane artifice or softening effect the hair might have had on the young goddess's face. And what a face it was, thought Suou, who had never seen the foreigner's visage so exposed before. Exquisite in structure, almost Himean except for the delicate straight nose. Lovely too the black-haired, ice-skinned and green-eyed colouring. Those eyes were *too* green! Oh yes, the girl was unearthly. Shizuru's Natsuki would be beautiful to old age, it was sure. And would continue to disturb many a man's and a woman's sleep.

Shizuru obviously knew this, and had probably made the Otomeian appear so to make sure every person who had not seen her yet would-while she was still conveniently around to remind them at the same time to whom that beautiful creature belonged. If any of the guests happened to miss her proprietary actions, he would be hard-pressed to miss her mark: on the upper part of the girl's neck and near the bottom of an ear was an outline of perfect teeth. It had provoked a giggle between Chie and Suou, seated next to each other at dinner, when the former remarked quietly that it reminded her of the markers of the *pomerium*, Hime's sacred boundary.

"He did not bother you overmuch, I hope?" she enquired playfully, wresting her eyes away from the scarlet of Shizuru's bite.

Natsuki shook her head, seeming tickled by something too. She explained it briefly: "The *primipilus*."

The two blondes facing her grinned.

"Tongue-lashed him, did she?" Suou guessed, stealing a peek. "And still going at it! Gods, she would have made such a senator."

"She *would* bring down the House with her invectives," agreed Shizuru, mouth quivering uncontrollably. "Tell me what she said to him, later, Natsuki. No doubt this one shall get it from Yuuki-han herself."

"It's an art, the way Nao does it."

"She said to teach me," Natsuki said unexpectedly.

Shizuru and Suou stared at her.

"What?" Shizuru said, uncertain she had heard aright. "She said... she would teach you? Invectives?"

Natsuki nodded.

Suou broke the short silence that followed, as Shizuru was still dumbstruck by the idea.

"Like, for instance?" she ventured, hugely entertained by the

proposition. "May we hear one?"

The girl drew herself up splendidly, nearly preening under their attention-she rather liked the Himemiya too, though not in the way she liked her lover-and thus further stupefying Shizuru.

" *Cunnus*," she said demurely.

Suou tacked her lower lip with her teeth; the other Himean did not have the presence of mind for that, for her mouth actually hung open. And there was the main character in this farce, still looking grand for having delivered. Oh, better than a play! If only she could laugh! And to where had Nao disappeared, for she had been standing only a few metres away earlier?

"Brilliantly done," Suou praised, the words only a little choked. And because she could be cruel in mischief, because she really was dying to let loose a gale of laughter, she asked: "Are there any more?"

The Otomeian pursed her lips and frowned in thought before looking up, smiling as sweetly as a Vestal. She opened her mouth.

" *Ver-* "

Shizuru hurled out a pathetically feeble cough.

"Excuse me," she said shakily, throwing an accusatory glare at her friend, who was obviously trying to push down a cackle. "That was impressive, Natsuki, but I have just realised it is so late. I am afraid we really should go now."

"Oh." Natsuki was unfazed. "Mm."

"What a pity I can't hear more. It really was very good," Suou told her, ignoring Shizuru's dry look. "Well, I suppose, in the future."

It was Shizuru who spoke, her voice caustic: "Suou."

"I'll call Sugiura-san over and tell her you two shall be taking your leave," Suou interrupted, her flight response initiated by Shizuru's increasingly baleful glance. "See you in the morning, Shizuru-san."

Shizuru exhaled heavily, giving her a wry smile. The other patrician turned to leave. She stopped halfway, however, and smiled in a friendly way at Natsuki.

"Oh, Natsuki-san," she called back. "You look lovely this evening, by the way."

While she went off, Shizuru turned to look at her companion, who returned the look with a smile in her eyes. Shizuru took a moment to touch the join of the Otomeian's dress at the shoulders, pleased by the cloth's softness. The dress revealed a generous amount of skin too, even softer than it, and enough to see the enormous black pearl nestled between white breasts.

Shizuru nodded in satisfaction; she had been the one to dress her.

"Well, Scamp," she began, with a languishing sigh. "What have you been learning?"

The scamp answered with superb delicacy.

"In-veck-tive," pronounced Natsuki.

"Or more properly in this case, curses, " Shizuru retorted. She was tempted to approach her primipilus-currently with some other legates at the far corner of the room-and give the reprobate a good talking-to for coaching her girl in what was undoubtedly a moment of naughtiness. She knew very well that Nao had done it primarily for her reaction. "You know they are curses or vulgarities, yes? Do you know what they mean?"

Natsuki was puzzled by her queries, but answered yes, of course she did. She had asked the primipilus, had she not?

" *Cunnus*, " she said with great authority, "is from the female parts of, um, sex."

Shizuru, who had winced discreetly at the repetition of the oath passing from the girl's lips, asked her if she knew what the other word-the one she had been about to say before interruption-meant too.

" *Verpa* ?" Natsuki answered innocently, unaware of Shizuru's savage bite on her tongue. "A scabby dog with a bald head."

There came a great suspended moment where Shizuru debated the merits of knocking her own head on the wall and crumpling to the floor in laughter. Before she could decide to do either thing, up came the governor to say goodnight. The goodbye, the woman said, would have to come in the morning.

She also asked if Shizuru was feeling well, given the odd look on the younger Himean's face.

"I believe I must have overindulged a little during dinner," Shizuru said smoothly.

The governor stared at her in disbelief.

"Hard to believe, since you ate so little!" the woman cried. "The two of you did. Well, I won't take umbrage for that, since I know it's probably just the excitement of the past few days. Just take care of yourself. Bad to be ill right before a sea crossing. It's hard on the Himean bones!"

They parted and left the room after a few more goodbyes to the others.

"She is right, though," Shizuru said as they walked away and to their room, which the governor had promised to retain for Natsuki's exclusive use for so long as she would be in Argus-as Shizuru had arranged. "You ate so little, Natsuki. Again. This has been going on for... I think the past week. Even more than usual."

"You too."

"The wine was good though," she said, relinquishing the point to move to another. "Did you like it?"

Natsuki allowed that it had been good wine: the servers had mixed a fine white wine in special spring water for her-again, as Shizuru had arranged. The Himean had come up with the idea recently that Natsuki might indeed prefer whites, since they were lighter. It had not really occurred to her before because, like every other Himean,

she tended to think only in terms of reds.

"She opened some of the best amphorae in her cellars for the occasion," she said, before speeding straight to their earlier topic. "Let us return to what we were talking about before Midori-han arrived. Where did you come up with that definition of, um, *verpa*?"

Natsuki shrugged. "Primipilus."

Shizuru winced again.

"I am sorry," she said. "But she misled you."

"Eh?" Natsuki stopped walking, furrowing her brows. "What?"

"That is not what it means and she knows it," Shizuru clarified, stopping too, but only to urge the other to keep moving. The young woman did so, but with a stamp of the foot that rather tested Shizuru's control on her amusement.

"She lied?" the Otomeian cried, impetuous and angry. "She lied to me?"

Shizuru nodded, surprised when the girl pivoted-with an obvious intent to return to the room they had just left-but she managed to turn her neatly back towards their quarters. She held the girl's hand as the latter fumed. She also explained that the primipilus had probably only done it for a jest, being famous for doing such things even to her friends.

"But why?" Natsuki said, two little red spots on her cheeks. "And what does it mean, this word? Really?"

Shizuru sighed again. And told her.

The little red spots expanded to cover the rest of the girl's face.

"No," she whispered, incredulous. "Really? Shizuru?"

"Yes, I am afraid so."

"Grr!"

"It is all right, I am sure it was meant as a friendly joke-and one primarily aimed at me, in fact," Shizuru said soothingly. "Still, you see now, I hope, that these are rather bad words. Not very fitting for you, *meum mel*, so you should not be saying them . "

Natsuki was still nettled with Nao's trickery, however, and rounded on her in a flash.

"Why?" she demanded. "I can say! I curse too!"

Shizuru smiled helplessly, knowing the girl was not really angry with her. Besides, she guessed that Natsuki was a little affected by the wine, light as hers had been. Having been forced by the circumstances to maintain an appearance of involvement in the gathering, she had chosen to do as Shizuru had done, which was to drink more than eat. And, although what the girl had imbibed was hardly enough to warm a regular drinker, she was a terrific lightweight when it came to liquor.

"Do you?" was all she answered.

"What?" Natsuki demanded again. "I what?"

"Curse. In your native tongue."

"Yes!"

"Beyond these words, I mean?" Shizuru continued, proceeding to recite some Otomeian words the girl had taught her by her own urging. These were words she had noticed Natsuki muttering often when she was angry or irritated, and they stood for "idiot", "stupid", "incompetent", "damn", and "worthless". Very light, as far as curses could go, and none of them the equal in salt of the Himean *cunnus* . As indeed the girl seemed to realise, deflating rapidly as Shizuru enumerated her favourite oaths to her face.

"Well?" Shizuru asked, once the list was done. "Do you use any more beyond these?"

The red was standing out more angrily on Natsuki's face now, although her voice was small when she answered.



"No."

"Are any of these as bad as the ones Nao-han just taught you?"

The Otomeian was still sulking, but shook her head awkwardly.

"But I can say if I want!" she insisted, though both of them could hear the unwillingness as she spoke it. "I can say buh-bad things! If I want..."

She trailed off, and Shizuru, who could not bear to see her embarrassed like this, stopped to pull her into a fierce hug.

"Of course you can!" she agreed strongly, raining kisses on the young woman's face even though they were outside, not yet in their room. "I am only saying that you do not need to. But you can. You can say anything you want."

Natsuki grumbled quietly under the attention, finally subsiding into appeased silence when Shizuru's lips turned to her ear.

"You can say anything you want, if you truly want to," Shizuru reiterated in a whisper, letting her eyes drop to the schist-tiled floor as she felt Natsuki's tension slacken. She kissed her again, telling her they should go to their room for a bath.

"It may help with the irritation... as well as the weariness," she said tenderly. "I am tired, and I know you are too. I am sorry we had to go to a late dinner party instead of just staying in and resting. I am sorry too that Nao-han did that to you, but I am sure she did it not out of any ill nature-as I said, she treats her friends similarly. I shall talk to her in the morning, but I know she did not do it to hurt you. Please do not bear her any ill will for it, Natsuki."

Natsuki disengaged herself gently and looked up, clearly expecting something more. Shizuru gave it.

"And I am sorry I tried to tell you what you could or could not say," she said quietly, knowing nevertheless that it was really *her* triumph: Natsuki might have the option of saying "bad things" if she truly wanted, but the way her face had looked at learning that Shizuru did not like it was as good as a guarantee that she would not. Shizuru

did not pause to think on whether this subtle calculation made her guilty. The desire to keep Natsuki free lived also with a desire to impose upon her some authority. This day, of all days, she needed to know she exerted upon Natsuki a fraction of authority.

When they reached their room, both braziers and lamps had already been lit, and the bath in the room adjacent already filled with hot water. Shizuru had beckoned one of the slaves to her towards the close of the dinner they had just left, in order to order these things prepared and ready upon their return.

They went to bathe first of all, as was their wont, where she cheerfully remarked that perhaps she now had an opportunity to wash out the other's mouth until it was clean. Natsuki predictably scowled-and splashed water into her face.

"And if you do," the Otomeian added. "Wash yours too."

"Mine is unsoiled."

"You say bad things."

"I?" Shizuru was amused. "I never curse like that."

"*Bad* things. I never said cursing, Shizuru," was the withering retort.

Badinage that continued until they were done and returning to the bedroom, both wrapped in warm robes with linen towels. By that time, the older woman was talking to Natsuki about the other guests' faces during dinner. She laughed about it.

"You knocked them flat," she said gleefully, like a naughty child. "Even Midori-han, who always takes great pains to tell me that she would lure you away from me did she think you inclined to following her. Yet even she was staggered to silence when you walked in."

Natsuki said nothing, merely hiding her face behind her wet hair, which she dried with some linen. She sat on the bed, and Shizuru sat at their table, resting her chin on the knuckles of one hand.

"Mind you, even I was perishing for want of you," she noted truthfully, before eyeing her lover hungrily and muttering, mostly to

herself: "Dear, dear, you shouldn't be allowed."

One green eye showed between threads of dark.

"I did it," the low voice whispered. "What you want."

"Indeed you did," Shizuru replied brightly, thinking of how she had convinced Natsuki into displaying the bite-mark on her neck. "Thank you again for that. I am sorry it was such a selfish request, darling. I shall make it up to you, I promise."

The other woman shook her head; the green eye was hidden again.

"For you," she told Shizuru shortly. "All right."

"I thank you," Shizuru smiled. "Come closer to the brazier, Natsuki, so your hair dries. Would you like me to comb it?"

Natsuki settled on a stool before her, the two of them enjoying the warmth and the other's presence.

"One bad thing about what I asked you to do tonight," the older woman sighed while drawing the comb through black locks. "They shall hate me for having you all to myself."

Natsuki murmured.

"Oh yes they shall-who would not resent me after having seen you like that?" Shizuru flattered her with a giggle. "Nothing new in that, so it does not alarm me. You know I get more than my fair share of hate among my fellows anyway. Even when I was in Hime."

Suddenly, the comb moving in Natsuki's hair stopped. When enough of a pause had gone on to make her think, she looked over her shoulder and to the older woman.

Shizuru met her eyes with wonder.

"I cannot believe I am going back tomorrow," she said baldly, as though this thing she had known all the time were a surprise that had crept up and ambushed her. "The days go so fast!"

Natsuki sucked in a breath, turning on the stool to face her properly. They looked at each other, both marvelling at how swiftly their time was drawing short.

"Oh god."

It was Shizuru who spoke, eager to disperse the fatalism that had settled upon them.

"Oh god," she repeated, shifting one leg over the other. She put a hand on Natsuki's knee. "Look at how strange we Himeans are, *meum mel* : our homes are actually the places where we have more enemies than elsewhere. Or is that normal, I wonder. There are so many of them back home who dislike me, you know. And all because the fools would like to imagine themselves my peers when they are not!"

Natsuki smiled at her lover's remark, diverted by the ego she knew well enough to assure her it produced that remark from no less than the truth. What counted as bald arrogance for others could not be for Shizuru, because she did not deceive herself about her own grandeur. Of course, the Otomeian allowed wisely, this could not be so easily attributed to modesty. Rather, it could just as easily be because Shizuru did not need to deceive herself: to be superlative in everything made self-deception redundant.

Natsuki felt at liberty to tease her.

"Because you are too smart?" she said, flashing beautiful teeth at the amused woman. "And too beautiful, I think the governor said?"

Shizuru put her head on one side and smiled.

"Do not forget 'too young'," she added unselfconsciously, poking Natsuki's cheek. "Older than you though I may be, I am terribly young among them, and they think me still wet behind the ears."

Natsuki found this a little confusing. She had always seen Shizuru as grown-up, not precisely ancient but ageless, and the perfect image of early adulthood. She had difficulty assigning the description "terribly young" to someone she had always thought

beyond being immature.

"Really?" she asked.

"Really." Shizuru smiled. "I am a cub too."

"Lion's cub."

"And the snake's."

"And you climb up the politics-a mountain goat," Natsuki said, erupting into a fit of her throaty, delicious laughter. "Add all together-*chaire, chimaira* ! So they are afraid: there is not in them a Bellerophon!"

Shizuru took this sprinkle of *sal Atticum* with pleasure.

"Oh, you are so smart," she said sincerely, which brought on more laughter.

"I am," Natsuki agreed, after she had receded to a chuckle. "Very smart."

"And so modest."

"Not as modest as you," the girl countered slyly. "But if you say, then I wonder. You are a cub. Then, they are how old?"

"My fellows in the Senate?"

"Yes." Then, realising how better to phrase it, she elucidated: "I mean, what age do your people become part of the Senate? There is an age?"

Shizuru nodded. "Yes, actually. The age of entry is at thirty, though some enter at twenty-seven."

Natsuki was staggered. She wondered now how old her lover's legates were. So assured had Shizuru seemed among them, so established and confident, that it had never occurred to her that they were so much older in years.

"The *Corona Graminea* permitted me to enter Senate at the age I won it," the Himean reminded. "One of our laws states that that crown grants automatic membership into the senatorial body to its winner."

Natsuki was frowning. "You were nineteen. When you entered your Senate."

"Yes. I told you this before."

"But I did not understand," Natsuki continued to frown. "Now I see a little why they hate you."

Shizuru smiled. "Just a little? How old were you when you became captain of the Lupine unit?"

"Seventeen," she was told.

"Nearly the same age I went into battle for the first time! We were both barely more than children. Did you not experience resentment for that too, *meum mel*, from the older ones who perhaps felt themselves more entitled to the position?"

The Otomeian smiled apologetically.

"Yes, a little," she admitted. "But not very much. Sorry, Shizuru. I do not understand it all because I am not-um-it is that I am not Himean. For me, it is not only that I worked to become captain. I worked hard, yes. But also... I have a birthright to it."

Shizuru nodded, seeing where she was going. "And you think the same should apply to me too?"

"Yes... or part of me thinks this way," Natsuki said. "You are descended from gods-you have the highest birth. I think you have the right too. But this-this is not how your people think. You are not people of the kings and queens anymore. So I see only a little why they hate you." She paused to frown. "I will try to understand better."

The Himean grinned, falling more in love with her than ever.

"Even a little is enough, since I know it can be difficult," she assured

the young woman. "And the mere knowledge that you do not understand it all is more wisdom than most will ever have in their lifetimes."

Natsuki was shy from the praise, cheeks alight.

"I shall be so lonely without you," Shizuru suddenly confessed. "It shall go hard for me not to be able to talk to you."

The ducking head snapped up.

"There was something I forgot to ask, the last time we spoke," the Himean went on, holding the other woman's eyes as they faced each other. "A request."

Natsuki enquired what it was.

"When I am gone..." She grinned suddenly. "Shall you write to me, perhaps?"

The younger woman smiled too, but without showing her teeth.

"Write?" she asked.

"Yes." She noted the hesitation. "Is there an impediment to that?"

"If I write it will be quick," Natsuki replied cautiously. "I cannot write so much because the letters... the mail will take long. Maybe you will get only a few before you come back."

"I care not," Shizuru answered. "Let them take long, so long as they arrive. I would like-perhaps I need-to know that you shall be writing to me. Everyday, if you can. Or every other day. If it is not too much to ask, I would actually prefer the letters to be late rather than rarefied."

Natsuki continued to be coy. "I am not... so good a writer, maybe."

"I am sure now that you are being overly modest. Even were you not, I would treasure each word from you. Letters from you cannot but be treasured." She winked at the other woman. "*Et cedro digna locuti*. Write in your scholarly Greek, for we both know it is excellent.

Or write in Himean, as you talk. I would prefer a letter, in fact, that speaks exactly as you always speak to me. But the decision is up to you."

"What will I say?"

"Anything you want. What happened to you that day. How you felt when you woke, and when you went to bed. How Shizuki is faring. What food you had to eat." She cast her a sharp look. "If anyone has been bothering you, and who."

Natsuki peeked up without lifting her chin.

"If... you will, too?" she asked. "To me?"

Shizuru answered without hesitation. "Regularly."

"Then..." Natsuki made her decision. "Yes."

"How often shall you write?"

"Very often, as you like," she said big-heartedly.

"Thank you." Shizuru kissed her. "You are so good to me."

"I am."

Shizuru arched an eyebrow, reflecting the other woman's smirk.

"Although you are a terrible brat," she said affectionately. "Now that we have settled that, I shall ask you if there is anything in particular you would like to do tonight."

Natsuki demurred, saying it was not her choice this evening, as indeed Shizuru was the one going away, implying she should be the one so indulged.

"My desires for tonight are simple," the Himean answered with a smile. "I would like to make love to you and talk: simply, to enjoy your company. Are you sure there is nothing you would like to do? You know that I would not refuse you."



Again the other denied it. Shizuru thought for a moment.

"Would you like me to play the lyre later, perhaps?"

And Natsuki, who loved music best of all the arts, betrayed that she had been hoping for the offer all this time, her face held tight but unable to conceal an eager radiance. Shizuru was pleased, for that was yet another way she could return the pleasure Natsuki gave her.

"I shall play something for you later," she promised her, beckoning with a finger. "But now I would like to see you, more than anything else. This is the last night I shall spend with you for some months. I must see you, *meum mel*. Undress for me, please."

Natsuki raised a recalcitrant eyebrow, but eventually did as she asked, not proof to Shizuru's pleading look. After a few moments, Shizuru asked her to turn around. She wanted an image of that faint-scarred back in her memory too.

"You shall be careful, Natsuki?" she asked seriously. "I would not like more of these on you when I get back. You stay away from danger." And under her breath: "I wonder if I really cannot convince you to wear a full cuirass."

"If a fight comes?"

"Then try not to be as recklessly daring as you usually are." Natsuki twitched, which she took as a dissent. "Oh, any fool with half an eye can see you are brave, Natsuki! I still think of Argentum sometimes- and my blood thrills. You were magnificent!"

Natsuki blushed. She *had* been magnificent, and she knew that. That had been the day she led the reserve cavalry from the forest to aid the swarmed Himeans, who had been deadlocked with the huge mass of Mentulae that had threatened to eat them alive. The magnificence Shizuru imputed to her actions was actually not even for that important act, which had been Shizuru's strategem from the start. Rather, it was for a specific manoeuvre Natsuki and Natsuki alone had authored: instead of steering all the troopers with her to the enemy flanks, Natsuki had actually detached two thousand of

them from the rest to lead herself, her own Lupine division at the head. These two thousand she had led straight into the centre of the Mentulæan rear, every one of them shrieking like madmen.

Natsuki and her two thousand had taken the day: it was their savage rear assault that had taken the Mentulæ by surprise and cleaved their mass right down the middle, thus separating the enemy force into two manageable halves. After that, it had been easy work for the rest of the Himeans to surround each half and commence slaughter.

"You were the true heroine of that battle, not I," Shizuru told her. "Which is why everyone applauded you loudest of all during the awarding ceremony, when I was giving out the decorations. Oh, Natsuki... my sweet, beautiful, brave Natsuki. Were you Himean, we would have given you what I, among a very few others, have: the Grass Crown, the *corona graminea*. Instead, I had to settle for giving you a larger share of the booty when it was divided."

She decided to keep it to herself that she actually planned to give the girl another signal honour in lieu of the *corona graminea*. For what Natsuki had done during that battle, it would be reasonable to obtain for her a Himean citizenship instead. When she returned, she would be sure to do so with that surprise.

"Still, it was the *corona* you deserved," she proceeded. "Everyone knows how courageous you are, and these scars bear witness to it as well. In that light, you must also see that there is no pressing need to demonstrate it any more than you already have."

She put her hands on younger woman's sides.

"I am commander," Natsuki objected sternly. "Of my unit. I am to be the leader."

"You are commander of your regiment," Shizuru agreed, still intent on driving home the point because it was so important. "You are the leader. Doubly valuable, for you hold together the threads of all the others. A leader does not always need to go leaping first into battle, yes? There are times when the leader stays out of the battle entirely, in fact, in order to better survey the situation and call out the correct

orders for the bugles to sound. What if something were to happen to you, who would do that then?"

"I have other... under-commanders."

"Who would be able to do your job as well as you do? I think not. It is precisely the reason they are the secondary or tertiary commanders while you are the chief." She lifted the long tail of blue-black hair to move over Natsuki's shoulder, leaving her view of the naked back unobstructed. "To remove the commander of a division is to behead it, remove the mind that governs the entire body. Many a battle has been lost because the commander was lost or rendered incapable for a few dire moments, when grave decisions needed to be made and the person best-equipped to make them unable to do so."

The young woman latched onto one of the supporting ideas all of a sudden, as was her wont.

"You think it is there?" she asked abruptly. "In the head? The part that thinks?"

"Hippocrates believes it is where the thinking apparatus resides, and I agree with him. Knock a man's leg and break it, but he will still be able to think and speak fairly reasonably if absolutely necessary. Knock him in the head and you shall find him unable to reason properly for his life."

A crackle of amusement from Natsuki. "Maybe because he goes asleep after you knock him."

Shizuru smiled. A brief interlude of silence ensued, wherein she merely studied the tapering column of Natsuki's back again .

Said the girl, "I will be careful."

"Good."

"You too."

"Of course."

Her hands were on the shoulders now, feeling the ropy muscles stretched over them like a bulwark of tiny ribs. She squeezed them before straying down, using her pointer fingers to track Natsuki's spinal canal. One hand left the path to hold Natsuki when she shied.

"Easy," Shizuru soothed, awed by the unremitting jolts her finger elicited just from stroking the channel of skin. "You really are such a colt."

She put both hands on two round cheeks, considering giving the girl yet another bite mark. The Otomeian whined.

"A little more," Shizuru haggled; she kissed the girl's behind, which shook. "Just let me see you a little more."

"Nn... me too."

"You too?" The older woman was puzzled and stopped her attentions. "What do you mean?"

Her human doll turned suddenly and draped herself across her lap, knees demurely together.

"I will see you too," she said, folding her arms to cover her chest.

"If you wish it. Stay up with me tonight?" Shizuru begged, stroking her skin. "I leave in the early morning, after all."

Natsuki's stare showed she had taken it for granted that she would stay awake. Shizuru nodded in acknowledgment and reached out to touch her leg, feeling the toughened sinews of one thigh before moving to a shin, which she used to pull up the lower half of the limb. She had intended to stop once it was horizontal, and would have stopped had she felt any jar to the upswing through which she took it, but she absentmindedly kept pulling since no resistance seemed to come her way. Before she realised it, Natsuki's leg was nearly parallel to their torsos. She froze, amazed.

"*Ecastor!*" Her stunned eyes met Natsuki's, placid and seemingly unaware of what had caused her to exclaim. One of the girl's arms had gone around her neck earlier for support, but she did not seem to be in any discomfort. "Does it not hurt, Natsuki?"

The younger woman looked surprised.

"No," she said.

"Really!"

"Mm."

Shizuru contemplated the angle of the leg once more before releasing a breath, shaking her head. She had known Natsuki was flexible, really, but not capable of this manner of contortion!

"Can you do this with your other leg?"

"Mm."

"My god. You could shame a Syrian dancer into suicide with that."

She took a moment to lower the leg slowly, and with reverence. She kissed it on the side first, however, since it was near her mouth then.

"You must have no joints to move your limbs so," she said. She grinned evilly, all of a sudden. "It gives me a few ideas."

She pushed her up and to the bed. She unfastened her own robe while following her down and straddling her at the waist. Staying there, she let Natsuki see her easily; she was not shy about her body, and physical revelations took less strength from her than they did from the Otomeian.

Who said, with flaring cheeks: "You are such... such a..."

"Such a?"

She groped for the words and breath at the same time. "A woman."

This caused Shizuru to laugh a little. "You make it sound a revelation. Oh dear... I hope that does not mean you thought yourself in a man's bed all this time."

Natsuki snatched her discarded robe from the side and balled it to throw at her. She seized a pillow next, not casting it from her hand

but using it as a bat to pummel at the older woman.

"Peace!" Shizuru cried merrily, fending off the blows and stopping her with a kiss. She was quite happy to let the girl wrestle her down. "You are such a woman, too, Natsuki."

Such a woman, she thought, that there were times she forgot her own gratification, fully engaged by the sight of the jet-haired female spending. Natsuki in ecstasy loosed herself, displayed the hungry creature in her that was the equivalent of Shizuru's and that clawed into sight for the tearing instant of pleasure. Shizuru would still her own enjoyment then to just watch admiringly. She was always glad for the privilege.

"*Mirabile visu*," she said, awed when Natsuki finally finished, having ground to fulfilment against her hand. The young woman collapsed in a cascade of jet-black strands on her chest and slickness on her palm. "You come like a dream, or perhaps a vision. I can never get tired of seeing it."

The other woman panted but did not reply; Shizuru could feel her lover's flesh still sucking hard, the spasms not yet done. She disciplined her own desire and caressed Natsuki's back while waiting.

When the girl was finished, she tried to retract her hand. She was surprised when another caught it and kept it there.

She stared at Natsuki, who hid further in her chest, head growing even hotter.

"I see," Shizuru whispered. "I shall stay a little longer, shall I?"

A wordless mumble was her only answer. She smoothed the palm of her other hand on the young woman's back, feeling it trail a light film of sweat. There were a hundred minute tremors at the contact.

"I hope you are not felled yet, princess," she smiled later.

Natsuki stirred, peeked out one emerald eye.

"*Resurgam*," she whispered, driving Shizuru to shake with laughter.

"Ah, the indomitable," she chuckled, finally slipping her fingers out; Natsuki moaned. "Faced with the insatiable. I am still hungry."

Generosity truly was part of the young woman's nature, so the Otomeian attempted to rise on still-empty limbs, shaking from the effort. Shizuru stayed her, saying she could do it as well for the both of them.

She had reasons other than wanting to spare the young woman the exertion: she also wanted to see how it would be to do what had occurred to her earlier, which was to swing up that trim leg again to that impossible angle, the vision of it as exciting to her as the view of Natsuki's revealed cleft. Two little lips, delightfully pink, and eager to swell at her touch. How swiftly they plumped! This being part of what she liked best about loving Natsuki: the girl was *succulent*. Shizuru had never had other women, and so she knew not exactly how it was with them, but how many times had she heard a friend complaining of the lay, saying that the other was juiceless? Instinct told her she was right in thinking that complaint could never apply to Natsuki, who spilled over with the barest touch: as now when her bead was caught between Shizuru's forefinger and thumb, the little kernel of pleasure growing and bursting quick.

Shizuru slid up, now the one on top, and felt the slippery blend of them coming together in a flutter of her heart. Of course it would feel like that, she thought, keeping her lover acquiescent and immobile with the hand holding up the raised leg, shackling it near the calf. She set the rhythm, and her heart tried even harder to fly.

"Oh, you're wonderful!" she said appreciatively. "You are just... so juicy."

She received no answer save moans reflecting what she felt. She had not expected any more, knowing Natsuki was always rendered incoherent by pleasure. The only reason she made an effort to talk, herself, was that she knew the girl liked it-her walls always vibrated replies to Shizuru's words.

The rise and fall continued until her hand slipped away from Natsuki's leg, reaching down the edge of a hip until she was holding her rear, clutching it to pull her up and inexorably closer. The taut

bow of Natsuki's body chose that moment to snap, spilling so much wet in climax that it caused her to come too, the sensation of that minor deluge from under her the trigger, a jet of erotic shock.

This time it was she who collapsed on the younger woman's breast, her body played into weariness, for she had chosen to prolong their pleasure by grinding down as long as she could. Natsuki received her with hands too gentle for their scars, still whispering her name. Shizuru heaved herself up.

She touched the girl's lips with her tongue, and Natsuki opened her mouth.

"I can hardly believe myself so favoured," she murmured through the kiss. "To think I am with the most beautiful woman in the world."

The other woman scoffed against her lips.

"You have not seen... all women. In the world," she said feebly.

"And I believe I shall not, even if you put them before me right now." Shizuru shifted to better lean against the pillows at her back, her gaze worshipping. "I could not see beyond you."

Natsuki averted her eyes, mumbling her embarrassment, which Shizuru ignored. She appreciated this about her young woman: Natsuki might blush under admiration, but she also blossomed under it. Protest though the Otomeian might at the compliments Shizuru hurled incessantly, the latter had come to see that the younger woman actually enjoyed them very much. Natsuki was like most girls in that she needed to be adored. The problem in it was that, whether from nature or experience, she was also unlike most girls in that her first instinct was distrust, which meant doubting any praise she was given. Not about her martial abilities, nor her intellect-of those she had never had self-doubts. No, what she doubted and had lacked for so long were adorations of a more personal kind. It related to a part of her that had ceased to grow for a while, lacking nourishment.

But Shizuru had been more than glad to tend to that.



" *Meum mel*, you both satisfy and make me thirst," she said after another spate of kisses, as they huddled together against the mound of cushions and fur. "I wish the dawn would not break. I wish I could stay here with you in endless night."

Natsuki hummed low, then suddenly cut through the looming sadness by delivering one of her wonderfully sensible remarks.

"The lamps will run out of oil fast," she said.

There was a short, stunned silence. And then Shizuru erupted.

"Seriously, Darling? Oh, you *are* beautiful!" she whooped. "Who else could say something like that? Fear not, Natsuki, for I shall buy you enough oil to last a hundred lamps for a century." She chuckled and pretended to cuff her on the cheek: in reality, it came nearer to a tap. "Disarming me in one shot! And I was being poetic only for you."

"Not for you too?" was the shrewd reply.

Shizuru grinned.

"Perhaps..." she breathed, running a hand over one of Natsuki's breasts. "Sometimes, I think you are too smart by half."

"A complaint?"

"On the contrary: I always appreciate intelligence. All the more when it is in the woman I adore."

"It must be," came the odd reply. At Shizuru's quizzing look, she twinkled and explained: "You cannot... cannot adore... one *not* intelligent, Shizuru. No?"

Shizuru gave her an appraising look, one eyebrow upraised in silent commentary.

"As I said," she finally answered. "Too smart by half."

Natsuki was rosy, but still managed a victorious laugh. Listening to it, Shizuru was struck again by how she really would miss her, and said so.

The Otomeian became subdued.

"What a pity you will not come with me," Shizuru said lightly, to bring back her smile. "Perhaps if you did, I could show you one of my summer villas." She thought of one favourite, perched on a cliff overlooking the sea and from where several islands could be seen floating in the distance, sometimes shrouded by mist. "The one I like best, my villa in Cumae, I believe you would as well."

"Tell?"

She settled herself better on the pillows, smiling down at the younger woman as she began a description.

"It is atop a very high cliff," she told her. "And affords a view of the great cape beside the dormant peak of Vesuvius." She saw the green eyes brighten at the name. "The sea is always very blue, chased with silver. The breeze is always cool, yet the water is warm year-round, because of the hot springs and many vents around the bay."

"Vesuvius."

"Which sleeps now, forever peaceful, its soft and slumbering breath fanning the warmth of the waters." She smoothed her hand over the curve of Natsuki's skull. "Many ports are nearby, and only a ride away are my vineyards in Campania, where I could take you for a walk to show you the grapes dangling from the vines, little clusters to be made into earthly ambrosia. We might play at picking some ourselves, and you could be my Diana..."

She stopped, realising she had returned again to her plans of what to do had Natsuki been coming along. It tasted painfully of disappointment, and she shut her eyes for an instant, trying to swallow the pungent regret in her mouth.

She said, "My villa smells of the sea and pine. You would fit there like you had always been part of it."

"I do not smell of the sea," the mountain-girl noted.

"But you smell of pine." She lifted Natsuki's hand for a kiss. "And

right now you smell of me. I like this fragrance on you best."

Natsuki stole away her hand, seeking out Shizuru's and lacing their fingers. Now that she was holding her hand more closely, the latter felt with some surprise that Natsuki's hand was also cold and clammy.

It held her hand tighter than usual, too.

"*Amo te*," she blurted out, feeling heat suffuse her face even though she had already said it twice before. "I do mean that, Natsuki."

Natsuki nodded quietly, red-cheeked too. She whispered her reply, saying the same thing Shizuru had spoken. The way the words sounded in her husky voice made Shizuru's eyes flutter, and the Himean groaned, rushing to lay kisses all over her face.

"I shall want you so much when I go away," Shizuru said quietly when the girl kissed back. "I think I cannot live without this. Each night would be agony, now that I have the taste of it."

And to her wonder, the words she had meant to pay tribute to her lover instead seemed to cast her down, something in the young woman's eyes saddened-yet not surprised. Natsuki pulled inward and *shrank*. Shizuru was about to ask when the girl gave her the clue in a few cool, painfully detached words.

"Yes," the younger woman droned unenthusiastically, as though discussing a grim but necessary business. "I understand."

Shizuru froze, surprised by the strange tone in her lover's voice. She stared. It took only a moment.

"By Jupiter, no!" she cried, rearing up. One of the pillows fell to the floor. "That is not what I meant. Look at me." She turned the younger woman by the chin, spanning the planes of her jaw with tense fingers. "Did you actually think I meant that I would be taking others to my bed? Did you actually think *that*?"

The hurt that Natsuki had been trying to hide swam up in her eyes.

"Why not think it?" she uttered, striving not to betray herself by letting her voice tremble. Her stutter proved the traitor, however. "I- we know you can. I wih-will not stop y-"

"I wish you would!"

Natsuki was surprised: that much was obvious. It was also, unfortunately, perfectly natural.

"I told you I loved you," Shizuru reminded her, trying to make the Otomeian understand why she would not do what others would have. It was difficult: she herself knew that she was the one being unnatural now. Love was hardly sufficient reason to limit liaisons where most were concerned, and even less so an unofficial love. Nor were official loves so different: one could love one's wife or husband, yet also bed another. Natsuki had only been hard-nosed in trying to accept that misinterpretation from her. What had she said? *I understand*. Ye gods! To think she would be willing to put up with that, being told that! And again, why should she not? Natsuki was obviously wise enough to bend to what was routine, and what was ordinary.

But Shizuru could not stand the idea of Natsuki being given just the ordinary... nor of herself being ordinary. Her decision here was both an effect of her feelings for the girl and of her knowledge of the differences between her and most others, as well as her acceptance of those differences as part of what separated her from the dull horde. The famously proper, well-mannered Shizuru Fujino took particular pride in being unique, and perhaps even took pleasure in finding that uniqueness by being a deviate. So the normal way was to love one and sleep with many. So it would be considered bizarre to pledge and keep faith with a single person-even more abnormal in her case, a person who happened to be a foreigner. Well, then, what of it? What mattered it to her when she had never been normal?

"When I said it to you, I meant it in no uncertain terms," she told her, speaking slowly but with enough power in her voice to make Natsuki believe. "You know how I am. You know I am incapable of half-measures in these matters. I would never say such words if I thought myself capable of dividing myself enough to bestow half-love, or whatever jot of love is possible for a person to claim himself

capable to mete out to more than one person. Do you not know that, Natsuki? How can you not know that?"

She darkened, tightened on the girl's jaw with her hand. Something had occurred to her now, something that rather displeased her: Natsuki's practicality stung! Why was it that the young woman was willing to compromise with the world where their relationship was concerned? Whereas she would have overturned the world had it been necessary, for the same relation! How could Natsuki be that detached, that coolly conceding, if she really loved her? Should the girl not have sulked? Should Natsuki not have asked her expressly not to entertain any other?

In her confusion, she quite forgot the pain she had seen earlier, banked in the hairline fissures of Natsuki's emerald eyes.

"How can you not know you have ruined me for all other women?" she whispered angrily.

Natsuki stared at her, amazed by this sudden offence. That was when Shizuru made a promise only a madwoman would have made, and which she knew she would keep, already fulfilling that requirement where this girl was concerned.

"I shall have no one but you," she uttered suddenly, shocking the girl who had taught herself not to expect anything from a life that had almost always been hard, and who now found that lifelong pessimism insufficient defence before a creature like Shizuru. "I shall touch no other, to the day I return-and shame to the one who does not believe it!"

Since that warning was obviously intended to dissuade her from any objection, Natsuki quieted. She knew that Shizuru in one of her moods was better treated with acquiescence where possible.

"Yes," she said, nodding slowly at her older lover. "Yes, Shizuru."

The red eyes burned fiercely for another instant before subsiding into quiet embers.

"Does this not please you?" she asked, hating herself for needing

Natsuki to be jealous, and hating that Natsuki was seemingly not.  
"Does it not matter at all to you if I take another into bed with me?"

"It matters," Natsuki said sharply.

And then she bit her lip, distraught over the swiftness of her answer.  
Still, Shizuru felt much better.

"Thank the gods," the older woman said, sinking once more into the cushions. "I was afraid that... that it did not even matter."

Natsuki nodded, smiling uncertainly at her.

"I shall stand by that promise, *meum mel*," Shizuru reaffirmed. "I cannot even imagine touching another now. Who could compare to you?"

Natsuki smirked, entertained by the onset of more sweet-talk.  
Shizuru was right in that she enjoyed such adulation more for having been so deprived of it: Natsuki could barely even remember her parents praising and cooing to her when she had been younger.

"I don't know," she said playfully. "Who?"

"*Nemo*. No one. If I could not have you, I think I would much rather romance my own hand," Shizuru said, eliciting a strangled giggle.

"Shizuru!" Natsuki gasped, looking both amused and scandalised.

"Well, do you not agree it is more worthy of that regard than another?" Shizuru asked mischievously, taking the opportunity to let the body part in discussion roam down Natsuki's stomach. "If you are not there, I mean. I like to think it not too unskilled in giving pleasure either."

Natsuki tried to scoff, but found it difficult: Shizuru's hand was already between her legs, and those fingers were forcing her to catch her breath.

She nodded and accepted the hunger.

"Not unskilled," she agreed, leaning in to copy what Shizuru's hand

did as it worked its romance on her. She closed her eyes and focused on the pleasure, the give and take, unaware that Shizuru continued to watch her face. The older woman kept her eyes open until the wave they were riding crested and crashed, so intense it took both of them by surprise.

Shizuru giggled and praised her for her mimicry afterwards, saying she was brilliant.

"Here, as everywhere else," the older woman told her. "I do believe you are perfect. You shall always stand out from the crowd, Darling."

Natsuki smiled into the embrace. "You do. Stand out."

Shizuru accepted that with graceful courtesy, since there was no way to gainsay it. It did remind her that there was something she needed to ask, though, and which she had dreaded. Now was the time.

"And is there no one else who stands out from the crowd amongst us?" she said very gently, putting all her power into masking the anxiety behind her calm. "Is there no one you find so easy to see?"

A few lines appeared on the girl's forehead.

"Easy to see?" she repeated.

"Who catches your attention," Shizuru explained, still speaking with tightly-leashed deliberation. "Who stands above the crowd for you... perhaps like me?"

But that dark young woman just laughed.

"Who?" she asked. "You are a head above all the women, Shizuru. And men."

"Oh, that is not what I meant, Natsuki."

"I know what you mean."

The glint in the gem-like eyes arrested her protest, and she listened to Natsuki.

"I see nobody," the Otomeian restated.

It seemed for a moment that Natsuki wanted to say more, and indeed she did: that she could not even imagine touching anyone else after having had the sleek presence of Shizuru in her bed; that it had as much to do with who and what Shizuru was to her as with the individuality of Shizuru's body, the fragrance of the Himean's young skin, and the pleasing contrast of a soft and perfumed chest bearing down on her with a flat and muscular abdomen below it. Shizuru was beautiful enough to be called art, and Natsuki appreciated that.

She also wanted to say that she appreciated even more what Shizuru had become. She could think of no other capable of treating her the way the older woman could. The older woman was a hydra, communing with her in a dozen different ways, from lover one moment to guardian the next. A dozen heads representing a dozen facets, all rooted in one body, and looking upon her from different angles. What this hydra represented to her was best encompassed not in her own words, but rather in those of the blind poet, speaking through Andromache in her last exchange with Hector: having lost everything and everyone, it had been Hector who replaced all those vanished people for his wife, turning father and mother at once, brother and sister both, and friend and husband as well.

So was Shizuru to her, and so did Shizuru outstrip everyone else in her vision. Who else could treat her like an equal in one moment, and cosset her like a child in the next? Shizuru did these things with exquisite balance, knowing instinctively when to take this aspect or another. Not even Andromache could have been better served during her and Hector's time.

And yet Natsuki knew, too, that her lover was less Hector than Achilles: the hydra overlooking her was as powerfully vindictive as it was munificent. Natsuki was no fool, and certainly *never* fooled herself into thinking this hydra safe. She had been chilled before it wrapped itself about her, yes, and now she thanked it for its warmth, true. Even so, she knew that warmth came with a dozen jealous sets of teeth.

It was with the awareness of all these things that she had dismissed



the idea without hesitation, the fear Shizuru seemed to have so fatuously. It was impossible to Natsuki that she could imagine anything better than this mythical being that loved her at once savagely and kindly, and which she would never have been able to imagine by herself in the first place, for her fantasies had always been lacking. She wanted to say all of that to assuage Shizuru.

But as her mouth was incapable of voicing such personal secrets, she said something else which would have to condense all these things into one sharp point.

"No one else *can be*... easy to see."

Shizuru measured the sincerity of the statement and found it pleasing.

"That is good," she decided.

But then she turned sulky in an instant.

"If you looked at anyone else I would kill them," she followed, soft as a shower of snow on the back of Natsuki's neck. "You know that, my dear Natsuki."

And because Natsuki was still thinking of the impossibility of Shizuru's being rivalled by anyone, she only took in the warning for a moment before displaying her cheek, the impertinence that often delighted Shizuru so much.

She grinned.

"Not me?" she asked. "You will not kill me?"

Some of the sulkiness vanished from Shizuru, who was genuinely surprised by the query.

"Oh, *from your lips* !" she said in disbelief. "I could never kill you, Natsuki. Not even if you turned to another, unforgivable as that would be. Not if you tried to fight me in battle. Not if you turned on me-"

"I will not turn on you."

Shizuru smiled at the quick oath: "I know."

"I would not-never-try to fight you in battle."

"I know that too." Shizuru looked sternly at her. "Just as I know I would never be able to think of killing you, Natsuki."

Natsuki nodded. "But you would kill someone? If I... I look?"

"Yes," she said honestly.

"Really *kill* them?" The soft smile on Natsuki's face was a contrast to the topic; she seemed to find it amusing. "But me you will not kill?"

"You I would not kill," Shizuru said again, before considering it with a small smile. "I might tie you up and thrash you for a bit, however."

Natsuki chuckled duskily.

"Will not," she declared.

"Do not be too sure, dear."

Natsuki shook her head.

"No, Shizuru," she said. "Not that."

She touched her on the cheek, and Shizuru felt the young woman's fingers shaking.

"I mean that... I *will not* look," Natsuki said softly, actually meeting her eyes. "At anyone else."

Shizuru put a hand over the shaking one and thought: *Yet you are killing me* .

"I promise, Shizuru." A gulp came, and then a panicked swallow; the little girl orphaned by all her kin, her first loves, suddenly surfaced. "It is true you will come back quickly?"

The question left her in a rush, like something she had not intended to say aloud, or to anybody. Shizuru saw that, and saw too that Natsuki was horrified by what had slipped out. She saw that Natsuki

would try to take it back.

"I mea-"

"I shall be so quick you shall not even begin to truly miss me," Shizuru interjected, anxious to placate the fearful creature she had just seen living inside Natsuki: the real child she tried so often to call out in this warrior. How lonely it had seemed! She wished, more than ever, that she could take the girl with her. "But you shall miss me a little, perhaps. I know I would miss you terribly."

Her companion, still embarrassed by the slip, merely nodded. Shizuru stroked her bowed head. Looking around, her eye fell upon their table, where there were several dishes ready for them should they desire a snack. She excused herself and left Natsuki to huddle for warmth on the sheets.

"Let us have a little something to eat?" she invited, knowing they would both need it to get through what promised to be a weary night. "Try to eat just a little. I shall play a song for you afterwards."

She stalked over to the table and chose a dish bearing some cheeses and nuts. She brought it back to their bed with a cup and a jug of water.

It was Natsuki who took one of the hard cheeses and crumbled it, putting little morsels into Shizuru's mouth. She had taken well to this form of affection, Shizuru noted, and not only for its sentimental value. Shizuru knew that Natsuki also liked to do it because it was often successful in diverting her from thoughts of how little the latter was actually eating compared to her, crafty girl that the Otomeian could be.

"You shall remember the things I told you?" she asked, halting Natsuki's hand halfway to delivering yet another scrap of cheese. "And try to follow them if you can, please?"

The younger woman nodded, slipping the food between her lips.

"Trust Suou Himemiya," she recited absently, going through some of the items on the list. "Avoid being alone with another Himean officer."

No wine." She grinned suddenly and looked up from the platter of cheese and nuts. "Easy."

Shizuru smiled. "Oh? You forgot the most important thing in the list."

She paused for a second to think on it.

"Ah-don't look at another?" she tried.

"That's my smart girl," Shizuru affirmed, stroking some hair that had fallen over her face. "Do not look, do not touch."

Natsuki all but sniggered. She picked around the platter again, trying to decide what to feed Shizuru next, and came up with a chestnut. She held it up for inspection. "This?"

Shizuru smiled. "Yes."

She let Natsuki shell it, then give it to her. She halved it in her mouth, and proceeded to slip one of the pieces through Natsuki's lips in a kiss. But something in the contact of their lips and the light sweetness of the nut over their tongues undid a lock inside, and she suddenly felt all the bitterness again of having to leave this woman she had tasted and loved, of having to be parted against her will and so suddenly. She crushed the piece in her mouth quickly and swallowed, staring at the girl with such grief that Natsuki's breath caught.

Shizuru took the platter away and set it aside, drawing her up into a fierce hug.

"Shizuru?" her lover called haltingly, surprised by Shizuru's sudden passion. "Something... Something is wrong?"

"Yes."

"What?"

But Shizuru only shook her head. Seeing that she was in pain, her lover's hands went to her hair, petting her.

"It is all right, Shizuru," came the husky whisper. "Really. All right."

*But it is not*, Shizuru answered in her mind. *It is not all right, Child.*

Again Shizuru shook her head, unwilling to speak lest her voice crack. Natsuki understood and continued to pet her.

"Shizuru?" A press of the lips to her ear, then to her temple.  
"Shizuru."

Shizuru listened to her calls, feelings lifting only a little at the way the Otomeian said her name. If she could say it like that, Shizuru thought, then surely it was true when she had reciprocated her love. She could take heart in that. Yet there was still the refusal, and the way Natsuki could still be so detached, to the point that she could act like this when Shizuru herself felt the chasm opening and the despair like a crush.

It was selfish of her-she knew that-but she wanted Natsuki to feel that crush as well, to be as bitter at their separation as she was, and to act more like a part of her were being torn away. It was not that she belittled the love the girl had already given her-ye gods, she had thrown thanks to all of heaven for it! But-this was a good part of why she was difficult to love, she knew-she who loved in such a passion that it was all-consuming needed to be loved the same way. She wanted Natsuki to want her so much that this imminent separation would be an incurable wound being opened, never to close until she had returned. The selfishness of love was ironically because it wanted to share: she wanted Natsuki to share the thunder of her emotions. She desired to have Natsuki feel what she was sure she was feeling now and would feel more later, a similar *pain* .

She longed, too, to feel Natsuki's tears drop on her shoulder in their final embrace-but she knew that would not happen.

All the same, Natsuki was not the only one who could be indomitable.

*So be it*, Shizuru swore to herself, lancing the sore with her steel. *So be it, then. I shall accept that you do not love me like that yet, Natsuki.*

She made the vow silently: *But you will.*

After a while, when she was sure she could speak again without being betrayed by her tone, she disengaged herself from the girl and smiled. There was no more anguish in it, and Natsuki smiled back once she saw that.

Shizuru got up wordlessly and went to fetch the lyre.

"Come to me, *meum mel*," she said upon return, positioning herself on one side of the bed. She beckoned her to sit a little closer, because she wanted to watch the eldritch flames that rose in the green eyes when Natsuki felt passion, when Natsuki was moved. She wanted so much to see Natsuki moved, and to be the one to move her. "I shall play for you now."

Natsuki crawled over dutifully.

"Shall I get a kiss for my pains first, perhaps?"

She got her kiss, and obtained a promise of another one after the song was over. Thus compensated, she began to warm up before playing the actual music.

Shizuru played a few bars, her hands gliding over the instrument with the expertise of one well-tutored. She was good with instruments and better than good with a lyre. She was good enough to ensure her vow would be sublimated in the notes, and even if Natsuki's ears might not fully translate the language, she knew she could play to the girl's heart.

So she began.

The Otomeian at her side, only a foot away, watched her fingers dance. The show being staged for her had her utterly rapt: she was watching her jealous hydra, her golden Achilles about to depart. Whatever Shizuru had thought about her attitude in the past few days, she had not been spared of the torment. What detachment the Himean had imagined in her was pure façade. Had Shizuru been a little less in love with her-a little less consumed by the ardour she felt for the Otomeian-she might have been able to see the crush which she sought, the one to equal her own pain. But that required a detachment neither woman could give, or not truly, so Shizuru failed

to see. It was because Shizuru lacked that detachment with Natsuki that she had failed to see so many things all this time.

She had failed to see, for instance, that she had never needed to obsess over the girl's love. She had had it for so long, though Natsuki had not told her. It came hard to the Otomeian to tell things like that, and that was why she had tried to give Shizuru the clue first in her deeds, then presents, and then-finally, when pressed by a question-in words. She had been surprised when she communicated through the last, like a person shocked at not causing a calamity after invoking a forbidden name. She had not expected to be capable of speaking it, herself. Feats like that could shock her.

Shizuru had been right about that: she was really not a talker.

There were times when the Otomeian wished she were, however. She envied those who were masters of dialogue, who could talk as naturally as they could breathe. It was one of the things that had drawn her most strongly to the Himean, who elevated language into art and traced curlicues into the air with her lilt. To hear such speech, Natsuki had thought at first meeting, was a gift in itself. How amazed she had been, the first time she heard her talk! Perhaps some part of her had even wished to emulate it. Yet she had known that she could not, because to do so would be disloyalty to a legacy, one she had never shared. Neither her cousin, Nina, nor the man who had saved her when she was a child, Mino, knew of it. All the people who actually knew of it could not talk.

She was the only one of them still alive.

On that night her people were written out of existence, when the treacherous tribes of Mithrii massacred them in their homes, she had received her parents' final and ultimate bequest. On that night, Natsuki was given the last injunction ever to come from those who had made her: when their bodies and the bodies of their kin had been falling all around, it had come from her mother.

*Do not speak, Natsuki*, the queen had strained, shredded body draped atop the girl-who-was-no-longer-a-girl, a dying and dead weight on her. *Do not speak, whatever you do.*

Harder instructions could have been given: a promise of revenge, an oath of sacrifice. The one she received was simple and expedient to her own survival. Natsuki did as her mother asked. And after even her mother had expired- *blood falling thick in her ear, the feel of it as it died on her skin ugly* -when she alone had been alive out of all those bodies strewn across the ground- *something or someone crushing her broken leg*, she remembered, *so little space and so hard to breathe!* -after Mino and the Otomeians had found her under the pile and dragged her out from under them, she had continued to do it. Natsuki neither spoke, nor made a sound. The dying queen had ordered her, and Natsuki had always been faithful to an order.

Perhaps, really, she was faithful to it still.

She could not tell Shizuru about that, of course. Nor could she tell the older woman about her dreams, seeded with memories of her mother's words and the strangled panic afterwards, the legion sounds of chaos and frenzy all around her yet never actually breaking the cocoon spun by her mother's command: the hollow, empty-echoing chamber of her silence. It took many forms, many versions of the story, but it always ended with the same hush. Sometimes, Natsuki would wake from the dream with a gasp, testing to see if she truly could make a sound after all. She always found that she could, in reality and when awake. But in her dreams, no matter how much she opened her mouth, she was always mute.

*... whatever you do.*

There was no way she could tell Shizuru about that, she had long decided, no way of speaking of it to the older woman. It was true that the Himean had freed her to some extent, helped her discover the liberty of her own voice and speech. For that, she would be forever indebted. But she still knew she could never break free of the order from her mother, which, aside from her life, was the final inheritance that woman had given.

*Do not speak, Natsuki.*

She had heard the order a million times already in her dreams, and knew she would follow without a murmur, without a complaint of how it shackled her-because that would be to speak too, would it not? It



was as though her mother had told her not to speak about the command as well. So she would not speak of it. She would *never* speak of it. Was not the pact sealed by life, and death, and blood? She understood the importance of that trifecta, knew the infinity that resided in their power.

She *knew* she would be bound by that contract forever.

So it was that Natsuki knew things. And so it was too that what most of what she knew she kept to herself, nestled safely in an iron mesh of privacy and quiet. All the words she never spoke were in that mesh; all the screams she had never given; all the thoughts she had ever known. Listening to Shizuru produce music-wordless sounds for an audience of soundless words-she found herself peering into her secret net, looking at the many things she had tucked away.

So many things she knew.

She knew, for instance, that if happened to change her mind at this moment, or even to the moment where the Himeans boarded the ship, the older woman would stay everything just to bring her. She knew that, if she did get on that ship, Shizuru would still return her to this land immediately if she ever asked. She knew Shizuru would never keep her against her volition. She knew Shizuru was kind.

She knew Shizuru was different.

Oh, she did know so many things. More than that, for Natsuki had the comprehension given to those who joined their stubbornness with a capacity for thinking: she understood . She understood that there were things she should do, and things she should not do. She understood she should walk away once that ship started to move, for example, because she knew Shizuru might see her eyes otherwise, and she had never been able to control the unruly things in her eyes. She should be cheerful this last night, because if she were too dismal Shizuru would be tempted to ask her again-even if Shizuru *had* promised not to, that day she confessed-and then she might be tempted to finally say yes. She understood she should not say yes.

She should remember that what differentiated Shizuru from other

people was the equal in significance of what differentiated Shizuru's people from hers. She should not deceive herself into thinking others could see her like Shizuru did, if Shizuru truly saw her as she thought. She should understand where barriers were placed along lines, where the lines also held a separating gap. She should not trouble her lover by revealing that she understood these gaps' width, and was unhappy for it.

She should not be so arrogant as to expect Shizuru would truly return still wanting her, because that would be to ask for too much, and she wanted it too much. She should remain faithful to her promises to Shizuru, however, because only a cur makes a promise and breaks it just because of an uncertainty that it is still needed. She should remember all her resolutions, and the good reasons she had for them, whenever she felt tempted to give in to her own desires.

God, how she hated the selfishness of her desires.

Lacerated by shame, driven by loyalty, she would repeat her admonitions in the cocoon of silence, over and over: she should not toy with notions of overcoming a division so inherent it was from birth. She should not delude herself that it was possible to ignore the world. She should not destroy a dream just because she would like to embrace it close to her. She should not sail to that city she wanted to see, just across the water. She should remember whom she had sworn to protect and why.

She should not be a heel they could use against her Achilles.

## Chapter 46

*This arc shall be somewhat faster compared to the first, as may be indirectly suggested by the title. Please permit me here to thank everyone who has finished the first arc. To know that you thought so lengthy an arc worthy of your attention makes the writing well worth it.*

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**Illustration** (*To access, remove the spaces after the full stops.*)

*ethnewinter. deviantart art/SNHC-153912811*

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### **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Auctoritas** (L.) - A nigh-impossible term to translate, it meant a man's share of the public esteem, his reputation, his ability to influence events. Magistracies had inherent auctoritas, but even persons not in a magisterial office could have it. A simple way of differentiating 'auctoritas' from 'dignitas' is to understand that 'dignitas' was the more important concept to a Roman: after all, once a man dies, his 'auctoritas' goes with him; 'dignitas' lived forever.

2. **Calends** (L.) - Also **K** alends; the first of the three named days of a Roman (Himean) month, and the only fixed or unvarying one. The Calends is always on the first day of the month.

3. **Campus Martius** (L.) - A large area outside the city of Rome (Hime) where legions were bivouacked (the military cannot enter the city unless for a triumph).

### 4. **Cedimus, an subitum luctando accendimus ignem?**

**Cedamus!** (L.) - This is from Ovid's **Amores I**. Translated into English, it means: "Will I surrender or stir up the sudden flame by fighting it [Love]? I will surrender!" The reason for the surrender is made apparent in the next line of the poem (leve fit, quod bene

fertur, onus ): "A burden becomes light when it is carried willingly."

5 . **College** - A group or body of men with something in common, e.g. the College of Augurs for the state augurs, or the College of the Tribunes of the Plebs for the elected tribunes of the plebs.

6 . **Curia Hostilia** (L.) - The Senate House or usual venue for meetings of the Senate.

7 . **Curule** - If used with the word "office", it means that the mentioned office has **imperium** (s.v.).

8 . **Dignitas** (L.) - Another nigh-impossible term to translate; 'dignitas' was the sum of a man's worth and right to honour due to his personal achievements. It touched not merely on his personal merit and pride as an individual but also involved the quality or augustness of his ancestors and family. To differentiate 'dignitas' from 'auctoritas', see the note for the latter, above.

9 . **First Citizen** - Adapted from the more Latin term of 'the First Man'. The First Man in Rome was said to be the one whose **auctoritas** (s.v.) and **dignitas** (s.v.) far outranked everyone else's. It was not an actual office to be occupied, nor a name won by an election, but a title granted by one's peers and even enemies: an acknowledgment of the undeniable fact that one was the most important and powerful citizen of Rome.

10 . **Ides** (L.) - The last of the three named days of a Roman (Himean) month. The days of the month were not named or given numbers, save for these three points. The Ides was considered a sacred day to the great god or Jupiter Optimus Maximus, and varied in placement depending on the length of the month. On long months or those reaching 31 days, it was set on the fifteenth. As the story is following the current calendar (with regards to month names and month lengths) instead of the Ancient Roman one, the Ides in this story shall be set at the fifteenth for the month of August, given that August currently has 31 days to its total and is thus a long month.

11 . **Imperium** (L.) - The degree of authority vested in a curule magistrate or a promagistrate. All curule offices and army commands held imperium.

12 . **Inde ira et lacrimae** (L.) - "Hence wrath and tears."

13 . **Lictor** (L.) - A Roman civil servant whose duties have been altered somewhat for this story. They retain their primary duty in the sense of serving magistrates with **imperium** (s.v.), however.

14 . **October horse** - A term originating from a practice held in the Ides (s.v.) of October, where the Romans picked the best war-horses of the year. Simply, an October horse is supposedly the best horse.

15 . **Pedarii** (L.) - The plural form of "**pedarius**", or something of a senatorial "backbencher". Pedarii are not allowed to speak during House or Senate meetings, and often did not hold/had not held any true office yet.

16 . **Praetor** - The rung on the Roman political ladder just below the top rung, which was "consul". The **urban praetor or praetor urbanus** is traditionally the chief of all the praetors, and has authority over the courts of Rome, which is why the urban praetor was the praetorian candidate who polled the most votes. To remind everyone, the reason Shizuru does not wish to be urban praetor, even with the honour attendant to the office, is that there is a limitation upon the urban praetor that states he cannot be out of the city for more than ten days at a time.

17 . **Tace!** (L.) - "Shut up!"

18 . **Tribune of the Plebs** - One of the most important offices in Ancient Rome, reserved exclusively for plebeians and purportedly existing in protection of plebeian rights; the prime lawmaking body of that time; the office bearing the power of the veto. If one was about to enter the Senate, the best way to make a name for oneself was to be a tribune of the plebs, since they garnered so much attention and had the opportunity to make a radical splash.

19 . **Triumph** (L.) - A victory parade or procession held by a Roman (Himean) general who was given the accolade of being called "imperator" by his troops on the field, after a great victory.

20 . **Urban praetor** - See note for "**praetor**".

21 . **Vappa!** (L.) - "Flat wine!" or, more properly, "Good for nothing!"

22 . **Well of the Comitia** - The standard venue where the **tribunes of the plebs** (s.v.) held their meetings, which were restricted to citizens of purely plebeian status (i.e. patricians were forbidden from attending such a meeting, and would often limit themselves to watching from the steps of the nearby Curia).

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## **Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae**

*par ethnewinter*

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Shizuru's fabled luck was with her. Her transports managed to latch onto the tail of the North Winds, which only began to wane midway into her journey. Urged by those friendly breezes, her ships soon docked at one of the ports of eastern Fuuka. From there it was only a few more weeks' march to the Campus Martius. The other two legions, led by her senior legate overland, would take significantly more time than that: not only they were building a road as they went, but they were also tasked with razing coast villages or ports belonging to pirates or bandits. Owing to this expected disparity in arrival times, the legion travelling with the general was permitted to slacken its march from the normal rapid pace-though still not enough for anyone to call the progress relaxed. One of the first things a legionary learned when soldiering for Shizuru Fujino was that serving under the undefeatable had its price: Shizuru Fujino's was that, battle or no battle, she always flogged your feet.

Still, she did permit the legionaries some tranquil stopovers. The first was near a town south of the ports, by a lake fed by one of Fuuka's great rivers. Shizuru allowed the soldiers a spring holiday in the lake, for the weather was clement and a far cry from the cold they had just left. The second stopover was when she passed by a country villa belonging to one of her cousins. That this cousin-who actually spent most of her time in a villa far to the south of Fuuka-was in residence when she arrived was her doing, for she had written a letter weeks ago asking to be met. It was only because

Shizuru was her favourite relative that the recipient of that letter even appeared.

They saw each other before the army, for Shizuru's cousin fetched her from the camp. Seeing the two together immediately persuaded the soldiers of the relation: the cousins had notable similarities. Tall and graceful with distinctly Himean lines, both were also distinct from the Himean standard due to unusual colouring. Shizuru's was due to her eyes and her cousin's, to unusually fair hair: hair so pale it lacked even the barest sheen of yellow, its gild not of gold but of steel. So strange colours did run in the family! As did good looks, thought the dazzled legionaries.

Those comparisons were purely physical. The rankers lived in a different world, where little was understood of the upper classes save that they *better*. Had an actual member of those better folk been asked about the two patricians, he might have given a deeper judgment on the two women. Shizuru and her cousin deserved more differentiation.

Beyond the beauty were other similarities, though. Both possessed formidable intellects, for instance. However, Shizuru's cousin did not exhibit it in ways that would have gained her the recognition she deserved. There was the same athleticism too that promised great exploits on the field, but Shizuru's cousin had neither the discipline nor the desire to prove herself in battle, as Shizuru had yearned to do ever since her youth. There was, perhaps, the most important difference between them: they did not share the same burning ambition. Shizuru had always consciously directed herself towards the perfection of her goals and herself, the achievement of everything that should be hers by both birthright and excellence. Her cousin, on the other hand, cared little for such exertions towards grandeur. *She* directed her efforts in pursuit of another, entirely different kind of opulence.

Shizuru was in a position to confirm this during her visit, being seated on a couch opposite as they conversed in the villa's atrium.

*Still driven by the whip of pleasure*, the home-bound general observed with regret, watching her cousin quiz a slave about the cellar while touching the slave's body in various unnecessary ways.

Not that the slave seemed to mind a bit, for she giggled and twisted her body in the awareness that her mistress's hugely attractive cousin was watching. *Quite the eager temptress*, thought a haughty Shizuru, who was not at all tempted.

The truth was that she was trying to withhold a slight grimace. It was not even so much for the slave's antics, but for her cousin. She knew her relative had always been a flirt, but not this much of a flirt before—specifically, not before that thing happened that turned her into this. A few years ago, Shizuru's cousin had experienced a tragic love affair that had nearly killed the all the light of her brilliance. It was this tragic affair that had driven her from the public sphere, into her voluptuary ways.

Oh, thought the younger woman, why did it seem as though all the love affairs in her family had an element of tragedy to them, especially for their generation? Was this to be their brand? It hurt to consider it, not just because of a fear for herself but because of the twinge she experienced whenever she saw how it had marked her relative: a woman who could have been an *October horse* working herself with an ass's whip.

"Stop looking at me that way, Shizuru."

Shizuru blinked, drawn out of her cogitations by the other's voice; the slave had disappeared.

"Ara?" she murmured.

A ring of laughter—at least it no longer rang completely hollow!

"Oh, good, that's it!" said the other woman, looking pleased. "I was beginning to wonder when I would hear that again."

Shizuru met the merry eyes with her own. *Sharp hazel—no, not really hazel*, she mused, watching the other pair sparkle changeably. Most people called her cousin's eyes hazel upon seeing them, but Shizuru thought the word inadequate. Her cousin's eyes were not actually amber, nor greenish-brown, nor truly green, but all and none of those things. They shifted colour erratically, as though seeking the most fitting shade for the occasion. There were times when they



seemed the colour of translucent ferns, a sort of olive green tint; there were times too when they seemed the colour of a lion's eyes, a tawny warm hue. But even during the most definite of events, they always held a little ambiguity to them, as though they never could make up their mind what they should or wanted to be.

*In line with what Mother said about us before*, she mused. It had been a joke in their side of the family that all you needed to know of any of them was in their eyes. *A true thing for Shizuru*, her mother had once said, claiming that her blood-red orbs were indicative of a genius for war and a fiery, passionate will. In her cousin's case, it was applicable too: changeable eyes for a character that could be terrifically mercurial.

Suddenly she thought of something else. What could Tomoe's eyes mean? Now that other cousin-the one purportedly responsible for her unwilling election as praetor-had grey eyes: not clear grey but a strange, filmy shade, like smoke. Perhaps that was the explanation for that one. Smoke-coloured eyes for a smokescreen character.

"I told you to stop looking at me that way," spoke the person in front of her, grim all of a sudden. There was the mercurial personality! "Either you are dejected about something or you are deploring my 'dissipated' state. While I would hate you to be the former, neither would I relish the latter-you know I have had enough of that from our other admirably upright relatives."

Shizuru achieved a sigh.

"Nothing of the sort. Pardon me," she apologised. "But I was not aware of my expression."

A wicked laugh. "Does a thespian wear a mask without knowing it? Bald-faced lies today, Shizuru, and after so long!"

Shizuru denied it: "No, not at all. You know I would not lie to you. I never have."

"And if you have, how would we be sure I would know? But it's a moot point, since you have never needed to lie to me, so I rest assured you have *not yet* done so," the other woman replied. "Never

mind. I'm glad to see you after so long, and we can talk about likely perfidies another time. I don't think I've even congratulated you yet for your recent achievements, Shizuru. I do now; is that scar an effect?"

The crimson-eyed woman put a finger to her left brow, feeling the neat and hairless line dividing it.

"Argentum," she said, and smiled.

"Lucky it is the eyebrow and not the eye. Interesting-it actually goes well with you," came the favourable assessment. "There are other changes too, I see, from living abroad. How did you like the North?"

Shizuru paused.

"I did," she eventually replied. "Like it, that is."

Her cousin nodded, subjecting her to a stare that peeled away the layers of inscrutability Shizuru had taken to piling on top of herself throughout the years. This cousin was one of the few who could do it; she was a master of piling on layers too.

"Really? About your sea-crossing, though," she said suddenly, face impassive. "Was it a hard journey, Shizuru?"

*Yes, and it gets harder each day.* "Oh, no. Why do you ask?"

"Because I tell you no lies either, and spare from you no concern," was the other's retort. "So excuse me if I observe that you look off, and not as pleased as I thought you would be at returning as the elected urban praetor *and* a triumphing general too."

A meaningful pause, accompanied by a glance that went from the barely concealed circles under the eyes to the hollows of the cheeks, which were deeper than usual.

"Are you really well?" the other asked again. "You look tired, Cousin."

Shizuru was astonished. She touched her face with one hand, as though to ensure it was there.

"Do I?" she asked wonderingly.

Her companion frowned.

"You should take care of yourself, Shizuru," she suggested, her stare already snapping. "Is something the matter? What is it?"

Shizuru met her look with suddenly weary eyes, shedding the mask she had been wearing for nearly a month of travelling. Normally, she would have chosen to deflect the query . Even coming from those who knew her best, Shizuru rarely answered questions that cut too deeply, too truthfully to the human core inside her shell. But the situation was not normal this time, and the core was too injured for her to keep tending to it by herself. Her cousin had been right in observing she was tired . She was tired... and she needed to talk to someone about it .

*And that is not normal either*, she told herself, distressed by the weakness in her spirit. She guessed it was another effect of her experiences in the North, or more specifically, an effect of her experiences with a particular person from the North. How could she have known it would change her this much? Certainly it was not that she repented of her time with the cause of this development, but she wondered if the development might not be a regression.

*Should I be worried*, she asked herself, *that I can no longer exist so independently?*

It was during the crossing that she had come to see the extent of alteration. The very first night spent on the ship and the first she had spent alone in a while, it had seemed to her that she was slipping into insanity. Oh, for the balm of sleep! It had refused to come. Only after two days had it visited, and only after a bout of indulgence that had frightened her steward enough for him to hesitate when called to serve yet another unwatered drink.

After that it became routine: two nights of tortured wakefulness punctuated by a night of inebriation only her steward witnessed, where she would nod off quietly and wake the next morning with a headache shrilling in her ears. It could not drown out the actual source of her sleeplessness, however: the words flooding her head

and clamouring for a listener, an ear. Or was it *the* listener, rather, and *those* ears? Ah, but it had brought on more desperate words into her head to think of those ears-the small, pink-tinged, perfect little ears. She had used to kiss them so often, had she not? She had needed to drug herself with more wine whenever she thought of how she had whispered into them so casually. She needed wine not to obsess over the idea that she should have taken more time when she was doing it.

Insanity, when she could be reduced to a sot by the thought of perfect little ears.

The words kept stacking inside her during that time. Writing letters could only do so much, especially since she had known she could mail them only when they reached port. The solitude hit even harder because she had no one to provide aid as a buffer: there was none of those aboard her ship to whom she could speak, and nothing to do that could take her mind off the loss. The greatest diversion was to watch the sea, which she sometimes did, standing on the deck. There was still very little one could call interesting. She found the waters unvarying, and wildly lonely.

Those were weeks of forced inertia, with nothing to divert her but the routine chat with her soldiers, during which occasions she had to pretend to be merry. She had not felt merry. Nothing had been able to help with the memory that lingered in her sleep-deprived mind like an imprint: a willowy figure turning its back on her in perfect calm, each unwavering step opening in her a parcel of pain. It still hurt to think of how Natsuki had not even stayed on the docks of Argus to watch the ship leave the port. Rather, the young woman had waited only long enough for Shizuru to give the signal to the ship's captain, and then turned immediately to walk-that beautiful glide of a walk!-as though eager to put distance between them as soon as possible. To be sure, Shizuru did not forget what they said to each other, the exchanges they made right before the separation. Nevertheless, it was natural that to see the girl turn away so coolly should have left such an enduring hurt; it was natural that each casual step from Natsuki had seen her die and die and die...

"Forgive me, Shizuma," she said, trying to shake away the silhouette once again walking away but never disappearing. "I did not intend to

trouble you too much with my problems when I came here."

Shizuma Hanazono shook her silvery head, eyeing her cousin with warm interest.

"No, I gather you did not," she said in her husky voice. "But you should be smart enough to know it's acceptable, all the same. We are *family*, Shizuru."

The other woman's lips curled a little at that, as though the younger woman had found something ironic in the statement. Shizuma waited for her to explain.

"It is good to hear that," Shizuru finally said, softly. "Especially when it is family that is chiefly responsible for my weariness, at the moment."

Shizuma's eyes widened, her strange steely lashes fluttering.

"Family?" she echoed in surprise. "Our kin may deprecate me, Shizuru, but they all worship you. You're the chief adornment to the tree whereas I'm a rotted branch. Hard to believe they would do something to prune you as they do me."

"Your rhetoric is still as beautiful as I remembered."

"And your propensity to change the subject as I remembered it. As I was saying, I don't believe they did something against you."

"Not intentionally against, no, I think not. But intentions are not punishable and actions are."

"Punishable!"

Shizuma's eyes were shifting wildly between colours now, outrageously protean in the light.

"Now I'm really interested," she said, shuffling up on her couch. "If this brings out that side of you, I am all agog to hear more. Shall you tell me about it, Shizuru? By god, I shall not forgive you if you come here and hint at it without telling me."

Shizuru exhaled slowly. "Certainly, I shall tell you. If for no other reason than to do so was a good part of what moved me to see you, Cousin."

Shizuma smiled happily and filled up both their chalices first, then settled back into her couch and looked avid.

"You have my full attention," she said. "Now make good use of it."

Thus invited, Shizuru spared no time in telling. She told everything, save that which she wanted most to discuss. It was not shame that motivated this but a feeling that the personal subject of Natsuki would be better broached after the external particulars were done. Hence, she talked only about the beginning of her appointment to the North, her work in that region, and the circumstances surrounding her replacement. Her cousin listened with complete interest, nodding and contributing remarks occasionally to make it clear she was engaged. Once Shizuru finished, she replaced the remarks with a glance of reproach.

"I see now that I have been grossly shortchanged in news," she said bitterly. "Oh, people have been writing to me. But you know how troublesome it is to try and see which letters are worth a damn, and which people worthy correspondents. I wish you had written to me earlier about all this."

She continued before Shizuru could offer the protest: "I remember! I know I said I wanted to be kept out of all this business and left alone to my own ways, but I can regret that, can't I? Especially when it's something like this, and something involving you. The complication of it!"

Shizuru smiled sadly.

"Certainly I would have told you earlier had I known you would be interested-or that matters would grow to such difficulty," she answered, finishing with a sigh. "How the sloth of communication encumbers us! Would it not be beautiful if, one day, people discovered some manner of delivering information that were instantaneous, like those mythical crystals the Eastern magi claim permit such exchange of knowledge?"

She received a sarcastic look for the fanciful digression. Masking her own surprise with a smile, she realised suddenly that she was speaking as though with Natsuki, whose tendency to divagate in conversation often drew out her own. Oh, how lastingly had she been altered indeed! And by a girl who had walked away from her so easily!

She picked up her chalice and took a long drink.

"I should hope you to be joking, Shizuru," her cousin was saying with dryness, ignorant of Shizuru's inner grief. "Even the Greeks do not impute such immediate exchange to the gods-else why come up with an Iris or a Hermes?-and you know what a ridiculous sense of imagination *they* have. Such magics do not exist, nor shall they ever exist. No, let's talk of something practical and closer to the earth... or the mud, in this case. Tomoe."

She said the name with caution, as though it were something she was afraid would stain her teeth.

"*Vappa!* A baser brat I never knew," she said. "Just as I never knew how you could stand her."

"Did you not say it earlier?" Shizuru said with light mockery. "We are family."

"Perhaps you are-I'd prefer to think myself no cousin of that creature," Shizuma answered. She peeked at Shizuru from under her fringe of silvery hair. "You know I never liked her."

"Yes, I know," Shizuru sighed tiredly. "And yes, before you say it, this may well be validation of that opinion."

"A pestilence on opinion. Her baseness is a fact." Shizuma scowled at nothing in particular, her aquiline nose pinching. "Even at childhood she would inveigle others into some meanness she wanted played, and had a wide streak of cruelty. Many's the time I've seen her kick away a newborn kitten." Her face darkened further, distaste maturing into patent repugnance. "Fascination with poisons is hardly the stuff of fidelity."

"Whereas a fascination with swords is?"

Shizuma, who had always been a deft hand with a sword, smirked: "Most definitely. Fidelity goes to the flashing!"

"And falsity to the festered?" Shizuru quipped. "Alas, you were right about Tomoe, Shizuma. But I swear I shall have vengeance upon her."

"So definite!" exclaimed the other woman, who knew Shizuru's normal policy of clemency with most things and with the family. "You plan to invalidate her nomination of you on the premise that she falsified your consent, correct?"

"Yes."

"Difficult. Unfortunately-oh so unfortunately!-she *is* family." She shrugged carelessly. "It's true we are not related to her by blood, but the familial link applies all the same, since her father married our aunt after her mother died. For all practical purposes, that pest is our cousin and part of the family."

Shizuma scowled and looked weary as she concluded it: "And to denounce family is a solecism to our society."

Shizuru looked even wearier than she did.

"I know that," she responded. "But what else am I to do, Shizuma? I have no intent of lying down under her treachery, else she may think I am a mat upon which she may wipe her feet. I *must* denounce her! *Dignitas* demands it."

"Can it not be arranged such that the culpability be thrown elsewhere?"

"I thought of that too," Shizuru replied. "Something to the effect that she received a falsified letter claiming to be from me and instructing her to submit my name for the last elections. That would put the blame nicely upon some other nefarious character."

The silver-haired woman nodded. "That would work. So what goes against it?"



"The fact that the fool apparently claimed I had left her with that instruction even before I left for my campaign, and left it to her orally, not by letter."

An irritated growl.

"That idiot!" Shizuma spat furiously. "Well, be it on her head. She is the one who has dug her own pit, and it's her own fault if that is where she shall be buried. You *will* have to denounce her for it, if you want to even stand a chance of getting out of that office. The only thing I can suggest to help with the shock it will give-and this is a suggestion that will truly ruin her, I have to say-is to stress an understanding of the situation that says she is the one who has ruined familial solidarity... collapsed it by her perfidy and connivance against you, that is. From beginning to end, she shall have to be a complete villain in the story."

Shizuru was smiling.

"Exactly as I intend to do it," she admitted gently. "That shall ensure, of course, that I am not the one branded with the slur of familial betrayal. Unfortunately, such a measure shall transfer an indelible mark to her-or bring about Tomoe's ruin, as you say."

"Don't tell me you still feel pity for that creature!"

"Oh, no. Not really." Shizuru shook her head in earnest. "I was merely thinking on how it would also cast a bit of a blot on at least one member of our family, even though it is likely all our relatives would dissociate from her afterwards. Thank the gods there is no blood link! Still, the familial implication irks me." She frowned a little, more in thought than real displeasure.

"That is a paltry consideration before the principal one, all the same. In fact, I have already set things in motion, and my allies even now should be tending to it."

"No appeal, then?"

Shizuru nodded, having thought hard about this ever since learning of the treachery from their cousin. Beyond her own preferences and

plans demanding the extension of her stay in the north, there was the other and ultimate query: which would she prefer to see, the wounding of her *dignitas*, the part of it that was made up of her pride in herself, or the political death of Tomoe and Tomoe's credibility?

No question about it. *Vale*, Tomoe .

"No appeal," she said decidedly. "She has wronged and must pay for it. Rightful vengeance is due."

Shizuma stretched out her legs and wagged the feet playfully, looking very pleased. Shizuru watched her cousin, sparing a smile for the large and long feet common to both of them.

"I like this side of you best, you know, talking from punishment to vengeance," the white-blond told her. "To be fair, I do see why you should be vengeful. I would feel exactly the same." She stopped to think and qualified her words. "No, rather, would I? There might be something of a difference. I have always disliked her enormously, let us remember."

"Whereas I have not?" Shizuru said, raising an eyebrow archly.

"A difference in degree is a difference in kind. You did not dislike her enough to preclude suffering her before. I'm relieved that she has finally reached your saturation point!"

"That is because she has now steeped both my sleeves to the chest." Shizuru heaved out another deep sigh: it was amusing Shizuma terribly, since Shizuru had been doing it so often and it put to her mind the groans of a thespian playing to the crowd in a death scene. "The offence to *dignitas* aside, what she has done has also ensured my parting from something important to me."

Shizuma's response was to look at her curiously but not with ignorance. Even if the silver-haired patrician no longer spent her time in the city and had sworn off public life, there were still those who apprised her of events, as she had mentioned. To be sure, she found most of the missives dull and-in her own words-"drier than a desiccated whore", but there were still some chance gems she could find when she sifted through the dust.

She produced one of those dusted-off gems from her memory.

"The girl," she guessed. "Otomeian princess or something?"

Her cousin peeked above the rim of a goblet.

"So you are not as uninformed as you claim," Shizuru said in accusation.

Shizuma responded negatively.

"I know only that much," she said. "Some wrote asking me if it was true you were carrying out an affair with an Otomeian-a noble or a princess of some kind, as well as an officer in your army. How silly, asking me! How was I to know anything? I've been away from that sphere for so long everyone should be aware of it."

"I imagine both the familial and personal tie was the reason for the asking-not to mention your diverse links to many other women from Hime who could supply you with some fairly reliable gossip."

Shizuma smiled, looked terribly rakish.

"*Fairly reliable*, nothing! What would women from Hime know for sure about some liaison happening up north?" she countered with a low chuckle. "It tickled me, however. Even more now, since you have very nearly confirmed it. Or have you?"

A nod.

"I see." She paused. "I'm amazed."

It was Shizuru's turn to smile and look rakish as she said, "Are you really?"

"Yes. It's a surprise." The white-blond hair moved, alive as Shizuma shook her head. "After so long without showing any real interest in anyone beyond your ancestor, Mars; I was starting to think your only love was really the battlefield. Then this, finally, and at five-and-twenty years of age. 'Mazes me.'"

She took a sip of her wine, looking very calm for someone

professing amazement.

"Very good-looking?" she followed, being a woman with exquisite taste in women.

Shizuru smiled and made to reply, but change her mind before speaking. She put a hand to her side instead, touching a cloth purse tied to her belt.

"I have a... cameo," she admitted guardedly. "A likeness."

Shizuma was amazed again: this time it actually showed.

"How is it that you do?" she enquired.

Shizuru kept her hand on the pouch, thumb stroking it.

"I wanted one," she said. "I had it made. It was simple."

"Unlike you," Shizuma accused, the words double-edged. "Holding a cameo? And on your person? What romanticism is this?" She sniggered suddenly, the sound faintly smothered as she tried to lower her grin into a smirk. "Did I not know better, cousin, I would say you were mad about this girl."

Shizuru's answer struck away her amusement.

"I am. But I like her as a friend, a person, too."

Then the wheaten-haired woman produced the item, a palm-sized oval of polished sardonyx, the face of a young woman showing white against a background of pearl-glossed umber and ivory. She had another portrait of the girl, an actual painting, but that one was tucked away with her things since it was large and not carried easily. Therefore it was the cameo she kept on hand, and showed to her cousin.

"This is she," she said, unable to resist a glance at it. "This is Natsuki."

Shizuma took it mutely. She looked at the clear lines, the fine huntress profile.

"She *is* beautiful," she said simply, knowing there could be no other word for it.

Shizuru beamed. Her cousin's next remark had her eyebrows arching.

"Leggy and slender, correct?"

"How did you know?" Shizuru asked.

The other woman rolled her eyes. "As though we did not use to compare the women we found attractive when we were younger. I know your taste."

Shizuru's lips twitched.

"But she is beautiful," Shizuma repeated, looking once again at the carved face.

"Yet that is merely a portrait. It does not capture her to the life."

"Then I am surprised you did not commission a better artist."

"It is not a criticism of the art or the artist," Shizuru clarified. "That is in fact an excellent portrait of her. But her beauty is not that which can be captured by an image, because images do not breathe..."

She paused, searching for a way to describe the enigma that was Natsuki.

"Beyond the beauty is the life," she said. "Her very life is part of what makes her so aesthetic. If words fall short of her, so should paints and portraits."

She smiled and took back the cameo: "Everything in the world falls short after her, I think."

Her cousin stared at her as though she had sprouted a second head.

"Will wonders never cease?" Shizuma's voice was carefully modulated. "You liked her very much, Shizuru?"

"I still do. She is likeable, you know, in many, sometimes peculiar ways." There was a thoughtful chew of the lip, which the hazel eyes noticed immediately. "She is quite singular, that child. She has the most unique habits and attitudes, like the way she often sat at my feet, or near them as I worked, to keep me company..."

She trailed off as something crossed her face like a lightning streak. She had become painfully conscious again and all too suddenly of the physical absence: the luxuriance of dark hair against her leg, the soft sweep of lashes by her knee.

Her fingers shot deep into the palms.

"The truth is," she uttered, finally driven past restraint, "I do miss her terribly!"

Shizuma's jaw dropped.

"*Ecaster* !" she exclaimed, for lack of anything else to say. Her cousin's response was even more Himean: Shizuru drained her goblet and refilled it.

"I know," was all she said, once the crisis had been dampened by liquor.

They looked at each other warily.

"This must be some sort of weird day," Shizuma proposed, shaking her head. "Things are going topsy-turvy. I cannot believe what I have just heard."

"Indeed?" Shizuru had recovered a little. "I wonder if that means you think me such a cold one then. I do miss people."

"But rarely enough to admit with such fervour as you did just now. Or with such a ring of truth."

Again the pain threatened to break over the tawny blonde's face. She was able to suppress it this time.

"It is true," she said colourlessly, her face blank instead of betraying the earlier flash of pain.

Shizuma nodded, disappointed.

"A princess, eh?" she said nonchalantly, eager to go a little deeper into this.

"Yes."

"Fitting. She likes you too, of course?" she asked.

Here was the test.

"She *loves* me," was Shizuru's grave assertion.

Up shot a silver eyebrow. "Hm!"

And then she asked, just because it could be true: "Not for your money, we hope?"

Shizuru flicked that away with distinct contempt.

"Impossible," she said quickly.

"Oh? What makes you so sure?" The white blonde suddenly laughed, and the sound was hard. "Ah, Shizuru, I hate to say it, but you shouldn't be so sure of women! Throw them a bauble first and they profess eternal love: deny them a bracelet later and they accuse you of waxing cold. Many a woman have I known who pretended to like me for reasons other than my money... and so, I predict, shall you, without offence to your more personal attractions."

The other woman was unfazed by the warning.

"I do not doubt that you have indeed known such women," she said. "I do not doubt that such women exist-as do similar men, for that matter. Nonetheless, I very much doubt that Natsuki is such a woman. Indeed, it seemed to embarrass her almost to the point of pain whenever I gave her the barest token of my affection. Natsuki has never even asked anything of me, which is more than I can say for myself with her."

Shizuma lifted an eyebrow, still sceptical about this "Natsuki".

"Even so," she uttered. "They say the best catch in the sea are the ones for which you do not cast a line directly. How can you be sure she is not chasing after your legacy?"

Shizuru sighed, dismissing that now with an even more sceptical look than the other had.

"As I said, impossible, given her character," she retorted. "But if you would like to have more concrete reasons, it is because she might be wary of legacy-chasers herself."

"Oh, so the princess *does* have access to the royal vaults, after all?"

"I am not sure if one could call them the royal vaults. Simply, I have every reason to believe she is fabulously rich, and without needing to touch my money. Perhaps it has nothing to do with the Otomeian Treasury, even."

She paused for a moment, trying to recall all of the myths about the missing Ortygian treasures and pared everything down to the barest, most realistic estimates. And even then...

"Why, that is so!" she cried, gasping at the thought of what she had never really considered before. "If what I suspect is true, she might even have a fortune to rival mine!"

Up shot two marble-hued eyebrows: "Hyperbole!"

"I swear it!"

Shizuru's mind was working again, trying to sort out all the stories about Natsuki's people. How many temples had they once despoiled, ages ago, when they had first begun their long trek from the coastline after leaving the original island whence they and the Otomeians came? Added to which were the treasures they had brought with them on their ships, mythical hoards of jewels and gold. And then there were the armies that had tried to infiltrate their forest home, all save that of the traitor Mithrii annihilated, all looted, all their armour and baggage and standards taken by those fierce extinct people.

"Yes," she determined, breath catching. "It might very well be so."



She threw a stern look at her cousin. "And this is not so well-known, Shizuma, so I would have you hold it that way. Let it be thought that the Ortygian treasures are gone. It is better for Natsuki."

Shizuma lifted an eyebrow at this display of protectiveness.

"Tell me more about her," she encouraged.

Shizuru subsided into the couch while acquiescing, staring up at the intricately frescoed ceiling of her cousin's atrium. As she expanded on the subject, the other woman began to realise just how much Shizuru liked the girl from the North, how deeply she felt for that foreigner. The curse of their family! Shizuru's obvious passion for her barbarian brought back echoes of Shizuma's own past all too quickly, of feelings she had spent the last years trying to forget.

The reminder had her feeling rather prickly.

"She is kind," Shizuru enthused, too pleased to finally be able to speak of her lover to notice the other patrician's discomfort. " *Such* a good person, Shizuma! Perhaps that is why animals like her, in fact. I have heard they are more cunning than people that way, capable of sensing those with meanness in them."

The silver-haired woman found a smile.

"Animals like her?" she repeated.

Shizuru smiled back, though more earnestly. "They do, and she likes them as well. I gave her a pet, by the way."

Her cousin started shifting about on the couch, trying to find a more comfy position.

"How sweet," she said blandly, still fussing over her seat. "A tidy lapdog to keep her company?"

"A feline."

"Still sweet. A nice little cat, then?"

Shizuru thought of her lover's pet. And then she remembered

Natsuki's defence of it, that day she had tried to talk the Otomeian into putting it on a leash.

"Yes," she said. "It was a nice little cat."

"Hmm."

"It was attracted to Natsuki from the beginning," she went on, steering the dialogue to her previous subject. "Most animals, I noticed, seemed to be. The same might be said of people. Certainly she does not invite familiarity, but to anyone with true discernment, or those who know her, she just exudes such... such warmth. A hidden but true flame-and this, a fact, not an amendment of my fancy."

Shizuma paused in her fidgets and suddenly looked terrifically entertained.

She said: "In sum, if I am to trust you on this, she is terribly good-looking, terribly intelligent and athletic, terribly rich, and probably terribly nice as well?"

"Yes."

"Would she also happen to be terribly fabricated?"

"Cousin!" Shizuru protested with a laugh, at which the other started chuckling. "You saw the cameo."

"Comeos can be invented-and that one looks more like some imagined goddess than a true character. Grant she's too good to be real, going from that flurry of panegyric you gave me! Far too good. Although... yes... There is that."

"That?"

"The fault in the otherwise perfect marble. She's not Himean." Shizuma shrugged, knowing full well that what she was about to say was provocative. "What a pity she's a foreigner-she's no use to a senator of Hime socially or politically, is she?"

"I should think she is much use to me!"

Shizuma was taken aback by the vehemence of the outburst, and straightened in her seat. The other woman was sitting up as well, looking highly offended.

"In the sense of being a potential bride for a marriage alliance, is what I meant," Shizuma explained.

Here she was surprised by her cousin again, for the sandy-haired woman replied petulantly. Shizuru, petulant? *Ye immortal gods*, she cried inwardly, *this day is indeed topsy-turvy!*

"She is a princess," was what Shizuru told her in that displeased tone, somehow making it clear that she was actually little interested in whatever political help her foreign girl could give her, despite her own words supposed to be in support of the contrary. "Princess by blood-rights. Of a powerful allied nation."

"Hmm, well," Shizuma intoned thoughtfully, her eyes never leaving her cousin's. "There's generally something to be had from such liaisons, I suppose."

Shizuru looked, she thought, like she was becoming even more irritated.

"Is she the next-in-line?" she followed in feigned recklessness.

"No, though she is in the line of succession as a formality," said Shizuru.

"That does add to her good qualities, then."

"Yes... quite."

"And she *is* rich."

Shizuru frowned, then tried not to frown: "Yes."

"Again something that goes in her favour."

The red-eyed woman nodded silently. Shizuma clapped her hands together.

"There you go, then: you're right. There is quite a bit to be had in the way of advantages with your young woman. She *is* young, you mentioned?"

"Why does that matter?"

"A young woman is more manageable, and a waif of a young woman even more so. How old is she?"

"Ni-twenty."

"Another good thing!" The white blonde peered at her cousin mischievously. "And all of these good things are not worth a tot or a tittle to you, are they?"

Shizuru's stare turned leaden as she recognised the trick.

"Damn you," she said, trying very hard not to smile; Shizuma was already grinning happily. "Why bait me?"

"Because it's enjoyable, and rarely successful," the other woman answered, before suddenly sobering. "But. You really are mad about her."

"Yes," Shizuru agreed. "I really am mad about her."

"Youth and love will have its way. Or so it is said. It cannot be helped." Shizuma began to turn so that she could lie on her back. "So long as your madness for her does not actually prompt you to do something representative of that state."

"Would it be representative of it if I procure for her a citizenship and use it to bind her to me?"

Shizuma's back had barely touched the couch: she shot up as though burned by it.

"*Ecastor*!" she exclaimed, looking with horror at her cousin-her truly mad cousin, it seemed. She swung both legs over the side of her couch with a smack and leaned forward, looking very much as though she were about to slap Shizuru in the face. "Are you having me on? You cannot!"

But Shizuru chuckled gamely.

"Oh, but I can," she said. "Chikane would assist me, too."

Starting a little at the mention of their friend, Shizuma opened her mouth for another protest before realising Shizuru might be right: Chikane just might allow her to get away with such madness. Or might it be otherwise? Ye gods, who knew what the outcome could be when the two conspired?

"Topsy-turvy!" she cried, drawing a curious look from her cousin. She frowned to dispel the moment and asked, stern once more: "Are you serious, Shizuru?"

"Yes."

"Then you have gone off your wits."

Her cousin seemed not at all offended.

"I can do it," she reaffirmed. "You shall see."

Shizuma shook her head passionately.

"No, no," she ground out. "Well, it may be that you can do it. But you should not-that is the crux of it! It could ruin you, Shizuru. Think!"

"I do, contrary to what you seem to be assuming of me. Would that you gave me more credit!"

The silver-haired woman glowered.

"Would that you did know how much credit I give you!" she shot back, eyes gleaming. "You know why I am against it, Shizuru, and it's for the selfsame credit questioned. We know it, cousin, and we knew it a long time ago, even when we were no more than kids-you *matter*! You are not just another politician, nor just another eccentric patrician, nor even just another Fujino, come to it. I am not saying this to saddle you, but you surely see from where I am coming. If your intended ruination of Tomoe is a social solecism, then this other thing is complete anathema! Especially to someone who is going to become the First Citizen of Hime."

Shizuru's face softened.

"I thank you for your belief in me," she said calmly. "But it is that which I invoke now, for I share the same belief in myself. Leave the matter be, for I have set my mind on it and not without some cost either, in the setting. My mind has weighed and the decision is made; it shall happen."

"Even if it drags down your star?"

"Would the moon drag down a star or complement it?"

Shizuma's brow creased again, but in puzzlement.

"Muddled metaphor," she noted confusedly, having expected something more appropriate from her cousin.

Shizuru chuckled.

"Not if you knew Natsuki," she told Shizuma, whose bewilderment only increased. "You should not worry. Aside from her more measurable qualities, she has that indefinable one that matters too, and greatly, Shizuma. In Argentum she saved me from certain skewering, when I could not see a nearby foe because of the bleeding that left this." The halved eyebrow was touched again, gingerly. "And that we won the battle so cheaply, with so few losses among our own, was chiefly due to her timely arrival with the cavalry. Oh, I told her what to do there, yes. But the action that reprieved us was hers to execute and finesse in the execution! Not only did she save me but also the army! Do you understand, Shizuma? She is lucky!"

Shizuma blinked at this. Being a Himean, she understood how Shizuru could feel bound to her foreigner because of such things and because of the favours of Fortune, whom all Himeans revered greatly.

"She saved you," she said interestedly.

"Yes, and more besides, as I said. All my 'great achievements' in the North, Cousin, were done with her at my side. Is that not noteworthy?" She smiled suddenly, remembering another thing.

"And she was born on the *Ides* of August, a day sacred to the great god, and a fifteenth. Fifteen is lucky."

"I know that," Shizuma sighed. Even if she was not an augur like her cousin, she knew that much because all Himeans did: fifteen was the lucky number since it was the fulcrum of the unlucky ones, thirteen and seventeen. "And I can see how you can feel tied to her because of that luck she has brought you, Shizuru, which saved even your life. I can see. But... oh, still!"

Shizuru grinned, knowing her cousin was beginning to tire. "Come, let it be for now. I do not wish to spend our reunion on a futile argument. I really shall do what I proposed, and you really shall not sway me otherwise."

Shizuma, busy killing the urge to grasp handfuls of her own hair, shook her head sluggishly.

"Unless..." she said eventually. "You yourself change your mind in the future."

"My affections are of a more adamant nature."

"Adamant yoke, then!"

But Shizuru closed her eyes calmly, knowing her cousin was now speaking more against love than the politics of it, being a woman who had once been burned by amour badly.

"*Cedimus, an subitum luctando accendimus ignem?*" she recited. "*Cedamus!*"

Her cousin scowled at the line, already reduced to massaging a temple.

"Some burdens do not get any lighter," she warned, remembering her own experience with Cupid's arrow: it was still stuck in her heart and spreading venom. "But really, Shizuru, quoting Ovid? Since when did you get so sentimental?"

"Call it what you will," the other woman replied steadfastly. "I care not. This is one burden that straps wings to my feet, if burden such

wings may be."

Shizuma stared at her for a few seconds, torn between amusement and frustration.

"You have a very irritating sense of romance, Shizuru," she said ironically, after some time of contemplating the oddity that was turning out to be her dearest relative. "Don't use it on me."

She picked up her chalice and lifted it to her lips, but stopped before sipping.

"I'm susceptible, you see," she admitted.

Shizuru set her own chalice on the console table and folded in genuine laughter.

"*Tace*!" the other woman said, flinging up a hand as though to bat away a terrifically persistent insect: that was how Shizuma tended to see love these days, for all that it still exerted vestigial powers on her, the susceptible romantic. "Have it your way for now. I shall cease pestering you on your lover. Never say I did not warn you."

"And never say I did not contest the warning."

"Done! Let us be on to the clearer business."

"As you wish," Shizuru answered, still giggling.

"I do wish," Shizuma replied. "Quick, Shizuru, and answer me. Why are you here?"

That stopped the other's mirth.

"What do you mean?" she said, arching her golden brows. "I came to see you, Shizuma."

"To slip me into something related to all of this, I'll warrant. Why are you here?"

"Can I not be here simply out of a desire to see you?" she asked Shizuma slyly. "You paint me so wily, really."



Shizuma smirked: "I paint you fine. Take me for a fool?"

"Only a fool indeed would make such a bargain."

"How good to know you esteem me that much." The silver-haired woman sighed and asked again. "Why are you here, Shizuru? Why call so abruptly-and, as I remember from your letter, urgently-on me? You've long honoured my request to be left alone, and only ever called on me when already passing through near country, so this request to get together is a notable break. What is happening to your career is notable, certainly, as well as important. But you would never have made this request of me to meet you had you nothing in mind for the meeting that could relate somehow to what is happening to you politically. So I repeat the question. What do you want of me?"

The other woman suddenly grinned, which she took as the prelude to revelation.

"Well," Shizuru said. "I told you I shall be seeking to invalidate my election as urban praetor."

"Yes-something that radical is hard to forget, once mentioned."

"I shall do it such that I might be rendered just another praetor, without the germane restrictions upon me."

"Yes."

"And such that I may resume command of the North."

"Yes, I know, to make war with the Mentulae," Shizuma said, exasperated. "I *was* listening, Shizuru. Whereas you seem not to have heard my question, for you have yet to answer it!"

Shizuru laughed, looking more like herself because of it.

"My apologies," she said cheerfully. "The answer is that I want you to go to war with me. I need your help this time, Shizuma, and I need it badly. Would you please be my next senior legate, Cousin?"

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At the same time that Shizuru was visiting her cousin late that April, the petition for her triumph was finally brought to the Senate's attention. It might actually have been discussed much earlier, as it was not even Shizuru who had written it but her friend and Hime's senior consul in residence, Chikane Himemiya. However, that was a truth that the senior consul and Shizuru kept between them. The public understanding was that the petition had been sent by the returning senator herself; it was known from her advance couriers that she was only a week's march from the city, expected by the Calends of May.

The junior consul Yukino Kikukawa was presiding over the meetings for April, and it was she who brought up the subject in the session, the senior consul having advised her of it just before the meeting. It was the last item on the agenda and the one with the least expectation of difficulty. Even Shizuru's staunchest critics had no desire to oppose her petition. Her battles in the North were universally known and agreed-though some agreed a little grudgingly-to be triumph-worthy.

Thus, there was no excitement at all upon the junior consul's introduction of the matter to the itinerary. The only drama expected was small and uncertain, given that its projected source might already have prepared: the expected drama was the chance to witness Haruka Armitage's reaction, since she was an avowed enemy of the petitioner and her own triumph had just been denied so bitterly.

"We now come to the request from the returning Shizuru Fujino," announced the junior consul, who was on the curule dais with the other *imperium*-owning magistrates. Before and below this dais was also the long bench where the year's tribunes of the plebs reposed, the president of their college in the middle of the seat. Usually, when a controversial or highly emotional issue was being introduced, the attention would be centred here, for the bench's occupants held the awesome power of the veto and were thus the greatest of aids or enemies. The present subject was unlikely to see debate, however, so no eye was turned their way.

"For having been hailed *imperator* on the field in the Battle of Argentum, she requests the House's permission to be granted a

triumph upon return to the city," the junior consul was saying. "I would like to remind everyone that she was the authorised envoy of the Senate and People to prevent the possible encroachment of the Mentulae upon our territories and our allies' territories. I would also like to take this opportunity to remind the House that she is the urban praetor-elect, which means she shall be inaugurated into her elected office immediately after setting down her *imperium* and finishing the requested triumphal procession."

"About time, too," came a sarcastic drawl from Hikaru Senou-father of Aoi Senou, Chie Harada's lover-who had of late been speaking strenuously about the shameful absence of the urban praetor from the city. "She has been taking to the extreme the idea of 'fashionably late'!"

"Given that she has those other duties to assume," continued the junior consul, ignoring the interruption. "I would like to finish this matter summarily. It's in the city's best interests to have its urban praetor go to her office as soon as possible. It's also in Hime's best interests to see the proper honour go to those who have carried out brave deeds for its sake. I believe there's no more need to recount everything Shizuru Fujino has done, and of what she is worthy. Therefore I move that we vote on the petition directly, without any further debate. I shall see a vote on this immediately."

A few titters broke, for it was clear that the junior consul intended that no one impede the triumphal petition of her faction's arch-enemy, and was thus directing her prohibition of debate to her own allies. Oh, the delicious irony!

All eyes slid sideways, trying to peek at the only person who might have had the gall to create the impediment so expressly forbidden: the junior consul's dearest friend and mentor, Haruka Armitage. Whatever show they might have enjoyed there was never to be known, for something happened that upstaged that dramatic possibility. Right before the motion was carried, with everyone ripe and spoiling for a bit of entertainment to cap what had been a dull meeting, a cheerful voice suddenly usurped the lead role in the comedy.

"I interpose my veto."

Eyes went rolling. Five hundred senators found themselves sitting mute, robbed of breath, as they stared at the source of the startling interruption. A veto? For *this* ?!

A few moments passed where nothing sounded in the Curia Hostilis save for a suspended gasp of the collective.

The junior consul was first to recover and speak. As she was the one presiding over the meeting, this was only appropriate; as she had been the one interrupted, it was actually necessary. There was a slight pause when she opened her mouth, however, during which she hesitated over what to say. What had happened was so unexpected! A veto on her motion? Ludicrous! So ludicrous, in fact, that her first concern was not even for the defiance to her prohibition of debate, but rather for the person who had just defeated that prohibition so illogically. A veto on a motion to see through one of the most deserved triumphs in history? A veto on what should have been the most sensible, easiest motion since her inauguration into the consul's seat? Absurd, really!

Yukino Kikukawa was a logical person. Thus she did the most logical thing, in light of her reasoning.

She decided to ignore the absurdity.

"I repeat," she said, as though nothing had happened. "I shall see a vote on the matter promptly."

But the absurd proved capable of striking twice in the same place.

"And I repeat, I interpose my veto just as promptly," came the voice again from below the dais. "Belay your motion, Junior Consul. A tribune of the plebs has vetoed it."

The House blinked in stupefaction once more. And then started murmuring.

Yukino, who had blinked too, looked about with the stunned expression of a person walking into a wall where none had been thought to exist. What a thing to happen! The situation was horrible to her because she hated surprises, and this had come as a total

surprise, not to mention an unfathomable. Try though she might, she could not see any logic in the veto barring her way to closing this topic. Now she wanted more than ever to close this meeting!

She had been hoping to finish the day's session as soon as possible because she had a headache. She had been squinting at the tiers earlier, and her eyes were weak, which she hated; they tired from only a few squints. How much she wanted to just let drop her eyelids, to squeeze them tight! But that would be deemed a weakness, especially with this unprecedented situation unfolding, so she had to settle for frowning. She hoped, at least, that the expression would help in her next task by lending her face some necessary gravity.

The loan turned out a little pinched, unfortunately.

"Urumi Himemiya-Kanzaki Nemura-san," she said, intoning the awesome name with the tenderness of one treating the mentally defective: she remembered well the reputation of the vetoing speaker, the many accusations of insanity despite or due to a frightful intelligence. Was it possible, then, that this genius had actually gone insane? Oh, Yukino thought, there were many precedents for such a thing! It was entirely possible and even likely. Why else would she have posed her veto so absurdly? And as someone supposedly one of Shizuru Fujino's allies? Rack her brain though she might, intelligent as she was, Yukino could see no reason for one on Fujino's side to prevent her triumph. This had to be lunacy-every other incredulous face in the House affirmed that it was lunacy.

"Did we hear you say you interpose your veto?" she asked finally. She asked it gently, however, and still with that tone that implied she believed she addressed someone mentally defective.

Urumi Himemiya-Kanzaki Nemura did not miss it.

"You heard me say I interpose my veto, Junior Consul," replied the president of the Tribunician College, whose face the consuls and all those on the curule dais could not see.

A pause. "Over the last motion?"

"Over the last motion, Junior Consul."

Again the emphasis on "junior", thought the junior consul, who was hard to bait.

She asked again, for the sake of certainty: "You interpose your veto over my motion to vote on granting Shizuru Fujino a triumph?"

The tribune of the plebs grinned, her differently-coloured eyes dancing.

"I interpose my veto over your motion to vote on granting Shizuru Fujino a triumph," she chanted joyfully, and ended: "*Junior Consul*."

This time there was no pause before the voices started buzzing. There was suddenly a legitimate worry that the president of the Tribunician College this year was a loony, or perhaps suffering from some abrupt ailment affecting her logic. It was common knowledge that she was an intellectual prodigy, which only worked to support the suspicions of insanity. Intellectuals were known to be unstable, constantly teetering on the precipice of reason and drawn to the abstract theoretical sea. Was there anything more abstracted from politics than that sea? Was there anything more alien to a politician than the purely intellectual theory?

Glances were directed to both her cousins-the Princeps Senatus and the senior consul-in search of the concern everyone expected to see. To everyone's surprise, however, the former merely looked intrigued; the latter looked serene.

That was when they realised that neither was surprised by what their cousin was doing.

Yukino was among those who peered at her consular colleague. Like the others, she received no answering glance, however, and felt the onus of handling the meeting crash upon her shoulders. Which were *aching*. She had caught on to what those who had chanced a peek at the Princeps or the senior consul had seen, which was that there was something going on beneath the apparent absurdity. The difficulty was that she could not figure out the nature of that something. What was Himemiya-Kanzaki Nemura planning?

Or was it something having Chikane Himemiya as its origin? Was it Kanzaki Princeps Senatus? Or even-and this caused a shiver-the returning Shizuru Fujino? There just had to be something, every instinct in her told her there was something.

So why could she not see it?

Feeling the dip of consternation, she glanced instinctively to the left of the tiers, where her friend Armitage was sitting. Her friend looked just as bemused as she, however. Desperate, she scanned through the rows to see her other friends' notions on this. Every face she met was puzzled, empty. No help to be had, then; she had to bring up her own steel.

She drew it.

"For what reason do you interpose your veto over the motion?" she finally said, and said it grimly: she should not humour this potential lunatic-cum-troublemaker with overdue acquiescence, else her own *auctoritas* suffer-and that would make Haruka angry. "We deserve to know, Tribune, because we can arrest you for obstructing the proceedings."

The House was shocked afresh, for the tribune's response was to burst into hilarity. Was that the first verification of lunacy?

"Forgive me, but we all know that is a near-impossibility," the chuckling tribune explained to the gawping senators. "I am an elected tribune of the plebs and my body is thus inviolate due to this office. Did you try to arrest me, I might claim that you were obstructing *me* in the rightful exercise of my duties and thus have *you* arrested. Would that not be funny?"

"Not if you don't spew a reason as the consul's just directed, Bratling!" roared the brassy voice of Armitage, who was finally provoked into speech. "It's you who's being obstructing!"

Urumi turned her head to look the other senator in the eye. As Haruka was to her left, it was her brown eye that Haruka could see.

"Obstructive," said Urumi. "You mean 'obstructive' . "

Up came Haruka, down toppled her seat, and away went a servant to get it.

"Lictors, arrest this tribune!" the enraged senator screamed, foaming at the mouth. "She's being obstruct *iii*ve !"

"Oh, don't let her goad you!" cried Sergay Wang, who was on the next stool.

"I said arrest her, Lictors!"

At which point the normally languid senior consul stood, yelled for the confused lictors to remain where they were, and stared down the members of the farce with cold fury. Taking advantage of the pause after her shout, she reminded the thoroughly fascinated House of the real subject they were discussing, and adjured everyone to dispense with the theatrics. It was noted that the admonition included even her cousin.

"Enough inanities and on with the issue, if issue there should be," she said fatally, once able to speak without raising her voice to a shout. "Any further intermissions had best be germane to the topic, else they be considered a *true obstruction* and reason to remove their speakers from this gathering."

She then nodded courteously to the fidgeting junior consul, and asked the woman to resume the meeting.

The junior consul took over again.

"No-no one shall arrest anybody," Yukino instructed uncertainly, a little flushed at Urumi's last retort and the recent display of her colleague's superior authority. To have quelled even Haruka, without even swearing! If only she could be a little more like that-or like Haruka, for that matter, who was naturally intimidating. Instead, she had to let someone else do it, even now when she was one of the two most powerful magistrates in Hime. Pathetic . It brought back echoes of what the other children had used to call her, when she was younger: Yukino the Mouse, Yukino the Timid.

*Yukino the Weak.*



It was those echoes that made her grit her teeth.

"We shall hear Nemura Himemiya-Kanzaki-san's reasons," she announced, speaking suddenly in a loud voice few had thought her capable of producing. "Of violence, there is no need. The same can be said for interruptions to this meeting, as expressed before me by my colleague."

And to her red-faced friend, very kindly: "Please, Armitage-san. Return to your seat."

After everything had been arranged more or less to her liking, she returned to the issue with more composure than before. She squinted-ye gods, how her eyes were aching!-at the menace still seated on the bench below the dais. A head of golden hair was all she could see.

"Himemiya-Kanzaki Nemura-san, are you ready to explain?" she demanded, voice growing steadier as she found her confidence. "I want no more dissimulation from you. Either explain, please, or retract the veto."

There was a suspenseful pause from the tribune for the extremely titillated House, for Urumi loved to be titillating.

"As directed, Junior Consul," she finally declared, rising to go to the centre of the floor. "I shall explain my veto or else retract it. I choose to explain it."

Yukino nodded sternly, looked the part of her office; inwardly, she heaved a sigh of pure relief.

Every member of Senate was awake now, and staring curiously at the young woman on the marbled floor. She took a moment to stare back piercingly. One of Urumi's eye tricks: it gave her the appearance of surveying the crowd while meeting each gaze individually, though that was surely impossible, especially now that senatorial attendance of the meetings was high. It was about this time that those senators and Himeans who preferred to live in the countryside returned to the city, eager to attend the games or *ludi*. Thus the senators present to hear Urumi were many... which was

just the way she liked it to be.

"Members of the House, I vetoed the recent motion for a reason," she started, pitching her voice a little higher than usual so it would carry. "And I know, Fellow Senators! I know that seems an odd thing! I know that reason seems distant, almost imaginary. Truth be told, I myself would have thought the same, had I not the fortune to be apprised of something unknown to many. And had the further fortune, Fortune being favourable in its justice, to see to the sordid and malicious depths of it."

She started walking up and down, for her oratorical style was that of the peripatetic.

"The reason I interposed my veto, earlier, was to address an illegality," she announced, nodding at those who leaned forward. "Yes, you heard me correct, Good Colleagues. An illegality, and a grave one."

She raised a palm.

"To be sure, I do not mean that the illegality resides in Shizuru Fujino's petition to a triumph, nor even in her right to a triumph. For, do we not all agree that of that much is she worthy? Is there anyone here who would truly contest her merit? Judge, ye gods, the one who does it, for I tell you he does it out of envy!"

"What does that have to do with anything?" called a senator, one of the Traditionalists. "If the illegality is not in her petition, then why veto it?"

Urumi paused and inclined her head to the questioner.

"A fair query, fellow senators, and one I gladly answer," she responded. "I vetoed the petition-just and legal and deserved as it is-because I believe the illegality of which I speak should be addressed *before* it, not after it. One reason for this is that the illegality is related to the petitioner, Shizuru Fujino, although not of her perpetration; the results of our discussion may have some effects upon her, though I shall get to the details of that later. Another and even more significant reason is enshrined in the rules

of conduct for this hallowed body, which demand that topics be addressed or discussed in the order that agrees with the Republic's priorities. The more urgent matter goes first, and after it goes the less urgent one. Does a man giving a gift to one of his children continue when a murderer is already leaping at him? Does he not pause first to fend off and eject the attacker from home and hearth, before continuing to pass the gift?"

"Oh, get to it!" cried Sergay, conscious of Haruka squirming again in her seat. "What's the illegality? To the point now, Tribune, and enough ornamental speech."

"Leave her be!" cried another senator, famed for his love of rhetoric. "We let *you* run on when you're the one rambling!"

"Enough interruptions, please," called the junior consul. Her voice was terribly fatigued, and thus thinned to a dryness that often took her much theatrical labour to achieve. "What is the point of all this, Tribune? What is this 'illegality' you keep mentioning and why is it grave?"

Urumi bowed, her left hand cuddling the folds of toga hanging over her shoulder.

"What is the illegality and why is it grave," she seemed to echo for a moment, looking pensive. "Well might that be asked by the junior consul! I shall tell you, Good Colleagues, about this illegality and how grave it can be!"

She paused, frowned, looked fierce without warning.

"I called this illegality a grave one," she repeated. "This for the way it has been carried out so barefacedly, in the most disgraceful manner. No doubt this shall shock you as it has shocked me, for the wrong of which I speak has been carried out in public! The villain has committed it in full view of us, like a murderer who does the deed at the gates of your house, and leaves the corpse on your street! What could be more obscene than that, I ask you? What could be more shameless? I can think of few things, Members of the House, that could outdo this blatant and brazen and *bastard* a wrongdoing!"

Now everyone was listening, for Urumi was a powerful speaker and could carry away most people on the sheer force of her rhetoric. Her voice had dipped after her last words, and now held a lethal timbre to it.

"Pardon me, my feelings reigned for a moment," she said quietly, but still audibly. "It is because I am angry. Those of you who know me know it is rare for me to get angry. What could have angered me today, you ask? Why, what else but this blatant crime? Even so, I wish that it were blatant only; would that the evil there would have been enough! The villain behind it, however, was not satisfied with that point alone. The villain had to cover the next point, which is that of achieving the *brazen*."

She snorted with disgust, waved a hand irritably.

"I know it must be hard for you to conceive how such a crime can be worsened," she allowed, a febrile glint in her eye that seemed to support her claim of anger. "But it can be, Fellow Senators. It can be. For the second thing that has provoked me so much in this illegality is the identity of the mastermind behind it. The thing that outrages me so deeply is the fact that the villain in this piece *is among our ranks*."

She caught the stir in her audience and nodded gravely, wagging her head like a hound eager for the kill.

"Let me repeat that: among our ranks . Among us is one who has sought to throw the curtain over our eyes whilst carrying out a crime-against Shizuru Fujino, to be specific. Thus does the crime go from bad to worse, its perpetrator brazen enough to turn on one of us even while under the concomitant expectations of being under our body's and class's membership. Conscienceless! Traitorous! But it does not stop there. As I hinted earlier, this is a crime of triple-weight: a crime that, having reached the worse, goes on to the *worst*!"

"I claim the superlative degree of evil because the harm it causes does not stop at one of us," she went on. "It does not stop at harming the esteemed Shizuru Fujino, but goes on to harm every other member of our great Republic. Every. Other. Member. The

villain in this story has harmed you, Honoured Junior Consul-and you, honoured Haruka Armitage-and you, My Friend-and you-and even me. The villain has harmed every one of us, to the last man out there on the street! An ambitious villain we have here, don't you think?"

Urumi grinned sourly, managing the expression with consummate theatrical skill.

"What manner of person is this of whom we are talking? Would you like to know who it is? I can see you muttering-yes-you are shifting uneasily; you are right to do so-look about you now, in rightful anxiety; where could this villain be? Why, he could be sitting beside you now! But I do not endorse the spread of such suspicion among us, especially in such times when we need to be united against this traitor in our midst. I would rather point you the right way, Fellow Senators, so you can all know of whom to be wary. To do that, let me tell you a story."

She was still walking and halted now by the great brass doors of the Curia, from which vantage point all could see her face. There she stayed and finally told them the tale of this great wrongdoing.

"Last December we held the elections," she reminded. "And it was at that time our villain appeared. In the guise of an ally to one of our colleagues, this villain schemed and pretended to lodge a nomination on behalf of our colleague. Our villain misrepresented-ah, forgive me! Did I say 'misrepresented'? I meant 'falsified', rather! How unduly euphemistic of me!"

She shook her head, grinned wryly, seemed self-deprecating.

"You see how this affects me, Fellow Senators?" she asked with wide eyes, deviating for an instant in order to introduce another salient point to her speech. "So unbelievable is it that someone from within our ranks would turn on her fellow-her friend-her family, in fact-such is her evil! So unbelievable is it that I find myself unconsciously trying to lighten the portrayal of her misdeed. But this shall not do here. We cannot pretend that a hack is just a prod, or a crime a petty prank, when the victim is not just one of us but the Republic. It is bitter poison the Republic has been fed, and thus

must be equally bitter our medicine."

She grinned abruptly, looking her most feral as she showed a row of gleaming white teeth.

"Getting back to what I was saying," she said. "Our villain falsified... fabricated... *fibbed to your faces* ! She claimed that her cousin was declaring candidature for the last elections, and convinced us of that lie deceitfully. How do I know it was done deceitfully? Because I have been exchanging communications with that cousin, as indeed have also some others in this same Senate, and I can tell you something with which they shall agree."

And just like that, Urumi was down on the floor again, her next words coming at ripping speed.

"I can tell you that Shizuru Fujino never wanted to run for praetor last year!" she declared in ringing tones. "And I can tell you that she never even knew of her nomination until the last moment, when it was too late! I can tell you that several honourable others in the House can verify this, as well as the woman herself once she returns! I can tell you that she viewed the news of her election with great humility, certainly, but also with great shame! For it was an election tainted by the corruption, the deceit, the unmitigated audacity of our villain, whom many of you have already guessed now to be her relative by marriage though not by blood-Tomoe Marguerite!"

A tumult broke among the tiers, particularly among the front ranks, as they wheeled about and craned their heads to see to the back and find the accused. The *pedarii* were less energetic. Most of them knew that the accused was not in attendance for the meeting-which was exactly why Urumi had chosen to stage her little show this particular day. Those who were friends or sympathetic to the accused, however, were already sending off their servants with a warning to the absent senator. Within half a turn of the glass, Tomoe Marguerite would receive the news of her denouncement.

And would understand, with incensed and psychotic fury, that she had been forsaken by her beloved cousin.

In the Curia, the junior consul was trying to be heard above the noise. It was her best friend who drowned out her words, however, as Haruka asked the question for which Urumi had been waiting.

"That still doesn't explain why you vetoed earlier, Tribune!" she shouted, reducing all other sounds to a background noise with her brassy voice. "So what if Shizuru Fujino was put up as a candidate without her consent in the last elections? They're over and she's elected! What does that have to do with her triumph and your veto?"

Urumi hid a grin, terrifically amused: the truth was that she had expected it to be one of the other, *sharper* arch-conservatives to point to this. After all, she had lit such a fire under the senatorial stools with her accusation that it was only natural for most to forget about the original topic, and latch onto the fresh scandal.

*What single-mindedness you do have when it comes to her, Armitage*, she told the woman silently, pretending to look severe. *Is it that she's so formidable she forces you into sharpening, or that you loathe her so much your stubbornness starts to spill over into perspicacity?*

"Well said, Haruka Armitage!" she responded, once the hubbub had lowered sufficiently after Haruka's yell. "Well asked, I say! I ask you now to suffer me a little longer, Fellow Senators, for I shall now answer Armitage-san's question and enter the true purpose of my veto. Members of the House, I pray you, calm and attend me!"

They listened, curious, wondering what more this wonder of an orator had to say. Who was that who said this would be a dull meeting, with no excitement?

"Let us go through her points logically," she said, ticking away on one hand. "What if Shizuru Fujino was indeed put up as a candidate without consent? They are over and she is elected. What has this to do with the triumph and my veto? Did I get them all? Good, that's clear!"

"Before I give my answers, permit me to note something quickly," she said suddenly, dropping her cheerful mien with impressive speed. "Everything I have had to say here has centred on an

illegality. I think it therefore behoves us to pause for a moment and remind ourselves of our position and power, and our responsibilities. The Senate of Hime is not, strictly speaking, a lawmaking body, although it does recommend and approve of prospective laws to be referred to and passed by the Assemblies. Any prospective law we approve is subsequently passed. Whatever we recommend becomes enshrined into the body of laws, written and unwritten, that uphold our Republic. That makes it something that does not just apply to the present, but goes far into the future."

"Therefore the Senate's stamp of approval is a great thing, a thing that can be taken as a legitimisation of a prospective law, a policy, or a procedure, in and of itself. Our very decisions, while not *strictly* law-making, have the force of law nonetheless. That we permit becomes permissible legally. That we disapprove becomes disapproved legally."

She scowled as she said the next words: "That we ignore, however, is not just ignored legally. Often, when the Senate chooses to ignore a matter, it is understood simply as the Senate taking *no action against it, and therefore allowing it*. To let be a matter is generally the same as putting a stamp of approval upon it."

"Get to it!" cried a voice. "This is nothing new!"

Urumi pretended surprise and lifted both palms.

"Why, that's so, thank you for reminding me!" she answered. "It pleases me indeed to know that you do not consider this new knowledge since that means it is at the fore of your minds. That sets my mind at ease. Only with such an assurance do I feel comfortable answering the questions put forward by Armitage-san."

She clapped together her lifted hands, drawing a start from several senators as the sound echoed loudly.

"First, so what if Shizuru Fujino was put up as a candidate and elected without her consent, which she has indicated to me she shall not give even now? Why, obviously, the *what* is that this is an illegality. But let us be certain of something first. Is it really an illegality?"



"True, there is actually no law expressly forbidding it; it can actually be legalised by the Senate and the People. Nonetheless, it is clearly an 'illegality' because that can never happen! It *can never be legitimised* in any way by the Senate and the People, owing to the implications it carries with it and the fact that those implications are contrary to the basis of our entire system of justice. Thus are we agreed: it is indeed an illegality."

"Second, the elections are over and she has been elected. True, but we have questions arising out of the first point that qualify the conclusions drawn from this. Can a person lawfully ascend an office achieved through an illegality, particularly when said person is not yet bound by the terms of that office? Shizuru Fujino has yet to be inaugurated into the office of urban praetor, as mentioned earlier, which means she is not yet welded to it. This means there may yet be a question of *whether she should or should not be welded to it*."

"Third and finally, what has all this to do with the triumph and my veto? Simply this," she said. "Shizuru Fujino was the victim of illegality and treachery by being put up as an unwilling candidate. Shizuru Fujino was nonetheless chosen by the people as shown by her domination of the praetorian votes. Shizuru Fujino was not technically a legitimate candidate, but was given so overwhelming a portion of the vote that she was returned in the highest of the praetorian seats, that of the urban praetor. The two imperatives here are pulling: the acknowledgment of the grave illegality that let her election come into being, and the recognition of the election that proved that people vested her with their stamp of legitimacy by voting for her overwhelmingly. Ought we subordinate one to the other? Ought we value the depth of the illegality over the people's manifest will?"

"I say no!" she exclaimed, sweeping into her peroration. "I say we must balance the regard for justice-which is what protects the people-with the regard for the people's will-which is a great part of justice. Thus I vetoed the motion that would have seen Shizuru Fujino forced into returning to Hime prematurely, and compelled into an office that-though she deserves it by virtue of popular vote- *she does not deserve* by strict and consented legitimacy. I keep saying this, Fellow Senators, Esteemed Colleagues, because I would like to

emphasise that we cannot subordinate one to the other! Ours is the task of advocates multiplied hundred-fold; we cannot pretend that the law and regard for the law outstrips the regard for the people it protects, but neither can we pretend that the people for whom the law exists are above it, else law be rendered futile!"

"Thus do we have only one choice, I believe. Thus must we now reconcile and balance the two imperatives in this issue with a single option! No doubt some of you see it already, but permit me to state that single option myself: we must grant Shizuru Fujino the status of praetor-elect while taking from her the more prestigious title of *urban* praetor-elect. That honoured office should more properly go to one of the other praetors-elect and someone more qualified in terms of legitimacy: not by popularity and trust among the people, perhaps, but by legitimacy! This recognises the illegality of her falsifying cousin's actions while also recognising the popular will!"

Shocked though the House was at this measure, further might Urumi have gone, and further might she have begun to turn them to the logic of her motion, had it not been for the long howl that erupted from Sergay Wang.

"No, never, over my dead body!" that worthy reared, proving himself very nearly the equal of Armitage when it came to brass lungs. "That is unconstitutional! Witness, Fellow Senators, the gall of this tribune to claim justice for such a thing! Justice is to pander to Shizuru Fujino, is it?! *Over my dead body!*"

While most people had truly been astonished by the apparent conclusion of Urumi's speech, Sergay had actually arrived at her purpose even before. Far from a political dunce, something had clicked in him during her systematic address of Armitage's points, from which he had begun to piece it all together: her incessant repetition of the word 'illegality'-the portrayal of Tomoe Marguerite's crime as a 'tainting' influence-the letters many of the senators had been receiving from the North that agitated for Shizuru Fujino's return as commander-in-chief. And then, the exact moment before Urumi's peroration, he had seen it.

"Shizuru Fujino, that ambitious creature, that ungrateful woman, put her up to it!" he was screaming, purple in the face from outrage.

"Think about those letters we've been receiving from the northern provinces-she's also the one who put them up to it! Fujino wants to resume her command in the North; she just wants to keep her army and use it to further her ambition! Look at the ambition of it! What a gall! What cheek! What you propose, tribune, is *not* justice! It is the gratification of a woman who has the audacity to turn away an elected office and then seek another as though it were equal to it!"

"Not precisely equal but in more measured value, if you were listening!" Urumi shot back, trying to get in a decent interruption before he could continue working up the other senators' feelings. He outscrambled her, however, and the buzz in the House started to grow louder and worsen.

"How dare you and how dare Shizuru Fujino!" he was now saying. "To be elected praetor and first of all the candidates is an honour reserved for the few! How dare she throw away such a gift, I ask you! How dare she cast it back to the voters' faces, I ask you that!"

"You ask with a curious lack of upward inflection, Wang-san!" Urumi noted wickedly, seeing they would never let her get another word in for this meeting. "Are you sure you are asking?"

Before Sergay could answer, Haruka did: "How dare you!"

Urumi swivelled to face the curule dais and held out both palms as though to say, *You see what I mean?*

"This is a travesty, Fellow Senators!" cried Sergay to the rest of the House, howling in a discordant duet with his seatmate. The other Traditionalists were up and shouting too, now. "This is a mockery of not only the Republic but an insult to all of us and all Himeans who voted! This spuriously-plebeian tribune of the plebs and Fujino have cheek to even think of it! Ye gods, they have hide!"

"Whereas *he* is obviously missing four inches of his," called out one of the Senate wits, unable to resist the chance to pun on Sergay's scar on the brow-about four inches of scraped-off skin-as well as impute a castrated state to him. As this was one of those insults that always brought on the fisticuffs during senate meetings, pandemonium broke when Sergay went at a run for his offender,

with their friends going to assist in the brawling. However, some of the Traditionalists had not forgotten the wildly amused tribune of the plebs cackling on the Curia floor, and started to move in.

"Junior Consul."

Yukino started, so strange was it to hear a perfectly calm voice above the yelling and cursing and screeching of chairs. She turned to her consular colleague, the only one capable of speaking so coolly at such a moment.

"Junior Consul," said Chikane Himemiya, unruffled but already out of her seat. "Dismiss the meeting."

By the time Yukino had understood enough to bolt from her chair and do just that, screaming for everybody to leave, the tall woman had already descended from the curule dais and headed for her cousin, whom she steered past a throng of confused senatorial sheep. They passed some of the Traditionalists who were out for Urumi's blood, but went through those unmolested. While more than one of those senators might have happily seized the tribune of the plebs by the toga had she been alone, no one found the nerve to do it while the senior consul was with her and staring down all comers. Some of the pair's allies had also rushed to join them, and they all made it out of the Curia Hostilia safely, if a little raggedly.

"Interesting," said Chikane, looking back at the howling senators in pursuit, and seeing that the Princeps was nowhere in sight. "Naturally."

"Jupiter," panted Yuuichi Tate, who had been practically dragged by his wife to aid them. "Jupiter. That had them foaming."

"Yes, it did," Chikane answered him calmly.

He pulled at his hair stupidly, gasping: "I didn't think it would have them foaming!"

Chikane threw him an amused look just as his wife dragged him again and further away from the Curia.

"Don't lose your nerve now, Yuuichi!" the redheaded senator

admonished excitedly, before realising she had no idea where they were headed. She turned to face the group, which was swelling quickly as their other friends ran up to join them. The Forum was filling with people eager to know the source of this chaos from the Curia, and this meant they were also surrounded by cheering bystanders ignorant of what was happening but thrilled by the ruckus.

"Where to now?" Mai Tokiha demanded, addressing Chikane and her cousin.

It was the latter who answered.

"To the Well of the Comitia and swiftly!" gasped Urumi, still holding on to Chikane's arm as though it were a spar in a wildly heaving sea. "It's begun." Out came a gale of breathless laughter. "Oh, finally it's begun!"

## Chapter 47

*A sincere thank you to the (polite) reviewers and writers of messages. It must be said, however, that one is slightly taken aback by the degree of presumption in a few-only a few-of the things waiting in one's inbox, on occasion; were it not for the majority still observant of good form, one would wonder if those odd exceptions are to be taken as the quality of intellectual courtesy these days. All the same, I tender here a mild request: if there are those who do so find fault with the story, then please do me the good turn of arguing for your criticism in politely reasonable terms instead of crossing the line into the unwarranted and impertinent; I shall be quite pleased to debate the merits of the suggestion/critique rationally and without taking umbrage. Very few things gall so much as ungraceful impudence, and the cup is very nearly full; I am willing to continue this story, but not at the cost of having to suffer more grief than the petty amusement is worth.*

*And I am most sorry it has taken so long. To say one has not been well for the past weeks is an understatement.*

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### **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Adamas** (L.) - "Diamond"
2. **Amanuensis** (L.) - One who takes down the words of another.
3. **Aquila** (L.) - "Eagle"
4. **Armiger armentalis** (L.) - Literally "armour-bearer of the herd". This pun translates far better if the reader is familiar with Latin. For those who are not: **armiger** is the noun for "armour-bearer", while **armentalis** is an adjective generally related to cattle (thus, 'of the herd' means 'of the cattle herd'). Both have a similarity to Haruka's last name, Armitage, which is what holds together the jest.

*Shizuru's use of the word **armiger** relegates Haruka to a lower*

position than Haruka claims for herself: Haruka is a self-professed pillar of the conservatives in this story, and would be more likely to metaphorically describe herself as a "soldier [or general] for tradition" than one who merely accompanies such soldiers and carries their armour. Adding the adjective **armentalis** deepens the jibe because it reduces the conservative senators (for whom Haruka acts as **armiger**) to cattle: domestic, supposedly harmless, herbivorous animals. Admittedly, oxen could be viewed as dangerous by the Ancient Romans, but only when the ox had a reputation for goring, in which case hay was tied around its horn/s as a marker. Cattle kept in a herd or with the group, however, were generally understood to be safe.

Considering this, Shizuru intimates from her line that the Traditionalists who are viewed by many as dangerous are in truth merely cattle in the placid herd, and thus devoid of true danger. Moreover, as they have no bloodlust-being **armentalis** -there is thus no need for them to have arms or armour-and thus no need for an **armiger**. Shizuru's words destroy Haruka Armitage several times over.

5. **Calends** (L.) - Also Kalends, the first of the three named days of a Roman/ Himean month, and the only fixed or unvarying one. The Calends is always on the first day of the month.

6. **Campus Martius** - The area outside the city of Rome/Hime where legions were trained and parked.

7. **Catulus** (L.) - "Cub"

8. **Centuriate Assembly** - (L., *comitia centuriata*) One of the Roman/Himean assemblies, it organised the People in their classes (the Centuries) and held meetings outside of the **pomerium** (s.v.). Typically, because of its nature, the only classes whose votes really counted would be the First and sometimes the Second. Members of the lower classes were rarely called upon to vote. Note that the classes were arranged by economic principle, or through a means test.

9. **Classes** - See preceding note, for **Centuriate Assembly**.

10. **Equites** (L.) - Members of the **Ordo Equester** , called "the knights" as opposed to "the senators". Those of knight rank were usually as well-born as those of senatorial rank, but the difference was that they chose not a political career but a commercial one. Recall that there are restrictions on senatorial businesses, which is the reason the knights are generally the richer of the two ranks. One may consider them the equivalents of the modern "business sector" of the community, with the senators being the "government or political sector", for a simplified but convenient categorisation.
11. **Forum** - The area of Rome/Hime where most of the government structures were, including the Curia, where Senate met.
12. **Knights** - See note above, for **Equites**.
13. **Pomerium** (L.) - The sacrosanct boundary encircling the city of Rome/Hime, which could not be crossed by soldiers or generals for the duration of their service in a military mission or capacity.
14. **The Eighteen** - The original eighteen centuries of the Ordo Equester (see note above for **Equites** ), meaning the original eighteen divisions within that group in its early days of existence. As time passed, more divisions were added to the Ordo Equester to accommodate the expansion of the knight class, but these eighteen centuries were kept untouched and intact. Hence, the Eighteen were perhaps the most influential knights of all.
15. **Tirocinium fori** (L.) - a term of apprenticeship at the Roman/Himean legal courts that was taken by budding politicians.
16. **Tribune of the plebs** - Elected official of the Plebeian Assembly, holding the power of both legislation and (more importantly) the sacrosanct veto, which may be applied to anything except the decisions of a Dictator.

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**Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae**

*par ethnewinter*

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Shizuru put the Fourteenth in the Campus Martius on the Calends of May, but did not choose to stay there herself. She opted for hiring one of the villas nearby instead. There were many such manors just outside the *pomerium* : houses to let for foreign sovereigns unable to cross the boundary into the city of Hime. As her arrival coincided with the waxing of public interest-and for certain people, outrage-over the issue her friends were pressing on her behalf, this fairly unusual move led many to infer that she was deathly serious: the returning general appeared so determined to get her desires that she was actually setting in for a cosy wait in her rented villa.

Not that Shizuru only waited. She girded herself for a battle she would have to fight from outside of the city, the barrier permitting her to keep her legions also barring her from the centre of action. It was a spring battle, when rural citizens began to flow into the city in anticipation of the coming games. From populace to plain, everything about the time bespoke a waking stretch from the winter sleep, and thus heralded a perfect start for Shizuru's plans.

More people were out and eager for entertainment, and many looked for it in Forum-watching. It was something to use to her advantage, which she did through the agency of Chikane Himemiya's cousin. The formerly-patrician tribune of the plebs was by then speaking to the crowds every other day, eager to win greater support for their position. As her tongue was golden, her face lovely, and her manner delightfully naughty, Urumi Nemura Himemiya-Kanzaki generally won the support she wanted.

She was also the first ally to greet Shizuru's arrival. Having been speaking from the rostra yet again when news of the older woman's onset came, she had decided it would be a nice touch to wave a jaunty farewell to the audience, inform them she was going to see the returned general, and run off with the titillated crowd hot on her heels, every one of them cheering for her and the one she called "the woman of the hour". All of this she related afterwards to the woman (of the hour), who was genuinely amused to be met by so sunny a representative. When the senior consul went to visit Shizuru too, her first query was how her friend had found Urumi. The reply, given with wide eyes and an equally wide smile, was "With amazement!"

The seal of approval being set upon that alliance, the next order of business for Shizuru was then to secure the support of that part of society so important to politics, even if it was officially separate from it: the mercantile First Class of Hime.

"Which is very easily done," she purred to her best friend, who visited her often. A feline smile came upon Shizuru's face, accentuated by the newly-sharpened planes of her cheeks. "The *Ordo Equester* is easy to persuade if you have a proper knowledge of the way their minds work-and here I mean their accounting! I know the Traditionalists are often mystified by their purposes, but that is only because they fail to appreciate the true value of business to Hime. We politicians might handle the Forum and army, but all of these are animated by the lifeblood called money."

"Which gravitates to its like," Chikane smiled. "It is also fortunate that you have such a record of being most profitable for them, Shizuru. The knights know you to be a sure winner, not to mention a generous one unlikely to hog the new avenues for herself. Your past campaign was marked by an expansion of our territories, and hence, of business. "

Shizuru lifted an eyebrow playfully. "I seem to recall someone asking me if it was wise to be so constantly audacious in my exploits when I extended Hime's territory relentlessly."

The older woman laughed.

"I was only concerned about how it would set the ultraconservatives on guard, early on," she said. "Allow that I was justified in being concerned about that much. All the same, it is not something you could have hoped to avoid for too long, I suppose... given the way you are."

Shizuru let her eyebrow do the talking again. Chikane ignored it.

"I do not deny it has worked out to your advantage now, come to the knights," she said to the younger patrician. "As with most things, it has been a trade-off. And that, too, is in concord with the economic principle."

"I have already begun whetting their appetites for Obsidian's lands," she told Chikane, for whom the news was no surprise. "I say nothing direct, of course."

"Ah, directness is unnecessary," said the woman known for her courteousness—really just another form of being indirect. "The *Ordo Equester* can tell where the wind is blowing from a scrap of cloth."

Shizuru's eyes danced. "Which figure of speech is a sterling example of directness."

"Quite."

"The senators should be catching on soon—if they have not already," Shizuru went on. "Has anyone approached you yet?"

"No, although I expect that to happen presently."

"Prepare for a howl, Chika-chan," Shizuru chanted softly, actually finding pleasure in the image of her old foes raving from shock; Armitage's blister-red face was at the forefront of her imaginings. "Pre-emptively defensive war though it shall be that we intend to wage, the conservatives shall not swallow the apparent semantics. Pure and unadulterated greed, is what they shall say."

The dark-haired woman did not even alter her relaxed drape over the couch, only looked aloof and decorative as ever.

"There are nuances," she answered.

"Our Traditionalist friends are old to be learning nuances."

"They are old to be learning anything," Hime's senior consul drawled, the lazy shape of her eyes turning hunter-like as she narrowed them—a familial characteristic that brought to Shizuru's mind her former legate. "It is not usual for Hime to sanction an apparently aggressive war, I know. Even so, the situation in the North is not usual either. As for greed... one cannot deny the prospect of winning such a campaign would enrich the State Treasury beautifully. Is it to be considered greedy to want to fill the coffers of Hime and expand its influence, even while preserving it and its allies from future peril?"

Shizuru nodded and got up from her own stretch, reaching towards the table to refill her chalice. Chikane watched her discreetly, eyes lingering on the fine pendant- *Is that chalcedony?* -around her neck. It was new, she thought, since her first time to see it was upon Shizuru's return. The younger woman also wore it now every time they met, and fondled it occasionally as they talked.

"The promise of economic concessions in the newly-annexed lands shall take care of the knights very nicely. As for the rest of it..." She blinked at Shizuru's hands, which were filling the younger woman's goblet with wine. *Another* unwatered cup? "Where *is* Shizuma, incidentally?"

Shizuru finally stopped pouring the deep red fluid. She put down the brass jug with a tinny sound on the polished surface of her tabletop.

"Probably doing something very bad with someone who should not be doing it."

Chikane laughed; she had meant to ask about the progress of their silver-haired friend's politicking on their behalf, but she took up the aside with good will.

"Oh, that Shizuma," she said with affection. "It reminds me: did she even tell you what a stir she created when she entered the Senate meeting that first day?"

Shizuru said no.

"But there was no need. I can imagine it," she went on to say. "No doubt they understood the relevance of her presence to my purposes, but only later. The chief shock would have been administered entirely on her own. Seeing her suddenly attend a House session must have been a sensation."

"Especially among the senators wedded to women."

"Especially among them!"

They smiled, even though one of them was a senator wedded to a woman, and the other was a senator whose heart had already wedded itself to a woman.

"She did mention visiting you two days ago, however," Shizuru added.

"Yes, she did. She told me then that you asked her to become your next senior legate."

"You mean she complained about it?"

An unhurried smile, so typical of Chikane: "Oh, I have no doubt she shall agree to your request."

Shizuru's eyes danced.

"Of course she shall," she told the older woman. "But not without meeting her quota of grouse first."

"That is our Shizuma." Chikane sighed as she mused. "I wonder, though, if you have any intention of making her play *amanuensis* for you."

The incredulity was plain on Shizuru's face.

"Shizuma, be bothered take down another's words?" she asked with feigned shock. "I am well aware she is no Chie Harada, Chikane. I shall by my own diarist from now on. The literary exercise should be enjoyable as I intend to experiment by writing my dispatches in a looser, commentary style. Not exactly new, I know, but never actually done as well as it could be. All those who have tried it before were not exactly literati, which disadvantage compelled them to use that style out of a deficiency rather than a strength. Whereas I intend to exploit its possibilities. It should make my dispatches unusual enough to further catch attention."

"Unusual indeed. Of anyone else, I would have advised against it. For you, however, I deem it a wise decision."

Chikane folded her hands loosely above her belly and leaned further against the bolsters on her couch. Shizuru remained sitting up, one hand occupied by her goblet. A goblet already half-empty again, though just recently refilled. Should she be bothered, Chikane wondered, that her friend was drinking more swiftly than usual? It could not out of dryness since spring weather was clement, not

sweltering. This had happened during their other recent meetings as well, though never to the point of sprouting suspicion of dipsomania: Shizuru's faculties were consistently unimpaired, and she always stopped a goblet short of the line. This consciousness of the limit reassured Chikane to some extent. Even so, she could not pretend that there was not that oddly thirsty look in the other woman's eyes, a look that never seemed to go away these days, no matter how much of the beverage Shizuru imbibed.

"I also applaud the shrewd choice of Shizuma as senior legate," she said then, easily separating her inner preoccupation with her outer one. "Many shall take it as a sign that you still do succumb to nepotism-which shall be good in the sense that it demonstrates you yet abide by our social laws on familial loyalty. To be sure, however, many shall also think that the choice shall be undeserved in terms of skill, given the reputation Shizuma currently possesses."

"A philanderer and a politically indifferent patrician only in Senate by virtue of her ancestry, rank, and wealth." Shizuru stated the opinion without uncertainty. She also drained, then put down her goblet. "As though half of the senators were not in their places by only the same virtues, and theirs of lower value than hers! All the same, I would still say Shizuma is a wager well worth my money, Chikane-especially in terms of skill."

"Double your money on that wager," Chikane supported. "Shizuma might be a dark horse, but many dark horses make excellent odds for a smart gambler."

"Said the woman who never gambles," teased Shizuru, who was not entirely averse to gambling.

The older woman tried to suppress her smile. "'Tis true she is a great womaniser. 'Tis true as well that she is politically indifferent, most of the time. However, indifference does not equate to a lack of skill. And womanising can prove useful if managed correctly."

Up went the corners of Shizuru's lips.

"Said one of the most notoriously faithful wives of our time," she teased again. "You had best not hear Hime-chan hear you say that,

Chikane."

The dark-haired woman finally surrendered to the smile trying to copy that of her friend.

"My wife is not the jealous type," she said. "And she shall never have cause to be."

A berating glance. "You should have brought her with you today."

"I promise to do so next time." Her gaze went to the silver platter between them, on which were spread some lightly-spiced honey biscuits her wife had made: they were Shizuru's favourites. "She wanted to see you as well, Shizuru, but I thought it wiser not to bring her today since I intended to talk business... and also expected that crush you had outside earlier. Am I wrong or does it seem to grow by the day instead of declining?"

She was speaking of Shizuru's clients and supporters, many of whom presented themselves at the young woman's temporary residence each morning. Because she had been away, and also because she was currently the most talked-about person in the city, it was to be expected that a while would pass before the hordes trying to dance attendance on her would reduce into numbers more manageable. In fact, given the way matters were going in the Forum, it was to be expected that the numbers should even swell for a while.

What truly compounded Shizuru's problem, however, was that a good portion of those numbers had little to do with politics.

It rooted from her recent love affair. When word first leaked about her liaison with a foreign noblewoman, the first tremors had happened amongst those who felt the earthshaking wrack of envy. Oh, the outrage that someone had finally pulled Shizuru Fujino into it! The injustice that it was a foreigner! These poor indignant women, so long desirous of romancing and being romanced by Shizuru, were greener than the spring foliage at the insult. Yet they also saw that the event marked a positive development in a way: it meant that the field had been opened. The courteously aloof Shizuru Fujino was no longer unreachable, and she was fair game.

That this was the optimistic conclusion was due to public inability to believe a crucial part of the rumour. As they could not credit that a Fujino would truly soil the hem of her toga on a barbarian-in the sense of devoting herself to one-they interpreted the affair as nothing more than a fling from a bored patrician whose sexual sensibilities had finally awakened. Such awakenings were unplanned, and prone to arise with great urgency of demand. Pardonable that it had settled for that foreign girl then, if there had been no better possibility nearby; it was said the foreign girl was a rare beauty, anyway.

That being said, who could disbelieve the idea that in the city of Hime, where beauties of a more elevated Himean aesthetic existed, Shizuru Fujino would find every option much better than that foreign consolation she had been bedding? Further, which one of these aspiring Himean beauties did not imagine with many a sigh the possibility of snagging Shizuru Fujino in the definite sense? Not that any of them would dare ask her for marriage, of course. One did not ask for a Fujino's hand: to declare oneself good enough for a Fujino in such a way was very nearly hubris in the social understanding, unless you happened to have equally magnificent lineage-which could apply to only a few others in the city.

No, one prayed for the good luck to have a Fujino offer instead. Before anything like that could happen, of course, one would first need the good luck to catch a Fujino's eye. And who knew where and when such a thing could happen? Why, it could happen during a simple dinner! Or even just a passing chat.

Thus a good lot of the women in the city were trying to snag an appointment with Shizuru for one tedious reason or another. As such forwardness was different from the distance most of these women had maintained before, the recipient of the invitations had to admit to surprise. Still pining after the foreigner she had left in the North, she was much disinclined to accepting such social invitations; however, she could not turn all of them away because there were also callers whose connections or influence were sufficient to merit her friendly tolerance of their advances.

While many another person might have enjoyed-and even taken advantage-of such exercises, the same could not be said of Shizuru.



It took its toll on her to have to expend precious effort on suffering such coquettes, politically useful or not. It was true that the pre-Natsuki Shizuru might have found such exercises amusing and sometimes enjoyable, but this was the post-Natsuki Shizuru... and she only found it troublesome, sometimes even worthy of nausea.

"Yes, I am being assailed," she said, flicking a lock of hair away from a surprisingly chilly eye. "Still, it pleases me that the identities of my more serious visitors show my influence among the First Class remains strong."

"Which shall prove useful soon, " said Chikane. "Their votes matter the most for our purposes. Even the less serious ones have a vote, in which case they also matter."

"I know that," Shizuru said, lifting an eyebrow. "I only wish we could take the legislation to the assemblies already. I want to be off soon."

Chikane looked at her friend.

"Eventually it shall happen," she said, sorry that she had to deliver so cooling an answer. "But not yet. Not so very soon, I fear."

Down fell white lids over red eyes, even redder for the tiny blood-cracks that had broken from fatigue. Viewed at a distance, the pinkish tint worked with her irises to make a slightly dangerous look when she opened her eyes. Chikane continued to study her-as she had found herself doing every visit, since Shizuru's return from the North.

"I know," she said to the younger woman, and very naturally. "I do not enjoy the wait so much either."

Shizuru found a smile.

"Yet you are the more patient of us, Chikane," she admitted, as the impatient part of her added: *And you need not worry about time spent away from the woman you love.* She shifted one leg for comfort suddenly, wicking away the envious thought with annoyance at herself. "It cannot be helped, I know. To our advantage, the interim can be used to cultivate the lesser knights and senators: they

do tend to be overlooked sometimes."

A suddenly pleased flash, very swift and somewhat cunning.

"As you were about to bring it up earlier," she told Chikane, "Shizuma has been having quite a success among the other backbenchers. The lovely thing about my cousin, as you hinted earlier, is that she can be frightfully compelling by virtue of simple charisma."

"And simple money."

Shizuru smiled. Chikane was on point, as always.

"Is it not nice that so many of our peers are constantly in debt for one thing or another?" Shizuru asked the older woman with a touch of mischief. "And that we happen to be outrageously rich and ready to help?"

Up went a crow-black eyebrow; Chikane cleared her throat.

"*You* are outrageously rich," Hime's senior consul alleged. "I am only very rich."

Shizuru began to laugh. The sound lifted some of the foreboding from her friend, who had been worried about her for a while now. It was not even a mere question of what was bothering Shizuma, which would be Shizuru's doldrums-although that was bad enough by itself, Chikane thought. Rather, it was something she could neither fully understand nor properly explain. The best way to put it was almost a reduction, in her opinion, and reductions generally were an injustice. Still, there it was, and with no better way to put it: Shizuru had changed!

"Such a difference!" this changed Shizuru was saying.

"There are nuances between 'outrageous' and 'very'."

Shizuru's brows drew together.

"To the tune of what-a mere thousand sesterces?" she asked sardonically. "I believe in nuances as well as you do, Old Friend,

and yet this pushes the boundaries to mere nitpicking." A sly look. "Besides, do you really know which of us is wealthier, that you say such a thing?"

"Truly? No. Do you?"

"No." She read the playfulness in her friend's blue eyes and answered it. "How could I when you keep your holdings so secret?"

"I do not keep them secret. I simply find no need to talk about them. You are much the same."

"Indeed? Yet mine are better known, I should think."

"The mines in the Spains, yes," Chikane retorted. "But there are other nests on which the little birds do not chirp. For instance, the properties in the south are not so very well known, are they, 'Old Friend'?"

The younger woman's grin had her looking like a girl again.

"Why do we not talk about Macedonia?" she shot back, knowing the Himemiya had large holdings there. "I hear, I hear about Macedonia."

"Interesting what you hear! I hear some say you are the richest person in Hime."

"I am not in Hime right now, am I?" Shizuru's eyes narrowed suddenly, focused on empty space. "Yes, I hear some do say that. Curious, is it not? I own I am among the top four or five, certainly, but the richest? Who really knows?"

"I understand what you mean," her friend answered. "Yet they do like to mention your name when it comes to guessing the top of the list, for some reason."

"I have been thinking about that," Shizuru told her. "I believe it is bruited about so much because of my previous campaign and the wealth I brought back from Africa then. High-profile fortunes seen attached to me. Everyone sees the wealth during the triumphal procession, and thinks it goes to the general, who must then be

fabulously wealthy. One of those faulty public perceptions... "

Chikane's eyes were laughing at her: "A *faulty* public perception, hm?"

"Oh, do not tease me," Shizuru said. "You understand what I mean. It is faulty in that most of the wealth from those battles did not go to me, and you know it."

"Yes, of course," said Chikane, who loved her friend's generosity to the soldiers and the State.

"I cannot help it if the public perception is faulty in that I am actually vastly richer than most of them think."

Chikane succumbed to a giggle, nodding wholeheartedly as Shizuru posted an addendum: "The same goes for you."

"Perhaps it is because never really talk about our money," Chikane explained. "They never have a real sense of how much there is. I have been thinking about this as well, Shizuru, and it seems to me that the reason we and some others equally affluent do not talk about our money is that we are at ease with it. That is to say, those who are born into wealth rarely feel the need to trumpet how much of it they have to everyone else, unlike those who began in financial straits and only later acquired their fortunes. To the latter, you see, those fortunes are an achievement."

Her companion nodded: "Yes, I see."

Shizuru sighed suddenly and looked rueful.

"The trouble with us is that we were born into too much," she said with faint wryness. "How many times have we heard our foes speak angrily of our birth-as though we had chosen it? A similar envy must occur for our wealth as well."

"A good number of them are also significantly wealthy," Chikane reminded. "Added to this is the fact that they outnumber us. Although, granted, quantity does not always mean quality." She paused and looked up at her friend. "Incidentally, Shizuru, I bought a few more tribunes of the plebs just recently. Granted, it seems

unnecessary when you think that it is Urumi who is pushing for our interests there, and we both know Urumi is equal to all nine of her colleagues twice over. All the same, one thought it prudent to get in before the Traditionalists could think of buying more than the three they already have."

"One smoothes the path as much as possible."

"Precisely."

The absurdly long lashes fluttered, swept over deep blue irises: Chikane Himemiya smirked and looked devastating. Anyone else watching would have caught their breath, but Shizuru was too aware of her own capacity for devastation, and also had no breath to catch, being that she was holding it until she could again see her Natsuki-also devastating!

"Even had they thought of purchasing some of those pebbles to scatter before us, it would have been likely to fail," Chikane said with lofty dismissal. "I doubt the rest of the tribunes of the plebs this year would be so quick to accept handouts from the conservatives, lest they be trodden underfoot."

"Why so?"

"Think on last year's tribunes of the plebs, and the ones of the year before that."

No need for her to say more: Shizuru's face lit up within a second.

"Ah!" the younger woman said, with dawning enjoyment. "I see. The tribunes of the plebs for the last two years have been shockingly shockless compared to usual. Boredom is our ally, then."

"Very much so," Chikane agreed. "We all saw it for ourselves in Urumi's first speech from the rostra. The shiver among the conservatives! It was plain as day that both tribunes and people were spoiling for a thrill, and thus likely to indulge Urumi in whatever she did. Anything related to you collects people in groups immediately anywhere, as your presence seems to ensure that Forum fur shall fly again."

A stream of amusement rushed from her mouth.

"My dear Shizuru," she said through the laughter, "Hime loves you!"

Shizuru smiled and showed her teeth were as good as ever.

"I do love it back," she said. "Although I cannot say the same for arrogant prudes like the Traditionalists, who conspire to keep things as boring and ineffectual as possible. How have you been dealing with them, Chikane?"

"If you mean how I am managing with a Traditionalist for a consular colleague, quite well, actually," Chikane responded. "Yukino Kikukawa is not as blinkered as her allies: she can tell a horse from an ass."

"Because she inspects it from the proper end, I suppose. If you do as most of her allies and look at either animal from the rear, all you see is ass."

They laughed.

"She is manageable," Chikane restated afterwards. "Although there are still times when she gets cowed by the rest of her pack, poor woman. One meeting went nowhere because she allowed Harukasan to have a say during the session-and we all know how well that one practices the filibuster. Scarcely an hour went past before nearly all of the senators were out of the doors, eager to be home. I was among them."

"Ah, so Kikukawa-han was presiding over that meeting, then? On what did our filibustering friend rattle, by the way?"

"I quote, 'the bastardliness' of your letters lobby."

Air spilled from Shizuru's lips before she could bring up her hand.

"Bastardliness?" she asked Chikane, shoulders shaking.

Said the other mildly, "We believe she meant 'dastardliness'. It *did* help to keep us in our seats a little longer, at the very least."

"It is funny."

"It is that."

The red-eyed woman shook her head in pitying amusement before going on: "Letters lobby. Is that what they are calling it?"

"Wang-san claims to have coined it," the older woman replied, with enough dreariness of tone to suggest she thought any fool could have coined such a simple term anyway.

"Add Shizuma's recent appearance: we have letters, lobbies, and libertines!" Shizuru purred deep in her throat. "Yes, it trips nicely off the tongue."

Chikane smiled indulgently: "He missed the last one, I fear."

"He does tend to miss some things," Shizuru sneered, aware of that senator's increasingly acidic remarks about her in his speeches. She baited: "When shall I see the House again, I wonder?"

"I thought Urumi told you when she last visited. I am arranging for a meeting to be held outside the *pomerium* in a week's time."

The wine-coloured eyes twinkled. "There is something that shall find opposition!"

"Quite," Chikane replied unconcernedly. "The Traditionalists are against it, of course, since some of them do understand just how dangerous it would be to let you have your say before the rest of the House. While the number of times you have made use of your privilege to speak during sessions are few enough to be counted, they were all memorable-and people still remember your reputation from your *tirocinium fori*, besides. Anyone would be wary of you as a speaker."

Another dangerous flash: "Among other things."

"Among other things," Chikane allowed, unfazed. She tilted her head to one side gently and back with exquisite leisure. "Still, wariness is hardly as strong as curiosity when it comes to human nature. I submit even some of the Traditionalists are curious about what you

have to say, which means I am confident of persuading the Senate to have some sessions where you may participate."

She tipped her head at her friend and added: "Wearing your *corona graminea*, of course."

A smile from Shizuru: "Of course."

And then she asked, "Where shall it be held, however?"

"Ah yes, you would not know it yet, would you?" Chikane shifted up and propped herself up on one elbow as she faced the other woman, an idea forming in her brain to wick away the melancholy she could still sense roiling in the latter. "Come to think of it, I believe we might see it now. Does not this villa have a good view of the western side of the Pincian Hill?"

Shizuru nodded. "I believe so."

"Then we can see it. Would you like to walk with me?" Chikane's body moved and she swept to her feet, towering over Shizuru until the latter stood as well. While both were among the tallest women of Hime, the younger patrician still outdid Chikane by a few inches; Shizuru was abnormally long for their people. "If you would permit me a selfishness, I wish very much to stretch my feet. It is a very pleasant day, too, and we waste it by cooping ourselves up and being stationary."

The young woman walking beside her smiled and agreed. They continued conversing in a lighter vein as they walked on, and Chikane voiced admiration for the house as they strode down a gorgeously red-marbled hallway.

"You chose a lovely mansion to hire," the senior consul remarked, her blue eyes roaming the architecture. "It suits you perfectly."

Her friend chuckled quietly: "It suits me?"

"So many of these deep reds," came the answer, along with a hand indicating the elaborately-tiled floor. "Purples and bluish blacks."

"You sound as though you are describing a bad contusion."



They laughed.

"I was thinking of rich, dark colours," Chikane told her. "Elegant would be the word." She turned her head to the side and smiled at Shizuru. "Purple *is* your favourite colour. One cannot possibly say it is inelegant."

"But I distinctly recall Haruka-han telling me it was, because it was the colour of royalty."

Chikane's thin brows suddenly took on a sharp slant, the deep eyes under them going narrow. Shizuru looked, then decided not to look: it reminded her so much of her haughty lover, that darkly supercilious expression. How strange that in some ways Chikane could be so like Her!

"And are not her eyes purple?" said the older woman, her eyes turning very nearly purple too. "When did she say that, Shizuru? Was it when we were younger, perhaps?"

"When I first met her, in fact." A puff of air through the nose, more amused than annoyed. "I must say that was the first time anyone had ever berated me for simply professing the colour I liked best. She lectured me that such a choice could imply a person's natural bent, and that she distrusted all people who chose purple as their favourite colour."

"It is not so much 'all people' but 'all patricians', is it?" Chikane retorted. "Which reminds me, purple eyes or not, I seem to recall her favourite hue is *green*."

The laugh spewed from Shizuru before she could stop it. Chikane's wit had been one of the things that first attracted her to the other woman, when they had been younger.

"Our Traditionalist friends are the ones growing less elegant with time," continued the older woman. "No doubt you have heard about their latest ploy, Shizuru, where they actually tried to use one of their tame tribunes of the plebs to veto Urumi's veto."

Shizuru smiled humourlessly. "A metaveto, one might call it."

"One prefers to call it 'crude', actually."

"I shall not argue with that."

"Urumi handled it swiftly." Chikane sighed with apparent approval of her cousin's doings, although it might also have been simply from the pleasure of the spring wind that was wafting in from the windows. The air was fresh and fragrant, and she turned her face to it. "There is, of course, the other howl coming from the Traditionalist pawns. It came up just yesterday."

Shizuru immediately showed she had more than a few sources inside the city: "I am supposedly intending to blackmail Senate into what I want by using my yet-to-be-disbanded army as a threat."

The blue-eyed woman hummed.

"As Haruka Armitage-lover of green, whatever that implies-put it, the right thing to do would have been to bring them back but disband them as soon as you came upon Fuukan soil," she quoted with the faintest touch of asperity. "Even before you reached the Campus Martius."

"In which case she is right," Shizuru admitted. "Had I wanted to avoid such allegations of threatening the Senate, disbanding them would have been the right thing to do. But would it have been the smart one?" She wiggled her tawny gold brows. "Even setting aside the consideration of a triumph yet to be approved, surely this is standard when it comes to the game. Or do they actually believe me ready to storm Hime with the Fourteenth?"

Chikane stifled a grin as she flexed her hands, which were the same as Shizuru's: very white, very long, and surprisingly rough of palm. Despite her refined looks, Chikane too had her share of martial experience.

"Did they actually believe *that*, every one of them would have run off to Egypt or Africa by now," the dark-haired woman told her friend. "Deny though they may many of your virtues, Shizuru, not even the thickest of them can do the same of your military prowess. Our Armitagian bull herself would not be confident going to general

against you."

There was a sly gleam to the red eyes.

"Did that situation actually arise, it would not be the *armiger armentalis* they would send to face me," Shizuru replied gently. "But an *aquila* ."

Unrestrained laughter from Chikane, her usual cool thawing from the jest.

"Come now," she said afterwards. "Our friendship is too long and well-known for that."

Shizuru was smiling: "At any rate, everyone knows eagles catch snakes better."

"That would only apply if you were truly a snake," Chikane retorted, looking at her friend's tallness and hunger, things that had nothing to do with her body. Really so changed! Or was it simply that the younger woman had become even more of herself during the past months?

"However, Shizuru, you are part-feline. No... I doubt they would feel reassured in tasking me with generaling against you in such an unlikely event, even should it materialise now as I am senior consul. Nor would I accept such an order."

Yet Shizuru wondered what the outcome would be if Chikane did lead an army against her. Presuming equal resources, she thought, who would win ? Who *would* win? She thought she would, for she had the greater ambition and drive, and a far greater passion for her own triumphs, as she was beginning to see. But Chikane Himemiya had her own drive, and it seemed to Shizuru sometimes that what people perceived as *her* obsessions, she also perceived within Chikane as commitments. She would be wary of fighting Chikane if she thought the older woman had committed herself wholeheartedly to her defeat, because she thought Chikane Himemiya's greatest strength was that, having committed herself to a purpose or an idea, Chikane would carry out that commitment to the death... or even into the realm of the immortal. And with such an opponent, who

could be certain of being the victor?

*You must be, a low voice berated from within her. No matter the opponent, you must win.*

She felt a smile pull the edges of her lips at that. The voice persisted.

*I knew you were strong. So you always win.*

"Well, I can see that The Eighteen and the rest of the knights do not believe those spurious claims about my intentions in having a legion outside the city," she told her raven-haired friend, still feeling the dull edges of mingled warmth and pain from the relived memory.

"Otherwise, they would have come to see me in more of a panic than they did just this morning. But what of the people?"

Chikane shook her handsome head.

"Oh, no fear on that account," she answered equably. "Besides, most of them listen to Urumi, and Urumi is an assiduous speaker on your behalf."

"For which I thank her." She took a deep breath as they reached a terrace and came out into the open air, saw a peach-coloured sky; the sun would sink in about two hours. "I missed this sky."

Her friend had stopped too. "You seem surprised, Shizuru."

"Perhaps," Shizuru said. "The sky never really blushes like this in the North."

"Is it because of the clouds?"

"I think so." A corner of her mouth twitched. "It matters not. *My* sky blushed there everyday."

She received a glance from Chikane, who then returned to an earlier matter.

"Do you see that one over there?" the raven-haired one asked, pointing to another villa of a moderate distance from their vantage

point. Shizuru identified it immediately.

"That new villa? It belongs to the Ogasawara, I believe." She squinted against the light. "So it is finished? I did not know it was."

"It was, last month. Now then, see you that smaller structure attached to it?"

"Yes. A theatre?"

"A basilica. It shall serve very well for our purposes."

"Ah." Shizuru scrutinised the edifice as well as she could from the distance. "And they shall lend it to us?"

"I already talked to Uncle," Chikane told her; her family had blood-ties with the Ogasawara. "He said yes."

"Lovely," Shizuru sighed. She remembered something. "Sachiko sent me a letter, come to think of it. She indicated she might call upon me soon."

There was the barest trace of amusement in Chikane's face at that news. "I suppose she shall not go unaccompanied."

Neither Shizuru's face nor her body moved, and yet the atmosphere changed. Chikane waited coolly, no stranger to these shifts of mood.

"I must mention something," the younger woman said.

"Yes?"

"My other cousin has been trying to get an appointment with me."

"Aaah." Chikane released her breath in a lingering exhalation. " *That* cousin."

"I refused, naturally."

Chikane asked how many times this had happened.

"She sent two letters thus far. I have refused twice. I shall continue to do so." Shizuru stalked over to a balustrade and leaned her hips

against it, the light behind her. She was facing her friend. "First of all, I would sooner strangle her than see her on amiable terms at the moment. Second and more importantly, we must keep up appearances. It would not do for me to be seen entertaining a supposed betrayer, an enemy."

"Yes, that is so."

Chikane smiled warmly all of a sudden, the white of her skin luminous against her hair's black. There were shades of Her there again, thought a secretly aching Shizuru, who was fighting wildly against the urge to grimace. Oh, to touch that black hair! Not this black hair, which would smell different-Chikane always smelled faintly of roses-but the one that smelled of forest and snow, the one that smelled as though made for her, smelled perfect...

"You ease my mind enormously, Shizuru. I confess I was wondering all this time how to ask about it."

Few things took a Himemiya off-guard, but Shizuru's candid answer did.

"Not to ask about the foreigner with whom I have been living?"

The briefest hiatus of sound ensued. It was the first stretch of tension they had ever experienced with each other since Shizuru's return, and it was the first time the topic had been mentioned between them. *Only true politicians would be so good at evasion*, thought Chikane, who was guilty of having avoided the subject consciously, out of a feeling that it would be better broached by her friend. Who had not done so for so long that the older woman had been beginning to wonder if she should be the first to bring it up after all. Until this.

"Is that where I seemed to want to go?" she asked finally.

Shizuru's eyes smirked, though not her lips. "Do you know that you answer questions with questions when you wish to avoid possible discourtesy?"

"Oh dear. Do I really?"

One beautiful face looked into another, and sapphire-blue eyes said, *But you just did it too.*

Shizuru was the one to end the stare. "You withheld yourself admirably. Most others have already been trying to fish something out of me about it, especially as opposition against us is hardening and I hear this topic is beginning to be bandied about more strongly by my detractors."

There was a brief pause before the reply: "I am not the only one who withheld, Shizuru. Is it possible you consider it of a nature warranting your detractors' intentions?"

"No, but that would not prevent them from trying to make out a horse as an ass." Shizuru unexpectedly produced a smile. "I think everyone shall soon hear something to the effect that my mind has been turned by consorting with a foreigner, and that her barbarian manner has influenced my way of thinking."

Chikane actually laughed.

"Only those who do not know you at all could believe such absurdity," she stated positively. "There is no one alive who has ever been able to influence your way of thinking."

But Shizuru's eyes darkened at that.

"Ah, now," she said with a feeble smile. "Who knows? There is always a first time."

The other woman's eyes opened a little more widely.

"Dear me," she said calmly, in what would have been better said as a gasp. "That serious?"

Shizuru winked at her: "What, has Suou-chan not been writing to you?"

"I have some news of her from my sister, yes, but not so very much," Chikane replied, before dipping her chin a little and commencing a subtle probe. "Even so, what I gathered from her missives was that my expectation should be for her to be

accompanying you upon your return, and so I fear my first understanding was that I would be able to form an opinion for myself."

Shizuru's face was awesomely inexpressive; that told Chikane that both heart and pride were still hurting at the absence. Nothing relaxed about the lack of expression on that face!

"No, she preferred to stay and wait for my return," Shizuru told her, further betrayed by a nearly indiscernible emphasis on the latter part of the statement. "I permitted it."

"You left her in Suou's charge, Shizuru?"

"Yes." A worried look, quite unexpected. "I hope they are doing well. *She* can be... well... difficult, sometimes. She is a touch moody, you see. Suou-chan might not know what to do for certain occasions."

The dark-haired woman shook her head.

"I do not know if this can be credible, since I am her sister and thus not sufficiently impartial, but I am willing to vouch for Suou's reliability, even in the face of the unfamiliar," she assured the blonde. "I believe her one of the few persons on whom one may constantly rely to be equal to any situation."

Shizuru voiced agreement softly, saying that she knew that, knew she was being silly. Chikane turned and brushed complacently at her tunic at that moment, diverted by some near-invisible speck of dust that had alighted there. Her next words to the younger patrician thus had every appearance of being entirely casual-which they were.

"You must rest assured, Shizuru," she said, still brushing away the speck. "You know, Suou has a tendency to be more understated perhaps, but there are times when my sister reminds me very much of you."

Startled, Shizuru stared at her friend. *What a remark!* Now what in the world could have possessed Chikane to say a thing like that? She would have to find the older woman was already on to their



previous topic before she could ask.

"Would it now be presumptuous to ask that you tell me about her?"

Shizuru shook her head slowly. The preceding comment that had startled her was filed away with care, to be dissected later.

"I really was expecting that you would," she confessed, looking fairly bashful for once. "So one might say I have been waiting for it all this time."

"Then I am sorry," the black-haired woman said. "I can only hope that the possibility of that expectation did not give you too much anxiety."

"Not at all."

But Chikane seemed perturbed: "As I thought... perhaps I truly should keep my curiosity to myself, after all?"

Shizuru seemed surprised by the suggestion.

"No," she said. "Were there anyone here that I would prefer to speak to about this matter, it would be you." She delayed the next words just enough to silently curse the faint heat on her cheeks. "I did intend to speak to you about her, for reasons I hope I need not pronounce."

"I understand."

"Thank you."

Having said that, however, Shizuru promptly clicked her mouth shut and produced an excellent imitation of a Praxiteles Venus-if Praxiteles would ever sculpt the goddess of love with a look of muffled persecution on her face. In defence of the senior consul's subsequent reaction to this sight, it must be said that she would have been patient to rest quietly in appreciation of this display for hours had the player been anyone else. As it was Shizuru Fujino doing it, however, Chikane lasted but a few moments before she had to lift a hand in a weak effort to silence the laughter.

"Cruel!" Shizuru cried, heat prickling on her cheeks. She tried to force it away by smiling. "Do not laugh."

Chikane ceased immediately and managed to look contrite.

"I am sorry," she said, before going on to admit something she had held back until now. "But the first time I met Shizuma in the city, she actually warned me to prepare myself for you 'spouting endless elegies' about your lover. Every since you returned, however, I have found it to be quite the opposite. One doubts this is what your cousin meant when she talked about you spouting. Fifteen days of it, Shizuru!"

Shizuru's smile was rueful, knowing the number was correct since she had been keeping count as well.

"Shizuma truly said that?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I should kill her," she said, prompting both of them into more laughter.

"And lose your next senior legate?" she asked, knowing Shizuru was having even more trouble speaking with her on this because they were such close friends. "At the very least, this tells me something: if the very thought of her makes your tongue cleave to your palate, she is indeed someone of interest. So would you be so kind as to tell me about her, even if only a little?" Chikane asked once more.

A nod from the younger woman, whose eyes were a very deep red.

"It would be best to dispense with the origins first," Shizuru began, recovering both confidence and tongue. She drew a soft but long breath. "I expect you know the essentials?"

"I should say so." Chikane ran through them swiftly to have the other woman verify her data and then went on to ask a query. "Suou said she was younger, but we never managed to discuss her precise age. May I know how young in years?"

Shizuru told her.

"Hmm. Shizuma said she was a child," Chikane replied.

"Is that what my cousin said? She must have taken the term from me."

"You call her a child?"

"Yes... on occasion."

In her mind, she added: *Also a girl. Girl, child, woman. Brat too, sometimes. Mine, all of them, and each one a wonder.*

"I see." The raven-haired woman blinked slowly, thinking. "Child indeed, I suppose, by relativity. Younger than I expected, though perfectly acceptable."

Shizuru took up one of the notions: "Than you expected, Chikane?"

Chikane turned a look of apology her way.

"I must admit I did you an injustice, My Dear," the older woman said, a golden gleam of humour in her eyes. "You see, I did not think you to have the patience for children, even though you are excellent at feigning possession of it on occasion."

Shizuru laughed at the light joke, actually a truth.

"Not at all, since you are right," she answered the grinning Chikane. "I rarely do find in myself the patience necessary for dealing with them, so I resort to pretending it. But there are children, and then, there are *children*."

The older woman tilted her head. "All the same, I truly thought that, come time for you to actually take up with someone, you would choose someone older instead of the other way. Thus I confess there is something in this that surprises me, Shizuru."

In afterthought, she went on to ask: "Or is it that she is of a character that does not go well with the word 'child', for all that you call her that?"

"Both," Shizuru answered. "She is singular in that sense, since one

can easily say of her that she bears herself with a dignity far beyond her years without consciously affecting it. But she also has an innocence that can only be found in the youngest of children, an unsullied curiosity about many things in life. Natsuki is quite the paradox."

"Natsuki." Chikane reproduced it perfectly, without any jar of the syllables on her tongue, and Shizuru very nearly said it too in a fit of irrational possessiveness. "I thought, when I first learned it, that it was an interesting name."

"In their language, it means 'summer child'."

"So we return to the matter of a child and children," Chikane said cheerfully. "And how did she merit the name, this paradoxical summer child?"

Shizuru explained it was due to the date of birth, going on to a query: "I presume Suou has described her in the letters?"

Chikane answered that she had.

"A very beautiful young woman, she wrote." She allowed the tiniest hint of mischief to lift her lips. "And I do recall she mentioned something about our hair being the same shade and quality."

Shizuru smiled, remembering that she had used to compliment Chikane often on her hair when they had been younger; she had been telling the truth when she told Natsuki she had always loved black hair.

"I had thought most of the Northern people to be fair," Chikane went on.

"Most of them are fair of mane," Shizuru agreed. "One supposes it is an effect of their proper home, which tends always to the cold, being of the mountains."

"And peoples that live in such climes, we have noticed before, are fair. Your summer child would stand out even more, black hair and green eyes all."

The fair-haired woman eyed her almost suspiciously, remembering having said something of the sort to Natsuki, herself.

"Her eyes?" she said, a fresh ache going through her at the thought of them. "You know of her eyes?"

"Suou said they were an 'uncommonly perfect green'," Chikane revealed. "I confess myself uncertain as to how precisely I should imagine that. Uncommonly perfect?"

Shizuru explained it to her with so much enthusiasm and detail that Chikane thought she would be unable to get the image of "uncommonly perfect green eyes" out of her head for a while.

"There is something else I find queer," she went on to say. "Perhaps you shall explain. She described her as 'mute-though-not-really'. For the sake of certainty, exactly what do those words signify?"

Shizuru smiled.

"Not a talker," came her answer.

"Ah!" Chikane's teeth appeared in a flash. "I suspected so; still, it was hard to imagine. That is even more unusual, you see. How did you find it, being with someone of that mettle?"

"Surprisingly enjoyable," the younger woman confessed. "As she once put it, we were fortunate because I like to speak and she likes to listen."

Chikane swallowed a chuckle.

"She has a slight speech impediment," Shizuru admitted after, hand going again to the gem necklace depending from her neck. "You know of that?"

"No, not yet. Pray enlarge on it."

"Natsuki stutters. But, as with most stutters, I believe it is initiated only by certain situations. She only ever suffered from it under certain stresses, or when interacting in a personal instead of official situation. The stutter never surfaced when she was speaking as an

officer, or in relation to her duties. Quite an earnest young woman, as you see."

"May I infer that she stuttered with you?"

"Oh yes," Shizuru said with a bit of guilty enjoyment. "To be fair, my girl can actually speak well. She can explain something if you request it of her, or tell a tale should you demand the diversion. But in and of herself, she is not one to readily offer speech to another. Those few occasions where she is required to speak, she delivers her words with such terseness and cold courtesy that most perceive her as grim sort of person, and do so a trifle unjustly."

"An unfortunate judgment, then," Chikane replied, trying very hard not to grin at Shizuru's jealous manner of referring to the foreigner. 'My girl', indeed!

"Yes, although..." Shizuru smiled helplessly. "She truly can be quite grim, Chikane. I do not deny she has a tendency to be sombre. Nor do I deny she is close-mouthed about what she thinks." She paused. "They called her the Sphinx. And Natsuki does keep her secrets."

"A guarded young woman?"

"Very, " agreed the *other* guarded young woman. "It is her circumstances that make Natsuki so, I believe. It is not a malevolent kind of secrecy." She suddenly grinned. "At least that means she is not the kind to gossip when idle."

Chikane smiled too: "In that much, un-Himean, eh?"

Her friend laughed.

"Too true," she said jokily. "She would rather talk about the last book she read than rumour. I believe, even, that she might have thought gossiping beneath her."

"Yes, I gather she is a noble?"

"Oh, very much so."

Chikane studied her friend's twinkling eyes for a moment before

guessing: "She has pride, hm?"

The blonde laughed, sounding almost carefree.

"In mass!" she answered, seeming very pleased by that fact. "Her dignity is tender, and I fear I can better say this because I have pricked it on more than one occasion..." She pretended to duck her head in shame as Chikane sent her a teasing look of reproach. "But her gentleness is also very forgiving, and her anger easily mended in the face of sincere regret. She is a true innocent, my Natsuki."

"I daresay I am liking her better and better," said the woman who was herself married to one she considered a true innocent. She moved her head to shake a few raven locks from her face. The gesture reminded Shizuru of Natsuki again, and how Natsuki would have done that with a wilder toss of the head, younger colt that she was.

"Suou told me you like her very much," Chikane was saying. "She does not seem to have exaggerated."

"I do like her very much," Shizuru replied.

"I see," said Chikane.

"And I love her."

Again, from Chikane: "I see."

"I want her to stay-to be with me from now on."

Chikane asked the critical question: " *In Hime* ?"

"Anywhere. Everywhere."

"I see."

"Do you really?"

A fresh silence went by while Chikane pondered the question.

"I do not-or not completely, I suppose," she admitted. "That is a

complex question, Shizuru. If I may hazard a description of my understanding, however, it seems to me that you want this person very much."

Shizuru's eyes were not their usual cheerful selves; Chikane saw her friend as she knew her to truly be: a person born entirely of flame and fire.

"Not want, Chikane, not just want," said the young woman seriously. "Need. I need her."

Chikane blinked at her leisure: "Very strong."

"It is."

The senior consul of the city looked away for a moment, seeming pensive. She was thinking of her own experience, and how strongly she felt for her wife-and thinking, too, of how that experience and that wife were nonetheless an insufficient basis for comparison with this matter of Shizuru's.

"For some odd reason, Shizuru, I always imagined you would be fervent in matters of the heart," she said then, shining eyes on the fountain she could see in the garden below them. "Was I right, then?"

Her friend smiled.

"Who knows?" Shizuru replied.

The other woman finally looked again at her, face pleasant in its curiosity: "Do you think of her often?"

Shizuru was not fully aware of it, but the wretchedness that washed over her countenance provided sufficient answer to that. Even so, she replied in a voice that she wished could have not trembled.

"Do I think of her!" she said in a whisper. "Do I think of her."

*Better to ask how I can not think of her*, she thought gloomily while staring almost resentfully at her friend, heart wrenching as she permitted her mind to focus for an instant on the subject she refused



to let occupy her consciousness completely for fear it would drive her mad. It slipped into her head every hour, insinuating itself with every face she saw and mocking the other face out by virtue of being so infinitely preferable. Thought carried over into the senses. She would visit the garden and see the leaves, see them mocked by green eyes, too-green eyes; sip wine and be taunted by the taste-not Her mouth, Her mouth was when food was eaten-but rather the sweet-acid taste from between Her thighs. Smell it too, almost, and sometimes feel the soft, blind warmth of inside...

"I think of her," she said curtly, and looked away to face the wind while it raked her hair, wishing guiltily that they had brought the wine when they came here. She continued the answer in her head while wishing that: *I think of her now and her foreign preference for drinking milk, and how she marvelled at the amount of wine I drank. I think of that time she pummelled my shoulder when she was thirsty and could not drink because I kept making her laugh. She pushed my cup when I was the one drinking, after that, because she wanted to get even. It splashed on my dress. I think of her face and the panic in it before I threw the rest of the cup's wine on her and laughed. She knew it was all right then. She picked up the jug and splashed all of it on me. I think of how it dyed my dress.*

The soft spring air was rocky in her throat.

*It dyed her dress too.*

As these thoughts ran through her head, Chikane had been watching the panorama of emotion: not on Shizuru's face, which the younger woman had been careful to keep still, but on her hands, her fingers.

They were closed so tightly the knuckles had gone white.

"I see," was what Chikane finally said.

They stared at each other. Shizuru spoke.

"I'm mad, am I not?" she said jokingly, cheeks smarting from the blood rushing to them. "Perhaps you think I have gone mad?"

The other's face was crossed by a light frown.

"Have I given you any indication of thinking so?" Chikane asked mildly. "I have not said anything of the kind."

Shizuru smiled-with some sadness, the other woman thought.

"No, Chikane?" she said.

"No."

The younger woman said nothing, so Chikane took it upon herself to say a little more.

"Even if I had indicated such a contrary opinion-which I have not, mind you," she told her friend. "It has no bearing on your like for her, I should think. Or so I hope, since I have always thought you the kind of person who likes others purely on her own terms, and not out of concession to some common fad or opinion. If you like her, that is your affair, and what I think has nothing to do with it. Nor would I presume to discuss the possible ramifications of your relationship with her as regards your career, for I believe you know them well enough yourself. I would not patronise you by lecturing you on them."

The younger woman nodded slowly, accepting the warm admonition in silence.

"And besides, who am I to speak?" Chikane added in good humour. "It would not be right of me to judge your choice of woman a mad one, especially when my own was considered nearly enough to land me a verdict of lunacy."

She was glad to see the smile return to Shizuru's face.

"Conceded," the fair-haired woman said. "But I did hope to learn of your opinion, all the same, Chikane... not only since you are my friend but since you have gone through something similar to this, before, as you said so yourself."

"In some measure, Shizuru. We must confess, unfortunately, that there are certain nuances present in your situation that were absent

from mine."

The younger woman's face lost its smile, hardened again into a mask of expressionless set.

"I note it well," Shizuru said, before suddenly saying: "I would like to obtain the citizenship for her."

"Oh, that," was all Hime's senior consul stated blandly.

"Understandable. It might help."

The crimson eyes peered at her. "Ahh. Suou-chan has told you."

A nod.

"Has she also told you that my girl deserves it?"

' *My girl*' again-what jealousy! "Yes."

Shizuru's face was cooler than marble; Chikane answered the next and unspoken query.

"I foresee no difficulty there," she told her waiting friend. "Although I believe it would be wiser to permit our plans to develop further before that. Once we achieve our aims, it should be simple for you to grant her the citizenship yourself, in recognition of her contributions to the Himean-Mentulaean War. Would that not be preferable?"

"That would be if I am given a full proconsular *imperium* in that campaign," Shizuru replied without aversion, lifting a finger to her chin and tapping thoughtfully there. "And, furthermore, named the governor of the to-be-annexed Mentulaean empire. I should have sufficient latitude and authority to make whatever dispositions and agreements I see fit pertinent to the people and the area, and have the certainty that my actions shall be ratified either by a law from the outset or by a law at the conclusion. I do not want any fiascos of the conservatives coming at my directives afterwards and invalidating them once I my term is done."

A sharp glance from under her brows.

"The Centuriate may do for the law freeing me from being the urban praetor, but I also want it-or the Assembly of the People, though I shall prefer the Centuriate Assembly-to give me the command of the campaign. Nothing less shall do."

Clever Shizuru! Chikane saw at once that the younger woman had stipulated such a thing because a decision made by either Assembly to give someone command for a campaign was nigh-irrevocable: it would have the force of law and be written into the tablets, unorthodox thought it would be. The only way to overturn it-and thus replace the commander specified-was to hold another vote for that in the same assembly. And both assemblies were not prone to invalidating their previous decisions.

"Of course," she answered. "So it is decided?"

"Yes."

They nodded in unison, and the gestures were suitably formal. Both women appreciated in full what had just been said, and understood just how grave it was, beyond the question of granting a citizenship to Shizuru's foreigner. Perhaps precisely due to the import of these decisions, and the denseness of the pause that import permitted their conversation, Chikane suddenly felt a hyperilluminated instant where something came into pinpoint focus. She turned dark eyes to her friend, who met the stare so evenly she very nearly faltered.

As she was herself, however, she did not actually falter.

"Shizuru, I must know something. Thus I ask leave to take a possible liberty."

"I give it."

"Thank you," Chikane said. "I thought, earlier, that you wanted the citizenship for your lover to give her cachet enough to live with you as a concubine. A shockingly uncommon development, I hope you shall admit."

"I admit it."

"And yet I look at your face now," the black-haired woman

continued, her eyes made of iron. "And I compare it to Shizuma's, when she was telling me about your passion for... Natsuki-san. I think, too, of Suou's last letter. Although both warn me of a shockingly uncommon idea cherished by you, I sense from all I have, somehow, that what I suggested is not yet that idea."

Shizuru said nothing this time, content to nod.

"Therefore I shall ask this now, and ask you to pardon me if I overstep. Are you thinking of-" Chikane paused, still too awed by the idea to voice it so simply, even if she had been turning it over in her head. "Forgive me. Are you doing this because you are considering marriage to her?"

Again Shizuru's cheeks smarted; she made no attempt to cover them, preferring to focus her strength on keeping her expression stony. Futile anyway to think one could reverse blood's flow!

She answered truthfully, "I do not know."

Chikane persisted: "Permit me to put it another way. Can you imagine yourself being married to her?"

"Easily."

Another blinding point of focus: Chikane saw, for the briefest moment, that even Shizuru was surprised by her answer. Nonetheless, the younger woman recovered quickly enough to ask something lightly.

" *Now* shall you say I am mad?"

Chikane shook her head, going over myriad things to say and rejecting some, considering a few, modifying others. All in two seconds, after which she produced the answer she felt most politic for the situation.

"I prefer to say, rather, that I hope you achieve what you want, as a friend," she said, careful to add just the correct amount of concern. "And that, as a friend, I also hope what you want turns out to be good for you. I wish you well always, Shizuru."

The younger woman seemed to study her fondly, a strange light in red eyes. And then, abruptly, Shizuru was grinning.

"Always mindful of graces," she murmured, causing Chikane to laugh softly.

"And yet I do mean all that I said," Chikane answered with delicacy, already occupied with working out numerous sums and figures of probability and chance: statistics concerning what Shizuru had just told her and how that might affect their schemes. "At any rate, we shall see. It changes some things, but... but I shall trust you with your decisions, Shizuru, for so long as you also trust me enough to ask for help should you ever need it."

Shizuru regarded the other woman fondly, feeling even more affection for her than she already had.

"You must be the first person to know of this without attempting to lecture me on the perils," she said with light wonder. "Or the first not to bother warning me of the possibility that she might be after my money."

"As though you would not be aware of such a thing, were it so."

"I have heard it said that lovers can be blind to such matters," Shizuru retorted with a grin. "Why, you did not even ask if she loves me."

She noted that Chikane was amazed by the remark.

"I did not think it necessary," Chikane said.

A short laugh: "That means either that you believe too much in me, or that you believe too much in the blind assurance of lovers."

"Do I? I wonder. I am only thinking of what I know of you and what I know of her." Chikane smiled a shut-eyed smile. "Suou said that the child watched over you every second of each day for nearly half a year."

"That was her duty," Shizuru pointed out.

"And does the duty nullify the heart behind the act?"

Shizuru said nothing, a fine crease talking for her on her brow.

"I do not see how she could have watched over you so closely, and for so long," Chikane explained. "And not done that."

That statement hurt her. It must have been a deep hurt, Chikane thought, if even her blood-eyed friend could not conceal it. One could not even say as an excuse that Shizuru was currently weakened. Hardly, Chikane decided, dismissing the other's tiredness as immaterial to the subject of such weakness. Shizuru was the opposite, if anything!

This too was part of the change in her.

This new Shizuru was something Chikane truly found fascinating, enough to merit a renewed consideration ever since her return. What was it about her? Somehow more human-the haggardness and loss of weight might be to blame-yet more compelling than before. Perhaps it was because she had acquired a tragedy quite new to her, Chikane suspected, noting idly the greater length of the curls over Shizuru's brow, the fetching leonine tousle of them as though she now had a habit of clutching her hair in her hands. What an image! Not something she might have imagined Shizuru doing before, but something she could actually picture now, even if she had never seen it. And she was reminded too of Shizuru's cousin, the silver-haired Shizuma, who bore something of the same tempestuous drama.

She supposed she should have expected this, in a way: the women of Shizuru's family showed a marked tendency to turn romantic late in their lives. Or was it that their lives turned them romantic?

*Yet I do not think the same can be said here*, she allowed, gauging her friend more deeply even as they continued talking. *She lacks their fatalism.* It was a queer drama Shizuru had, because Chikane could not see in it the same sense of defeat from the others. It was true that Shizuru had always been hard-harder even than either of her parents, who were great people, and thus very hard ones. Even so, Chikane could not help but suspect Shizuru had grown even

harder than that. And, she believed, so much hungrier.

A faint worry whispered a thought about the meeting she was planning. Would it really be wise to let the other senators see Shizuru now, give them an opportunity to sense how much harder and hungrier she was? If any of them caught on-and some of them would, for not all of them were completely blind-the hackles would go up. They were wary enough of Shizuru as it was, and it would be easy to compound that wariness by giving them a glimpse of the Fujino threat growing bigger. Chikane had no doubt it was doing that. What if they too saw it?

*Neither here nor there*, she decided. Shizuru had long been headed down this path. Besides, if Shizuru truly was as hard as she thought, then opposition would not matter to the purpose. That was a good word too, come to think of it: purpose. She sensed in Shizuru the awakening of a terrible purpose.

*She has always had determination*, she said to herself. *Her ambition has always been complete. Yet it seems to me, somehow, that this ambition has been doubled. It is not that I was wrong in thinking it complete then, for I am convinced it truly was what I thought it to be. It is rather that she has done the impossible with it: grown it, increased, expanded beyond the perimeter. It is not a vainglorious expansion; she has always been hungry for victory, a hungry sort of winner, and even now shall continue to be. But now I think she sees winning as both inevitable and devoid of alternative. Beyond margins of error and limits. Her mother would have said, "Is that not like my daughter, truly?"*

Chikane wondered if she approved of this. Her mind-a cerebral, aloof mind-could not form full agreement: determined as she also was in her own ventures' successes, Chikane nonetheless could not discard the minutiae of chance that computed those unlikely probabilities of failure. It was hard for her logic to approve of this development in her friend, which she suspected made Shizuru impervious to those tiny fault-lines she might see, disdainful of such negative possibilities. Of course, the part of her not so bound to the mathematic appreciated the addition of an entirely incomputable factor: the maturation of that hard, ravenous will in Shizuru that she could feel. A will that would not so much discard the obstacles in its



way as it would crush them entirely, unheeding of repercussions so long as the repercussions did not affect its grand scheme. Ah, but it was so hard to factor in such a thing! From where had it come, anyway? What was it that had happened-what manner of thing *had* to happen-to generate as inhuman a will as this?

It continued to bother her even when she left Shizuru to herself, even to the time she reached her home. It would bother her for a good while, deep into the future. There were few things she did not understand, and it was an uncomfortable feeling not to understand something so important about someone she loved, as she truly loved her friend. So the subject continued to gnaw at her.

That the reason evaded Chikane was not due to the limits of Chikane's reason, but rather due to the limits of her experience: specifically, that with the person she wished most to gratify, or the woman she loved. Being of the same temperament as Shizuru in the sense that she tied her own ideals inextricably to the expectations of this person as a centre, Chikane was unable to fathom the inhuman intensification of Shizuru's aims because her wife had not given her the force she needed to develop the same thing.

Chikane's wife, although she looked up to Chikane as she would a god, was nonetheless unfamiliar with the hopes of the gods: she did not comprehend the full scope of aspiration among their society's upper class. Himeko Himemiya had been born into a world so far below Chikane's it partook of little-to-no sensibilities of politics and power, which meant Himeko could not appreciate the totality of what Chikane could truly be as a politician-or as a patrician-or as an example. She had no expectations of Chikane beyond an abstract belief of excellence... which Chikane fulfilled very well without true exertion.

But Shizuru's Natsuki was different. Shizuru's Natsuki, while a foreigner, was a foreigner born into politics and orphaned by it; a mover of her world in her own right; a creature who also lived amidst the tectonics of warfare and wealth. If Shizuru had not grasped fully from the outset of their acquaintance exactly how influential her young woman was, she had done so by the time of their separation, where myriad observations had led her to deduce the range of Natsuki's political strength and the significance of the girl's position

as the Otomeian king's first retainer-what they had so loosely translated as *bodyguard*, to the (perhaps intentional?) detriment of her understanding. Slipped into a position to observe and monitor the Himean from the beginning, Natsuki had also been slipped into a position where Shizuru could watch her back, and from that common watch had both gained a healthy sense of each other's significance.

Thus the common base that had made it possible for them to speak on the things they had. While one could not belittle the contribution Natsuki's intellect made to her understanding of Shizuru's many speeches to her, neither could one discredit that she understood them better because of her familiarity with that common denominator that determined most of Shizuru's perceptions and thoughts: the elevated viewpoint of those riding the crests of power.

Natsuki, unlike Chikane's Himeko, understood these things. She appreciated Shizuru in a way Chikane's wife could not appreciate Chikane, and made it plain to Shizuru that her appreciation was thus: Shizuru was excellent, not just as a person, but also as a political creature. Tied as this appreciation was to a ferocious, powerfully obsessive love, Shizuru could not but take heed of it. Ambitious as the Himean already was, she suddenly had a second ambition fuelling her personality, which was to gratify the passionate belief in her of a woman who saw a blinding expanse of success in her destiny. To disappoint herself was insufferable; to disappoint Natsuki, catastrophic.

Thus it was that she who might have made allowances for herself before, even with her own perfect conviction of superiority, became resolved to never make allowances ever again.

*" I knew you were strong," the girl told her, holding her cheek. "So you always win."*

*She knew her cheeks were burning. "You really do like to think thus of me, do you not? It seems to me this is not the first time for you to say it."*

*" Shizuru."*

*" Why is that, Darling?"*

" *Because... it pleases me.*"

" *What does?*"

" *That you should win. That you-you have what you deserve.*"

*Shizuru laughed at that: "What do you think I deserve, Natsuki?"*

*The girl's reply stopped her laughter.*

" *Everything.*"

*It was a few moments later when she was able to give an answer.*

" *If it pleases you,*" she told her. *"Then... then I shall always win."*

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Suou Himemiya looked up at the sound of someone walking into her office and checked the spread of her smile upon seeing the visitor's disgruntled face. She motioned to the client's chair on the other side of her desk and waited for the person to be seated.

"You returned earlier than I expected, Nina-san," she said.

"Something went wrong with your errand?"

The Otomeian's taut face pulled tighter.

"She knew," she said through clenched teeth, which Suou took to mean *She found out*.

Nodding at Nina, she put her hands atop the desk, looking singularly serene for someone whose plan had been foiled.

"Ah well. I suppose it cannot be helped."

The girl opposite her glared back with some displeasure, angry at the way the Himean seemed so accepting of disappointment. If she had expected it, then why had she chosen Nina to do this at all, of all people possible? Why not one of those spy-folks they had among the Himeans, those who had used to report to Erstin's mistress, the primipilus centurion Nao Yuuki?

But that was a silly idea, she supposed: seeing what she did now, she realised the woman had been accounting for the possibility of discovery from the very beginning-and if the woman had used one of those spies instead of Nina, she probably knew as well as Nina did that there was every possibility the spy might not return with the relative bodily preservation that Nina had.

After all, Natsuki was not very forgiving when it came to her privacy.

It was a troublesome errand that had to do with it. When the Himean had approached her with the task of watching Natsuki, Nina had quailed. To follow Natsuki, to creep about and watch the whereabouts of her cousin from the shadows? What an odious thing to do! Leave it to a Himean to think of doing such a thing to a princess of the blood. No Otomeian would have conceived of it, especially not to Natsuki of the Ortygians, who had been heir immediate of her dead people, and was even now acknowledged royal by the people who had adopted her. No Otomeian would think of it-even less one who was born Ortygian and also Natsuki's cousin twice-removed.

*Even if you say that, a wicked little voice suddenly whispered, you did agree to it eventually.*

As she was not a young woman afflicted by the bitter guilt that lived inside her cousin, Nina's first reaction to this thought was to brood first on the wrongful way in which she had been persuaded. Himeans were so good at it! Wily, with their strangely frank smiles, and candour-coloured ways of talking. Look at this woman, Suou Himemiya. Beautiful, in that long-nosed Himean way, and so easygoing in manner. So very like the Otomeians to look at, even if the shape of her features was different. Oh, and the woman made sure to get all the use she could out of that! Nina had seen her working her charm amongst the other Otomeian barons, winning them over to her authority as head of the auxiliary troopers. Not that Nina disapproved of that entirely-especially when compared to someone as disagreeable as the chief legate of the new general-but, really, it was so deuced sly!

And now this new piece of slyness, this spying on Natsuki. Well, to be perfectly honest, she would never have agreed to it had she just

been forced. No, simply: she had agreed because there was still a point in the fair-haired Himean's persuasion, which touched on a concern for Natsuki's present welfare. It was a point even Nina had to allow was most convincing.

Nina's cousin was terribly unwell.

In the month since Shizuru Fujino's departure, Natsuki had suffered a startling a change, significant enough to merit recurrent discussion among the other Otomeians. The month that had so reduced Shizuru Fujino had in her case ravaged, leaving Natsuki with the bone-sketched look of an ascetic. When it had first begun to manifest, people had first shrugged, said it was the usual thing after what had happened. Natsuki would be sure to get over it. But when the prediction failed and the Otomeian's state even worsened-then the serious worries began.

Aside from the Himean to whom she had been charged, her subalterns and fellow officers were most concerned, for they saw the change in her keenly. It was not even that the captain of the Lupine Division started letting her duties go slack; indeed, she threw herself into her responsibilities with more dedication. Coupled as this was, however, by an increasing tendency to avoid her meals, and a popularly held suspicion of doing the same to her slumber, the effect was to shear off what little fat might have been present in an already lean frame, as well as remove what few tendencies she had before for conviviality. More silent and skeletal than ever, she put off all those with the courage to enquire about her health with an increasingly effective, sunken-eyed glare.

The woman to whose care she had been transferred-although the official line held that the relation was the other way around-was naturally the first to note the deterioration of her health. Her first thought was similar to most others' in that she considered it natural, although she did add a rider that Shizuru was certainly going through the same. When she noticed the alarming rate at which more angles were appearing on Natsuki's face, however, she began to wonder if Shizuru really was going through the same. The girl's decline was so fast! Suou had never seen anyone lose weight so swiftly, nor indeed seen them keep losing it while staying on their feet. What to do about that?

She might perhaps have known how better to help had she known what was in Natsuki's head, for the latter's decline was so much more marked because of the difference between what she and Shizuru believed: Shizuru only felt the anxiety of a temporary division; Natsuki felt anxiety that the division was permanent. As she had experienced abandonment before, and one that was also-in her eyes-in great part of her doing, this possibility of a second incident struck the girl with almost-crippling anguish. Natural therefore that Natsuki would suffer so keenly, and with such silence.

Suou still did her best. Despairing of keeping the girl in good health, she took for a while to imposing food upon the Otomeian, ordering her to finish everything laden on her plate. But the problem with this was that it not only irritated that prideful young woman, but also made Suou guilty whenever she saw the agony on Natsuki's face while struggling with the meal. This approach was abandoned quickly, especially after the discovery that such episodes often led to Natsuki retching in secret afterwards, as though the Otomeian truly could not hang on to her gorge. Horrified, Suou summoned the army physicians to check if the girl had some sort of inflammation of the stomach. All the physicians could do was to prescribe infusions of milk with heavily sweetened wine and beaten raw egg, and tell Suou what she already knew: it was more malaise than malady. And the only medicine was leagues away, all the way back in Fuuka and struggling with the Senate! What a predicament!

The Himean had recently come into some intelligence that explained part of why the predicament did not seem to be getting any better. Apparently, during the times Natsuki left her for mealtimes and breaks, that dark young woman had not actually been eating with the people she claimed to be her messmates. Rather, reports had come to Suou's ear about the girl vanishing, going to gods-knew-where to do gods-knew-what. Apprised of this deception, head hurting from her worries about the girl she was chaperoning, Suou finally went to ask the Otomeian's cousin to spy on her, in an effort to know exactly what the girl was doing and where she was doing it. Thus had Nina's assignment come about.

"What happened?" Suou asked her. "Does she know who asked you to follow her?"

A white shade rose in the area around Nina's lips.

"I did *not* tell her," she said aggressively.

Suou noted the pause and understood then that Natsuki did know. Yet she also felt that Nina was telling the truth, which meant Natsuki herself had probably guessed who it was.

"Tell me what you can, at least," she said. "Where was she headed?"

But Nina was suffering from some belated regrets: "I should never have spied on my kin."

Suou smiled.

"We've been over this," she answered the girl. "Would you deny that her actions of late have been of concern? Or that she wouldn't have answered had you asked her? I collect some people did ask her and got a harsh glare for their pains-and that you are one of them."

Nina frowned, careful to keep her voice as low as Suou's.

"You would spy on your own kin?" she asked provocatively.

"I would," Suou answered. "But only if I were given no other assurance of their safety and said safety were of my concern. As it generally is for kin. I think it's part of the compact of true kinship to give latitude for a possible overstep on-I stress this strongly-on their behalf and for their benefit, as well as an openness to understanding the goodwill behind it. See, I have no intention to be arrogant, but I do believe your cousin is wise enough a person to understand this."

"She was angry," Nina retorted testily.

Although the girl said that, she was dwelling more on her own anger at the moment, for she had just experienced a galling situation: she had just been chagrined by Natsuki. The older girl had actually given her a painful lesson on the difference between their skills by doubling back upon her and surprising her in an attack that left Nina flat, albeit not really bruised. After which Natsuki had cautioned her not to do it again and to "practise the feet".

*Noisy as a callow hound*, Natsuki had pronounced critically. *You hurt my ears.*

When she had retorted, burning with hurt pride, that she had been able to evade her notice long enough to make it out of the city, Natsuki had sighed and given her yet another dampening reply: *Would I censure my cousin before the common? You think so little of me?*

Flushing with renewed embarrassment, Nina stared grouchily at her present companion.

"She is angry," was said again, as though to give Suou warning.

"Of course she is angry," Suou replied, unfazed. "But neither your cousin's understanding nor her sympathy is thwarted by her pride. Else I would have mistaken my understanding of her. Have I?"

Nina seemed to pause, looked uncertain. The Himean struck.

"I shall take care of Natsuki-san, as the intention was from the start. Give your report now," she said firmly, in a voice that carried profound authority. It worked: Nina finally unbent to tell what she could.

*At least this one is more malleable*, her Himean auditor thought, while listening. Ah, but the cousin! Now, that one was a little more complicated. Too secretive, too prideful-and now too depressed by half! Suou winced at the thought of having to face Shizuru once she returned and presenting to her a Natsuki this shrivelled in weight. Shizuru would not thank her for that. Certainly the prescription of the army physicians seemed to work-if working meant keeping her well enough to be able to do her vanishing act-but could not return the girl to her former state. Oh, thought Suou, groaning inwardly at the walking problem that accompanied her these days, Shizuru really would not thank her!

She remembered what her red-stared friend had instructed.

"She shall want for nothing," Shizuru had specified. "I wish you to ensure she shall want for nothing."



"Of course," Suou had replied. "That much was understood."

But Shizuru had more to say on that: "You understand too that this covers much territory."

*Very nearly ominous*, Suou smiled, turning over the words in her head. It was all very well for Shizuru to say those things, of course, but what was Suou to do when the greatest part of that "territory" was Shizuru herself, and she was away?

Saddled by so impossible a pledge, limited by so gloomy a charge, it would have been perfectly understandable for Suou to succumb to either consternation or a shrugging acceptance that there was no more to be done. However, this patrician did neither. She had experienced greater pressures, after all, and weathered them all her life: she was the younger sister of Chikane Himemiya, and that was, in a sense, a tragedy by itself.

Unless you happened to be like her.

Well-regarded as she generally was, Suou was someone also generally underestimated. She was the younger of the Himemiya sisters, and thus often mistakenly seen as the lesser of them. It was telling that many still referred to them as Himemiya Major and Himemiya Minor, which nomenclature bore overtones beyond superiority in age. Suou had never borne her sister ill will for this, nor even suffered envy, as she was a very fair-minded young lady and grudged not something to one who rightly deserved it. Furthermore, she was of much the same imperturbable ilk as Chikane, although with a variation. Possessed of the same cool, she was also possessed of a ruthlessness for the result that possibly outstripped her sister's and found a closer equal in Shizuru Fujino's. While her intelligence was not the equal of either woman's when it came to grasping a high abstraction, she was nonetheless their equal when it came to the practical stratagem. She was also a person with less of the dramatic centrality both her sister and Shizuru carried, having in its place the prosaic sensibility better held by those in critical spectatorship. Thus having an acuity that presented her with the most common-sense perception, and a smaller number of romantically-cherished scruples over means when it came to achieving an end, Suou decided quickly on her course of action over

the ailing Natsuki.

Suou Himemiya started to lie.

Halfway into the second week of Shizuru's absence, she began to discreetly procure objects, arranging matters such that Natsuki would believe her when she said the objects had been purchased at Shizuru's behest. All manner of trifles and presents were purchased, from the sweetest dried plums and grapes to books by the bucket. As Shizuru had actually been so obliging as to leave a list of the things she knew Natsuki to like best, Suou had no difficulty picking which ones to buy and present to the girl as gifts Shizuru had ordered ahead of time and arranged to have delivered over a certain period—a sort of regular surprise that would keep the girl thinking of her during her absence. As this was very like Shizuru in Natsuki's eyes, and as the person orchestrating this deception was as cool a liar as could be, the girl accepted the gifts without doubting them once.

Although Suou did suspect that part of this was because the girl did not *want* to doubt either.

She had written to Shizuru about this already, and wondered if the other woman would be displeased with the liberty she had taken. She doubted it. If for such a purpose, Shizuru would not mind if she lied. Or, even if Shizuru did mind, she would have to think twice. For Suou's scheme worked as well as intended, her charge evincing moments of rare good spirit whenever a new present arrived. And she ate and kept down the edibles! For that alone, Suou felt her deception justified. She put that in her letter too.

Of all the things she procured for her charge, she wrote, what she found most curious were the toys and puzzles, childish whims Shizuru had made a point of informing her Natsuki enjoyed. The girl had taken them cheerfully when they arrived, true, but had not done more than look at the things. It was not until a few days past that Suou had finally discovered what Shizuru had failed to add—if Shizuru had known it, that is—which was that Natsuki did not like the toys as much as she liked to use them with another. Had Shizuru ever realised it? For, Suou reflected, Shizuru had probably immediately invited the girl to play after giving her such things, and

might not have even had the chance to see how much more important the act of communal play was as compared to the tools that facilitated it. Of course the girl had always had toys! It was just that she must have never had playmates.

In effect, aside from lying, Suou Himemiya found that she also had to play with toys like a child. The art of chaperonage could be quite a fascinating exercise, her letter said.

*At least it keeps me on my toes, I suppose,* she ruminated, pushing the new bucket of scrolls beside her with one foot, and closer to her desk. Her Otomeian conspirator had left, and she was already thinking on the fruitlessness of Nina's attempt. Even if the report the trooper had given was delivered in fair confidence, Suou had quickly divined that Natsuki had known someone to be following her from the outset, and had thus been taking her cousin on a merry ride.

Perhaps it would have been better to go with one of their spies, after all? *No, very stupid.* Shizuru's girl was a vastly suspicious young woman who never let down her guard, and should it transpire that the spy made a tiny mistake, she would catch on to it-and very likely break their bones before a word could be said. It was clear the dark one had a dark temper as well.

*I wonder if Shizuru-san ever realised what a wild creature she caught for herself,* she mused, eyes screwing up to the ceiling. Her old friend's cub was turning out to be quite undomesticated, deceiving her about having meals with her fellows when she was actually running off somewhere. Had Shizuru ever seen this wildness in her young woman? Or was Natsuki always docile with her, cuddly and thrumming as Suou remembered from seeing them together instead of the wary creature she was with everyone else?

Oh well-who could really tell? Suou shrugged, knowing it did not much matter while Shizuru was away. She had to deal with the fallout and make sure the cub did not bite the hand currently trying to feed it. And, come to think of it, she considered that this failed attempt at tailing the cub might actually be an advantage.

She surfaced from her considerations in time to greet a new visitor entering. Her next words were whispered under her breath.

"That was fast."

This time, Suou nodded to her clerks to leave the room. Once they had left, she beckoned the Otomeian captain not to the same seat her cousin had occupied earlier, but to one of the couches nearby. A queer honour for a foreigner, perhaps, but this foreigner was loved by her friend, and one she had grown fond of, besides.

She perched herself on the other couch and met stormy green eyes without unease, studying the stately bones that defied even the ravages of Natsuki's ailment. Was that where the blood told? *Interesting to see such nobility of form on one so wasted*, her mind wandered, before focusing on the situation at hand.

"Natsuki-san," she started, with her gentlest voice. "What is it?"

The Otomeian's face pinched even more as she opened her mouth to respond: the result was a look both famished and disgusted.

"What!" she said in a husky tone of disapprobation. "You ask what."

Suou said nothing, wise enough to let her fume first.

"You ask," Natsuki drawled on, indignation collaborating with bloodshot eyes to add a feverish quality to her effect. "You ask Nina. What!"

Suou nodded, not bothering to stage a denial. She did not want the Otomeian to become any more displeased with her than she was already and she knew the young woman enough by now to know any attempt at denial would be read as an insult.

"My apologies," she said while bowing her head lightly. "I am sorry if my decision angered you."

She looked up at the slow hiss of air from her auditor's nostrils.

"I hope you can forgive me," Suou said swiftly, sending her most self-deferential smile to her auditor. "Please allow me a moment to explain. While I regret having resorted to such a tactic, I would like you to know that I only did it because I have been tasked to ensure your safety... which is to say that I did it with every good intention. I

was so worried, you see, that I did not know what else to do. You had been vanishing so often, and without a trace, that I believed I had cause to fear. If something happened to you, I don't know how I could even face her again."

Her smile widened a little upon the change this reference to Shizuru brought upon the other's countenance; it was something she had expected.

"I must remind you too that I had good reason to be concerned-you never told me of these disappearances," Suou plodded on, striking while the girl still looked willing to listen. "I distinctly recall, Natsuki-san, that you told me you would be eating with your fellows. It turns out you have not been doing so, and thus I had reason to be concerned."

That reminder snagged. Natsuki scowled again, looking as though she would leap from her seat any second.

"Hrrh!" she hissed through bared teeth, even more displeased because it was Suou who had done it, and Suou was someone she actually liked. She reverted to Greek all of a sudden, her accent as sharp as it was cold: "Even so! You had me followed. Followed. By my cousin!"

She rasped a heavy breath, her wasted frame shuddering from agitation.

"You wrong me!" she cried in vexation.

Suou gave an answer in Greek as well, eager to placate her because she did not like the way the anger sat so heavily upon the girl. What if the foreigner passed out or had a stroke?

"I did not intend it, but I see that I have," she confessed. "You are right. It was wrong of me."

A furious nod.

"Pray hear me first, however, and try to understand. You see, I am not like *her*, Natsuki-san," the Himean continued in her softest voice. "Shizuru-san's delicacy is still above mine when it comes to these

things, and I am afraid I did not know what else to do or how to treat you properly. Perhaps I panicked and worried too much. I handled that badly, I see now. I am sorry for that, and that you have to make do with someone so much less subtle in comparison..."

She lowered her eyes as though in shame, deciding her explanation would go better with such an act. After a moment's pause, she looked up.

"It goes hard with you, no doubt, to have to make do with so poor an alternative as you have in me. Nonetheless, I shall endeavour to get better at this. Only, I ask that you try and have patience when I make such mistakes. I truly meant it only because I was worried about you. Even so, I see now that I was wrong."

Precisely as Suou had known would happen, the girl before her seemed to calm down after the speech. Not for nothing had Suou been studying the girl extensively; one of the things she had quickly learned was that, although she had a dark temper, the Otomeian was actually a very *nice* person all the same. Tender of heart, with a disposition that yielded to heartfelt appeals, Natsuki was unable to prevent herself from softening at Suou's sally.

"Yes, I... I see this." The young woman paused, looked torn between maintaining her indignation and giving in to her sympathy. She coughed, and again her thin body shuddered. "Just..."

Suou put on her most contrite smile.

"I was only thinking," Natsuki managed weakly. "Alone."

Suou nodded and waited to see if she would continue. A few moments more and Natsuki did not disappoint her.

"You see too, sometimes," the girl said. "I need that."

Her lips then pushed up into that tiny flag of pain Suou had learned to associate with her, that unpremeditated pout Shizuru must have found so distracting. Or had Shizuru seen it? After all, the reason Natsuki made that flashing expression so often these days was because of Shizuru's absence.

"Thinking alone, I mean," Natsuki finished, returning to Suou's native language. "Do you see?"

Suou nodded.

"Of course," she told her. "I should have thought of that."

Natsuki looked away.

"Do you go on rides during those times you are missing, perhaps?" Suou guessed, recalling her own sister's old habits.

The green eyes slid her way. Yes.

"I see. I really should have thought of that. Stupid of me."

She allowed a moment to pass, to indicate to the girl that she understood the gravity of the topic.

"I really am sorry for what I did," she said afterwards. "And I shall atone in any way you wish, of course. But if I may ask-and I ask this in all courtesy-would it be possible that you tell me where you are going, first, when you leave? I promise not to infringe on your time alone, nor betray that trust any other way, but it would ease my mind remarkably if I knew where you were. Besides, it also makes it easier for me to reach you should there be an emergency."

Natsuki saw the good sense of this and flushed.

"I... yes," she replied stiffly. "I will tell next time."

"Thank you."

"Mm."

A brief silence ensued, which Natsuki spent with her fingers picking at a corner of her seat. The patrician watched her furtively, amused by the fidgety gesture.

"If that is settled, may I bring up something else?" she eventually asked with feigned timidity. "It is something for you. From Shizuru-san."

How quickly that sent away the glaze from her eyes! Suou noted it, as she always did.

"I am afraid it is not yet a letter, however," she said, turning away to fetch the bucket next to her desk and so managing to avoid the slight wilting she knew would appear in the green; she hated having to see it. "All the same, I imagine she thought it would keep you occupied before her latest letter reached you."

She returned and handed it over, letting the girl take out a scroll and begin perusing it. She watched her serenely during this examination. This part of her duties she liked, because Shizuru's girl was exceedingly watchable. There was a strange pleasure in watching a creature as exotic as this, and also a more common pleasure that had to do with the gratification of one's aesthetic senses. A beautiful woman herself, Suou liked to be surrounded by others who were also beautiful. Part of this was because she had a great love of beauty and another part of it was that she distrusted those who lacked self-esteem-and most of those who lacked beauty tended to lack self-esteem. Suou distrusted such people because she thought they could and usually would sell you for a pittance. Of course, she thought, beauty was not always the decisive factor. It was simply the most obvious one.

"Catullus!" her subject uttered huskily. She glanced at Suou and repeated it. "Catullus."

"Poetry this time, I see," Suou answered with nonchalance.

A sociable nod was bestowed: "You like?"

"That's difficult to answer. I should say that I do not dislike it, I think," Suou admitted. "I am more of a history-reader. Some poetry bores me, unfortunately."

The green eyes shone for an instant.

"Ovid bores?" Natsuki said.

"Hmph!" Suou sniffed with good humour. "I said some, Natsuki-san. *Some*. Ovid is never part of *some*. "



"And Catullus?"

"No. You know he is too good for that." A pretend-frown. "Or do you think me so devoid of literary sensibility you actually believe I wouldn't appreciate him? Unkind of you, Natsuki-san."

The black-haired foreigner seemed very much as though she would smirk. A change came over her face before she could do so.

"Shi-"

She stopped there. Suou's eyes were very pale, very light upon her. Little though Suou knew it, one of the reasons the girl bore her gaze so well was that her eyes reminded Natsuki of Mino's eyes, the first eyes the girl had seen when she was freed from that prison of corpses years ago.

"Shizuru?" the Himean supplied.

Natsuki visibly chewed on the inside of a sunken cheek.

"She... likes him. I know," she said, her voice as fragile as she looked: she looked as though she might fall apart at any instant. "Catullus."

"Is not the name part of the gift, though?" the other woman said playfully, to lighten her mood. "Isn't that like Shizuru-san, to send you a gift with a pun?"

Natsuki's eyes fell on the scroll. She could still hear Shizuru's voice in her ear, calling her *catulus*, soothing her when she awoke gasping from her dreams in the night.

"Yes," she agreed quietly, not lightening at all. "Like her."

Suou pressed on, wanting to see the sparkle she had seen earlier. She much preferred the girl when she was witty and glowing. It was a pleasure to be with her when she was like that.

"I'm certain she has already sent a letter," she assured the Otomeian confidently. "But the passes may be difficult for the couriers. It should take about a month."

The girl nodded and looked up for an instant. Suou finally read what was in those large, sad eyes.

"She *will* write to you," she said firmly, permitting a frown to come to her face. "Do not doubt that, Natsuki-san. I never do."

Gratitude now-sparkling gratitude in the green. So pleased was the patrician to see it that she quite forgot herself and smoothed the girl's hair with one hand. She caught herself at the confused surprise on Natsuki's face, however.

"Just wait for it," she said, backing away with no trace of her inner awkwardness. Should she not have done that? Then again, why should she even be troubled for having done it? She decided to shrug it off and essayed a smile. Still, it nagged. This was not the first time she had felt this urge or the awkwardness over it, was it?

An inward frown as an idea came to her: was Shizuru's covetousness over this person so strong that it threatened even now, with a sea in between it and them?

"Anyway, you seem a little tired, Natsuki-san-"

"Natsuki."

Suou stopped, turned back.

"Pardon me," she said. "What?"

Her companion's face was so red Suou almost reached over to test her temperature.

"Natsuki," said the Otomeian, glancing up shyly. "It is fine."

"Oh." This time, she almost tested her own temperature. "I see. Thank you."

She swept away, faintly irked that she too should blush. Why was it that when someone blushed in that sort of situation, you did too?

When safely at the doorway, she announced: "I'm going to send for someone to make your infusion."

The Otomeian sighed at her proposition. Natsuki did not bother lodging a protest, however, knowing Suou could not be dissuaded from having her drink the prescription whenever the Himean got the idea in her head. Besides, if the girl had to tell the truth, the milk-and-egg-based concoction was not at all bad. It was also one of the few things she could keep down in her rebellious stomach, so she could not complain overmuch when it was what kept her from outright hunger; she really was not vomiting her food on purpose.

She tracked the Himean's movements to the door, listening to the woman giving the order.

"Soo-oh," she called gently afterwards, not adding the honorific because Suou had ordered her to drop it from the very beginning; it was part of what had motivated her to ask the Himean to do the same with her name just now. "Suou, there is something."

Suou finished giving instructions to a slave outside the doorway and turned to go back into the room.

"What is it?" she asked, taking a seat again. When Natsuki answered without hesitation, she understood that the subject was strictly for business.

"The new supplier-no, that is-the new *praefectus*?"

"Yes, *praefectus fabrum*," Suou helped. "You mean the one who handles the procuring of materials and supplies for the army?"

The silky-haired head nodded: "A problem."

"With Makito-san?" Suou asked, registering little surprise on her face. She pulled back one leg and put forward the other, unconsciously assuming the classic pose of Himean magistrates. "What is it? Speak freely with me, so that I can address it. Trust that I will."

A very quick, very tiny smile raised Natsuki's lips.

"I do," she said.

Suou smiled back, quite touched by that expression of faith from one

so generally suspicious of everyone else. Again she felt the urge to extend a hand and pat that dark hair she knew now to be very fine. She did not do it.

"Please tell me," she said, shifting easily into Greek as an invitation for the girl to do the same.

Listening to the young woman outline her concerns about the subpar quality of provisions being provided her troopers and stables, she marvelled once more about the change such a topic could cause in the other's features. She seemed so *strong*. Suou knew Shizuru's girl was that, truly, but she had also seen how much frailty could reside in the same soul. She had seen it for herself, learning the extent of the Otomeian's stutter when it came to things that were personal and that had to do, for instance, with Shizuru. She had seen it that day she discovered her bent double as she retched all the contents of her stomach, going on even when it was empty and her expulsion was reduced to a greenish trickle.

She had seen it that night she had chanced a glimpse into the window of Natsuki's bedroom, and seen her curled up in bed, head bowed and hands wringing.

*Queer how frail she actually is*, she thought, understanding now precisely what drove her old friend to clucking like a hen whenever the foreigner was involved. What was that Shizuru called her? Not ice, she had said. Not ice, but *adamas*. Only now did Suou comprehend what the other woman had meant.

Adamas was tough. It was the hardest substance ever discovered. It was rare and thus, precious. Its great virtue was in its purity. Yet the same purity and hardness, that which gave it strength, made it brittle.

Adamas did not scratch easily... but it was very easy to break.

A knock on their door intruded on her thoughts, as well as on Natsuki's speech. Both women looked up as Suou called the interrupter's entry.

"Suou-ku-ah! Natsuki-san."

The man who had replaced *their* general bowed stiffly, his dark skin not yet dark enough to hide the colour on his cheeks. Suou smiled at him, whereas the Otomeian with her looked away.

"I, uh, I hope you received the flowers," he said laboriously, his eyes hungry as he roamed them over the dark-haired woman's form; she kept her own eyes studiously on her feet. As this was no departure from how she usually acted around him, Takeda was not cast down by it. He believed her reserve was only to be expected of such a young lady, and thus read what might have been better considered contumely as modesty instead.

The young lady got to her feet and faced him, bowing her head with her back straight. He flushed once again and bade her be seated, trying to compose himself enough to remember why he had come here. As his gaze refused to part from Natsuki, however, and the desire that had been driving him mad for so long was being stoked by her nearness, he had to struggle with himself for a few seconds. The only other person in the room, Suou, merely watched him and held a tiny grin.

She was wondering what Takeda Masashi would say if he knew the girl had given away his flowers to her, along with every other gift he had sent in the past few weeks.

"Aah-Suou-kun!" the man said, seeming to recall exactly what his errand had been. "Right. I came to see you."

Suou grinned at him: "And you see me."

He plodded on, still very much aware of the Otomeian's presence.

"I want you to pack up the troopers," he said. Perceiving the twitch of a black-haired head, he unconsciously strengthened his voice, speaking deep from his chest. "We're moving to Argentum."

Suou regarded him with genuine surprise, a fine crease appearing on her forehead.

"Oh?" she said. "I thought we were going to stay here in Argus? What happened to that?"

"Things have changed." He coughed, stare flickering as he kept darting his eyes toward the girl on the other couch. "We just got an invitation. Diplomatic, of course, beautifully worded-came with a very nice gift," he said with excitement, thinking of that impressive sculpture he had left in his office. Solid gold! Beautiful! It would make such a nice offering to one of the state temples when he returned. And such a good mark on his record-along with the peace contract he was undoubtedly about to get.

"Anyway, get ready to go as soon as possible," he continued brightly. "We can get there and wrap this up without another bit of trouble then. They're already there."

"A moment, please," Suou cut in, her eyes glacial. "You are not making much sense, Takeda-san. Who sent this invitation? *Who* is already there?"

"The embassy from the Mentulae."

## Chapter 48

*INDE IRA. Incidentally, if a term does not appear in the provided list but is in the chapter's text, it means it is either a place/location (such as a minor street) that demands no further understanding, or a term that has been used so many times in the story that it should by now be familiar (e.g. dignitas, consul, tribune of the plebs, etc.). Owing to the content of this chapter, however, I would most respectfully remind you of a point relating to the culture on which this world is based: to an Ancient Roman senator, dignitas was everything .*

*Finally, thank you for those very sweet persons who sent messages after the last chapter-and all worded with such handsome and winning courtesy. I regret that I cannot answer most of the messages this very moment, as I am rushing off to a flight for business, but I promise to do so once I am able to write responses. I thank you in advance here, however, and shall communicate a more personal gratitude later on.*

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**Illustration:** For Ch. 46

*(Remove all spaces after the full stops, replace X's with W's, and replace YYY with COM.)*

XXX. deviantart. YYY/ethnewinter/art/Cameo-164117023

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### **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Censor** - The most senior of the Roman magistracies, although not one that owned imperium. Two censors were elected to serve in tandem for five years, some of their duties being the regulation of senatorial membership, the execution of a general census, the application of means tests, and-this being why Shizuru refers to them below-the giving of state contracts for public works and buildings. Note that only **consulars** (s.v.) could stand as censors.

2. **Consular** - One who has served as a consul at least once in the past.

3. **Curia** (L.) - The meeting place of Senate, the full name being **Curia Hostilis** ; like most of the locations below, it can be found on a map of Ancient Rome.

4. **Fasces** (L.) - See note for **Lictor** .

5. **Forum** - The centre of Rome's political happenings, having in it most of the major government buildings; on a map, it is typically labelled "Forum Romanum", and lies between the Capitoline and the Palatine.

6. **Hemiolia** - A boat of the bireme type, although swifter and smaller than the average bireme.

7. **"Interventor, illicitator, idiota!"** (L.) - "Interrupter, sham bidder, idiot!" The second word, *illicitator*, describes false bidders at an auction; it must be taken as a metaphor in the exclamation. For "**Tace** ", see note below.

8. **Knights** - Members of the **Ordo Equester** , called "the knights" or "equestrians/equites" as opposed to "the senators". Those of knight rank were usually as well-born as those of senatorial rank, but the difference was that they chose not a political career but a commercial one. Recall that there are restrictions on senatorial businesses, which is the reason the knights are generally the richer of the two ranks. One may consider them the equivalents of the modern "business sector" of the community, with the senators being the "government or political sector", for a simplified but convenient categorisation.

9. **Lictor** - A public servant I have chosen to eschew almost entirely for this story, the lictor was originally assigned to imperium-owning magistrates as a type of escort. The number of lictors depended on the degree of imperium or authority the official held. The lictors also held bunches of birch rods tied together by red leather straps, and these were rods were called **fasces** , symbols of imperium. In the case of the consuls, whichever consul was officiating over meetings of Senate for the month (they alternated in this duty by month) held



the **fascēs** through his lictors.

10. "**Mea vita**" (L.) - Extremely affectionate endearment in Latin: "my life".

11. "**Meum mel**" (L.) - Another endearment in Latin: "my honey".

12. **New Man - N ovus homo / homo novus** ; socially, ancestrally, and politically speaking, a parvenu. These were generally looked down upon, as antecedents were very important in highly-stratified Rome.

13. **Pomerium** (L.) - The sacrosanct boundary encircling the city of Rome, which could not be crossed by soldiers or generals for the duration of their service in a military mission or capacity.

14. **Princeps** (L.) - Also **Princeps Senatus** ; the Leader of the House in the Roman Senate.

15. **Quaestor** (L.) - A fiscal officer. Distributed at various levels of the Roman state.

16. "**Tace!**" (L.) - "Shut up!" or "Be quiet!"

17. **Tarpeian Rock** - The traditional location for executing Roman traitors. They were either thrown from or made to jump from this overhang, which may have been above some serrated crags. One says "may have" because the precise appearance and situation of the Tarpeian Rock is yet contested amongst historians... although there is universal agreement that no records exist showing survivors of the drop.

18. **Triumphator** - One who holds a triumph or victory procession after battle

19. "**Vehementer errabas, novus homo; vehementer errabas.**" (L.) - "You were making a huge mistake, parvenu; you were making a huge mistake." The vocative interrupter of the diacope (novus homo) was highly scornful and belittling to a Roman politician, especially if he truly was a novus homo. Think of it in the sense of being called a "Johnny-come-lately", only with magnified insult. For more on the novus homo, see the note above for **New Man** .

20. **Via sacra** (L.)- "via"being "street", this is thus *Sacra* (or *Sacred*) *Street*. On a map of the Roman Republic, this appears as a road from the Forum to the Capitol.

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## ***Inter Nos II: Inde Ira et Lacrimae***

*par ethnewinter*

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Shizuma Hanazono did not much care for the profession to which her class belonged. There was little lure for her in the weights attendant, the exchange for the privileges enjoyed by those in a political capacity. Nor did the privileges themselves beckon: the possibility of increasing her wealth did not attract, for she was neither avaricious nor remotely impoverished. The enticements of glory and fame mattered not because she already had them, though in an admittedly infamous condition. As for power, it was to be had in victories, and Shizuma had many of these already, in her own infamous way. In fact, she loved having many of these. It was perhaps one of the few pleasures she shared with her cousin: Shizuma also loved to win her wars, whether they involved the crushing of an enemy, or the taking of a woman's virtue.

It was not uncommon, when she considered it, that the two went hand in hand.

*Not of late, however;* and that was unfortunate. Shizuma had not had the pleasure of that blend yet in this new war, one that she was perhaps even more determined to win than others past. Not to gratify her own taste for success! It actually soured her tongue faintly that she should have been manoeuvred into returning to the stiff ivory chairs of the Curia for this fight, but-preferences be damned-this was one war that just had to be won. Most of her other wars had been less urgent than this because they had demanded nothing of herself, whereas this one required such a gift. This war was special because it was *personal*.

Unfortunately, Shizuma also worried that too much of this new war

was personal. Her concern here had to do with the woman who had requested her involvement: Shizuru Fujino, dearest cousin and friend. Who was, Shizuma very much feared, turning out to be a woman after her own heart. Given the tattered state of that organ somehow limping along in her chest, Shizuma knew there was very little good to be found in such similitude. Few knew as well as she did the perils of the heart, and how easily they could lay low even the mightiest. All she had to do was remember her own experience, for it was what had taught Shizuma that to invest all your life in one thing was a risk that rarely saw returns, and would likely take a part of you with it when it collapsed and vanished forever. Obsessive dependence was as embarrassing as it was enfeebling, and a grave error to be corrected early.

*Yet such errors seem an affliction carried by the line*, Shizuma often reflected coldly, having as she did her own share of detachment. *Can something be corrected when it is carried in the blood?* After all, she knew there was in their familial history a tendency for mania or despair. Other clans were renowned for traits as eccentricity, cupidity, intractability, and the like; the Hanazono line, which Shizuma's cousin shared through the maternal side, was known for its tempestuousness. A family that produced beauties, it had also produced through its record a startling number of obsessives with varying objects of compulsion. Some had been artists, others had been practical lunatics, yet more military men, and a few-the worst indeed-had been lovers. Whatever it was driving each, it seemed to drive them very close to an edge, one Shizuma had seen for herself and feared. How could she possibly permit her cousin to go riding off that cliff? And yet, what could she do that could help stave off a fall other than give warning?

*Much good that would do*, she told herself, knowing that small precaution was not something that could assist. Shizuru Fujino could not be warned of her peril because people in love could never be warned, and Shizuma understood that her cousin was truly in love, in the most obsessive and manic of ways. With a foreigner too, of all people! That much, at least, defied all of Shizuma's understanding. It was such a parody; a woman who aimed for the title of First Citizen could not risk being firmly under another's spell, as Shizuma's cousin seemed very much to be. Right before she reached the top,

the chasm would open at her feet. And that would be a shame, as much for her as for Shizuma. There were self-turned considerations as well in Shizuma's motivation, and they were tinged with private guilt.

This was because of the significant contribution her cousin's attitude had to Shizuma's own *carte blanche* with her infamous doings: Shizuru had always been the opposite, having sufficient will and capacity to meet both their families' ambitions. As such, she was the one who pulled all the poundage and pulled it well, suffered not the crick in the neck Shizuma had felt when placed under the same yoke. Shizuma's cousin was the one born to enhance their families' *dignitas* even further, the perfect horse to drag their chariot first and far ahead. It was only because of her that Shizuma felt no remorse in abandoning the same race, littering yoke and standards in her wake. Why worry or be hampered by guilt? The Red-eyed Conqueror could meet ennoble their families enough for both their sakes, which was what she had been poised to do before this trouble transpired.

What if this trouble proved too great a hurdle or too crippling a saddle upon her? What if the reason for Shizuru's determination in this latest project was not so much her ambition but her passion? To put in motion a plan as difficult as the one she had made with Chikane was fine... provided it was done in search of glory and the enhancement of *dignitas*, because it was understandable to brave the greatest difficulties for something like that. But to do it for something so irrational as love, so unreasonable as a woman-! It had to cause a shiver.

It was frightening because it would create the first true fault in someone who had previously been without weakness. If discovered, it could be the fatal chink in Shizuru Fujino's armour, which was already bearing too much weight to suffer such a defect. This was what caused Shizuma to shudder when she thought of her cousin, whose shoulders bore part of a burden that should have been hers instead. Not that Shizuru had ever complained or given her rebuke for the abjuration: and this was all the more reason to feel guilty.

*When she asked me for help, there was really only one answer, she mused with resignation. They would yet see the outcome of the dent*

in the armour, but what little assistance the one wearing said armour had requested was not about to be denied. Her cousin had asked her to be a senior legate, and that was not so bad. Her cousin had also asked her to return to Senate and politics, and that was probably the worst part. But it was still not so bad that Shizuma could conveniently forget that she had never asked her cousin to take on her responsibilities, which Shizuru had done anyway.

So Shizuma could become a senior legate, which might even prove enjoyable, and a senator again, which might not be so enjoyable but was not impossible either. There were things one was always willing to suffer, she thought wryly, for those whom one loved... and for those to whom one owed that much.

A voice intruded upon her meditations, the owner's hand having been pinching her for a while but to less effect. She rolled onto her back and faced the person.

"I'm afraid you're beginning to bore of me," the woman next to her said. "What's so interesting it has you straying when I'm here?"

A lift of the whitish brows was all she gained, instead of the desired flattery.

"A curious term to use," Shizuma replied in heavy suggestion. "Straying."

The other woman did not seem at all put out and even smirked.

"Yes," she said. "I know. I've just permitted the most famous rake in the Republic to have me, and in my wife's bed as she is away."

She giggled, putting up a finger to stroke Shizuma's arm voluptuously.

"I've been *very* bad."

Shizuma read the triumph in her eyes and sat up, away from the finger.

"The House meets today," she said, rising to her feet. "I must attend."

Her companion turned to one side and watched her dress, unashamedly ogling Shizuma's naked body. Shizuma had been right in identifying the tone in her voice as triumphant, for the woman was already dying to call together her friends and disclose whom she had just bedded. They would be horrified, be completely scandalised... and be eaten up by envy!

"Pity you must," she breathed, staring at Shizuma's fantastic beauty. No wonder so many women yielded to her despite her reputation: she was just incredible, a white creature from crown to base, and lean of body despite her supposed lifestyle's excesses. And that hair! She would be a bald beauty were it not for the silver that seemed to gleam amidst the whiteness, endowing brows and mane with a grey-glint tint. Even the hair between her legs was like this! Easy to mistake her for a statue if she stilled and veiled her eyes, for it was those irises that gave the lie to the marmoreal effect. They were always flashing endlessly, as though they could find no peace. Against the grisaille of Shizuma Hanazono's colouring, those eyes were violent spots, sharp fragments of some broken and green-gold prism.

"You're so beautiful," she sighed again, revelling in the thought of their earlier activities. "Like some goddess."

Shizuma shot an amused glance her way: "Thank you, but there is no need to say that."

"Why not?"

"I suppose because it sounds ridiculous to me."

"Anyone else would be happy to hear it. How strange you are!"

"Oh, yes." The rest of the words were muffled as Shizuma found her tunic and pulled it over her head. "I am that."

The other woman flopped over in bed and propped herself up on crooked elbows. She looked singularly pleased with herself for a second, and then said, "Well, you won't see my wife at the meeting today, being that she's all the way off in one of those ghastly provinces to the east. Why we can't leave those horrid places to

their ways, I never will understand. It's for the sake of settling a few savages that I my wife leaves me?"

"You miss her then."

"Miss her! Not so much-she's dull, you know." A high, nervous giggle. "Although I can't wait for her to come back!"

"To what end, if you don't miss her so much?"

"So I can tell her that while she was away doing some useless thing, I was having the time of my life."

Shizuma stopped what she was doing, her belt hanging from her hand, and turned to stare at the sole occupant of the bed.

"You would tell your wife of this?" she asked, surprised. "This we have done?"

"Why not?" the other retorted, twisting her body on the sheets. "Do you mind?"

"Not really. However, I harbour no grudge against her. It seems wiser to spare her feelings."

"Spare her! She spares me a lot, all right. She spares me all the great parties, and all the fun things..."

"Do you mean the restrictions you talked about earlier?" the standing woman asked. "I confess they are strict, but still sensible. Why would you want to go to such parties as those your friends give, anyway? Those are wild circles, really."

"You should talk: you've gone!"

"Yes, and even been disgusted a few occasions," Shizuma retorted. "I'm not married. Those gatherings are full of actors and whatnot, and not fitting for attendance by a properly married Himean lady-especially if she goes to them absent acceptable attendants and her wife for escort."

That sensible contention earned her a resentful look: "Well, I don't

want those 'acceptable attendants' she left with me. As you know, I have to send away that steward spy of hers just so we can meet. Bastard! What am I, a child to be watched by a nanny?"

A hum from Shizuma.

"And how can I have her escort me when she's the one always going overseas?"

"She has her duties," Shizuma told the younger woman. "She is one of the quaestors for the eastern provinces, and is in one of the most important positions abroad. The conventions are what dictate that she cannot bring you. You should yet be pleased that she gains such title for herself, and thus stands well to enhance the glory of the house the two of you are establishing."

But the other scoffed, obviously dismissing such things as unimportant. Shizuma felt oddly as though she were listening to a mockery of herself being lectured by someone else, someone wearing her garb and stepping in her shoes. As ironies were very much to her taste, it tickled instead of bothered her immensely.

"I didn't get married for this!" her companion said, still grouching. "Where's the fun? She never even takes me to any of the good parties-just the strict and boring dinners full of straight-laced old corpses too stiff to realise they should be falling into the funeral pyre already. And she makes me act just as strict and boring as they are!"

Shizuma smiled and returned to her belt, wise enough to recognise that very little could be said to disabuse self-centred and immature young women of their peeves once they began to cherish them. But she could understand why the wife had placed so many restrictions on this one! This one was a parcel of juvenile trouble waiting to happen, wrapped up in a pretty skin.

"Is not the usual recourse to divorce when marriage so displeases you?" she asked, with just enough aloofness to prevent the other from interpreting that as a proposal.

"I can't."



"Why not."

"She won't let me."

" *Why not?* "

There was a rather unladylike snort: "She says she's in love with me."

Shizuma paused and took a breath, but chose to say nothing.

"Anyway!" The half-squealed word caught her off-guard, and she jumped. "There's something I've been dying to ask you all this time! Everyone's probably asked you about it already, but-oh, I need to do it."

"What?"

"You see... I've been hearing the most scandalous things about your cousin." A drop of the voice to a stealthy whisper, although only the two of them were in the room. "Is it really true, Shizuma? Is she really *wild* for some savage from the northlands?"

Shizuma's body stiffened and she turned to the inquisitive blue eyes.

"Where did you hear that?" she said harshly.

The other answered unperturbed, too eaten by curiosity to note the warnings in the older woman's stance.

"Oh, everyone's talking about it, and I'm not one to be late with news, you know!" she giggled, raising her voice again. "Word claims your cousin was so besotted she made as much of her as one would a wife! Is it true? How positively depraved of her!"

She rolled over yet again, apparently thrilled by what she viewed as a positive depravity.

"I even heard from Ayako yesterday that Nakanichi-san-do you know her? Oh, what am I saying? Of course you do! She's absolutely famous for her exploits, that *whore* -though she is quite ravishing. Terrible eater of men and women, howev-"

"What about Nakanichi-san?" Shizuma prompted crisply, her patience rapidly thinning.

"Well, I was about to get there!" came the retort, accompanied by an incensed flapping of eyelashes. "Ayako claims that she encountered Nakanichi-san somewhere on the Pincian Hill just recently, and that Nakanichi-san was absolutely spitting curses. Ayako claims the woman was puce with fury." She shivered with delight. "Oh, how I wish I could have seen it! She must have looked a fright: gods know she places too much rouge on her face already."

Shizuma folded her arms and glared at her companion sternly. "Do cease meandering like a drunk and get to it. If one of Hime's most famous tarts decides to throw a fit somewhere on the Pincian, how does it concern my cousin?"

Her paramour's eyes gleamed.

"Because she was coming from your cousin's villa there," she said exultantly. "Nakanichi-san's always had it for your cousin, you know, and presented herself that day at your cousin's place for what she calls a 'convivial visit'. We all know what that really means, don't we? Still, there she was, flouncing out in a trice almost as soon as she'd got in-which means, Ayako says, that there was none of the *getting in* she wanted, really! Isn't Ayako witty? Anyway, she says Nakanichi-san claims to have said something about your cousin's foreigner and your cousin got angry for no reason. Nakanichi-san says she only called her a 'savage', though how that could be reason enough for your cousin to have been inflamed, I don't see- anyway, she said something and your cousin said something back, then sent her running out of the house with a flea in one ear!"

She kicked her legs in laughter, roaring gleefully: "It's shocking, of course, and no one would trust Nakanichi-san with their husbands, but the woman isn't known for telling lies either. If that's so, Shizuma, your cousin must really have been bewitched by that foreigner."

She froze suddenly and turned Shizuma's way, her long-lashed eyes wide.

"Oh, say, that foreigner wouldn't happen to be one of those horrid priestesses they have abroad?" she asked, practically salivating at the notion. Why had no one thought of it before? It was brilliant! But the person looming above her merely narrowed eyes at her brilliant idea.

"What you have there is the greatest pile of nonsense I have yet to hear," the woman with silver-gilt hair sneered. "And you add yet more to it. Priestesses and being bewitched! You and your friends should start finding better things to do than gossip, if all you produce for your talk is that sort of idiocy."

"Oho!" A titillated gasp, a smothered giggle. "Why are you so angry?"

Shizuma returned silently to her dressing. She bent over to find her shoes as the woman in bed continued to talk.

"Come, Shizuma, tell me already! You wouldn't be mad if I'd not been right! Am I right? Maybe I'm right!"

"*Left* by the train of thought, more like," Shizuma muttered to herself. She was beginning to feel pestered, trapped yet again. It always happened during her affairs, although not often this early.

*Oh*, she thought, *what am I doing here, with this silly young woman?* Was this really to be her lot, never able to like the women she loved in bed once she was out of it? No, no, better not to think of that. Not while she was still here. Better to focus on dressing, so she could finally leave.

"Nakanichi-san never thought your cousin could get mad either, so there must be something to it. Now there's you too. Shizuma, it is true!"

"Rubbish!" the harassed woman snapped irritably. "You know nothing."

"You wouldn't be so angry if it weren't true. I think I am right!"

Shizuma had finished putting on her footwear. She turned to glower at the young lady in bed.

"What you think is nothing too," she said, her face flinty. "No doubt your wife understands this, which is why she's wise enough to inflict on you those rules you hate. You should count yourself lucky you have her love yet, for most wise women do not generally spare time for those of less intellectual ilk. Unless it's for charity."

She paused to smile into the woman's flabbergasted face, and bent to pat her on the cheek.

"You see, you do not think very well, My Dear, so I would advise you to save your efforts for something at which you are better." A disdainful twitch of the mouth. "I suppose that disqualifies bedding as well, doesn't it?"

Four pillows and countless shrilled imprecations thrown at her later, Shizuma was finally out of the house and shaking her head. That one had been very silly indeed, with little to show beyond a lovely face, and far too giggly once she got talking. A dalliance that had been enjoyable for the short romp, she decided, but was not meant to be renewed. Unfortunately, the short romp had not been as short as Shizuma fancied, for a swift enquiry revealed that the House session was not so far off, and she had yet to change to proper senatorial attire. Making up her mind quickly, she decided to forgo a stop by her abode to remedy that. Today's meeting was not in the Curia, but rather outside the *pomerium*, which meant she still had a way to go; the location presented a solution to her problem, anyway.

As her last conquest lived in the Carinae, she was able to take the Via Sacra directly past the flower markets, her path taking her through the Forum. She ran into more than a few fellow senators on the way, all of them headed for the same destination, and she talked to some of them. Not all of these were pleasant talks, nor born of courtesy. Smile though they might for the benefit of those watching, politicians were nonetheless capable of whispering loathing to each other in public, speaking in guttural tones to avoid edifying eavesdropping ears. Merely another part of politics Shizuma found troublesome, for she was not much given to bestowing smiles on people she truly detested while exchanging words with them: unlike her cousin, who did it with a venomously serpentine delicacy.

"Highly unorthodox," said one more senator to meet Shizuma's path,

the two of them trudging the cobblestones stiffly together, for they were from opposite political camps. "To hold a meeting outside the *pomerium*. It's no mystery for whom the senior consul did it, of course. The shamelessness of it! Everyone knows why she pushed so strongly for the motion."

Shizuma hummed noncommittally, busying herself with leering at some pretty girls nearby. *Better to look at them than this old toad's face*, she thought, barely holding back her lip from curling at the presence by her side. Why spare the trouble of walking beside her merely to trade insults, anyway? Some people had far too much time on their hands, and no wise activities on which to spend it.

"Who'd have thought it? A Himemiya licking a Fujino's boots?" the man continued provocatively. "It's a disgrace! If she'd not pause at that much, your cousin would have us all doing the same."

Again a careless hum as Shizuma remained focused on the girls. One of them returned her smile and was promptly dragged away by her companions, the act complete with many a scared glance Shizuma's way and murmurs in the ear of the girl who had returned the gesture. The eschewed womaniser chuckled, knowing full well her reputation was preceding her yet again. This amusement, however, was cut short by one more rally from the man at her side. He had been trying to inflame her all this time, yet had succeeded only in being goaded by her conspicuous neglect. How dare she ignore him!

"Nothing to say then!" he spat, hating her more with each second she failed to retaliate. "Well, at least one of you has family loyalty, it appears. One wonders what she offered to draw you back. No doubt the promise of a lusty cun-"

Shizuma's head whipped his way like a lash.

"Who said it was her doing that drew me back?" she asked with a sneer, her face pale and haloed by her silvery hair. "I came for my own reasons and entertainment. In fact, I came for the games."

"And why," the other drawled, looking as superior as his inferior height could permit next to the unusually tall woman, "did you not

come for the games last year, then?"

She looked down at him through the length of her nose and produced a very nasty grin.

"Because you were not married last year, Old Lad," she whispered. "That little inducement was not yet present, and no games to entertain me!"

Whereupon she stalked away, pausing only to savour the image of the man's burning face. More desirous now to arrive at her destination, she paused at the corner of the Forum where the streets of the Argentarius and the Argiletum adjoined it. A boy was there, hovering in front of some honey- and tart-sellers. He was one of those enterprising little men who carried with them a jug of water and some towels while frequenting like areas, ready for those who might seek to wash after sampling the sticky goods of the nearby shops.

Shizuma called out impatiently, mood still soured by her last encounter.

"Here, Lad!" she said, with a jerk of her head. "Fetch me a gig and you'll find some coin in your hands. Quickly now!"

Off he went, and to good purpose: he soon returned with a small gig for hire. Shizuma tossed a coin in his hands for the service and ascended the conveyance, giving the driver the address of her cousin's villa in the Pincian. With many an obeisance to his haughty-looking customer, the man snapped the reins and set away, marvelling at the strangeness of having silver-gilt hair while you were still so young. Or maybe it was true what they said, that the rich had their own worries to turn their hair grey quick? He continued to ponder the matter to the time he deposited his client at the destination, an imposing villa on the Pincian Hill. She paid him and was quickly shown in by the house servants, led to the villa's loggia after enquiring for her relative.

She found that her cousin was not alone: the senior consul was sitting with her.

"Where is your toga?" Shizuma's cousin asked after they had kissed each other. "I trust you have not forgotten there is a meeting?"

"Would that I had, Shizuru-if this one would let me off for such excuse," Shizuma retorted, moving on to kiss their other companion, who grinned. "As for the toga, I thought to borrow one."

"Have your servants been slow to do the washing?" her cousin teased.

Shizuma flopped tiredly into an empty couch.

"I don't come from home," she explained.

The other women regarded her with amusement.

"Very well," said the lady of the villa, snapping her fingers. The crisp sound produced her steward, who appeared with two ready slaves. Shizuru spoke to the man.

"Hermias, please find my cousin a suitable toga." And turning to Shizuma: "You would not prefer a fresh tunic too?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Would you give Hermias the instruction, perhaps, as to what you prefer? He may bring out whatever is suitable and you may choose from it."

"I leave it to him," Shizuma said, with a glance of acknowledgment for the servant waiting. "You may choose which ones you think suit me, Man. Only have a care that it is something dark," she specified, aware that her colouring looked best against dark hues. "I expect you'll not displease."

Hermias nodded, his faun-like face shining; he had not actually needed to be told to choose such shades for her. Shizuru's steward had impeccable taste in many things, which was why it was a relief to him that his mistress had the same, as he had been quick to note the first time they met. While she had not been truly "dressed-up" on that occasion, what simple clothing she wore had spoken very strongly of a sense of style. For one thing, she had forsaken that

shapeless mass of fabric Himeans called a tunic- *tunic, nothing!* - and had worn instead the Attic one. How wonderful to find a Himean, he had thought then, who understood the attraction to a properly nipped and tucked tunic, one that outlined the form instead of hanging like a sack from it. And how much more wonderful, he thought now, to help dress Himeans so beautiful of form they made even a sack look like a decent bit of drapery. For the fashionable Greek was quite dazzled by his own good fortune in waiting upon such an assemblage as the current one, the sight of which would have also dazzled the rest of masculine Hime and sent the feminine half of it swooning: three of the most celebrated beauties of the city before him and one of them entrusting her attire to his taste. Ah, service could truly be a treat!

"Domina," he said with feeling, and invoked the name again for the other two ladies. His bow was most deferential to his mistress, as was proper. A snap of his fingers sent the slaves behind him forward, pouring wine into a fresh goblet for Shizuma. "I will be back presently."

"He'd better," said Shizuma when the Greek had exited. She accepted the cup held out by one of the slaves, her other hand tugging at the neck of her tunic. "This thing reeks of attar of roses. I do not want to smell it on me another moment."

A glance from her cousin. "The woman or the scent?"

"Both," she smiled equably, and waggled her feet at the slave who had served her wine; the woman began to unlace her sandals, the other running to fetch a towel and a water-basin.

"It escapes me," she declared, "why some women think it sensual to slather themselves and everything around them with the latest scent they've found in some shop. A dab is quite enough, and subtlety far more sensual than being overdone."

"It may be since they believe themselves to be in a passion," said Chikane, remembering her own relative's words on the subject. "And passion is generally overdone."

"I shall gladly concede that point, then," Shizuma smiled, batting her



lashes in a purportedly outrageous fashion; her affections for Chikane were entirely platonic, but she was not above attempting to flap the unflappable woman for fun. "Especially as it has been spoken by the woman of my dreams."

"You have many women in your dreams," was the cool response, drawing laughter from Shizuma and her cousin.

The slave washing her feet finished and Shizuma swung both legs onto the other end of her couch and waved a dismissal to her cousin's servants. They vanished obediently through the archway.

"While on the subject of women," she began, once superfluous ears were absent. "I have a fancy to be introduced to the wife of Noboru. Have either of you her acquaintance?"

Two pairs of eyes regarded her curiously, neither ignorant of the implication.

"Which Noboru?" Shizuru asked. "Of the redheaded branch or the blonde?"

"Redheaded."

"I know her," said the senior consul, while Shizuma's cousin looked away. She had always had difficulty keeping an interest in who was married to whom, and also had an enhanced tendency to wander in attention of late; not even Shizuma's misdemeanours could hold her for long these days, so given was she to her private melancholies.

Said the woman still facing Shizuma, "One wonders why you would have designs to cultivate such company."

The hazel eyes flashed gold: "Pray jump not to conclusions, Chikane."

"I say nothing to indicate such an act, yet feel assured of landing on the mark were it so."

Shizuma suddenly looked dark as she recalled the reason for this new idea.

"Small matter to me if you do," she retorted. "I met Noboru earlier, on my way to this place."

"Ah." Chikane was quick. "A response, then?"

The other woman clapped jokingly.

"You *do* touch the mark," she quipped, before sending her raven-haired friend a challenging look. "Would you deflect my aim, Archer?"

Chikane shook her head, her beautiful eyes closing. Shizuma regarded the woman silently, envying the superb discipline that managed to imbue serenity to every inch-serenity Shizuma despaired of knowing.

"To what purpose?" Hime's senior consul said. "I shall make the introduction if you require it, of course. It is not my concern."

Shizuma lifted her brows: "My gratitude is yours then."

"I hope I still have it after the event."

"Oh no." Shizuma grimaced, sat up on her couch. She stared down her friend, who was obviously trying not to laugh even from behind shut eyes. "No. *Please* . Tell me she's not a hag."

The blue eyes were revealed, as was the hilarity in them.

"She is not a hag," Chikane said tonelessly.

"Juno save me." Shizuma heaved a sigh, made a disgusted sound. "Then tell me at least that she passes for human, damn you."

They laughed.

"Rather, let us simply say she may not be your type," Chikane disclosed gently. "Your sense of the aesthetic, I feel, is not exactly at par with that which she displays. In any case, is this 'response' so necessary, Shizuma?"

"I should say so!" Shizuma growled deep in her throat, her husky

voice expressing the feeling to advantage. "Well, we'll see... though, preferably, we'll see not the hag. Our 'sense of the aesthetic' would be much oppressed."

"I did not say she was a hag."

"Little assurance, coming from you," the very fair woman replied sardonically, knowing Chikane Himemiya was nigh-incapable of saying the insult of even the most gruesome harpy. "Noboru is pretty long in the tooth. I recall he was married years before to another woman, and then remained a widow after her death before he married this new one. Has he a daughter from the previous spouse?"

"Yes."

Shizuma read the twinkle returned to her friend's eyes and smiled.

"The opposition this time?" she enquired.

"That it is unsporting to ransack a nursery."

Shizuma laughed again, and shook her head at Chikane.

"*That* young? Gods forbid I should ever be branded a cradle-snatcher," she winced, taking another sip of her wine. "This business grows more difficult, it seems. Why can all wives not be like Himeko-chan?"

"I am not certain I like that question."

"I am certain you do not, in fact."

Chikane only smiled, evincing no discomfort even at the implication of being cuckolded by a woman famous for embarrassing many among their circles. *Truly the unflappable*, thought the mildly amused philanderer, who had absolutely no seriousness in what she had just insinuated.

"Oh well, I suppose I shall have to think of something else then," she shrugged with a faint pout. "Or let it sit for now-there's always something delicious in that particular postponement." She sipped

from her cup and grimaced, which facial expression could not be due to the wine: her cousin's vintages were always first-rate. "Who knows? The child of a hag could turn out to be a nymph. Other freaks of nature have been produced."

"Or we might offer you a more immediate alternative than that gambling wait," Chikane proposed, wondering exactly what the man had said to irk her friend so deeply. "Noboru is among our opponents, so it should not prove entirely counter to interests. Have you a thought on it, Shizuru?"

But no sound came from that quarter, prompting her and Shizuma to turn that way. They found the third member of the company still stretched out on her couch, contemplating a grey-winged bird perched on one of the plant-boxes.

It was Shizuma who called the woman a second time.

"Shizuru."

There was still no acknowledgment. Shizuma and Chikane exchanged a look.

"Shizuru Fujino!"

Finally the red eyes faced them.

"Yes?" said their owner, surprised by the full-named address. "What?"

"How do you feel?" demanded her cousin.

"I feel fine," Shizuru answered, perplexed. "Why do you ask?"

The other woman frowned, her white brows rising.

"Because we've just had to call you thrice on account of you being too busy mooning over that fowl to take heed," she said, pointing to the bird that had flapped down to the loggia's mosaic floor. "Fond of poultry now, are we?"

Shizuru smiled and assumed an expression of charming self-

deprecation.

"Well," she said, genuinely bemused. "I did not notice I was 'moonning over' it."

Another frown from her cousin, who was seeing several worries take shape.

"Honestly," the woman sighed, with an upward roll of the eyes to the still-smiling Chikane. "She grows odder each day, and I despair of her mental state." And then, recalling her earlier thoughts on the subject, said with secret irony: "Pray the intellectual deterioration is not a familial tendency."

"Else she follow you down the path?"

"How very droll you are, Himemiya. I'm positively choked with laughter."

"Forgive me," Chikane giggled, receiving the full brunt of her friend's most sarcastic glare. "More wine, then, to clear the passages?"

"Or smother yours, at least." The white blonde held out her cup and permitted the other woman to refill it. Her eyes flicked to her cousin as the deed was accomplished, and she smirked. "See, *she* already travels on the path once more."

Shizuru faced her company laughingly, having merely turned to glance at the fowl one last time.

"I do *not*," she stated, shamming an offended tone. "Why am I being bombarded by your accusations today?"

"Apologies!" Shizuma retorted, looking vastly dubious. "But you seemed to wander again. Is it wrong to worry that my relative should be lost?"

"I was merely thinking," Shizuru countered. "Is that so unusual for me?"

"It depends," was the glib answer. "On what you were thinking."

*Nothing but the usual*, she replied in her mind, knowing it would little please her cousin did she say it. *Nothing but the usual northward thought*.

She had been thinking of only one thing each time they had called her, and that was something that happened in Argus, with a pigeon that looked like the one flapping about her loggia. She had been thinking of a black-haired girl bursting into her office and startling her with a chin that could be held no higher and the same height in the colour of her cheeks and, strangest of all, a dead bird high in her hand.

Shizuru remembered she had been able to say only one thing, under those circumstances.

"Ara."

*That was what I said*, she recalled. *And yet it had served to make her happier, oddly enough*. For the intruder-a very welcome one-had actually nodded at the utterance and laughed, striding until she stopped only a metre away from Shizuru's desk. And indicated the dead bird she was holding. The peculiarity of that scene! Shizuru remembered her bafflement so well that the event might have occurred only a day previous, or might be occurring at the very moment, as she thought of it.

"Shizuru," she could almost hear her lover breathing, harsh and animated. " *Shizuru!* Look!"

Up went the bird. Shizuru looked at it.

After some moments of no reaction save puzzlement from the elder woman, the Otomeian finally burst out impatiently: "You see?"

Aware that she was being deemed slow at that moment, Shizuru moved her attention with comical sluggishness from the fowl to the other's face.

"See... er... a pigeon?" she ventured, clearing her throat. "I see a pigeon, Natsuki?"

Natsuki nodded, yet another triumphant flush rippling over her

visage.

"Yes," she said, and very grandly. "You see. A pigeon ."

*I see no further than it*, thought Shizuru, tempted to ask the young woman if she had gone out of her mind. As she supposed there was a good reason for this interesting display and interrogation, however, she decided to humour Natsuki for the moment and attempt to play along-as indeed she did with everything Natsuki decided to do.

She leaned forward in her chair, mimicking the girl's excitement.

"Ah yes, quite so, my dear! Well, now, this pigeon is... is..."

And had to stop there. She had suddenly realised that she had no idea what the young woman expected her to say, nor what said young woman found in the dead bird that was so engaging. What was it about this pigeon? Or was that it, perhaps? Could it possibly be about *this* particular pigeon?

"It is certainly..." she started, hoping her guess would be correct. "It is quite a splendid pigeon, Natsuki!"

She said the words with as much enthusiasm as she could muster for the carcass in her lover's hand, which was not very much, but still notable in terms of sheer clueless endeavour. For all the effort it cost, however, all she gained was a flurry of merriment.

"Shizuru!" Natsuki squeaked, voice gone feeble in mirth. "A splendid pigeon? How silly!"

Dumbfounded silence from the other end. Shizuru stared, hardly able to believe what was happening. Her Natsuki, laughing at her expense? And without her intention?

"How can-how-" The sentence was broken off for another hiccupping giggle. "How is it splendid, Shizuru?"

Shizuru merely sat there uncomfortably, feeling quite the fool as her lover went into another peal of laughter. *Ye gods*, she told herself, just as she remembered to compress her parted lips. *Again she makes me feel an absolute idiot.*

She shot a leaden glare for the fowl she had just praised, slightly irritated that she should be so diminished in dignity before Natsuki, of all people. As she did not want to blame her girl-she never wanted to blame her girl-the blame had to be rested instead on that accursed, un-splendid pigeon, whatever was so remarkable about it.

"No, Shizuru, no," the young woman was speaking to her, cooing Shizuru's name in the way she did when no other ears were present. She waved the dead bird once more and explained the mystery: "*Shizuki*. She caught the pigeon."

"Ah!" the Himean exclaimed, finally grasping it. "Now I see. Shizuki? Really?"

The girl pinked again with happiness: "She did!"

"She caught it just now?"

"Mm-hm."

Shizuru smiled, amused by the young woman preening as though she had been the one to make the catch herself. Oh the silly girl, not to explain it to her earlier! But so rarely did she show her happiness, and so special was the opportunity to share in it, that Shizuru decided to ignore the earlier discomfort and leapt instead at the chance to participate in the glee.

She clapped both her hands on the desk, grinning widely enough to split her face.

"How marvellous of Shizuki!" she said indulgently. "She must be quite the huntress."

"It was flying," Natsuki informed, the pride of the accomplishment turning her majestic. "It was flying, Shizuru. She caught it, very swiftly and without trouble."

She waved the fowl again and thus shifted from The Royal back to being Shizuru's Girl: "Such a good hunter!"

Shizuru's smile softened. She lifted a hand to beckon her nearer and make her sit on the desk. The girl acquiesced in three of her



soundless bounds, bending afterwards to put lips to her general's brow. The contact was gentle and lingering, her lips silky-clean.

"And where is our good hunter now?" the older woman sighed, melting at the gesture.

"Eating. I gave her reward."

"My, my."

Another tender kiss, very soft and warm, followed by yet another.

Said the Otomeian, "Shizuki deserves it."

"That she does." Shizuru's eyes went to the bird in the girl's hand, quite forgiving its earlier fault because of what she now received. If one such casualty earned her this, she would be quite willing to purchase a hundred more pigeons to be massacred by Shizuki. "Such achievements must be... mm, rewarded."

"Mmh."

Another kiss came, her rapt face receiving it. *What a pleasure this woman is when she is glad*, thought Shizuru, relinquishing all thought of the work she had been doing. One of her hands was on the Otomeian's waist by the time something else occurred to her, something that begged pause from these caresses. She would have liked to ignore it, and yet, she felt it was something better answered as soon as possible. So she squeezed the other's knee.

"Natsuki?"

Only a hum: Natsuki was busy nuzzling into her hair.

"Where did you catch the pigeon?" Shizuru asked, mouth turning down when the nuzzling stopped.

"Not me," came the helpful correction. "Shizuki."

Shizuru blinked.

"Why yes, yes, of course it was Shizuki," she said with great

solicitude. "But where, Natsuki?"

"Near the markets," was the answer.

She repeated it: "Near the markets."

"Yes."

"So the pigeon probably belongs to someone near the markets."

"Hm."

"Oh dear." She loosed a rueful giggle. "Natsuki, do you really think it wise to let Shizuki, ah, take her prey from someone else's coop?"

A minor crisis appeared on the pretty face at this conflict, a frown skittering across it.

"But it flew out," Natsuki contended. "On the road, Shizuru."

Shizuru said nothing, merely looking up at her with faint regret.

"She caught it," the young woman persisted.

"I know, Darling, I know. But, well, the propriety of it still nags. It may have been unwise, you see."

A heartbroken look; it seized Shizuru's chest immediately.

"Now, *meum mel*, " the Himean coaxed, actually wincing. She loved her so much that to have to dampen even the simplest of her joys was painful, and felt like cutting away several fingers. "Please understand, *mea vita*. "

"But Shizuru," the girl gasped, still torturing her with that face; Shizuru found it necessary to look away. "It was-it was-it was a very fine catch!"

"Indeed, but Darling..."

"It was!"

Shizuru wavered, then made the mistake of looking up.

"Of course," she said weakly, vanquished. "It must have been."

But the girl was sulky already, and pouted away.

"It was a fine catch," she reiterated.

Shizuru agreed: "It was a fine catch."

"And I paid for the bird after," came the sullen mutter, to Shizuru's astonishment.

"Well, why did you not say so earlier?" the Himean cried passionately, not even bothering to conceal relief. The younger woman merely frowned, however, and even clicked her tongue in disappointment.

"Shi-zu-ru!" she said, the call communicating grave reproach. " *Not* important."

She shook the limp fowl again, showing it to the older woman with the look of a frustrated schoolmaster, and then said angrily as would such schoolmaster to the class idiot: "Shizuki caught the pigeon!"

Shizuru strove to restrain her cackle to a snigger as she recalled that, remembering quite well how Natsuki's line had reduced her to a quivering mass of jelly. As it was threatening to do now, over a month after it had happened. Oh, her Natsuki! There was a young woman capable of destroying her in more ways than one.

"Are you going to say too that you did not notice you were chuckling at the road?"

She surfaced from her thoughts with surprise, hooked out of them by the low remark.

"What?" she asked, turning to one side and finding Chikane's beautiful face peering shrewdly at her from the side. "No! Was I really?"

The other woman's eyes twinkled.

"Passably delivered. I believe it," she said in evaluation of Shizuru's

reply.

"As well you should! It is true that I did not notice."

"It is well I told you, then, before Shizuma did," Chikane said, still leaning slightly towards her; they were walking the path now to the venue of the Senate meeting, their other companion occupied by a conversation with a couple of other senators they had met on the way. "She might accuse you yet again of turning into a madwoman once she saw you regarding the cobbles with such overweening affection."

Shizuru laughed.

"And I without a leg upon which to stand, I suppose," she said, thinking on her friend's description of her latest act. She made a face, looked nonetheless tickled. "I must have looked a well-satisfied road surveyor just now. Shall we say 'well done' to the *censors*?"

"If you intend to be sarcastic, yes: the current pair of censors is shockingly dilatory, you know." Chikane tucked away a lock of black hair, the rest of her mane tamed by a ribbon. It was tied close to the scalp and tightly- *as Natsuki does it too*, thought Shizuru-because Chikane's hair was also very straight and fine. "I understand how the mind might wander, however. It is said that spring is the time of memories."

Shizuru smiled back. "Now why would they say that?"

"Because of the wind, I think," the senior consul answered solemnly. "Because of the smell, the aroma of new flowers in the air. Does not a scent like this invoke a woman better than any portrait?" She sighed sentimentally. "There are things borne on such winds that stir the heart more than the mind."

"My god, Chikane."

"What is it?"

Shizuru still looked stunned, although there was a faint smile tugging at her mouth. She explained: "I understand what you said better than I might have before, yet... whenever you said things like this

after you found your wife, I used to laugh at you in secret."

"Oh, that," Chikane nodded calmly. "Yes, I know."

Her friend looked her way: "Are you laughing at me now?"

"Only in secret."

Shizuru grimaced.

"Does love make all of us such fools of the comedy?" she asked rhetorically. Chikane's answer was suitably rhetoric as well: a proverb.

"To love and be wise," quoted the older woman. "Is scarce granted even to a god."

"Full of popular sayings these days."

"And laughter too, but in secret."

An elbow dug Hime's senior consul in the ribs, the blow softened by the folds of her toga.

"Yet more indication of the onset of lunacy," Chikane chuckled, rubbing her side where the friendly nudge had hit. "Gratuitous violence. Let us pray you do not turn out in large company with this trait later, Shizuru, for general safety."

"One doubts the prayers needed," was her companion's mischievous answer, right before she went to greet a crowd of admirers. "Whatever the violence later, I have a strong feeling it shall be well-incurred!"

She spoke in jest at the time, and little knew how applicable her statement would become to her, especially. In going to the meeting Chikane had arranged for her sake-and thus to be held outside the *pomerium*-Shizuru's only expectation was to be quizzed and opposed as she presented her case, which was by then the talk of every political mouth in Hime. Everyone had heard of the incredible motion put forward by the woman known to be her ally, which was that Shizuru Fujino should be granted praetor-elect status while

shifting the title and responsibilities of *urban praetor-elect*-the position into which she had been truly voted-to another. Everyone had heard, too, of her break with her allegedly infatuated cousin, who had been the one to put up what she claimed was an unauthorised candidature in order to have her returning to Hime. That the aforementioned cousin should have recently tucked tail and scampered off to one or other of the Greek cities only added to the situation's shocking lustre. This matter had all the elements of a good play, from comedy to drama, from conspiracy to betrayal. A perfect amalgam and, to Himeans, irresistible! Thus, no matter what everyone had already heard, everyone wanted to hear more.

The queries abounded, the most common being: why would anyone want to exchange the lofty seat of urban praetor for another that was lower? And why had the betraying cousin sailed off without even offering defence against the accusations, as would have been-at least in public eyes-so much better? For to leave the arena so furtively was as good as an admission of guilt, and that strengthened Shizuru Fujino's case, to the consternation of her foes. It was also the equivalent of attending a much-anticipated boxing match and being cheated of enjoyment by one participant's unexpected surrender, to the consternation of the Forum-watchers. All of which meant that Tomoe Marguerite was not thanked by either people or politicians at the moment, one of whom she had robbed of a good show, and the other of a good argument. Both parties wondered, and both parties screeched loudly: *What a rotten thing to do!*

The answer to Tomoe's action was actually quite simple, albeit private. Tomoe Marguerite left because she had no other option and because the love she also hated-past family, present foe-had dictated her choices. It was there in the curt, concise letter Shizuru Fujino had sent to her.

*Quit Hime, the terse dispatch read. Absent yourself else you see me institute legal proceedings against you for your presumptions. Do not think me reluctant, for merciful hesitation is not given to the abominable. You have made of me, one who thought to call you family, a victim of your selfishness. You sent me letters explaining your reasons, which I have received and read. Let this be my reply then. I ask not for your assistance in anything, for what you have*

*thought to call assistance has been more of an impediment. I ask not for your sentiments, which you label in letters as love, yet present as something baser in fact. I ask not even for your apologies, so do not tender them. You lost the privilege of having me take heed when you lied in my name and betrayed my trust, and all for yourself, devoid consideration of my plight. I ask you now for only one thing, and that is to leave. This warning you have because you were once a member of the family. I consider you not so any longer.*

Disowned by her beloved and spurned by her clan, disgraced before both friends and peers, Tomoe Marguerite saw the choice clear. She quit the land of her birth and boarded a ship headed for Greece. If her cousin-or, rather, *former cousin* -thought Tomoe did so with a broken heart, she was quite mistaken: for the break between them had fissured not Tomoe's heart but something else, something that released a creature that had actually laughed hysterically at Shizuru's dismissive message before subsiding into an awful muttering that had sent shivers through the household servants. It was this creature that got on the ship and sailed off without a single backward glance at Fuuka, giggling, smiling, eyes rolling in a particularly malevolent fashion.

Had Shizuru Fujino known what it was her letter had birthed and how it would develop, she would have slain it at that very second. But at the time she received the news of Tomoe Marguerite's departure, she merely nodded and ticked it off her list of things to be cleaned up. Hence, in that moment, she did not spare the woman another thought, as opposed to those who still talked of the woman and what the woman had done. The question of Tomoe was no longer salient to Shizuru's scene.

The more salient question for everybody, especially that day Shizuru walked with her cousin and friend to the Ogasawara basilica, was actually the other: why did Shizuru Fujino desire to forsake her prestigious position and take on a downgraded version of it? Among the less politically-interested, all that was thought was the eccentricity of the old patrician nobles. Yet many others understood it could not sufficiently explain this issue. Of course Shizuru Fujino was from among the oldest of the patrician families, and the noblest;

of course she had to be among the most eccentric of them; nonetheless, she was also a very cunning woman known to have more than her fair share of political deviousness, which meant whatever she did generally had a not-so-eccentric reason.

So the guesses had flown about from the beginning. Some of them were informed, some merely intelligent, and some outright shots in the dark. Those who were closer to the subject and had better sources naturally touched more closely. As time passed too and more information came to circulate, there were more of these accurate guessers.

The first person to express his explanation of Shizuru Fujino's case publicly had been her fellow senator, Sergay Wang, during the explosive House meeting sparked by Urumi Nemura Himemiya-Kanzaki. His allegation then had been that the proposition was due to Shizuru's desire to resume the command in the Northern territories, and thus extend her term of generalship over that mission's army. All for furthering ambitions, of course, which sounded very logical to those listening. The letters on her behalf, which yet continued to pour in from those territories, also supported the thesis. As such, this reason was generally accepted by the upper and more intelligent echelons as the much-talked about motive.

Even so, this acceptance was something faintly abstruse. While many grasped the ambitious possibilities of having an army, they did not grasp the concrete objectives of it. Their understanding of Shizuru Fujino's aims was something hypothetical in the main, or as a practical measure viewed through the blurring lens of a general theory. That this was so became clear when the first whispers of heavy knight participation in Shizuru's cause appeared, and with them a concrete objective: Shizuru Fujino was contemplating invasion-a gasp for this-of the Mentulaeen Empire bordering the north provinces.

The first reaction to the word on the street was disbelief, followed by a ghastly recognition that the word was likely. As it imbued substance to the understanding of Shizuru's peers, the effect was opposite from that among the knights, who quite naturally approved of it and did so for at least one of the same reasons the senators



objected. The Mentulaean Empire was rich! If Shizuru Fujino were to tame it, there would be significant gains to the purses of those involved, which meant it would be easy for her to get knightly support and funding. Unfortunately, it also meant she would profit from it, not merely in gold but in glory-for not even her foes doubted that Shizuru Fujino at the head of an army could tame anything (not that they would say that aloud).

It was fair to predict that her Forum popularity and her share of *dignitas*, already great things, would rise astronomically if her plan went unhindered. No human being enjoys seeing another profit so much, however: and so it was a foregone conclusion that those who were not her enemies already became so upon learning of her intent. As the senior consul put it to Shizuru in one of their private asides before the start of that meeting, "Suddenly everyone's favourite colour is green; I notice all wear a shade of it."

Hence that day's Senate session was ripe for outbreak, a seething pot of elements ready to leap into flame. Heavily attended by both senators and populace, the meeting was facilitated by the venue's proprietors, who had spent the past week creating barricades and fences around the area. These were augmented by the many *lictors* the senior consul had stationed in strategic places. It was to avoid certain enterprising pedestrians from straying from the main path and the basilica-in search of something to pilfer from the private villa and grounds that adjoined said meeting-place. It was to be a public meeting, and this meant those curious enough to listen could do so from outside the edifice.

Chikane was in the chair, May being a month where it was the senior consul's turn to preside and hold the *fascēs*. She disposed of the preliminary rituals swiftly. Once the omens had been consulted, the prayers and sacrifice finished, the House settled down to discuss the more banal matters, eager to get to today's main event. Everyone knew what was coming, or so was the belief. Yet what everyone was about to see was a little more than that for which everyone had bargained.

"Reverend Founders of Hime, August Members of this House," said the senior consul, once the lesser matters had been concluded. Her voice was gentle, although all could hear it: the Ogasawara basilica

had excellent acoustics. "We have settled all issues concerning us save one, and I invite you now to direct your attentions to it. This is the issue that occupies us most strongly today, that of Shizuru Fujino's position and how to deal with it."

There was a buzz, the sound of a distant swarm approaching. The senior consul continued, and the swarm paused to listen.

"That we hold a meeting outside the *pomerium* and in this basilica is due to that issue," she said. "Thus far we have heard endless debates on the subject, yet have reached no agreement. There are those who feel this is because we have yet to hear the voice of the most important person in this case, who has been prevented from touching our ears by several unfortunate circumstances-"

"Of their own doing!" Sergay Wang whispered savagely to his seatmate, who was as usual his Traditionalist fellow, Armitage. "Himemiya has gall to even call it unfortunate, when it's been more unfortunate for us than them."

Haruka Armitage only grunted, busy saving her breath for her rival. How long it had been since last they laid eyes on each other! She looked fixedly at the woman, who was sitting right of the tiers and was flanked by a very rare attendee-although her family did own the venue, so it was to be expected-Sachiko Ogasawara, and on the other side by Mai Tokiha, who herself sat behind the Princes. A cluster of august and stellar personages, yet Haruka Armitage's purple eyes saw only that hated being, whom many ventured was looking rather paler of late and somewhat thin.

"That this meeting is held in here is to remedy that deficiency," the senior consul was saying. "We cannot be blamed for having postponed any true decisions on the matter, I believe, precisely because we have yet to glean all information pertinent to it. The House cannot be expected to carry a division in a vacuum."

Chikane ran her blue eyes over the senators, noting the tension on all faces. Or rather, almost all faces-for she could see her silver-haired friend sitting amidst the *pedarii*, the senatorial backbenchers, and already making eyes at someone. The awful flirt!

She held back a grin at what she had just seen. When she spoke again, her voice was still impressively formal.

"We would be informed, Fellow Senators, and informed by the best person to do it. I wish all to profit from this event, else it be wasted, so I would request that any objections or questions be held until this person has concluded her speech. We are not fell beasts to hamper our own understanding so unthinkingly, nor fell persons to hamper the understanding of others so meanly. Let us conduct ourselves with propriety and grace, for this is a meeting being recorded verbatim. I have instructed the scribes to take everything down to the last utterance, and have also brought three more scribes than normal to ensure the integrity of the records."

She swept a hand towards the scribes in their corner.

"Furthermore, please remember that the People observe from outside the doors, which are open because I believe that this should be a public meeting, being a subject that touches on the status of an elected official," she reminded them, with a flourishing bow to the doors that was applauded by those members of the populace standing there. "Let us show them an example of the demeanour to be expected and emulated from their betters, of the elegance that distinguishes the venerable class that governs them. Let us not disappoint such elevated expectations, Fellow Senators, and rather enrich their experience of it. Now that this has all been cleared, let us move on. I invite the senator Shizuru Fujino to speak and further improve our reason as to the motion she seeks... if she is ready."

*Oh Chikane, thought Shizuru, smiling at her friend's last-second quip. You know I am ready. I have been ready for this the day I arrived, bearing my army behind me. I have been ready for so long it feels I have been waiting for a decade. "If she is ready" indeed!*

She made to rise, a chaplet of grass runners conspicuous upon her golden hair. The *corona graminea*, the greatest of all awards in the military. She had chosen to wear it because to do so augmented her distinction-Shizuru was a creature who loved distinction-it being a thing no one else in the present Senate had ever won, and for some, never even seen. Furthermore, it gave her the status and priority privileges of a *consular*, which was only one of its special

entitlements. Most eyes were upon that plain little circlet of green on her head as she stood. A rustling sigh went through the people at the doors who could see, the heads of those farther away craning as they tried to catch a glimpse.

This was when the event happened that led to the conflagration, a catalyst so similar to one previous that it seemed more joke at the time, or ghastly parody.

"I veto Shizuru Fujino's right to a speech!" blared one of the tribunes of the plebs, suddenly leaping to his feet. "I veto her right to address this hallowed gathering! I veto the senior consul's yielding to her the floor!"

Angry mutters exploded. The vetoed woman was silent but stayed up, one of her eyebrows slowly climbing at this twist. The bemused expression on her face was similar to that on most of the faces in the meeting, with the exception of the smug faces of some Traditionalist senators, and the amused expressions on a few others.

"Oh, sit down and shut up!" said the voice of the Plebeian Tribune's president, Urumi Himemiya-Kanzaki Nemura. She was one of those who looked amused, in stark contrast to the rage in most of her fellow tribunes' faces: most of them looked ready to throttle the man standing to the conservative end of the tribunician bench. "This sort of surprise is only enjoyable once, you know, when it's still original. Column right out of my book!"

The man who had leapt up ignored her and bounced forward, his toga flapping about him.

"This is a Senate meeting! This is a sacred gathering that is supposed to be held to discuss matters for the benefit of the People and Hime!" he roared, sweeping his way to the middle of the floor. "Yet here we are, in atypical circumstances, just for the sake of *one* woman who would seek to be treated atypically! I, Katsu Hitagi, am ashamed!"

He turned to the doors, bowing frenziedly to the people clustered there.

"I am ashamed that you should see this, People of Hime! And as for you, My Fellow Senators, how can we call this a sacred gathering? It's been profaned by such selfishness! To let the woman who is the root of it speak is to profane it even further!"

There was now a wave of troubled speech going through the tiers, as well as a more discordant sound from the crowd outside the building. Katsu Hitagi listened to it with approval and glanced at his benefactors, the Traditionalists who had paid him for this. They were beaming at him, apparently in satisfaction, although he did notice that one looked disappointed when he turned to the tiers at the right. Katsu Hitagi did the same and saw what it was that took the edge off that one's pleasure: it had been planned that he would raise his voice only when Shizuru Fujino had risen, in order to leave her standing awkwardly once he interrupted. Instead of looking ill at ease, however, the woman had shifted her weight to one leg and now stood smirking at him, her chaplet of grass still perfectly in place, her poise every inch as dignified as her name. Her eyes too were smiling, seeming to view him with as much remote amusement as would a goddess an ant trying to move one of her feet.

*What a terrible woman*, he thought, aversion rising in time with the first warning prickles. He had never met her, and only knew her from remote observation before, in the Forum. Oh, she was already something to see then! But that did not compare to what he saw now. What sort of creature could stand there looking as though she were the victor when it was obvious she was the one losing? What assailed person could stand there so coolly, like a *triumphator* walking over the spoils of the already vanquished?

Truly a patrician through and through, he thought, and one who had never had to fight over qualms of ancestors or the lack of them. She was so self-assured, so proudly beautiful. So easy to hate!

He heaved a breath, ready for the next sally, but the voice of the senior consul got there before him.

"There are times, Fellow Members of the House," she declared calmly still, but at her most freezing, "when I am tempted to believe all my words fall on deaf ears! It seems I have given my earlier injunctions in vain. Katsu Hitagi-san, we understand very well why

you do this-do we not all see your masters grinning?-yet I for one question the wisdom of your act as well as its respectability. This meeting was arranged chiefly for the purpose of giving Shizuru Fujino a hearing, and every senator of this House was aware of it. By agreeing to this arrangement as well as attending, they have also given their tacit permission to said hearing. You are the one maligning the meeting, and I would have you control your antics."

"You would have a tribune of the plebs obstructed from rightfully exercising his duty!" Katsu howled, at which point the senior consul's cousin threw up her hands behind him.

"Nearly a direct quote!" Urumi was laughing. "Go on, threaten her with arrest, say it!"

"Oh, be quiet, you defector, you charlatan!" Katsu spat angrily, truly annoyed by his college's president. "I should have you thrown from the *Tarpeian Rock* for your profanity of the Plebeian Tribune! See how they malign our sacred gatherings and groups, Fellow Senators, People of Hime! A patrician president of a plebeian college and two other patricians pulling the Senate at their will and whims! See how they would have our Republic spiralling beyond control!"

"I see nothing spiralling save your speech, Hitagi-san," said the senior consul, sounding if not looking angry. Her expression spoke less of anger than it did disgust, of which feeling her eyes spoke volumes. "Recall the rules of conduct, if you please!"

But Katsu was speaking in full-throated yells, and the clamour was ever-rising all around them. He pointed to Chikane, then to Shizuru, always shouting.

"There speaks our senior consul, whose forelock is tugged by her friend! And standing there is the friend herself, Fellow Senators! Smiling as though she cared not a whit for what is happening-and why not? She cares not a whit for us, for our institutions, for Hime! All she cares about is herself!"

He trumpeted his next words, as fierce and indignant as one injured on the deepest level.

"I have proof of it, for I present my veto to you with compelling evidence that she does not deserve to be heard. Hear my reason and the evidence first, Fellow Senators! Hear one who esteems our ways, instead of one who would trample upon them!"

Off went Urumi into another bout of laughter, while Chikane shook her head wearily and exchanged a look with her best friend. As Kanzaki Princeps Senatus got to his feet, trying to call for order, Shizuru asked Chikane the question silently. Heaving a heroic sigh, the senior consul made an imperceptible flicker of her eyes in reply.

Shizuru opened her mouth and spoke.

"The accused professes curiosity!" she called, using the vocal trick taught to her by an actor-friend: it permitted her to project her voice enough to be heard without having to shrill it to a higher pitch. "What is this new complaint, Katsu Hitagi-san? Shall you produce, or cover with more exclamations of stunning ambiguity?"

*So long!* thought Haruka Armitage, unable to tear her shining eyes from the woman she loathed. It had been so long since any of them had heard that voice, the curiously lilting, enormously aristocratic speech that distinguished Shizuru Fujino from so many. It was almost a shock to hear it again and feel the odd menace it could inspire when it wanted: a bristling unease at the confidently laughing undertone it sometimes held underneath. It seemed most others were thinking the same, for there was a pause immediately after her challenge, as though they were still marvelling at the thought that its speaker really was returned to them.

Even Katsu Hitagi quieted, though only for a second.

"You speak of ambiguity," he eventually said, rearing up again. "You, of all people! Oh the disgrace! Oh the irony!"

"Oh the drama!" groaned Shizuru's cousin from the back, setting off a low snigger amongst the *pedarii*.

"That Shizuru Fujino should complain of ambiguity is a joke!" Katsu yelled, not having heard this interruption; his speech was getting in stride, and he had little time for asides. "For let me tell you, Fellow

Senators, that this woman has been working on her own ambiguities just recently. Truly have I saved you by preventing you from being forced to sully your ears by listening to her lies!"

"Should we vote the arrogant little peacock the title of Saviour of the Republic?" quipped a senator towards the middle tiers, herself opposed to Shizuru Fujino's proposition yet extremely annoyed by the man currently blocking it.

"Hush yourself and listen, you wrinkly old relic!" hissed a senator near her.

Katsu was still talking, and the object of his recriminations still smirked as she listened to him.

"This woman demands far too much for herself!" he cried, tapping into the resentment many held against the enemy. "She demands to be treated specially, above all of us! See the things she tries to wrangle out of our hands! First, this unusual Senate meeting! Then that arrogant measure she has put to us by her agent, that other destroyer of our customs, that plebeian Nemura who is really a patrician Himemiya-Kanzaki! What will she ask next, we have to wonder? What else will her outrageous and unjustified sense of entitlement try to take?"

It was going down well, yes, if those increasing nods were any indication. Good, good! Just a little more, Katsu thought jubilantly, and they would be willing to swallow everything he had to offer them.

"Now, the answers to those questions we already know, don't we?" he said offhandedly. "We know what Shizuru Fujino wants! We know she just wants to get her hands on one of Hime's armies again, to use and order at her whim. We know she just wants to use it for her ambitions, as said by many others before me. What we don't know is if she'll be using it for more unnecessary war-making with a now-peaceable nation, one that even sent us an embassy recently to sue for peace, or maybe-who knows, just maybe!-she could be intending to use that army for something like coercing back into her bed that barbarian she's been diddling-"



Even as a few chuckles rang out at this, Shizuru's smirk disappeared, as did the smiles from some other lips. The speech had suddenly taken a very dangerous turn.

"That would be ridiculous, but it's not so far off a possibility with this woman, isn't it? I don't think anyone would be willing to scamper under the sheets with someone this wicked-this corruptly entitled!- unless it took the threat of an army, *even if* that person was just an ignorant barbarian without a jot of civilised thinking," Katsu Hitagi grinned, playing harder to those chuckles he had just elicited. He was ignorant of the peril he was entering and enjoying himself mightily, along with a few others whose hate of Shizuru outweighed their sense of civility. This tack was not even really unforeseen, as the titbit about Shizuru Fujino taking up so publicly with a foreigner had been, as her cousin feared, the first true crack Shizuru's opponents had ever found in the woman. So Katsu Hitagi the tame tribune of the conservatives would use that crack-let it be noted that he was the first to do it in public!-and would work in the knife until it reached skin.

"Yes, this famous patrician, this supposed scion who should be upholding all our Himean virtues, has been bumping headboards with a savage. We've all heard about it! And if that savage had any wits, she'd have run off at first meeting!" he continued. "But we all know Shizuru Fujino's ways, don't we? She wants to have everything! If she wouldn't respect us, Fellow Senators... if she'd wrangle all the things I mentioned earlier from us, oh Senators of Hime... how could a low savage possibly escape her taint?"

As Katsu spoke, the woman he was impugning listened to him, her fabled red eyes blinking gently. She was wondering why her hearing seemed to come and go. Katsu Hitagi's words, clear enough to the rest of the House, sounded strange in her ears: sometimes close and sometimes distant, sometimes trailing off with contempt. Yet she could see him gesticulating, his mouth opening wide, and knew he had never stopped talking.

"-let Shizuru Fujino paddle her fingers inside her anyway-"

Her head hurt. There was a searing pain, very white and bright, behind her eyes. The *corona* on her head felt heavy suddenly, and

she itched to remove it. She could hear some people sniggering, along with Katsu Hitagi. What was it he was saying of Natsuki? And what was the matter with her heart, which was pounding?

*Why, what is this*, she wondered while staring blindly forward, hardly able to see from the light behind her eyes. The man posturing below her was saying such odd things. About Natsuki, her Natsuki. She had expected it to come up sooner or later, but not like this. He was saying such things! How could anyone say such things of her Natsuki, she thought dully. What did he-what did all of them, those idle rumour-mongers on the street, that fool of a woman who had visited her recently, this idiotic man in the pay of the Traditionalists-what did they know of her for them to say it?

How could they say anything cruel of someone like that, her mind asked sorrowfully. Did they know, for instance, how quick Natsuki was to stroke her head whenever it hurt, how gently the girl held it to her chest to take away the worries? Did they know that Natsuki hummed songs to her when they were abed late, as one would to nudge a drained child into sleep? What did they know of the girl who did that, the one who had once passed an entire evening sitting up on a couch because Shizuru had fallen asleep on her lap, and she had been loath to move for comfort else it mean the sacrifice of Shizuru's slumber? What did they know of these many kindnesses, really?

*Natsuki*, she groaned to herself, so pained by the insults she felt very nearly close to tears. *Natsuki! My sweet girl, whom I have never heard speak unjustly of anyone, nor seen act meanly even to those who deserve it. They say this of one of the noblest people I know. My Natsuki!*

And the man was still talking. What was he saying this time? She had to listen. It was hard, what with the pounding in her ears. Ah, there. He was still going on about it. About Natsuki, her beautiful and innocent girl, calling her a barbarian, calling her a savage...

"-but aside from being seduced by a foreign whore, there is more proof of her moral degeneracy!" Katsu exclaimed, ignorant of the monster's heads rising near him. "I've come upon information that further gives light to her character, and to the most important reason

we should not have to entertain the whims of someone like her. Voracity, fellow senators! Greediness! Rapacious traits that do not belong on a true Himean of truly noble family!"

"We were talking about what we knew of her," he went on. "We've known for a while that Shizuru Fujino is hungry for blood-which depraved hunger is probably the reason she succeeds so often in war-but what we've not known is that she's also hungry for money! And to have that hunger when you're already known to be so wealthy, to be so mean with coin that you actually cheat the Treasury of booty is nothing less than a disgrace."

He was conscious of the scepticism that had risen in his audience at this allegation. Focusing on fighting it, he lost sight of what would have been a healthy deterrence for him: Shizuru Fujino's murderous face, her lips pulled back over her teeth in a strangely vicious grin. Shizuru's right-hand neighbour, Sachiko Ogasawara, and the senior consul were first to notice it: the former was already trying to quietly talk Shizuru into sitting again when Katsu dealt out the rest of his accusations.

"It's unbelievable, or so I thought too!" he told the House, whose favour was beginning to turn away from him, to the dismay of his masters. Yet this was something many of them had expected, Katsu included. Katsu understood only part of the reason it did so, which was that Shizuru Fujino had never been associated with corrupt practices, especially because she was so well-known to be wealthy that corrupt practices seemed unnecessary. That he failed to understand the rest of it was because Katsu Hitagi was of the breed known as the *New Men*. Devoid of the august lineage possessed by those such as Shizuru, Katsu Hitagi's kind possessed in its place a great deal of ambition married to antipathy of those blessed with what he lacked-and, coming naturally with the antipathy to such beings, the unwillingness to be sympathetic to them.

This lack of sympathy would prove his undoing.

"I thought it was unbelievable because we all know she's so rich! But there are people among us who don't know satisfaction with their lot, and if there's ever been one, it would be this woman! Don't we all see how ravenous her ambitions are? How her selfish hunger never

seems to stop? Why should it stop at that, and not extend to a selfish hunger for hoarding? Why shouldn't it translate to a stinginess with her own money that would see her spending public moneys in the interests of her selfish betterment? After all, why spend your own money when you can spend that of the state? This sort of devious business sense is what we should expect of those rich not only from inheritance, but from being *in trade* !"

*That was another ambiguous thing to say*, thought the now-livid senior consul, even if she knew it did find its mark among many ears: precisely because it was ambiguous. As a senator had limited commercial activities available to him according to the laws, he was generally expected to be relatively poor compared to the mercantile knights of the upper classes. To participate in trade was not only unlawful but detestable amongst the senators, and-if the one doing it happened to be successful-was also envy-inducing.

In trade! It was a damning assertion, since nothing was specified and everything insinuated. No matter that most of the senators were themselves 'in trade', although most of these were in *permissible* trades for a senator, as provided by law; to say "he is in trade" was nonetheless an implication... and when the person being implicated was one as enviable, as rich, as famously good with numbers as Shizuru Fujino, many would be willing to convince themselves it insinuated the most deplorable things. *As though all of them were not aware how irreproachable are her sources of money!* Self-deception was always most powerful when there was a burning will to do it.

There was a curious thing happening in the House. While it was true that several of the hungrier wolves were leaning heavily towards Katsu Hitagi's speech, there also seemed to be a growing dissatisfaction amongst the tiers: specifically, amongst the members of the older and noble families. Even those known not to be Fujino partisans seemed to be growling, and the man on the floor could sense it, but not understand. He redoubled his efforts, still shouting.

"I give you proof of her corruption, Fellow Senators! Think of what I have said after this, and remember her ambition and arrogance, if you still do not believe me! Shizuru Fujino did the booty tally for her latest victories even before the officials of the Treasury arrived in

Argus," he cried, well into his speech and revelling in the undivided attention given him. "And after doing those booty tallies, she chose to distribute the wealth immediately in a shady exercise! What an opportunity that was! I shall exhibit to you later the figures for that booty. Mark my words: you will see the booty from the Northern countries much smaller than it ought to be. This woman talked just now of ambiguity when she actually practised it after her campaign, doctoring the booty accounts without the fair eyes of the Treasury to see how she turned them into ambiguous estimates that fattened her gluttonous purse. This was what allowed her to give-ask her soldiers about this-a bonus to the legionaries at the expense of the State, using public moneys to bribe into her loyalty the public army! She gave away at our expense a bonus to be credited to her unfairly, a carrot she garnished from-

" *TACE!* "

The roar, uttered at the volume of a thunderclap, made everyone jump in his seat. And there, for the rest of that incredible meeting, would everyone stay.

" *TACE, INTERVENTOR, ILLICITATOR, IDIOTA!* " said the woman none had thought capable of yelling, and especially not at such a pitch. She was still standing where she had been all this time, her face white save for two red spots burning on her cheeks, and the crown of grass on her head still in place. The man she had just addressed froze on the floor of precious white marble, seeming suddenly to wish he could sink right through it. The shock going through him, as through everyone else in and out of the building! Shizuru Fujino in a rage, and actually showing it?

"You will shut up, you dismal, insignificant maggot," the woman said, her voice lowering swiftly as it found itself in silence. Everyone present was too robbed of breath to even gasp, including those sitting beside her. Not that the angry woman noticed any of them: Shizuru's temper was too far gone for her to care. Neither a glimpse of her cousin's stupefied expression nor a look at the slack-jawed face of the Princeps would have mattered-nothing beyond her wrath, the red-hot fury none of these people had ever seen.

"What pathetic recourse is this?" she was asking, her voice so

hissing it was nearly a whisper. "To try to defame me with such outright lies, such pitiful fictions that not even your mother-whom I pity for having had to bear such as you!-would believe? Did you think this would actually be credited by anyone who can manage the most elementary thinking? Did you cherish any hope of it? Aaah! *Vehementer errabas, novus homo; vehementer errabas.* One wonders what made you think you could get away with it. What was it that persuaded you to try? Were you even thinking?"

Here she actually paused to contemplate him, looking even more disgusted than her best friend had earlier. Everyone else, however, both inside and outside the basilica, contemplated the surprise that was she. Only a handful of them were old enough to have been in Senate during the time of her grandfather, and could thus draw the atavism: for that other Fujino had put on the same grand facade of imperturbability only to display later a spewing fumarole of a temper too. So the Fujino fury had skipped a generation! Even for those who thought this, however-even for them this eruption was something else! Who could have known it, they wondered. Who would ever have thought that the silver tongue on this latest product of the family was actually a blade edged with steel?

Down on the floor, the object of her acrid glare twitched, his face suffering a minor contraction. Alone of all the people present he was not thinking anything, for his wits had left from the moment he heard that first thunderous "Tace" and seen the face of the woman saying it. All he could do was stare into those red holes leading into the abyss, too fascinated and afraid to escape. His sides felt wet: sweat was rolling down from his armpits. The man himself did not realise it.

The silence seemed to go on for so long. No one in or out of the basilica had the nerve to break it. That was until Katsu Hitagi opened his mouth reflexively for air, suddenly finding he had a burning dearth of it. But the woman staring at him took that as an indication that he intended to speak, and snapped out yet another scathing directive.

" *Shut up*, damn you, else I cauterise that festering sore of a mouth on your face! I told you not to speak!"

Katsu's breath whistled in despite his efforts to stifle it, unbelievably

loud in the quiet around them. He gulped the air heavily, face ashen, and looked as though he would collapse.

"I said you should not speak, Little Man," Shizuru said more softly, her attitude as mutable and dangerously elastic as a snake's. "You have spoken quite enough, I think. Whereas I have yet to speak my piece. Ever since I returned here, in fact, I have not been allowed to speak my piece! You-and your masters, whom I am now addressing-have enjoyed your turns at my expense, speaking calumny after calumny upon my name, yet never once calling me to reply in public. And now that I am indeed called, you place before me this... this... *sad* creature for a hindrance, pre-empting me before I could say anything. Oh, it was well-played, Fellow Senators. Well-played. For, had I been given the chance to answer your accusations, you would have found yourselves entirely undone, would you not? After all, hardly any of you would have been expected to answer any of my arguments with more than the inane gabbling you so often employ in place of actual logic!"

She shook her head, lips pulled up into a small and humourless smile as she held the tiers with her gaze, which had now left the shaking grey man on the floor.

"It was a well-played game, I admit, but all games wear out eventually," she told them grimly. "And this particular game is done. I am the one who has been given the floor by the officiating consul, and the one who deserves to speak ahead of that maggot who has thus far been blabbering. That I speak now is no imposition on my part, for I take no privileges above what has been granted to me formally. Therefore, you shall- *you shall, Members of this House!*-kindly listen to what I have to say about these latest accusations, and without trying to claim again that I am demanding more than is my due. Do not imagine you can interrupt me, please, for I give you solemn warning: I shall string up the next person to try it, whether by the *lictors* or by my own hand! I have been given the floor, and that means I have the right to speak!"

She looked briefly towards the curule platform, and glanced at Chikane. Her old friend's fair countenance was very white and intense. The slightest nod of acknowledgment; and then Shizuru looked away.

"I shall preface my remarks by saying that I have long suffered the insults of our profession," she began fairly gently, for she was pleased by the continuing silence. She was the Orator now, her carriage perfect, her voice modulated to convey an aloof authority. "As indeed have nearly all of you. We, many of us, have had to suffer the particular thievery that exists in our class. For there are thieves among us, Members of this House, and they thief as much as their counterparts in the lower classes. Nay -they thief even more! For whereas the robbers of the lower classes do not wilfully attempt to rob a person of his dignitas-that most precious and elevated thing-the robbers in our midst do so. And for that, shame on you thieves here, who should know you are. In the event you thieves are not familiar with your own identity, however, then permit me to assist in introducing you to it."

Her voice was rising.

"You are not honourable protectors of our institutions and bodies. You are not saviours of the Senate. You are not guardians of the way things should be. Rather, what you are is this: you are cankers on the face of our dearest Republic-you are stool that has been stepped upon by its feet-you are fleas off the meanest cur to lick muck off the streets-you are the lowest of the low-vomit from Hime's belly-thieving whelps got off a malformed and brainless bitch!"

At any other time this glorious string of invectives would have had over half of the senators applauding wildly, but the amazement was still so strong in the basilica that only one person moved: the indefatigable president of the tribunes of the plebs grinned where she sat, her head jerking up and down passionately, her hands clapping. Shizuru looked at the woman and bowed gravely, one of her own hands rising afterwards to cuddle the folds of toga over her left shoulder.

Even with that relaxed gesture, she drew a flinch from the petrified Katsu Hitagi. She had turned to him again, and again he was fixed by the abyss.

"I know you so well, you thieves, because I have had some of you attempting to steal from me," she said scornfully, her voice softening so much it seemed like a caress. "I have had some of you



attempting to steal my glory, whether in credit for some public work or for some military achievement. I have even had some of you attempting to steal my money, which act, base as it is, is yet something I can condone. After all, we all know I can weather one or two filching hands, can I not? Oh, I admit it, Fellow Senators. *I am wealthy.* You all know I am wealthy. I did not gain that wealth through those grandiose schemes you whisper about me-all my finances and sources of money are aboveboard and perfectly unimpeachable, Katsu Hitagi-but it does not change the fact that my coffers are indeed grand. I am so wealthy-take note of this, Katsu Hitagi-that the very prospect of more wealth does not in the least matter to me. I am so wealthy, my dearest, wormiest Katsu Hitagi, that I am confident I could quintuple whatever amount they paid you to do this, and without feeling the lightest mockery of a sting."

Katsu's skin had gone the colour of the marble beneath him.

"Being so favoured by Fortune, it is a given that I am used to the sort of thievery I described," the woman went on, face suddenly darkening as the anger worked again on it. "But what I have no intent of getting used to, Fellow Senators, is the particular thievery the thieves amongst us have done to me! You-you thieves-have transgressed the last boundary, for you have actually attempted to steal the one thing that I guard with perfect jealousy, as should every self-respecting Himean of every class. You have attempted to steal what should never be stolen, pilfer the thing that is most precious, rob me of nothing less than my *dignitas*! You tried-to steal-*MY DIGNITAS!*"

The last was very nearly a scream, and would have been a scream had it been said more shrilly. As it rang so deep and strong, however, it came again as a roar. A ripple of shivers broke out at it, for there was something in Shizuru's voice when she had yelled that indicated she was still holding back the most of her anger. And if this visible fury was only a foretaste, then the whole furore must be awesome indeed.

The House cowered, shaken as soundly as a mouse facing a big and indignant cat.

"You have attempted to lay your filthy hands on it," the big cat was

snarling, hungry eyes no longer on Katsu but now touching on all of them. "You have tried to besmirch it on the pretext of my supposed avarice. Avarice, Fellow Senators? Avarice from *me* ? Have I ever given you cause to think me so greedy? Have I, even, any reason to be? You know my wealth, you know I could buy half of you given the necessity, and with change to spare-so *cheap* are some of the personages that stride through our hallowed halls! You know this, so why do you persist in saying such things of me when you know all reason militates against it? How desperate are you to oppose a reasonable measure I seek reasonably that you degenerate into this manner of unthinking stupidity?"

"I ask you further, why must you touch my dignitas, into the bargain? My dignitas is the only thing belonging to myself that I seek to enrich, the most sacred thing I own. Seek to steal my silver and gold if you must, but never seek to steal my dignitas. For the one who would do the second is worse! That man is a fool! He robs me of that which does not enrich him! He gains nothing but the emptiness of spite and yet makes me the poorer too! I wonder, Fellow Senators, I truly wonder. Did you ever think I would take this sort of impoverishment sitting down?"

"I warn you now to cease it," she said haughtily, lowering the heat to a sizzle. "Cease producing these trumped-up accusations of embezzlement and corruption, as well as whatever ridiculous figures you have that supposedly prove that I have cheated the Treasury. That bonus Katsu Hitagi mentioned earlier was from my own moneys, and had nothing to do with the public's! I absorb all added costs of all my campaigns myself, as any of you would know if you have ever worked with me. Look at the actual ledgers, hire accountants who can actually do arithmetic, and pray get your facts right! And as for my rumoured liaison with that young woman you are all so fond of discussing, cease to speak of it in these sacred halls! Liaisons are nothing new and nothing to do with the public. What bearing does it have on my career if I did have an affair during my campaign? *All. Generals. Do.* And before you even get the idea to deny it, I caution you to restrain yourselves since I see more than two dozen examples in the lot of you. Would you like me to name them, details included?"

The threat was met with a perceptible gulp from at least two dozen throats. Those eyes told people the Fujino was not given to bluffing.

"Wonderful-I trust everything is clear," she said mock-cheerfully, suddenly lapsing into a smile of awful sweetness. "Cease your shoddy attempts at besmirching me else you find yourselves on the receiving end of what you have never experienced yet, Fellow Senators. Cease or you shall see the full brunt of my fury. And that is something you do not want! Remember this, Members of this House! To defend my dignitas, I am willing to destroy every last one of you!"

She sat down. There was full silence afterwards, the only sound in the hall being the slight shuffle of her feet as she assumed the classic pose on the ivory chair, right foot forward, left foot back. Then, when she had ceased to move and no sound was heard save the oppressed breaths of several hundred senators recovering from the greatest shock of their careers, the silence was broken by another soft shuffle.

It was the senior consul sitting forward, her face icy rather than tranquil and blue eyes showing the faintest trace of the same astonishment everyone was feeling. Afterwards, it would be remembered that even she, the unflappable Chikane Himemiya, had needed to clear her throat before she could speak.

"I *thank* Shizuru Fujino for clarifying certain murky points of late," she intoned, mouth slowly inching upwards as her excellent mind accommodated itself in lightning-fast processes to today's unexpected events. Her smoothly drawling and coldly authoritative voice, coming so soon after the slithering heat of Shizuru's, served to cement the senators further in their seats. "I personally thank her as well... for reminding the House about the parameters of common decency, even in such an often-indecent arena as politics. Even here, fellow senators, be you reminded that there are still limits to calumny. Be you reminded too that there are limits to our topics of discussion, for we are not a common market or rumour-mill that we should engage in bringing up anything and everything happening on god's good earth."

She produced one of her slow blinks before fixing the lot with a

severe gaze. The House was transfixed, forced to listen with the submission of nerves already stretched past their limits. Even the formidable Armitage was silent, her mouth compressed in a tight and white line. Chikane understood why this was so, of course, and chose to take advantage of it. Was she to be blamed if the mice were still too dumbstruck by the lion to object to the talons?

"I move, henceforth, to strike all the aforementioned accusations against Shizuru Fujino from the agenda," she told them. "As well do I move to dismiss all further accusations of the kind if they are presented without the benefit of formal evidence admissible in a proper court. Further, I forbid from now on the discussion of matters more proper to the gossip gangs of the streets than this sacred body... in particular, that of supposed foreign liaisons of Himean officers abroad or otherwise, the same having little to no bearing on public governance or our rightful concerns. The first two reflect on the soundness of our logic; the third, on the soundness of our collective dignity. Have I any objections?"

As she predicted, none objected.

"Then let the records show that not a single person spoke against the orders and all were in agreement as to the unsoundness of all accusations," she dictated loudly, knowing the scribes taking the records of the meeting would set down her words to the letter. It was twisting the truth a little on her part to say that 'all were in agreement' since they were actually just too shocked to say otherwise, but she knew no one was as yet brave enough to complain about it. History was written not only by the victorious but by the canny.

"Owing to the untimely interruption provided by the tribune of the plebs, Katsu Hitagi, we are running far late of schedule. The sun shall set soon, Fellow Senators, and you know the restrictions upon us. We must end this meeting."

Some senators looked up in surprise, not having noticed the darkened surroundings. It seemed they had been dazzled earlier by a light inside the basilica, one that had come very close to burning them.

"We shall have to adjourn for today, unfortunately, and reschedule this session. Is there anyone who has something to say before we do so?"

Chikane was a little surprised when her prediction this time was incorrect. She had thought no one would have the strength yet to stand up, but stand up someone did. And it was none other than her own cousin and tribune-of-the-plebs, Urumi.

The two of them eyed each other for a second, weighing, measuring. After which she tilted her head to give the younger woman the right to speak. She was curious to see what her cousin would do, having absolutely no idea for once.

Urumi thanked her and turned an absolutely straight face to the rows, as though she had not just been grinning wolfishly earlier.

"As President of the Plebeian Tribune and a member of this hallowed body," she said with rare seriousness, "I give you my apologies. I am embarrassed by today's shabby happenings. All of us on this bench are embarrassed by it. What you-Good and Honourable Senators-and you-Good and Honourable Citizens listening from the doors-have witnessed is so far against the good and the honourable that I can only weep at the thought of its origin. It hurts me and my colleagues that you should have witnessed this disgrace being perpetuated by one of our college."

"Further," she said, "it hurts the People that this should have been committed in such a place and such a meeting, for this session has been taken down verbatim by the scribes, who are thus honour-bound to enter in our records the disgraceful words we have heard. Consider that, Fellow Senators! The disgrace of which we speak shall soil future people's memories of us and the tribunes of the plebs forever! The perpetrator of this disgrace-the traitor, for all that he called me that earlier-the deviant who has spat upon the duties of his office-should have his own threats carried out on him and rightly be thrown off the Tarpeian Rock himself! Yet the age of such punishments is no longer here, and so we must look to other avenues of remedying dishonour... and it must be a remedy that speaks, as much to the Himeans of the future as those of today, of a true sensibility and esteem for justice amongst us in this building

today."

She turned slowly where she stood, so as to go from facing the right to the left of the tiers. As this was something she had practiced before in front of the mirror, the turn was perfect, executed at just the right speed to permit her to keep her grace as well as her dignity.

"The remedy I propose now as a tribune of the plebs, and as their leader," she declared. "That I propose it to you here and now is for two things: first, to show the urgency with which I believe we must address it, else it be allowed to soil the Plebeian Tribune any further; and second, to show you the esteem I give this best and wisest of all bodies, the Himean Senate. I can and will take this motion to the Plebs later, Fellow Senators, and will ask the Plebs to vote on it themselves. But I would prefer to ask you first, as it concerns one of us . I pause to repeat that, as it is of such import: *it concerns one of us* . A concept of collegueship that the man we are sentencing seems not to have understood, but which we can impress upon him now by collectively deciding his fate. My proposition, as the President of the Tribunes of the Plebs, is that Katsu Hitagi be ejected from our college and thus stripped of his status as a tribune of that college. This, for his unseemly conduct and the crime of bald slander, which has dishonoured not only himself but his family, his office, and the other members of this sacred body. For such a disgrace, let his name be struck off the list of the Plebeian Tribune's College, that it not so mar the body politic forever with its ignominy."

Chikane was barely able to suppress a smile, while the stunned House came alive again. A few courageous souls attempted to protest on behalf of the to-be-sentenced man, who had somehow slunk back to his place on the tribunician bench and was gasping. Urumi bowed gravely to him and, just as gravely, returned to sit in the middle of the same bench.

"You cannot do that!" said one of Katsu's senator friends, rising indignantly from his seat. "There's no such law saying you can do that to a tribune of the plebs! There's nothing!"

"There isn't a law saying we can't, either!" snapped an old consular

two rows ahead of him. This man was a member of the conservative faction, and thus actually against Shizuru and her allies, but he had been sorely disgusted by Katsu Hitagi's conduct. "Others have been legislated out of higher office for less than this! Be quiet, you *pedarius*, you backbencher without the right to speak! I have the right and I say strip the position from that arrogant bumpkin!"

"This is injustice!" howled one of the arch-conservatives. "There is no precedent for it!"

"There's no precedent!" echoed another of Katsu's mates.

Another senator's voice rang: "Be quiet and let your betters deal with it, Idiot! Your friend is a presumptuous, substanceless *cunnus* who's sullied the office he occupies. The young Himemiya-Kanzaki is in the right of it!"

Crushed by shock piling on shock, Katsu Hitagi looked about himself stupidly, unable to see even the faces of his friends arguing on his behalf. Nor could he feel the hand of the other conservative tribune next to him, who was touching his arm with worry. Even some of the other conservatives, he thought, even some of those on the other side. Even they were against him! And there were the fierce violet eyes of Armitage, which glared at him. What had he done to deserve all of this? Why was it?

When Katsu Hitagi framed his speech, he had forgotten something very important-or perhaps, given his origins, never even had the chance to realise this something. It was this that was now blazing out from the obscurity before him. Had he recalled or attended to it earlier, he might even have won the House over to his side, softened all these now-stony ears. It was this unwisely-ignored thing that had turned even Shizuru's foes against him: the high pride of the Famous Families.

When Katsu accused Shizuru Fujino of stealing, he had broken not only her proverbial camel's back but that of the other proud members of the old clans. It was bad enough for his accusation that Shizuru Fujino was so wealthy she did not conceivably need to steal; it was even worse that he was the one to speak it, a New Man of obscure origins, someone the haughtier senators viewed as a

virtual country peasant. Who was this *novus homo*, that he thought he could produce that trumped-up allegation against a woman of the Fujino pedigree? Who was this dismal, insignificant maggot-to use the woman's words-to presume that he could bring such a foul charge against his betters?

Not one of them and not a true Himean, this presumptuous country bumpkin... as compared to Shizuru Fujino, who was one of them despite everything. Much though some of these very people did not like Shizuru, they were nevertheless conscious enough of her and their ancestral superiority to boil over with indignation at this *homo novus* Hitagi.

Beyond this too was a deeper indignation, less widespread among the ranks yet far stronger as an obstacle to Hitagi's case. It was an indignation felt only by the noblest, most august, and most patrician of the senators present. So strong was it that even some of those who did not feel it could understand it, which understanding was still enough to have them disbelieving Katsu Hitagi from the moment he accused Shizuru of stealing booty from the Treasury. *Inconceivable*, was their verdict, and not even because of the Fujino wealth. After all, other wealthy people stole constantly, did they not? No, what made Katsu Hitagi's claim so inconceivable was the terrible pride exclusive to the most ancient *patrician* families, of which Shizuru Fujino's was one of the most terrible and most ancient. So terrible was this pride that it made you sense in its holders a wherewithal, an ineffable quality that made you feel as though they-these descendants of the original ruling blue-bloods-were capable of nearly everything. And indeed, to take Shizuru Fujino alone as an example, it was not inconceivable, looking into her eyes, to imagine her killing, raping, destroying and daring nearly everything.

But not once could you possibly imagine that she would steal the way he said she did.

The terrible pride a Fujino carried would not permit her to stoop to such an act, nor anything of the same demeaning ilk. That pride permitted much, certainly, but also made impossible many things. Not a single one of those who understood this could credit for an instant the allegations that she-a Fujino and Hanazono both, a product of an extremely patrician family married to another



extremely patrician family-could ever bend her stiffly aristocratic knees to go rummaging in the filth. A Fujino, to do something as mean as stealing from the public purse that way? Pure and unadulterated rubbish! Easier to imagine her breaking her own neck before she would do it, a neck as stiff and unaccustomed to bending as her knees.

The upshot of all this was that it was easier for the senators to direct their jolted energies upon the man who had committed the unpardonable offence of overstepping his place, and who had probably been put up to it by some of the more idiotic conservatives who had not understood that his pawn would be *overstepping his place*. Without the most Himean of securities, Katsu Hitagi had failed to understand how swiftly the higher ranks had closed against him once he uttered that unreasonable slander against one of them.

"We shall have a division on this, as there seems to be dissent," the senior consul said loudly, trying to stop the chaos with the Princeps. Both of them were on their feet again. "Mark the words of the President of the Tribune College, Senators, that she can and *shall* bring this motion to the Plebs if you choose to defer it. Better we decide on it ourselves now and have the Plebs simply ratify our decision afterwards. Otherwise, we would be leaving the decision exclusively to them."

A threat veiled in fur: the senators were none too keen on losing more power to the Plebeian Tribune, especially when it already decided so many things in government through its officials' lawmaking and vetoing abilities. If the Senate made the decision instead, it would be seen as having controlled the matter and its choice would likely be ratified by the Plebs.

"Let us waste no more time!" Chikane followed. "All those in agreement that Katsu Hitagi-san should be expelled from his position, pass to my right. All those in dissent, pass to my left."

Even the choice of positions was calculated. Most senators had a superstitious dislike of passing to the unlucky side, the left. Even without that deft little twist, however, it was obvious from the outset what Katsu Hitagi's fate would be. The final hack to the man's political neck came when Haruka Armitage, staunch conservative

and pillar of the Traditionalists, got up and marched stonily to the right.

The motion was passed by a crushing majority, only eight people standing for dissent. The senior consul noted it for the scribes and nodded.

"It has been decided," she announced. "Katsu Hitagi is forthwith stripped of his office and ejected from the Tribune of the Plebs, upon a wide majority decision of the Senate and, be it noted, unanimous decision of his fellow tribunes-of-the-plebs. The reason for his expulsion is that he has disgraced not only himself, his family, his office, and this sacred body... but also, I add, the Plebs he was supposed to have been representing in their interests."

She turned suddenly to face the doors, her voice carrying clearly in the air.

"People of Hime, Honoured and Fellow Citizens, what you have seen today is not what I would have had you see!" she said, holding out one hand as if reaching for theirs. Her face was shining and, in the half-light, was very beautiful.

"You have had to put up with the mock posturing of a man who claimed to represent you, yet ended representing only the selfishness and jealousy of a few shameless individuals. That we do this now is for you, and not against you. Do not all of your other tribunes of the plebs vote to do it? Is not your friend, the woman you trusted to vote as the president of your college, the one who proposed it? We would have your welfare protected, People of Hime, our beloved fellow citizens! We would have your representatives an adornment, truly gracious heroes worthy of bearing your approval! We do not take away one of your true tribunes of the plebs, but rather strike away one who did not act in keeping with his office and was thus unworthy of being called a tribune of the plebs. That we do this now is not just for us but for you, for the good of the Whole People, for the good of our Republic! May it never again be disgraced! May you never again be disgraced!"

Dazzled by so much beauty and graceful speech, hearts still racing

from having witnessed the wrath of one of their heroes, the people outside the doors yielded to the senior consul, throwing up a cheer so loud it fetched up to several villas away. Thus did Chikane Himemiya destroy any possibility of a riot being incited by their opponents that day, and close a meeting that ended without its true purpose having been resolved or even debated. Exhausted from the earthquake they had just experienced, dying to talk about it once safely in their homes, People and Senate went home as meekly and tractably as a herd of sheep.

The woman who had shaken all of them insisted on returning to her hired villa alone, refusing all offers of company. Her heart was still stinging for the insults: both to her and to the girl whose letter she carried. The scroll was in the sinus of her toga, and had arrived just recently. She must have unrolled and reread it at least thirty times since its arrival, even though she could revisit its contents easily without looking: yet it was something else, she thought, to feel in her hand the paper those beloved hands had touched, to trace the clean letters those beloved fingers had wrought upon the sheet. The work of her wonderful girl, whom that cretin had apostrophised so unthinkingly.

In her was the painful awareness that had been responsible for the loss of temper earlier, the thing that had made her feel so impotent she had vented so dreadfully: Natsuki being insulted, Natsuki's name being subjected to indignities. Not even less painful that it was by word, because word was exactly what Shizuru had always feared when it came to sheltering Natsuki. It was hard to stop words, nearly impossible to shield from them. And yet, how pathetic of her if she could not even shelter the one she loved from those petty but vital things! How pathetic if she could not stop such harm from reaching Natsuki!

*Mea vita*, she cried, *forgive me for that!* Never again would she let it happen, never again would anyone come close to it. Shizuru swore it on her own head and the names of her ancestors, knowing for certain now that there was nothing she valued as much as that young woman she had left behind, nothing save perhaps for her dignitas. Even that seemed now indivisible from Natsuki, part of it constituted by everything she felt and wanted to do for the girl. To

protect her dignitas meant to also protect Natsuki's, which meant no one could touch either of them again.

She would annihilate the next one to make the attempt.

*Who put him up to it*, she wondered, going through the possibilities. Nothing certain for now, yet nothing more certain than that she would find out eventually. It had not been Haruka Armitage, she thought, because that old foe had appeared just as surprised and almost as angry in the meeting. Whichever of her allies had done it, Armitage had probably not known. It was to be expected since she was not the sort of woman to stoop to such a thing, nor the sort to use a New Man to do it. So which one was it?

*I shall find you*, she vowed. *I shall find out which one of them you are and crush you as I would crush an insect with my heel. Katsu Hitagi insulted me and mine, and now he has been finished and shamed forever, but he was acting only by your direction-and when I find you, gods damn you, you shall wish your own direction had been to run away from me.*

So did she brood as she walked back, the slave carrying her ivory chair cringing mutely as he followed. Never had he seen his mistress so furious, nor indeed so frightening. He liked her very much, as did every one of her servants, and also had a good slave's healthy fear of his mistress... but he had never thought to be *breathless* with that fear. What he had just seen had brought him close to wetting himself, only his other fear that such a loss of control would displease her stopping him from that indignity.

Even so, that secondary fear would not have been able to stop him from voiding both bladder and bowels had his mistress only been aware of something that would have significantly altered her furore that day: the amount of paper crumpled in the writing of that letter she prized so much and carried; the obsessive revision that had gone into the making and remaking of it; the finger-cramping discipline of lettering with hands not used to the task, and clumsy besides from the nerveless feeling induced by the first week of that ailment of which Shizuru yet knew nothing.

It was a letter that had seen its writer shiver with nervousness over

its respectability, hands aching so much from the effort of writing everything to her exacting satisfaction that, by the fifth rewrite of it, the girl had been obliged to tighten the linen wrapped around them. It was as well for Shizuru's slave and the former tribune of the plebs, Katsu Hitagi, that Shizuru knew not of these pains, else she would have strangled the latter then and there for his offences to her Natsuki.

Upon returning to the villa, she sent away both the slave and her welcoming steward, going instead to slam the door to her study. It was there that she flung her toga against a wall and unrolled the scroll in her hand, her own fingers trembling.

*Greetings, Shizuru.*

*I write as you asked, and at the proper time. It is one week now that you have been gone, and that is when I promised to do it. I send this at daybreak and hope it finds you swiftly.*

*I write apologies first. This is not so good a letter, I think. I do not write letters, and I do not know what or how to write in them. You know I am not so good with words. It is difficult too when I cannot see your face, so it becomes difficult to begin. I remember only what you said to write, so I try to follow what you ask. I follow too all the other things that you asked, so you know that I keep my word, even if I am not so good in writing it. That just now was not very bad, no? I try sometimes the rhetoric, but I am really better in Greek. You will let me write next time in Greek?*

*I write in our room. It is strange here now that I am alone. It is so big. This is not complaint. It is a good room still. You also forgot something in it. I found, the day you sailed, one of your helmets. It is the one with the big red plume on top and the many dark serpents stretching to the front. I told your friend Suou Himemiya and she said I should keep it for you. It is safe with me so you will not worry. I keep it polished, and the inside smelling nice. I know you like everything to be clean.*

*Thank you for the flowers that first day. The room also smelled nice, and it was less big.*

*I write now about today, as promised. Nothing is interesting about today save for the shark. Today, they brought a shark to the docks. Suou-she says I should call her Suou and it is all right, if it is all right with you too?-brought me to see, as I had never seen a shark before. I know what they are, as I have read and heard of them. But I did not imagine it would look like that. It is so that I thought it would be larger. You hear of them from sailors' mouths, and you are led to think of a monster large as a hemiola. But the smallness of it was only a small point to me, because the rest of it was all point anyway. It was all teeth, and when I touched it, its skin had teeth too. You have ever touched a shark? If so, you understand what I write. If not, I can boast of a feat you have yet to do. You are not impressed? I know what you will say: it is a fishy feat. There. I say it before you can, too.*

*The new commander made a speech today while watching the drilling. I am not as good at the rhetoric as you are, but it seemed to me a bad speech, very long and circular. Suou agreed with me, so I at least have one who stands witness. I know this because I asked her for that word-circular. I forgot it, and worried you would laugh if I wrote round-round.*

*I know you are laughing. Stop it, Shizuru.*

*There are things here you would not find so merry. There are many changes I find strange. The half of the Seventh still in Argentum has been ordered to come to Argus, and my people placed there are to be dismissed. This is a smaller army. The new commander explained, too, in a staff meeting, why it should be smaller. The reasons sound not sensible to me. His intent is to be sparing with many things, as you said, and they are things that deserve not the economy. You said to me before that he is not lacking money. Yet he acts like a poor man, or a rich man pretending to be poor in his own palace, with his own staff. Only a fool does this, so I cannot agree with him. He is a very clumsy man, and so foolish a commander. He is so much beneath you.*

*I never call him General. He is not my General.*

*It is often that I worry much about your army, because it is still your army. You have good men, but the one who leads them now does*

*not compare. I am glad to have Suou Himemiya as our legate, to be in charge of my people and your cavalry. But I also worry that her position is not higher. I think her most able of all your legates, and most able of all the new legates. Is it not that she should be the one to make the greatest decisions with the commander, as the senior legate? I worry much that the fool has with him a fool too in that position, and wastes one more able. I do not know if I am right in saying this. Some of your ways are unknown to me, so you will forgive me if I am wrong. It is only opinion.*

*I do not know what else I should write. Suou said that she will write to you of the news, so I do not need to write those here. If you write me a letter I will know better what to say next. So I will wait until you can send me a reply. I know you have much work, so it is all right that I wait. I pray every day for you, and make offerings to many gods. I remember you said before that to do this is evidence I am pragmatic, and laughed a little. But I think it is better to be safe and have you safe. I ask all the gods I know that you are well, as I believe this.*

*Shizuki is well too but I think she looks for you.*

*That is all I can say now. And before you think it, I do not forget. You asked, last we spoke, that I write two things when I finish. I write them here not only because you ask, but also because they are true: I think of you and I love you. I love you very much, Shizuru.*

## Chapter 49

*Gratitude to the readers and reviewers. Yesterday I reread chapter 45 for reference. As the usual reread, it yielded the typical crop of typographical errors... and also the discovery that one wrote Perseus in a line where it should have been Bellerophon, then proceeded to repeat the misattribution like a fool. (Sigh.) My apologies: I truly did not realise it at the time. The only reason of which I can think for the gaffe is that it was the overlap of Pegasus that made me interchange heroes so inately, although it remains a fault as I should have seen that earlier and rectified it. Again, please pardon me.*

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### Illustration:

*An attempt to atone for the relative dearth of Shizuru-Natsuki interaction:*

*ethnewinter. deviantart art/HTSUAF-1-of-3-169077951*

*(please remove the spaces after the full stops)*

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### Vocabulaire:

1. **Ala** (s.) , **alae** (pl.) - A cavalry unit; the estimates on the number of horsemen per ala differ, but for this story, the number shall be set at five hundred. The Lupine division, for instance, has approximately 700 horsemen, and is thus just a little shy of being an ala and a half.

2 . **Asclepiad** - Something that may be familiar to the literature students, the asclepiad is a line in lyric verse and has two sub-classes: the Lesser Asclepiad, with 12 syllables and a caesura; and the Greater Asclepiad, which takes a choriambus both preceded and followed by diaresis.



3 . **Calends** - Also **K** alends; the first of the three named days of a Roman/ Himean month, and the only fixed or unvarying one. The Calends is always on the first day of the month.

4 . **Campus Martius** - T he area outside the city of Rome/Hime where legions were trained and parked.

5 . **Capite censi** (L.) - **The Head Count** ; socially the lowest of all Romans, they did not even deserve a rung on the class ladder. The poorest class was technically the Fifth Class, but these were still a notch above the **capite censi** , who were classless, property-less, vote-less, yet also the most numerous in Ancient Rome.

6 . **Cassandra** - Prophetess from Greek myth who was doomed to always know the disasters about to happen, yet never have a single word believed once she prophesied them.

7 . **Comitium** (s.), **comitia** (pl.) - Assembly; a gathering called together for the purpose of discussing or settling political or state matters.

8 . **Contubernalis** - The Ancient Roman equivalent of a military cadet. These were nobles or members of the Famous Families, so they were often kept out of the battle and seconded to staff work for the general's office.

9 . **Domus Publica** - T he state house in which the head of the State religion and the **Vestal Virgins** (see note below) lived.

10 . " **Ecastor!**" - An exclamation permissible in high company, and a reference to Castor (of the heavenly twins, Castor and Pollux/ Polydeuces). It was used by women, the equivalent for men being "Edepol!"

11 . **The Eighteen** - The most influential knights, these were the original eighteen centuries of the Ordo Equester (see **Equites** ), meaning the original eighteen divisions within that group in its early days of existence. As time passed, more divisions were added to the Ordo Equester to accommodate the expansion of the knight class, but these eighteen centuries were kept untouched and intact.

12 . **Equites** - Members of the Roman **Ordo Equester** , called "the knights" as opposed to "the senators". Those of knight rank were usually as well-born as those of senatorial rank, but the difference was that they chose not a political career but a commercial one. Recall that there are restrictions on senatorial businesses, which is the reason the knights are generally the richer of the two ranks. One may consider them the equivalents of the modern "business sector" of the community, with the senators being the "government or political sector", for a simplified but convenient categorisation.

13 . **Glyconic** - Like the **asclepiad** (s.v.), another line in lyric verse, this time having 8 syllables.

14 . **Head Count** - See note for **capite censi**.

15 . **Ilium** - Troy, of Homer's Iliad and the famous Trojan Horse.

16 . **Infra dignitatem** - A Latin phrase still being used in Modern English: "beneath one's dignity".

17 . **Knights** - See note above, for **Equites**.

18 . **Mos maiorum** (L.) - The established custom, tradition; the way things had always been done and "should" always be done, according to the arch-conservatives or the "Traditionalists"

19 . **New Man** - **novus homo** / **homo novus** ; socially, ancestrally, and politically speaking, a parvenu. These were generally looked down upon, as antecedents were very important in highly-stratified Rome.

20 . **Plebs** - The Plebeians; while 'plebeian' referred to all Roman citizens who were not patrician, the sense in which Plebs is used here is more specific to politics. It meant those members of the plebeians who were actively attending and/or influencing meetings of the Plebs, like the **Comitia** (see note above) called by the tribunes of the plebs.

21 . **Pomerium** - The sacrosanct boundary encircling the city of Rome, which could not be crossed by generals for the duration of their service in a military mission or capacity.

22 . **Subura** - One of Rome's poorer districts, known for its squalor and population density.

23 . **Urban praetor** - Head of the praetors and the city's courts, he dealt with all civil litigation within Rome.

24 . **Vestal** - A Iso **Vestal Virgins** , priestesses dedicated to the protection of the sacred flame of the hearth of the goddess Vesta; they were expected to remain chaste for the duration of their service.

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## **Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae**

*par ethnewinter*

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The sessions held outside the *pomerium* went well into the month of June and the next, with both camps speaking indefatigably-if a little more cautiously, on the part of those opposing Shizuru-for or against the controversial motion. Public interest by this time had peaked for two reasons: first, because of the now-famous events of the first session in the Ogasawara villa; and second, because of the start of campaigning season for the coming elections. As provided by the incumbent consuls at the beginning of their term, the officials for next year would be voted in around mid-October. Thus most of the candidates for those elections began the heavy vote-gathering around June.

Vote-gathering comprised a range of activities going from public works all the way to bribery. High public visibility was necessary; a flurry of speechifying candidates was going about the city at all times, talking to any crowd willing to listen. These speechifying candidates made much of whatever topic was currently seizing the city, for they used their speeches on these topics to clarify on which side of the political fence they stood. That June, Shizuru Fujino's issue happened to be one of the topics most used, as it was such an excellent base for distinguishing political polarisation, aside from being a subject guaranteed to tempt people's ears. There were

dangers to this temptation, however: those fervently against Shizuru soon learned not to make their speeches within hearing of a rowdy-looking mob of Head Count composition. As demonstrated by several violent but thankfully bloodless occasions, the Head Count stood more or less on the Fujino side of things.

It was said that this sentiment among the lower levels could not be out of any intelligent political opinion or understanding. Even without the scorn with which such statements were oft issued, this was generally true. Even those myriad followers of Shizuru Fujino's ally, Urumi Himemiya-Kanzaki, were not enough to account for the widespread lowly support given her. Indeed, not even those Urumi-followers were all truly aware of all the complexities of the Fujino controversy: against the sheer multitude of people living in Hime, *Comitia* -goers were still a mere drop in the slop-bucket, especially where the poor were concerned. The humble folk did not actually pay much attention to politics, having plenty of their own worries and controversies to occupy them.

Even so, for some arcane reason that continued to defy her foes' understanding, they seemed to pay attention when it was Shizuru Fujino involved in the politics-and also seemed to assume that, whatever was going on, it was Shizuru Fujino on the right side of things. Which assumption helped make life very difficult for those bent on opposing that side of things, as they already had enough worries among their peers without having public sentiment against them too.

"We're in trouble," Sergay Wang said bluntly to his allies, who had gathered for a strategic meeting in his home. Only those with the greatest clout had been asked to come, which meant the Wang atrium held the leaders of the arch-conservative faction that night, distributed two-each to a nicely plush couch.

"We're struggling," he restated. "We need to decide on a rational strategy to stop her from seeking that motion once and for all. There are more turning to her side every day among the neutrals in Senate. Public opinion is one thing-the People are fickle, we know that-but having the other senators swing against us is a more serious matter."

"Like that prick, Yasuri!" spat Jin Akagi, who was on the couch opposite. "Did you hear him yesterday? He turned right around and said perhaps it wouldn't be so bad if we gave her what she wanted!"

"That's exactly what I mean," Sergay cut in, before Akagi could either work up one of his huffs, or influence the others into working up theirs. He wanted to proceed through this meeting calmly. "You can't say Yasuri's ever been sympathetic to Fujino or any of her allies, but even he has started to consider giving in. We need to face facts, and the fact is that a lot of people are getting worn down. This needs to stop! If it goes on, any vote in the House will see the division going Fujino and Himemiya's way, so much I can promise."

"What do you propose, then?" demanded Haruka Armitage. She shared a couch with her boon companion, the junior consul. "If you can see a solution, say it. And if anyone even suggests something like what Nakao did, I'll strangle him!"

Her red-cheeked face turned redder, virtually mottling.

"Using a New Man to do it," she said through her teeth. "How could he? The man's got no sense."

"Yes, it was a foolish thing to do," the host agreed, willing to be sidetracked by this particular topic. He ignored the flush that rose to Akagi's face, knowing the other man had been a party to that ill-advised scheme to discredit their enemy using the now-discredited Katsu Hitagi. Oh, if only they had told him about it before they put the plan in motion! He might have fixed things to actually work to their advantage. They should have informed at least him or Haruka, anyway, that they had been planning such a move. He always wondered why some of them insisted on acting solo, thus sparing themselves the combined wisdom and resources they would have had with the assistance of the group. He wondered that even more these days as this was a time when he believed they needed all the resources they could put together; the current enemy was proving enormously difficult.

"Mind, I think it would've worked if it'd been someone else," he admitted. "Someone with actual *ancestors*, of course, and the necessary balls. But there it is: our current tribunes of the plebs are

especially weak. What a year for it! At least our bets for next year are better, or so they seem to be."

"They should be," drawled Hikaru Senou, who on had his usual facial expression: a superior look of distaste that some had likened to the grimace a man pulled when you shoved something nasty under his nose. Hikaru now turned that look to Sergay, and spoke in the nasal voice that matched his countenance: "I'm backing one of them, you know."

"Yes, so I heard. He's your client, is he?"

"Quite so."

But Haruka was still fuming over Nakao, who had not been invited to this meeting for the reason that so infuriated her that very moment. Not that they thought he would show had he been invited, either: he had been keeping to his home of late, in a black depression over the outcome of his pawn's failure.

"Why *did* he do it?" she demanded of the company, which turned her way. "There's no love lost between me and Fujino, but I could strangle Nakao! We've had trouble only since. Most of this that you're complaining about, Sergay, happened after that session. It sent our support sliding down the hill!"

There was an uncomfortable pause after this truthful assessment.

"It's to be expected, to be honest," Sergay said ruefully, his wide shoulders slumping just a little. "Fujino's... *speech* was impressive, you know. Hitagi gave her all the openings she needed. Even the bit about that foreign lover of hers was well-put: she threw it back in our faces with a vengeance! It really is too bad, since it could have been such good material. She made Hitagi-and by association, our side-look petty."

He shook his head tiredly.

"I detest the woman, but even I have to admit she was formidable... which is probably the reason it was only Nakao who could've got such a fool scheme as that in his head. His hate for her is so deep it

robs him of his other senses sometimes. He'd never see anything in her as even remotely admirable. We all know there's bad blood between them."

" *That* was pretty long ago," someone replied.

"Yes, but it was the sort of thing to be remembered," he said, easily recalling the event that had started Yuzuru Nakao's vendetta against Shizuru Fujino: a non-violent mutiny that had seen an entire army rejecting him and preferring her, who had merely been a subordinate. "It cost Nakao a great deal of *dignitas* ."

"But using a New Man still isn't the sort of thing I had expected of him. I like Fujino no more than you do, but the fact remains she's still one of us! Having that upstart of all people accuse her of that sort of thieving hit the limit for the old-guard patriciate, you know, and that was something I'd have expected Nakao to think of, since he's a patrician as well."

"Though not as old-guard," sniffed Hikaru Senou.

"Well! Still, d'you think he's going senile?"

"Maybe, but who knows?" Sergay sighed and frowned. "I think we're straying from the point."

He raked a hand through his sandy-yellow hair.

"Look, as I was saying, I do have a solution. It would actually work so much better if we had a good tribune of the plebs to do it for us, in truth," he told them. "The way it is now, we'll all just have to pull a good share of the weight."

"What is it? Out with it already, Man!" Akagi said, eager to leave the topic of Nakao's failure.

"Delay the vote," Sergay replied. "If we can keep delaying a division on the motion, Fujino will see her term of office end without having ever been inaugurated into it, *and* see the issue come to nothing. I was actually leaning the other way before pushing the House into an early division on it before her camp started getting its stride, I mean- but the debacle at Ogasawara's villa changed that. Would that I'd

pushed for it earlier! We've already gone into the latter part of the year. If we can just delay it long enough to the end, the motion will be moot."

"There's half of the year to go yet," spoke up the junior consul. "That seems like a lot of time."

"A mere few months-it'll fly by," Sergay rebutted. "All we need to do is have our tribunes of the plebs veto when needed, with us supporting them by giving blocking speeches to Fujino and her allies. We will actually depend on you heavily for this, Yukino."

He nodded to the woman who looked like a tiny mouse perched next to the dauntingly bright-coloured Haruka Armitage. For a moment he pictured how she looked when she was on the curule platform with her consular colleague, then felt malicious for doing so.

"If you can offset Himemiya, it would be a great help," he told her, hiding the irritation he was feeling: weak tribunes of the plebs and an unimpressive consul at a time when the enemy had one so stellar-or should it be *lunar*, given that one's atmosphere?-she need only sit beside you to make you look pitiful. What a year indeed for the conservatives! "Worse comes to worst, you might even have to cut some sessions short when you're the officiating consul, in case they suddenly raise the issue of a division and we're unable to block them. That shouldn't be too hard, given your position."

No one heard the woman's sigh of despair. She was thinking of her fellow consul, who was not someone so easily "offset". Not too hard indeed! For a moment the retort that Sergay should do it himself hovered, but she bit it back and listened to him.

"This is just about the only thing I can think of that could work right now. It will work-it has to! This is the only logical recourse to us at this point. After all, we can't even intimidate that cousin of Himemiya's into retracting her veto on Fujino's triumph, nor can we intimidate her into pulling back the damned motion."

"There's one *I'd* love to get my hands on!" Akagi suddenly burst out, jerking so convulsively he splashed some of his wine on the couch and on his annoyed couch-mate too. "Stirring up trouble with the



Plebs-do you know she talks to them nearly every day? She spends more time wooing voters than the actual candidates! I piss on Nemura!"

That provoked a timid reply from the quietest and most uncomfortable member of the gathering. Kazuya Kurauchi's discomfort was due to his awareness that his presence was mere formality, since even he was painfully conscious of his own shortcomings. He knew he had neither the touch nor the mind for his political heritage, and was only suffered by the current group because of his name and his august, fanatically arch-conservative family history.

That family history still demanded that he contribute his mite, though, which he did now.

"It's actually Himemiya-Kanzaki again, Akagi-san," he reminded the older man punctiliously. "Not Nemura."

In this Kazuya was actually correct. That this was again the proper name for that notorious patrician-turned-plebeian was since the plebeian who had consented to adopt her-her childhood friend, Tomoko Nemura-had finished the rites that legally released Urumi from her authority. Although this meant Urumi no longer needed to use Nemura for her last name, it could not change back her status to patrician. Thus, Urumi Himemiya-Kanzaki was essentially establishing a new family of her own, a branch from the famous families Himemiya and Kanzaki, albeit a plebeian one.

All of which Akagi knew very well, but did not really care about.

"Nemura or not, I still piss on her!" he snapped at the younger man, goaded. "I piss, I piss, I piss!"

He received a glare from the immensely haughty-looking man to his right: "We've better things to do than talk about latrine activities, Akagi."

"Why not talk about them, Senou, given how deep in shit we already are?"

"Oh, stop bickering, the two of you!" Sergay cried, exasperated. "We're here to talk about how to beat Fujino. If that's clear, let's hear the opinions on what I just proposed. What do you think of my plan?"

"Sensible," Haruka said.

"I agree," said Senou. "I say we adopt Wang's plan for now."

The rest also voiced agreement.

"So it's decided," Sergay said, heaving a sigh of immense satisfaction. "We use delaying tactics to prevent them ever seeing a division... at least, until we're sure that we have more support for our side than they do on theirs. In the meantime, we can keep working on the problem and swinging more people our way."

"If by 'people' you mean senators and senior *equites*," Haruka said through her teeth. "The actual People look to be more on her side, even more the Plebs. Idiots! How they fail to see her for what she is, I'll never understand."

A lift of her clenched hands, to be shaken in the air.

"Why is it," she cried, "that she's so wretched popular?"

It was a good question. Why was Shizuru Fujino so wretched popular? Far beyond all the others who were also famous, in fact, which was why Haruka Armitage had felt the need to append the ironic adjective *wretched*. It was a question very few members of their class could answer, because the answer required a perceptual depth not normal to them. Or, more simply, it required a willingness to talk to those of far lower station in order to find the answer. But what member of the First or Second Class would ever credit a response given by someone so far beneath theirs? Or would even spare time to ask such lowly beings a question?

Better they would have, because most of the lowly beings actually knew the correct answer. Yes, they loved all those who were great and beautiful and worthy of admiration... but that was a fickle love, and not the kind they held for Shizuru Fujino. She had all the traits

every Himean admired in his superiors and officials, to be sure, but the adoration they gave her was still special. It was because, of all the great and powerful people who had ever swept around the streets of Hime nodding and smiling their way, only Shizuru *really talked* to them.

There were others who took the time to smile and exchange pleasantries, it was admitted, but almost never so warmly and never to every class including the *capite censi*. Whereas Shizuru talked to even the *capite censi*. Furthermore, she showed unusual interest in their situations, often remembering them by face or even sometimes by name. How strange was that? A patrician of the patricians, remembering *capite censi* names! Names that would never matter to a politician because they had no electoral worth, could not even count as a vote to move her into office. Why would any patrician give time of day to a member of a group so low it was classless, talk to them as though they mattered? What politician would speak with them without any apparent demagoguery of purpose, right there on the street and on their level instead of from the elevation of a rostrum? Oh, it was definitely a weird quirk to do such things-and a wildly flattering one too. What could possibly have engendered it in Shizuru Fujino?

Perhaps it was her upbringing, some people suggested. Her parents had been of the unusual type who considered slaves and everyone below their station worthy nonetheless of personhood. Unlike their fellows, they sent them away from the rooms for private situations. Not because the slaves offended them. Rather, because they understood that even slaves had thoughts and ideas, had feelings and reactions they could not always control. Shizuru had been reared to think the same, which was why she never treated slaves as mere house furnishings. People of lower station could think. They could feel and even love. And Shizuru, ever a creature out to charm the world, had always liked to inspire love.

Those who knew her better also thought, *it is not merely in the upbringing*. That alone could not have explained why Shizuru was loved not just by her household servants but also by the populace. The answer to this was in Shizuru's character itself, and her boundless thirst for knowledge.

From the time she had been taught that even lesser people could think and feel, Shizuru had been seized by the question of what they thought and felt. *Human like us*, her father used to say, *yet not like us*. So from the precocious child she had been to the woman she became, she continued to take an interest in them as she wanted to understand the differences among humans, all the time learning that she cared less about those differences than about that which made them human.

Those who had known her since infancy knew the trouble this interest had given her parents. She earned many a scolding for herself and her servant girl as a child because, after lessons at the pedagogue's, she would detour on the way home and run off to some part of the city or out of it. Not that they were truly troublemaking adventures, her parents would always learn: she was simply a naturally curious creature, as interested in the doings of the Vestals within the Domus Publica as she was in the filthy squabbles of the Subura. At first there was a genuine worry when the Fujino learned their only daughter passed through even that pit, but it was soon solved by striking a deal that she would take a capable bodyguard with her to such places—at least, until she came of age.

The compromise was necessary because, no matter the prevention, the Fujino found they truly could not stop their child from going where she wanted. If they assigned a stricter servant to watch over her, she charmed him into giving in to what she desired. If they threw a hurdle her way, she would devise a way to leap it. The wretched child was too wilful and too wily! Many another parent advised them to turn to a good spanking, or perhaps to imprisonment in her room for some days, but the Fujino were philosophically progressive and disliked such crude remedies. They had taught her to be free in mingling with those lesser, said her father ruefully to those advisors; therefore, they now had to live with a daughter who had learned the lesson well.

The only other provision they made in the compromise was that, upon returning from her detours, Shizuru would have to recount to either of them something that indicated she had truly profited by the adventure. If it passed that she failed to produce anything during these reports, she would have to cease visiting the place where she

had found nothing at all worth knowing.

Thus Shizuru as a child came to know things her peers had no opportunity to learn. She learned to speak the commoner's cant perfectly within a month of her adventures, which knowledge she later used among her soldiers as a grown woman, pleasantly surprising them. She learned a dozen other argots and tongues, some of which would boggle many foreign rulers and enemies in the future, when she would use their own languages to either intimidate or negotiate terms of their surrender. She also learned how best to deal with people of diverse backgrounds and status, as she had to overcome the brand of being an intruder during her excursions.

This last was perhaps the most difficult, although still something she overcame with typical smoothness. Most people liked her from the first meeting, as she had a natural charm that loosened the most grudging of tongues. It helped that she was breathtakingly good-looking. Her smile was sufficient to thaw the most frigid, and she smiled often. Even her dignity was friendly, a relaxed air that somehow managed to avoid the cooling puff of high-handedness.

This last was another crucial trait in understanding her. All the rest who gave the populace attention always seemed just a tad aloof, as if subtly but constantly aware of the difference in their stations. Shizuru never gave that impression: precisely because she had no need for it. A Fujino born of a Hanazono was so high up the ladder that she need never fear the indignity of any association and could afford to be humble because nothing could ever make her situation humble.

There were few others whose lineages permitted the same possibilities, but most of them were too in love with their aristocracies to act as Shizuru did. Her dearest friend, another top-of-the-tree patrician, might have been closer than these others if not for a limiting temperament: Chikane Himemiya, while bearing much the same philosophical humanity Shizuru carried, was nonetheless a far more reserved person by nature and intensely private. Chikane's sympathy for others was sincere and, Shizuru suspected, actually the greater between the two of them; the degree to which she permitted that innate warmth to seep through her shell, however, was lacking.

So it was Shizuru the people adored and believed to always be right because of it. They had known her for so long that they believed she was theirs, a sort of special heroine, a living mythology that belonged more to them than to the elites who were her peers. Was it not she who had once lobbied so strongly to give them grain so cheap it was practically free? Was she not the one who had given those magnificent week-long games years back, in honour of her ancestors and the deaths of her parents? Was she not the beloved of Fortuna, who continued to give her reason for added celebrations by showering her with victories? And-most importantly to the long-time residents of the city-was she not the girl who had once and still passed among them, always willing to entertain questions from the curious and having her own questions in return, always to be put forth with easy friendliness?

All very real things to them and worthy measures of her value, as they neither knew nor cared about the disapproval these same things had gained for her amongst her peers. Those who did know only thought her peers were the typical stiff snobs, people who treated their darling Fujino very shabbily indeed. Well, what would the snobs know, anyway? These were people terrified of even sticking a toe in the Subura!

Shizuru was aware of these sentiments, as well as the other sentiments for or against her. She soon had more cause to be glad for the people's support. In the latter part of June, she got Natsuki's answer to her first letter, which she had sent when she and the Fourteenth docked at the ports of Fuuka after their sea-passage. This second letter was delightfully longer than the first, and thus afforded Shizuru a great deal of anticipatory pleasure when she handled it. Yet the pleasure faded once she unrolled the paper: the Otomeian had composed the reply on the very day she received Shizuru's first missive, not sleeping just to finish because, she said,

*I must write this tonight and send it tomorrow. The Mentulae request a diplomatic meeting for a treaty and we are to march at dawn to Argentum for it.*

Shizuru's breath snagged that very instant. After which her eyes raced through the paper with lightning speed, reading at the pace only she could manage, and which was one of the reasons she was

called a prodigy. Thus she found out about the invitation from the Mentulae and Takeda's acceptance of it, as well as his resolve to meet them at Argentum. Shizuru could barely believe he intended to humour them by meeting there, and with only the number of soldiers Natsuki specified. Five cohorts and the Lupine division? Oh, what an ill-advised plan, not to mention a weak show of over-acquiescence to an arrogant king! Pray nothing harmful came of it!

She went through the letter she had intended to savour with her heart racing, teeth rounding on her lower lip. The scroll was dated about a month old, which only worsened the storm she could see brewing. What was happening over there? What had already happened? Would the Mentulae have dared it? Would they actually have the gall and ready manpower at this time?

She disciplined herself into considering the matter coolly and found she had difficulty crediting it as a likelihood-more likely they had begun to set up an operation in Argentum with shades of Ilium for the future-but then she would waver and remind herself that what was not a likelihood could nevertheless be a possibility.

On the other hand, it was still difficult to believe any nation could have the daring to launch an offensive against Hime itself, especially if that nation had been recently paddled over Hime's knee. *But all this aside*, she would scream inwardly, what was *actually* happening? If only she had had the time to finish setting up the intelligence network she had been making when she was still in the field! Good as she was at guesswork, Shizuru knew there was nothing like an actual verified piece of information.

So which was it, she wondered. *Trap for you, Takeda, or Treaty?* Perhaps both, with one coming before the other: she could easily imagine the Mentulaean embassy in Argentum as an intelligence mission, aimed at scouting enemy forces before a possible attack in the future. They *would* attack eventually-perhaps soon, perhaps only after some years-but inevitably, eventually. The Mentulae were not peaceful neighbours, so much was clear. A sooner attack would most likely be in late summer, giving the Mentulae sufficient time to muster all their forces this spring: two months would be enough for that. Unlikely they could launch anything worth considering just yet. Or was it that unlikely?

The General in her screamed out the various things she would do had she still been the Northern army's commander-demand to be met at a different place, for instance, and take more than a mere five cohorts if she wanted to march-but all those thoughts were impotent. Was that idiot of a substitute taking every possible precaution on this march, thinking of every single care? She had thought him militarily capable enough to at least do some of the things she had in mind, but perhaps she had overestimated him there? The thought was enough to drive anyone crazy! She surfaced from that first reading in a welter of sweat, her skin cold and her lover's words swimming before her eyes.

*Shizuru, I am very worried.*

Remembering that line made her hair rise. She who had never spent too much time on prayer before-because she believed the gods favoured people who spent less time on prayer than on action-would from then on spend her nights praying to the arcane powers over the various aspects of mortal life. She did not waste her time merely pleading with them: to do that was Greek. Shizuru was Himean, and Himeans approached everything, including religion, with supreme legalism.

She made contracts with her gods, promising all manner of honour and offering if they only kept her army safe and-most importantly-sheltered from harm her Natsuki. Donations were sent to various temples, focusing on those most relevant to the aim: *half a million to your temple, Salus, you who can ensure her health; half a million to you, Bona Dea, protector of all women; half a million, Juno Moneta, giver of timely warnings in extremity; half a million, Jupiter Optimus Maximus, embodiment of all forces and divinities; and so on.*

The largest donation went to the temple of Venus Victrix, Shizuru's ancestress. To her did the worried woman pray hardest, invoking the power of their blood-link and the pertinence of her worries to the goddess's province: for Venus Victrix was the ruler of the life force in victory, the goddess of love conquering. *Venus the Victorious, I shall give you all honours you find pleasing: only let not my love come to harm or defeat!*

She agonised over the legionaries and her friends in the North, of



course, but it was the girl she loved who caused the most hurt. If any fighting did happen, what would happen to Natsuki? Who was a brilliant warrior and leader, yes, but also too dangerously brave for Shizuru's comfort. Oh, no, better not to go down that track! Better to think of the capable double-agent she had left, the one who was also looking over the girl. Better to recall, too, the power sheathed in that wonderful body she missed each night.

Her Natsuki was strong. Her Natsuki was smart and skilled, and would be fine. But every time Shizuru tried to convince herself of this, the letter she had received along with the girl's would be the one to revisit. It was the missive from her double-agent, who had detailed much the same worries and news as had Natsuki... but with an added problem the Otomeian had not mentioned.

*There are more problems here than you can shake a stick at, so to speak. I've already written about the ones concerning the army and Masashi, and I have no doubt you're already shaking that oh-so-long stick of yours, not least because of my little joke here. But for this next one, you might want to put down that stick for a second, because it has to do with Natsuki.*

*Let me say first that your girl is faithful. I do not think there can be any more doubt that she truly loves you, for what I see gives every appearance of confirming it. But the confirmation might be coming at a price that is a touch too steep for comfort, and that is the next-or rather, last-problem I have to write. See, your Natsuki is not well.*

*Before your imagination plunges into the pits, Shizuru-san, rest assured it is not actually life-threatening, the physicians assure me. Of course, if she keeps going on like this, they admit there may then be space to despair-for, as it is, your girl seems bent on relinquishing all the space she herself occupies! She has become quite reduced, enough to merit commentary from nearly everyone. As this reduction happened only after you left and there is naught else I can find to serve as reason for it, I think I can say with certainty that your absence is the cause. But I'm rushing to the conclusion, and you must forgive me; I should start from the symptom rather than the diagnosis.*

*We noted it first from her eating habits. Or should I say lack of them,*

rather? She can barely eat. She neither looks forward to taking in food, nor seems capable of retaining all she does admit. Most solids are vomited within an hour of ingestion, often earlier. Liquids seem to be fine, but-if we believe in our Attic friends-not even the gods subsist on liquids alone, do they? It was only natural that, after a few weeks of this, your girl's weight dropped drastically. I shall not describe it to you because I am sure you can imagine it for yourself, so unsettling is it. She has always been thin, after all. Remember as cause for optimism, however: not life-threatening.

I summoned the physicians, both from the army and the city. They said only what I expected, which I think is both cause for relief as well as consternation: she is suffering from an acute malaise of the spirit, which influences adversely, among other things, her digestive processes. The physicians claim that such black humours, when guarded as jealously as does your Natsuki, create a constant unease of the belly, similar to the anxiety that makes one incapable of eating or ignorant of hunger during dire or extremely grievous moments. They said a great many other things, but I am afraid that I was not much impressed by the rest of the babble, finding the one I have just stated as the only worthy note. To put things in brief, your girl is simply too depressed to eat properly.

The physicians made recommendations, and all seemed sensible to me: save for one fool who wanted to make some class of poultice or gloop to put on her chest, so as to draw out any "noxious poisons" through the skin. The trouble with physicians-unless they are our good, trusty army ones-is that you have to take what they say with a healthy dose of suspicion: they are as likely to kill you with their cures as to heal you, depending on the practitioner. When that particular man suggested the business with a poultice, I was irked: you know as well as I do that his proposition was sheer claptrap. Barring the unlikelihood of her suffering from such toxins, what poultice has ever successfully drawn out toxin through the skin? I am sure you shall excuse me for having chucked both that quack and his recommendation out the door. Besides, I did not think you would like the thought of anyone putting anything on her bare chest-which prospect our girl did not view with anticipation either, I noticed. She looked ready to pull a dagger on him.

*The other, far more reasonable practitioners prescribed much the same things: chopped fruit and also very small but regular helpings of whatever light stews or broths are available, the solids in them kept to a bare minimum. All liquids should be warmed if possible to avoid upsetting the stomach's balance. Fish or fowl is preferred to meats like pork and beef. It's quite like feeding a chick, although no chick every looked as haughty as yours does when being given its sustenance. I'm afraid I actually have to pull rank on her sometimes to make her eat, although I try to do it very nicely. No doubt she would be far more tractable were you here to order it, but then again, that's a non sequitur: were you here, no doubt either that she wouldn't be like this. So perhaps you could just write a tidy little line in your next letter to her about eating properly? It should help, I think.*

*According to recommendation, I also have her drinking a blend of thickly-honeyed milk with raw egg and a bit of wine, apparently to fortify her spirits. While I do believe she needs all the fortification of spirit she can get, I am uncertain the concoction actually serves the stated purpose-unless, perhaps, I were to make her drink enough of it to be intoxicated. Rather, it is simply added nutrition, and as she seems not to dislike the taste of it, then it is as well I should keep her drinking the blend. Be assured I mete it out carefully, so as not to put her in the undesirable spirit-saturation aforementioned. It even took a bit of persuasion to make her drink it at all... for which difficulty I fear the culpability must now be laid at your feet. See, I didn't know you told her to stay away from wine. I understand perfectly, just so you know, but perhaps if you were to write something on that as well, she would look a little less guilty when she drinks it? The drink does its good, I assure you, and there are days when it seems she can be prevailed upon to take nothing else.*

*I truly wish it were this alone, for I know this is quite enough bad news already. But there is more. She does not sleep. How do I know that? Oh, it shows; trust me.*

*Ah, no! thought Shizuru when she reached that section, her already darkened imagination running mad with images of a ravaged-looking Natsuki. Her poor girl was going through nearly all the same things she was, it seemed. Difficulty eating-although the way Suou*

described it sounded far worse than her own case-difficulty sleeping, difficulty *living* again... all of which was far more difficulty than she could genuinely stand to have her girl undergo. It was true she had felt a splash of vindication in finding out about it, because it told her what it told her friend: that Natsuki loved her indubitably. Even so, the strength of that vindication enhanced her guilt afterwards, when she managed to read through the rest.

She fervently hoped Suou was only being literary in describing the girl's state. It sounded so bad! When she read about the concoction of wine and milk, she felt even more horrid for having drunk herself into a stupor for so many evenings, using wine as a conduit to the realms of slumber when she had forbidden the same prospective conduit to Natsuki. Who seemed to be so bent on following Shizuru's parting edicts that she had nearly refused a prescription intended to preserve her own well-being. Poor Natsuki! How wretched was she that Suou would skimp further description, saying imagination could handle it? It must be wretched indeed, if Suou would leave such a thing to a lover's paranoid imaginings.

How then could she complain when Suou recounted her deceptions of Natsuki? At the very least, they seemed to serve the purpose fairly, and also provided good reminders of Shizuru's love. Shizuru was actually annoyed by the scheme at first, but realised later that the feeling was more directed to herself than to her friend. Why had she not thought of arranging gifts herself? Granted, she had arranged for their room to be filled with flowers the first night she went away, but that was it. Her heart cried out that she should have done properly what Suou had done through deceit.

Not that Suou had felt all that sorry for said deceit, however: the other patrician had insisted very strongly on the justice of her actions, explaining that they were done not merely for Shizuru's sake.

*See, I like your girl terribly, even more now that I've had the opportunity to see more of her. She's so very nice, Shizuru-san, almost surprisingly so. Do you know I caught her moping to herself the other day and found it was because several of her men were- and I quote this directly-"too young to be kept away so long without battle to keep busy"? This, from the girl who happens to be younger*

*than every last one of her subordinates! I taxed her with it: it transpires she was talking about those of her troopers who had just recently married. Some were expecting their first babies at home, it appears.*

*I understood the concern and said that if there were only a few of these, I would be willing to give them a short leave. As it happens, they were all too touched by their leader's thoughtfulness to actually take advantage of her bid, and opted for simply sending packages from Argus to their families. I understand she distributed her full share of the booty among her men after our battles, by the way. I'd have thought that was you teaching her how to politick were it not that I learned she's always done it. Seems you're not the only one with a knack for building a fanatical following.*

*Now then, that was quite a lengthy side-story. But all I wanted to say is that your girl has a very likeable character that appeals greatly to me, and that, aside from being her current chaperone, I genuinely wish to be her friend. That having been said, I repeat that I did what I did as much for her sake as for yours. I hope you can agree with me that the false gifts from you were necessary lies, in the interests of getting her just a touch closer to being healthy. She needs so much to get closer to being healthy, Shizuru-san! If you agree with me, then please mention something about the Catullus books in your next letter to her-do you know she actually knows to identify asclepiad and glyconic? Ye gods!-and ask her how she liked them. No doubt she shall subject you to the dissertation she actually gave me!*

*I am exhausted and my hand is just about cramping. This letter has been newsy enough, I think, for it is beginning to look as though I should divide it into separate volumes. I shall stop here, and hope to have an hour or so of sleep before rising. We march to Argentum on the morrow, and I wonder if sleep is actually possible given my worries. Would that the man who led our march were worth only even half of you! But if that were the case, we probably wouldn't even be marching at an invitation from the enemy-or not with only five cohorts and about an ala of cavalry, at least. Still, I suppose there are ways to get through this, and I also suppose I just might be indulging in unnecessary worries... but I fear what could happen if*

*they prove validated, as I keep telling Masashi. Playing Cassandra was never one of my aspirations.*

*I promise to do what I can to protect both your girl and your army, so please try to conclude quickly that Forum war you're still fighting. We need you here, little though I like having to add to your many worries in saying it. I am truly sorry to have to trouble you with so much and so quickly. But there is nothing else to be done save to admit the trouble's necessity. We need you very badly.*

Which had Shizuru jumping to her feet and calling for Hermias in the middle of the evening. With the aid of her capable steward, several letters were soon carried to various locations, the most important being those to the senior consul of Hime; to Sosius, her banker who was also one of most senior among *The Eighteen* ; and to the two legates responsible for building the new highway connecting Argus to Fuuka, finished a day before the Calends of July.

The arrangement in those letters was to permit her to send out the Ninth and the Eleventh legions again, even if they had only just put in at the Campus Martius. Under the legate Shouhei Nagayama's care-Chie Harada had returned to the Senate-those legions would march back up the same highway they had recently built, under pretext of addressing a security threat in Upper Fuuka by bandit tribes living nearby. As the ruse was supported by allegations and sudden complaints from several of the most powerful *equites* ( courtesy of Shizuru's banker and other knightly confederates) as well as by the edict of the senior consul herself, there was little for the Senate to do but carp and groan belatedly after learning what Shizuru had done.

The truth, however, was that several of them were slightly relieved. The more legions Shizuru Fujino had on hand, the more nervous some of the more timid senators became. To these mice, having a disgruntled Shizuru Fujino outside the city walls was like living next-door to some mythical beast biding its time: if prodded enough-and gods knew how the Traditionalists were prodding it!-it just might come roaring through the door. Had it not roared in their faces only recently?

Only after both legions had marched away again was the mythical

beast able to sit back and rumble a breath. There! Those fifty thousand soldiers could be a faster help if ever Suou's worries came to anything. While another of the legates who had returned with her to Hime, Taro, had ventured that any offensive made by the Mentulae at this point might actually help with their aim, she disagreed sorely. When he pressed the point, arguing that such an outright attack from them would push the Senate into a faster decision now that they had a sense of her aims, she disagreed even more sorely.

Gathering her patience to explain, she told him that she had been hoping to beat them to first move from the beginning because of simple logistics. The greatest advantage the Mentulae had was in their numbers. If she could attack them before they started mustering their scattered armies properly, she could take on each fraction of that enormous whole one-by-one, instead of having to contend with a unified enemy. Shizuru knew this to be an enemy so massive she should more often think in terms of legions rather than cohorts for her strategic units, which idea her replacement was at that very instant spiting.

That was truly one of the reasons she preferred to steal a march on the Mentulae. But far more important, which she did not bother explaining to Taro, was the worry of unnecessary casualties. Those were good soldiers she had left with Masashi! And good auxiliaries. And a good girl, a wonderful girl, one she could not have thought to exist but in dreams. That dream-girl was *very worried*. Her blood ran cold whenever she thought of that, knowing the seriousness with which her girl spoke everything, and the seriousness of any situation that permitted the girl to actually speak of worries. It made her uneasy each time she thought of that second letter from Natsuki. Yet she could not stop rereading it.

There was a faint concern too at what was obviously a burgeoning like between the girl and her new chaperone, but Shizuru's anxieties over their well-being were too great and prevented her from imagining anything unhealthy. Besides, she would tell herself, it was well that Natsuki and Suou should get along: they had to depend on each other in an extremity. And Natsuki needed friends more than ever, when it seemed she was so lonely. Her Natsuki was *once*

*again* lonely. Ah, poor child! Why was it that fate conspired to have her lonely so often? Of course she should have her friends.

*Provided she does not love them more than me*, the green-eyed monster in her heart would condition, hissing. *Provided that when she calls them by their name, so familiarly, her voice does not love their names the way it loves mine.*

But then she would remember the part of the letter where Natsuki had admitted to missing her, and the monster would subside with a purr. Natsuki loved and missed *her*... and going from Suou's letter, not even the presence of a new friend could substitute. Would that there had been a less painful way to ascertain it, of course! Still, it hardened her determination to get what she wanted, and quickly. There was a girl and an army that missed her sorely.

So when the Traditionalist and current junior consul, Yukino Kikukawa, came to see her and put forth the concession the arch-conservative faction was proposing, the answer was clear to Shizuru from the outset.

"We can give you a plebiscite," Yukino said, as the two of them talked over a drink in Shizuru's study. "It will allow you to run for praetor again in the next elections, unopposed by us. Your candidature will be uncontested, so much can we promise."

Shizuru nodded.

"You will be returned as urban praetor again, most likely," the junior consul continued, knowing that was practically a certainty: Shizuru Fujino had yet to enter an election where her name did not come out at the top of the poll. "And probably in a far better climate, not to mention with a full year of office before you. As it is now, Fujino-san, the year has almost turned over to the second half without you seeing inauguration yet. Think on it, please! If you run again for praetor next year, you can occupy your seat for the proper length of time, without interruption to your duties. Half a year is not that long a wait for such a thing, I think."

Shizuru hummed quietly. Yukino persevered, hoping the other woman was at least thinking about it. Oh, why did she think this



really was going to fail? And why did she feel as though those queer red eyes were laughing?

"You've also only turned twenty-five," the short-haired woman continued. "Which makes you far below the usual age for... everything you've achieved. You're far younger than most of us, Fujino-san, which means you can afford to wait. Neither the position of praetor nor any of the provinces currently being used as praetorian provinces, such as those in the North, say-" She cleared her throat here, telling Shizuru subtly that she had believed the talk about her intentions to annex the lands of the Mentulae. "-shall be going anywhere."

Shizuru hummed again and raised her goblet to drink.

"Fujino-san," Yukino prodded. "What do you say?"

The blonde stopped halfway through her sip.

"I say... no," Shizuru said gently.

"Why not?" Yukino asked, finding she was not too surprised by this. "What we offer is a fair trade, and perhaps more than fair, given how we are actually guaranteeing your election as a praetor again. If it's command of an army you want, it would be easier to achieve it once you took on the praetorian governorship of a province-perhaps even one of the Northern ones, if that is where your preferences lie! Merely a few months, Fujino-san. And far more *legally*."

"'Far more traditionally', you mean!" Shizuru exclaimed amiably, laughing but somehow managing to keep it from sounding like an insult. "After all, the legalism is not in question here. You know no law expressly forbids what I am asking, Kikukawa-han, whereas a law expressly permitting it can actually be created, which is what Urumi Himemiyaka-Kanzaki intends to do. Or so I hear."

Mouth going dry, Yukino reached for a sip of her own drink.

"It's unconstitutional," was the only thing she thing she could come up with just then.

"Is it?" Shizuru replied, having grown used to this old refrain.

"Perhaps and perhaps not. The interesting thing about having an unwritten constitution is that so many things can be tested as a point of law. For my part, of course, I shall argue that it is if any would be willing to indulge me in a little legal examination."

Yukino's lips parted from her cup. She regarded the other woman appraisingly, sparing a moment for a renewed consideration. *Hard to believe she's so young!* she thought, recalling exactly how many times she had already thought this, and feeling chagrined at the number. She, the elder of them, had reached the consulship earlier, as was right and proper. Yet, she also knew she had achieved little else that could compare to the younger woman's accomplishments: from the time she won the *corona obsidionalis* in her first battle, Shizuru had entered the realms of legend, and continued to win an ever ascending prominence in that realm with every military victory she generated. Shizuru was already assured of a lasting memory among their people no matter if she never ascended to the top of the political ladder, the sort of enduring repute not even a consul could immediately have. How could that not make one feel just a little bitter, wondered the junior consul of the year.

The worst of it perhaps was that she deserved her repute. Had it been otherwise, it would have been so much easier to ignore or topple her. But she was no easy foe, this one! She was too large, too dangerous, too threateningly great. That was why she should be knocked down, in Yukino's opinion: she was a titan, and this was no longer an age where titans walked the earth.

*Little though Haruka-chan would like to hear me say that*, she admitted, knowing her metaphor had just accorded a superior praise to their enemy. But she was not talking to Haruka now, and so she could say to herself what she truly felt. And she felt so much as though they were giants going up against something even larger. It could fall for all that height, Yukino was sure. But she could not imagine it falling easily. It was a titan sprung from Mars and Venus: an archaic divinity infused with the newer Olympic blood. Not a thing that could be forced into retreat or dropped into some deep pit, left to moulder slowly and die the death of the forgotten. This was a creature bent on fighting to the end, and that thought brought back to Yukino the sinking feeling she had experienced when deputed by

her friends for this interview. Why did she really feel as though this mission was doomed to fail?

"You know neither Haruka nor I put up Katsu Hitagi to it," she said, suddenly veering into other territory.

The other woman looked faintly astonished by the confession.

"Of course I knew!" Shizuru said warmly. "I never even thought it. It hardly bespoke the Armitagian style-or the Kikukawan, for that matter."

Yukino smiled a little. "I'm glad of that, at least."

"So who was it really?"

"I don't know."

The crimson eyes gleamed. Both of them knew she was lying.

"A pity," Shizuru said. "But not for long."

Yukino very wisely chose not to comment.

"Returning to our discussion earlier," she said smoothly. "We're doing this because we want the unrest to stop, Fujino-san. The people are getting restive, as are the other senators. Some orders of business are being put on hold because of this issue-and that's a shame, I know you will agree. Why, even the civil courts are backed up with cases yet to be resolved, because there's still no urban praetor! We need to resolve this quickly, and we want to do it in *peaceful* way! So please do consider what we are offering. If you agree to it, we can all go on with our lives without the strife this matter has been causing in our sphere. Surely you want that as much as we do."

"Of course, but as I am not the one making so much of the issue, I am confused that it is to me this speech has been directed," Shizuru said, smiling.

Yukino persevered. "Because only you can cede in this matter, Fujino-san."

"Untrue. Those blocking the motion can cede just as well, perhaps even better. I fear I must refuse the offer, Kikukawa-han."

"Please think about it."

"If you wish, but never in consideration."

"Please, Fujino-san! It is no harm to your *dignitas* to cede this fight and take the right way!"

Shizuru put down her goblet on the table, exactly on a place where a beam of light from outside caught it. The sparkle of its crystalline facets was dazzling, and Yukino wondered idly from where the other woman had purchased so handsomely cut a piece.

"Do you remember what I said in my speech answering Hitagi?" Shizuru asked very softly. "What I said at the end of it?"

Yukino fought down a shiver: still light outside, yes, yet the room seemed to have grown so cool.

"Yes," she said. How could anyone forget?

The woman before her nodded.

"I meant every word, Kikukawa-han," she said, still very softly. "I believe that too is part of what makes up *dignitas*. The words we speak. We must carry out the promises we make, or else suffer the irreparable harm to *dignitas* if we fail."

"But not," interjected the woman who had once been called The Timid, "if the promise is wrong or immoral."

"Irrelevant, I fear," Shizuru answered. "The moral worth of the promise does not matter to our subject, Kikukawa-han. What matters to *dignitas* is the delivery of the promise, no matter how wrong or immoral the act promised would be. And, even if the morality did matter, who exactly would deserve to be an authority on it? No, the point is simply irrelevant. That just then sounded more like Haruka-han speaking."

The barb lodged. Yukino stiffened dangerously.

"She has sworn to oppose you if you press this," she warned. "As have the rest of us sworn. I ask you again to consider our offer, Fujino-san. You *cannot* win this."

Shizuru angled her head.

"I respect you, Kikukawa-han, so I shall recognise that challenge," she said. "And shall hold you to your word, then, as you should learn to hold me to mine: I shall expect all of the Traditionalists to do all within their honour to see that pledge come true. I do, however, have a light request to make."

"I can listen to it, but can't promise," the woman before her said, eyes narrowing.

Shizuru leaned forward slightly and smiled.

"Give me your best," she said. "Give me the best fight you can give, that I may say afterwards that the opposition I faced was truly worth facing. The harder you fight, the stronger I must be; the smarter your attempts, the smarter I must be at returning. Your opposition enhances me, Kikukawa-han. I am-I say this with no sarcasm-genuinely thankful for it."

Try as Yukino did, she could not dispel the chill from her body.

"You're assuming you'll win," she managed, getting up quickly to her feet; the jerky movements helped hide the shivers still passing through her. "It's dangerous to assume, Fujino-san."

"Especially if you assume against me," came the cheerful rejoinder. "Remember what I said to Katsu Hitagi and to the rest of the House, please. I meant it! And not you, nor Haruka-han, nor the rest of the Traditionalists together can stop me. If to win this means I must crush all of you together, crush you I shall."

Her hand came out with typical elegance, yet caused a flinch.

"My compliments to my adversaries," Shizuru said, urbane smile still in place as they shook hands and parted. "Please tell them I have heard the challenge and acknowledge it. As for the offer, I must very politely refuse. Although it does bring to mind Hector bargaining with

Achilles over what to do with the loser's body."

A lift of the eyebrows from the far shorter woman, who had to step back to look at Shizuru properly.

She asked, "Are you saying you'd drag us through the sand by our heels if you win?"

"Oh, no! That is where Achilles fell afoul of the gods, after all, and I would not tempt Fortuna to turn from me with such disrespect to my worthy foes," was the answer. "No, merely his words to Hector's first offer. Perhaps you should bring that to the others as my answer."

So when Yukino returned to her comrades, she bore the answer direct from Homer: *There are no binding oaths between men and lions; wolves and lambs can enjoy no meeting of the minds.* An answer that chagrined them so much-Whom did Fujino think she was calling "lambs", exactly?-that they decided they were fools to think such a woman could be approached with the civility of an outstretched hand. They resolved to escalate their efforts in destroying her purpose. Which was exactly what Shizuru wanted, as a matter of fact, because the sooner the struggle reached the highest point, the sooner she believed she could break the enemy's hold... not knowing the enemy was dedicating itself to a battle of delay and indirect confrontation.

Thus the tug of war in Hime raged on, neither side willing now to give ground nor believing it could possibly lose. The standoff split Hime right down the middle, with most of the senators ranging on the Traditionalist side and the populace, plutocrats and progressives on Shizuru Fujino's. Work as either side would, nothing seemed capable of ending the deadlock. What the situation needed was a catalyst, a spark to send their impasse up in flames.

The spark would not come until August.

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When Takeda Masashi received the invitation to hold diplomatic talks with the Mentulae at Argentum, he had the idea of taking with him one legate, and settled upon Suou Himemiya. Ironically, she

had been the one most against the march; after he made clear that he would brook no argument, however, she suddenly changed her mind and insisted on accompanying him. Thinking her turnaround complete, he was thus quite glad to take her along, and so expected his trip to Argentum to be a pleasant one. Unfortunately, it turned out to be anything but... especially because of Suou Himemiya.

The differences between them showed from the start. Takeda had soldiered only under commanders who insisted on going by the book, which meant he insisted on a proper baggage train even if they were carrying only half a legion and seven hundred cavalry. Not Suou's style, for the only two commanders under whom she had soldiered before had both been obsessed with travelling light. The first was her elder sister, for whom she had been a *contubernalis* : Chikane Himemiya, although she had a baggage train, had always preferred a highly shortened one, so short most bandits blinked at seeing it and refrained from ambushing what looked so baggage-poor a cavalcade. Chikane also liked to use mules for her baggage, disliked the trouble of the standard and slower-if more powerful-oxen. Nor did she like encumbering her armies with its spoils when more battles would be necessary: she often sent all booty ahead to Hime under a separate but heavy guard, leaving her fighting legions free to manoeuvre as they wished.

The second commander of Suou's experience was even more unusual of tactic, having taken Chikane's example of mules-over-oxen and adding a stunning variation to it. Often eschewing the baggage train itself, Shizuru Fujino just strapped the gear on the legionaries themselves and marched them off willy-nilly. This style had actually contributed greatly to her legend, provoking many a joke amongst the men who had had to carry those extra thirty-pound packs for miles on end: not for anyone else, they swore, would they ever do it! They slogged through dust and drizzle, through snow and sleet-just about anywhere with the burden always on their shoulders, and always with the same dizzying speed. But never complained. Quite impossible to complain when their general took her share of weight and also went on foot, even going double the normal paces because she was always going up and down the ranks to chat with the legionaries and praise them as they walked. Making them merry enough to forget the packs and the fact that they were marching

enough to cover at least thirty miles a day, on the *slow* days. *You've not marched*, went the joke among those who had served with her, *until you've done a Fujino march*.

Having in mind such commanders, Suou thus insisted that there should be either a very small baggage train or none at all for their march to Argentum. Takeda being of the opposite opinion, as well as cautious enough to want to buy more cheap grain than they would need-he intended to save money by not having to buy grain in Argentum, where the prices were higher-an argument ensued over the issue. Unfortunately for Suou's case, she was the subordinate, and thus the foregone loser. She ceded the argument and persuaded him to at least bring the artillery if they were to have a baggage train.

"Why?" he asked at the time, genuinely surprised by the request. "We're not going to lay siege to our own allies, you know! Sometimes, Suou-kun, you really are peculiar."

"Go ahead and call me peculiar," she told him with smooth laughter. "I'd just like to be good and whole when you do say it."

She insisted so strongly on the point that he gave in to the request as a concession, thinking her truly odd. Artillery without a possibility of impending siege? He had no idea she was thinking of her previous general's words on the subject.

*Artillery should become a staple in the battlefield, I think*, Shizuru had told her once, as they inspected the latest pieces developed by the engineers. *I do not mean merely for siege. I want artillery to be used regularly, even in pure field encounters. What is the point of restricting ourselves in the use of technology, if the technology can be made to adapt to more than one purpose? Take these scorpions, for instance. Handy little things! Do you know how to use them, Suou-chan?*

Shizuru had shown her, using one of the scorpion ballistae to plug several trees in the distance, each bolt going right through the middle of the trunk. Suou learned how to do it... and absorbed the rest of the lesson. Artillery in the midst of battle might not be too standard, but that would be the advantage-and when the possible



enemy had such an overwhelming lead in numbers, all other advantages would be necessary.

So when the little army set out from the port city, it was baggage-heavy and bringing its own artillery. It also proceeded at a much slower velocity than Suou and the five cohorts of the Seventh would have liked, even if their current commander thought they would be grateful to him for the easy pace. *Muddy ground is hard on the ankles*, he said benevolently, seated high atop his general's horse.

What he said was true, as the earth was spongy, and not very good for walking. Even so, the men he had with him were too apprehensive to rest easy in his indulgence. They disliked the reason for their trip as much as Takeda's accompanying legate did. Said legate also bickered with the commander so regularly that he soon regretted his decision in having taken her along with him.

Six days away from their destination, she brought up her arguments again while the legionaries made camp.

"I don't like this," Suou told him. "I really don't like this."

"Oh, Suou-kun, stop being so negative, please!" Takeda cried, exasperated beyond belief. How many times had she already flogged this argument? Oh, when he set out so cheerfully from Argus with Argentum and a nice peace treaty waiting for him, he had not expected to be travelling with someone so contrary!

"Then perhaps you should stop being so romantic," she sighed, her drowsy eyes blinking slowly. "I hate to belabour the point, Takeda-kun, but you should know I'm not the sort of person to pester without reason for it. At least grant there is reason to be suspicious, considering the ones we go to meet are the very same ones I and the rest of this army were fighting only some time ago. Added to which is the fact that we have yet to hear from our scouts sent weeks into the past, and that no messages from Argentum seem to be forthcoming. Especially suspicious, when you consider that even Yamada-san's agents have been tardy in their cross-border business-or so he claimed last I spoke to him."

"That Greek trafficker!" he exclaimed, finding the name worthy of

nothing but a scowl. He had not been impressed by the man when they met, deeming the man an un-Himean pretender seeking only money or elevation for his supposed information-an opinion that worsened even more after Takeda learned his predecessor had promised said un-Himean pretender the citizenship.

"Well," Suou sighed. "If you don't want to take him at his word, then think of *our* scouts, please."

He sucked on his teeth.

"There's that, true," he said patiently. "But there must be some reason for it. I imagine the paths are much more difficult up ahead, or something. The thaw must be worse near Argentum."

She shook her head. "They should still have returned by now, if that were the case."

"Banditry thrives in these parts," he proposed, gesturing to the forest thick about them. "It might be, you know, though it would be unfortunate if that's the case."

"All the more reason, at the very least, that we should be making a stronger camp than this."

"Oh, not again!"

"Yes, again. Just think of it as caution," she replied coolly, her extraordinary light eyes on the orderly activity of camp-making taking place. "You said it yourself. We're walking into highly-forested area, where an ambush grows more and more possible. Our scouts not only have yet to return, but the available number of men we can afford to send out is drastically dwindling. We have barely two *alae* of horse with us-and we can't afford to keep losing more of them to scouting since they're of the Lupine division! A good number of these are Otomeian nobles, mind, and the most elite of their soldiers besides. They're matchless auxiliary. Both horses and their riders are too precious, especially when you consider we have only five cohorts for infantry. Needs must conserve forces."

He shook his head at the criticism in the words, barely hanging on to

his unravelling patience.

"Well, what do you want me to do, then?" he demanded, holding out both hands in supplication. "I'd like to point out that, for all your doomsaying, we've got this far without meeting a single bit of trouble! Except for the scouts, everything's gone pretty much as I expected... and can we really be blamed if a few foreign auxiliaries defect or take a side-trip somewhere because they're getting closer to their home territories?"

"Try saying that to Natsuki-san," she retorted, growing even more frigid; she was very like her older sister in displeasure, which always showed in them as a sudden frost. "Because she's been fidgeting all this time at the loss of some of her best scouts without their absence being taken as a warning."

He bit the inside of his cheek angrily.

"We should make the camp stronger," she repeated.

Takeda gave up. "If it will make you feel better, why not?"

"Good! I can handle it, then?"

He threw up his hands: "Do whatever you want!"

A quick nod to him, and she was already walking away.

"Takashi!" she yelled. "Kintarou!"

Meanwhile, Takeda ran a hand through his hair in the classic gesture of exasperation and shook his head ruefully at his legate. The two senior *primipilii* Suou had called were already approaching, and he decided to leave her to instruct them as to whatever it was she wanted. Perhaps, he hoped, if he let her have his way here then she would finally calm enough for them to make the few days' march left. They were so very close to the destination, barely a week's worth of travel remaining. Barely a week of easy walking, if Suou would only stop being so contrary.

He slipped away, his mind fixing suddenly on the prospect of a nice, *un-contrary* drink of wine. How he needed it!

"We want a stronger camp," his legate was telling the centurions when he left them. "Too perilous not to have a fall-back position in case something goes awry. I'm not saying something will go wrong, but we need to be on a higher alert than usual, especially given that our scouts haven't returned after all this time." She frowned shortly while glancing to the woods nearby. "And this is more forest than I would like."

The centurions nodded, eyeing the fair patrician with greater respect; they had been feeling prickly for a while, almost as though they could sense eyes in the trees about them.

"Double the towers for this camp and add four more metres to the walls," she ordered, brisk in her commands because she had devoted much thought to them the past few days, and had also seen a truly great general go through these motions already: her crimson-eyed friend had given her an object lesson before in how to set up a strong camp, and Suou still remembered what the woman had drilled into her head.

"We've got plenty of trees around," one of the centurions told Suou, indicating the woods. "They'll do fine for what we want."

"Shall have to," Suou answered, scuffing the toe of her boot on the muddy ground. She looked up and beckoned to one of the noncombatant servants attached to the troops before returning her attention to the centurions. "Yes, definitely more logs. Pare down that forest."

"I'll send them felling again. What we hauled in already is just enough for the usual."

"Get all the added lumber now. I want the breastworks raised by tonight-and make no mistake, Centurions, that when I say tonight, I mean *tonight* ! We'll all work until dark if necessary."

The men grinned and said they understood.

"And keep the branches for scorpion bolts when you get to lopping off from the logs. What a good thing I insisted on bringing artillery! I'd like several of the engineers assigned to that, although we can

get to shaping and sharpening the bolts inside the camp when it's finished. Can we get rocks?"

"The stream."

"Get some men to it, and have the engineers work on diverting a good, usable channel of water, just in case." A wry smile appeared. "Perhaps it's as well our commander insisted on bringing far more food than necessary, after all, though I'd not like to say anything for certain."

The servant she had called was waiting.

"Find me the Otomeian princess," she said simply, knowing everyone knew by now who that was—even Takeda, for whom it was a recurrent private slap in the face. He had once presumed to try and purchase her from someone, after all, as though she were no more than a slave. It was so mortifying! Cast off their royalty Himeans might have, but many of them could still be impressed by existing, if foreign specimens of it. And the particular foreign specimen in question had to be one of the most impressive, if anything.

"What about the trenches?" Kintarou asked when the servant went away. "Can't dig any more, can't deepen what's already there." He pointed an eyebrow at the mud Suou had just dug up with her boot. "Ground's either mushy or still iced up."

Takashi finished the thought: "More stakes in them?"

Suou flashed her lazy smile at him.

"Enough to stick a legion's worth of pigs," she said. "I'm praying it shan't come to anything, boys, but if it does—I daresay we'll have ourselves a roast!"

The centurions ran off to execute the orders, happy that they were actually doing something about their unease. How nice to find that at least one of the people in the command tent understood it! For they were quite impressed by the young legate's grip of the situation, and the businesslike efficiency with which she rapped out the directives.

She had worked with Shizuru Fujino, after all: no matter what others might say, experience told there.

Natsuki arrived on the scene.

"Thank you for coming so quickly," Suou said in greeting, noting with a wince the blue-black shade extending from the bottom of the Otomeian's eyes: it could no longer be hidden by the thickened ring of black Natsuki was applying around her lashes these days. Suou allowed herself a moment to muse on this other one of her problems. Thank the gods for Shizuru's letter that arrived last month! It had seemed to cheer up the girl a little before they marched, and Suou knew for a fact that Natsuki reread it whenever they stopped for the night. The girl also seemed to be on slightly better terms with her food after it arrived, which told Suou one of the Otomeian's anxieties had truly been that Shizuru would not write. Foolish girl! Was she really so unaware of how soundly she had conquered Shizuru?

Even with the good effects of the letter, though, there were new chaperoning difficulties with which Suou had to contend these days. It was no longer possible to use the 'gifts from Shizuru' to help the Otomeian with depression, as they were on the march and not in a city. Nor was it easy to find milk for the girl's prescribed drink, for that matter. Oh, what legate ever had so many things go wrong in her first shift, and so quickly?

She covered the personal queries first.

"How are you feeling and when did you last eat? You did not get too much rest last night, I think."

That earned a long-suffering grimace. *Well, what do you expect me to say when you look like that*, thought the frustrated Himemiya, who set it aside for the moment; she would have all the time to earn all the grimaces she wanted later, once they were in a properly fortified camp.

"All right," was all Natsuki said, and with one of her weariest shrugs. "My men... not yet returned."

"I know. And yes, I am worried. I tried to talk to Masashi about it, but you know how he is."

"Thick," the girl rumbled mutinously. "Very."

Suou nodded in agreement.

"I called you over because we need help building, Natsuki," she said. "There aren't enough men, as you know, and I feel more anxious the closer we get to Argentum. I've managed to persuade our commander, at least, that we should build a really heavy camp, since we're so close already. I want a defensible fallback position in case something does go wrong. Can you see your way to sparing half of your men to help us set up the main camp? The other half can keep working on the cavalry's stables and section."

Some of the haggardness went out of Natsuki's face. So she had been feeling the unease too, thought the legate.

"Our servants and grooms, they can do most of the work," the girl said. "Not half. I can-I *will* -have all my men help you, but for some. I want to keep some. Not more than maybe one hundred?"

She turned her head to stare at the forest hedging them, and then turned to Suou again. "If your men have to go there again, some of us will keep watch. Or if they have to go farther than there."

Suou smiled, pleased by the Otomeian's quickness.

"Excellent," she said, and meant it.

They finished the fortified camp that day, and it was to all appearances a camp sturdy enough to withstand a siege, its construction having been carried out to Suou's exacting satisfaction. *Surely* it was worthy of satisfaction, thought the general of the mission, who believed his legate would no longer protest to his desires of marching on. Unfortunately, he found even two days after that she refused to march again, once more citing the scouts and messengers who had failed to return. And yet again, the general found himself in another debate with his legate, who was proving to be so opposing these days that he suspected it to be some manner

of ailment.

"Either we stay put and send for reinforcements, or we march backwards and go to Sosia," she said.

"We've already passed Sosia!" he exclaimed, bewildered by so much stiff resistance from someone he had always known to be so laid-back. "We're so close to Argentum, Suou-kun! Five, six days at most! At the very least, we should march to know exactly why the scouts are not returning! The sooner we put into Argentum, the sooner we should be able to reorganise, not to mention have our men in a much safer place. You keep saying you're concerned. There *is* a legion of our soldiers sitting right in that city we're headed to, you know."

That earned him a level stare.

"I do know," she said flatly. "And yes, I believe we should eventually march to Argentum to find out why the scouts are not returning. But I do not believe we should march to it like this, so blindly. Do try to see it, Takeda-kun-you could be leading all of us into peril. I know you want to get a peace treaty very badly, but try to remember, please, what all the rest of us do: the people you want to meet are the same ones who killed some of our comrades in battle, very recently."

But that reminded him too much of the things said to him by the woman he had replaced, whose ghost he had been feeling more and more of late. This was perhaps where Suou made a mistake, for whatever part of him might have been willing to listen to her protests was stoppered up by all the feelings he had been trying to hide: all the resentment and uncertainty and hate. Was this really *his* army? Why was it that he felt dogged, every step he took, by whispers of comparison? His legate and old friend was becoming a curmudgeon who echoed of *her*, his legionaries restless and not as friendly as the ones he had known on his other campaigns. Even the girl he pined for refused to say more than one word to him when they spoke, and seemed to be wasting away-and, he very well knew, not for his sake. All because of the spectre of a woman that seemed bent on haunting him!



He glared at Suou, all patience exhausted.

"We march tomorrow," he told her curtly. "And that's it! No, I don't want to hear it-not another word, damn it! Tell the men to be ready to leave by dawn. That's the least you can do. You've been so bloody uncooperative!"

Her eyes flickered and communicated a faint contempt he could read.

"You're bent on being a fool, it seems," she said, ignoring the fresh rush of blood flooding into his face. "Remember that I warned you, if it ever comes to it! Though I'd rather be proven a liar, in this case: scant comfort I'd have in any of it ever becoming."

"Oh, go away!" he cried, tried beyond all endurance. "Let me have some peace, I beg of you!"

"If that's what you wanted, you should never have taken over this army," she retorted, after which Parthian shot she left him in his tent. But not to brood as he did: she went to inform the centurions and other officers of the march, and then went to sit at her desk and send for Natsuki. Who materialised with her usual superhuman alacrity.

"He insists we march tomorrow and nothing can persuade him otherwise," she told the Otomeian calmly; the two of them were alone. "I've done all I can here. I am sending letters to both Ushidasan in Argus and our old comrade who's still based in Sosia, Toshisan. I plan on informing them of the situation and all the markers supporting my suspicions. Both of them will know what needs to be done and will do it."

The large eyes stayed upon her.

"Secrecy?" the girl suddenly said, which brought a smile to Suou's face.

"Yes," the legate admitted. "He doesn't want to send to them and bring up reinforcements. Probably thinks it's too much trouble, you know. So he's not going to know I'm already doing it for him as a

favour-or, say, an act of good will."

"The messenger will know?"

"Better they do, I think. One who knows, at least. Another can just act as safety, accompaniment."

"We must choose well."

"I have already chosen someone." Suou came out with it: "I want it to be you."

"No."

A pause followed the word. Suou blinked as if to reassure herself she was awake, then spoke again.

"That was an order," she said.

"No," Natsuki answered.

Pale blue clashed with green, and had anyone else been in the room, they might have frozen solid from the drop in ambient temperature. As it was, only the two women took the measure of each other, both creatures used to having their orders followed, and now radiating the awesome aura of their respective aristocracies.

"I'm your superior officer, Natsuki," the blonde woman said, her very pale brows rising. "If I say you should go, then you should."

The beautiful, prone-to-pout lips set and thinned.

"No," Natsuki repeated.

"What do you mean 'no'?"

"I refuse."

"You *refuse*?"

"I refuse."

The Himean leaned back in her seat, frowning direly at the girl

standing before her.

"You do know to refuse this is technically insubordination?" she asked. A faint twinkle was in her eyes. "Punishable offence, for which no one would blame me no matter what I did. Although that could work out well for the purpose too, in a way: I could have excuse to send you packing home to Otomeia."

As the girl was no fool, she did not find the statement at all surprising: she had understood Suou's reason for wanting to send *her* from the beginning.

"Will not be well for your purpose," she said. "If I go, my men go with me."

"Are you threatening mass defection of the auxiliaries?"

"Not threaten," said the dark-haired troublemaker. "I tell."

"Worse than a threat then!" Suou said, finding it in herself to keep her face stern. But how difficult it was, when the girl on the other side of the desk was eyeing her with such haughty dignity, aloof-yet-sympathetic like a court advocate for the defence. What a perfect Himean she would have made, thought the actual Himean, wishing she were not so hugely amused by what was happening.

"That would be unpardonable, Natsuki, and a breach of the treaty between our countries," she told the mutineer dangerously. "You know Hime does not take abandonment or fickle actions by its allies so lightly."

"Neither do we," said the young woman, switching abruptly into her beautiful Greek; Suou quieted to listen, quite appreciating the sound of the Otomeian's mellifluous dark voice even as it argued against her will.

"I refuse your decision as it is made lightly," Natsuki reasoned, articulating her thoughts with the scholarly precision she had in that language. "I am part of this army and leader of the auxiliary you carry. If I leave now, I abandon them, and you, and my duty. Such an act is not the representation of what you mean by 'fickle'? Such is

not abandonment, an act a true leader calls *infra dignitatem* ?"

"Shizuru-san was a true leader," Suou countered to this. "And yet she had to leave behind her army at the behest of her commanding officer-which, in her case, would be the Senate and People of Hime. Would you then consider what she did so worthy of scorn?"

"I find the analogy... inapt," the girl returned gravely. "Her recall required her specifically. No other could substitute, as no other was elected urban praetor. The task you want does not require me specifically. Another can substitute as messenger without harm to the task. The analogy collapses."

The Himean's lips were trembling.

"So it seems," she growled softly.

Natsuki plodded on, determined to push her argument further while she was still being allowed to speak; she had noticed the changes in the legate's demeanour and interpreted them as signs of rapidly mounting irritability with her defiance. Squaring her shoulders, she drew enough breath for a good final speech.

"Hypothetically," she pronounced, drawing a muffled sound from the now-shaking woman behind the desk. "Let us say that-that the analogy is apt, if you wish. But we still find a flaw in the reasoning. The analogy returns to the original problem: we find ourselves in this situation because of what happened tuh-tuh- to *Shizuru* ."

She slowed her pace after the stutter, but by dint of strict concentration managed to say the rest clearly.

"The true leader was removed for a reason counter to the interests of the many. No one could substitute for *her*, so we are led here... where one who pretends to substitute places us in danger. I am the true leader of the auxiliary. No one could substitute for me exactly. If you send me away for a task not requiring me and only me, you place my men and yours in more danger unnecessarily. So considered, your analogy destroys your reason."

She rasped a deep breath, relieved to be finished and thoroughly

pink in the cheeks.

"I refuse you only because it is logical for me to refuse," she concluded. "As you see."

Bracing herself for the rejoinder that was undoubtedly coming, she set her jaw again and looked at the blonde with a combination of apprehension and obstinacy. To her surprise, she found herself on the receiving end of an odd look that had in it something so *inapt* she had difficulty identifying it.

Until the Himean helped her by bursting into hilarity.

" *Ecastor* !" the blonde cried in between whoops. " *Ecastor* !"

Natsuki gaped at the laughing woman, flabbergasted. Of all the possible retorts she had imagined, none had certainly contained laughter.

"Oh, all right already!" Suou said later to her, wiping away genuine tears. "By the gods, what a patrician you would have been! Go and find someone you can trust to do it, then come back here so I can hear you argue with me again in that lovely Greek. Jupiter, it truly is a pity!"

Shaking her head in bewilderment at the Himean she left still hooting, Natsuki went off to do as directed, wondering exactly what had just happened and unable to make either heads or tails of Suou's utterances. She was a practical girl, however, and had a great many things on her mind besides trying to understand some Himean's humours. She turned her thoughts to resolving the most immediate of her problems, for the time being.

She went to find her cousin.

"Nina," she called to the young woman, whom she found with two of her own subordinate officers: they all bowed respectfully to her. "Come with me."

The girl got up immediately and followed her until they were out of the others' range.

"An order," Natsuki said, proceeding to inform her of the command Suou had given. Once she had finished, it became clear that her cousin found the task as disagreeable an order as had she.

"But why not someone else?" demanded the younger Otomeian.  
"Why me?"

"Why ask this?" Natsuki squinted, seemingly indifferent to her relative's distress. "You dither. Speed is important."

"But Natsuki, I don't-"

"Belong in my unit," the older Otomeian finished in her low voice.  
"You came only to assist me. Assist me now."

"But I can also assist here!"

Natsuki disagreed: "Better you go. Once you go, I shall not think about you or the letters."

Hurt swam to Nina's eyes, was met only by an impregnable breadth of green.

"You want to send me away when we know there may be trouble," Nina said with bitterness, too tired and on edge from their situation to withhold it as she would normally. Her face crumpled, and she scowled fiercely at her gaunt but nonetheless intimidating cousin. "I can't keep up with you, so you have to think of me all the time as a burden? Leaving is the only way I can help?"

The slender black brows slanted, and Natsuki's sunken eyes narrowed within their orbits.

"You talk like a fool," she said severely, fuelling the resentment in Nina's heart before smothering it unexpectedly: "I chose you because I trust you for this."

Nina looked up at the statement, her eyes wide and heart racing.

"I need one fast on the saddle," the other continued with a frown.  
"And able to stay on it for a day without stopping. I need one skilled at evasion too, if evasion is needed. There are worries enough here."

I want not to worry about the letters too when the one I send leaves. I want not to think about the one who goes because I trust them to finish the task completely. *Nina* . You understand me?"

The girl nodded eagerly, quite overwhelmed by this flattering expression of belief from her admired cousin. It took a while for her to realise Natsuki was waiting for her to speak.

"When do I go?" she breathed, attitude having completed a full turnabout. "Now? Immediately?"

The other woman looked away to tilt her head at another Otomeian passing.

"You will wait," she said simply. "The legate must finish writing. Today, soon."

The slender brows slanted again, although they relaxed quickly as she added: "You will reach Sosia in a week, then Argus a little over two weeks."

"I can make it in less."

Natsuki looked down at the younger woman without expression, then smiled rather suddenly to reveal that what had robbed her of flesh the past few months had not robbed her smile of its magic. Her smile was still the same one that had bowled over half of Shizuru's army without its owner even realising, although the deeply sunken cheeks and eyes did give it a new pathetic feel.

"Could be," she said, her tone making it clear she spoke a tribute. Between that and the smile, her cousin's cheeks flared. Natsuki looked away to save the girl from any possible embarrassment and folded her arms over her chest, using them to press the pearl that was under her uniform. Her eyes veiled instinctively at the familiar weight of it, but she fought the urge to close them.

"Argus..." she muttered as if without any thought to it, before her companion could move away. "There should be new mail in Argus now, I think."

"I'll be sure to get it," said the younger woman, obviously thinking

they were talking about Natsuki's next letter from her Himean.

The look she received told her she had to reconsider that thought.

"Nina," said the elder girl evenly, as a further hint. "Also the *regular* mail."

And that word shed light upon the meaning. Nina knew that Shizuru Fujino's letters to her cousin were not carried by the normal couriers but by one of the Himean's own servants, loaded with money for the change of horses and papers of introduction should he encounter any difficulties. This man was tasked with riding at a furious gallop through the length of his journey: no stopovers save to sleep and change horses, no other purpose other than the delivery of the two letters in his pocket, one for Suou and the other for Natsuki. By the time he delivered them, he was usually so exhausted he either came down with a fever or slept away the entirety of the next day.

The rest of the mail was borne by the usual carriers, which meant it had more stopovers and less urgency. As was undoubtedly the case for any letters from the young woman who should have by now had time for writing, a young woman travelling with the legion that had been building a road while on the march. How hard Nina had been trying not to think about her! Apparently not hard enough, if Natsuki had still noticed.

"Ride fast, change horses often," Natsuki instructed. "Take caution."

Nina nodded meekly.

"I think you will be safe," Natsuki continued, her long neck craning as she tilted her head and sniffed at the air. Nina took a few discreet sniffs too and smelled nothing but the usual odours of camp, wondered for an instant if her cousin was actually scenting anything whenever she did this. Who knew when it came to one with such strange senses as Natsuki? Perhaps she smelled something no one else could? Like a coming enemy?

"Even if the missing scouts were sent in the other direction, to Argentum," the elder added, no longer sniffing but still looking up, towards the sky. "You will always take caution."



"I understand," Nina answered.

"You will take provisions and weapons. I will arrange with the legate the money and papers."

"I understand," Nina repeated.

"You will remember," Natsuki followed suddenly, her imperious syntax softened by the gentleness of her voice. "That you go is not running away. So you do not run away."

Poised to repeat the same words as before, Nina's lips fell apart soundlessly for an instant. Natsuki seemed to know she had taken the meaning immediately this time, because the older girl said no more and simply waited, furtively pressing the pearl under her shirt further into skin.

"I understand," Nina said quietly.

Natsuki nodded. She turned to go, even while leaving a parting directive.

"Prepare."

But Nina stopped her before she could leave. Acting purely by impulse, the younger Otomeian had reached out and gripped the older girl's arm. And almost wept when her fingers closed and overlapped markedly: how thin Natsuki had become!

The skeleton wrapped in her cousin's beautiful skin waited, seeming unfazed by the contact.

"I'll be quick, Natsuki," Nina blurted out, unable to remember what she had truly wanted to say. "I promise I'll be quick. And have your letter too, for you, when we next see each other."

The taller Otomeian said nothing, merely tipping her head. Nina struggled for a few seconds over what more to say, feeling awkward because she was still holding her cousin's arm, yet feeling somehow that she could not remedy the awkwardness by letting go of it. She rarely touched Natsuki, and although most of those times were kept cool by either the situation or Natsuki herself, there were also a few

she remembered because of the clumsiness she was now feeling. It was always a struggle, and not because she did not like to touch Natsuki: it was because Natsuki hardly ever touched back.

"Take care," she eventually managed, choking.

The arm shrugged off her hand, and she relinquished her grip nervously. But then she felt her cousin's palm on the top of her head, giving it a brief pat.

"You will see Shizuki for me," the husky voice told her. "You will see she is fed properly?"

Nina nodded, scalp tingling from her cousin's touch. Natsuki smiled again, very briefly.

"Prepare now. Wait in your tent."

Again Nina stopped her from leaving. "Wait-Natsuki?"

"Mm?"

"If-I just thought-if you write a letter fast, I can carry it too," Nina suggested, visited by inspiration. "I can send it to Hime from Argus, if you want."

For a moment Nina tried to probe the cool eyes of her cousin. Whatever she imagined she saw there was lost quickly as Natsuki hummed again and left without a word.

Nina was able to leave shortly afterwards, still an hour or so before dark. She carried with her all the provisions and papers she would need to hasten her journey, along with several sealed letters-none of which was from Natsuki.

At the time Natsuki's cousin departed, the little army set about preparing their belongings for a march, then settled to turn in for an early night's sleep. They woke at dawn the following day, a mixture of apprehension and odd pricklings. Their commander, at least, did show them that he was not entirely casual once they marched out from camp. He sent all of the cavalry riding ahead at a distance that permitted them to act as the scouting advance, but still within

sufficient reach of the Himean cohorts in case they did encounter opposition. For this his legate was both relieved and again exasperated: she admitted the wisdom of sending a strong reconnaissance force because of what had happened with their previous scouts, yet fidgeted over the thought that the girl she was chaperoning had to lead them.

As it turned out, the legate's fears proved justified: the second day into the march, the advance party came within sight of what seemed a huge army moving slowly their way. They ran nearly headlong into its scouts, but managed to wheel and retrace their tracks. Their captain did not bother seeking contact with them: that, to her, was an army ready for battle! A good thing she made that decision, it appeared. The horde-Mentulaean, judging from the armour-suddenly gave pursuit, sending an enormous detachment of their own horse to try and catch up with the fleeing Otomeians.

The chase was nerve-wracking to the Otomeians because of the suddenness. All those pricklings of the past few days had abruptly taken shape, and the shape was even larger than what they had feared. Even the horse unit sent after them seemed so big it could well swallow them up-and that was not even half of the army they had seen shuffling their way.

The chasers were Mentulaean cavalry, however, and that was a point for the Otomeians. Mentulaean horses were mere ponies next to the Lupine division's splendid chargers, so the pursuers were hard-put to catch up with the Otomeian troopers. Indeed, the Mentulae would have continued to merely trail on the Lupine horsemen's dust, had it not been for an additional consideration borne by the captain of the latter: the Himean cohorts, which she had warned by sending some of her fleetest ahead of the pack.

At first she toyed with the idea of leading the cavalry pursuing them straight to the Himean army; she estimated the pursuers to be six *alae* strong-what numbers these Mentulae had!-and though that was considerable, she knew that could be still be easily handled by her men with support from the Himean infantry. But then she heard an unmistakeable sound in the distance, mere minutes after the Mentulaean cavalry first began pursuit. *Hooves*, she thought, *and something else*. And then she realised that a second detachment of

horse had been sent by the foe, most likely one made up of chariots.

The possibility of chariots changed the situation, especially as the ground in this area was still icy enough to support such units. Natsuki knew a standstill with the Himean infantry was no longer an option, because the second wave would undoubtedly catch up during the fight, and possibly extend it enough for the rest of that sluggish Mentulaean army to arrive. She did not know how large that army was, but from the glimpse they had seen, it was more than enough. It was necessary to retreat to the camp! But how to prevent the Himean infantry from being cut down as they retreated, how to protect them and Shizuru's precious artillery against those enemy horses coming closer...

As Natsuki pondered these matters, the Himeans had already begun their retreat, reversing the march with the speed only Himean infantry understood. Suou's cohort, which had been the rear guard, was suddenly the leading cohort as the order turned on its head. Takeda himself was to the middle, near the baggage train, when the sounds of the returning Otomeians first reached them and the warning signal was given. He thought of the same thing the Otomeian captain had: to stand ground. Before he could choose that option, however, he heard sounds louder than the distant marching beat of the infantry army heading towards them. Cavalry coming their way, and not just their own cavalry, from the sound of it! He gave the order to withdraw.

The retreat was executed at a frenzied pace by the energised Seventh, which understood very well from the sounds in the distance that at least one full army was coming. While most of them were actually spoiling for a fight, they were also veteran soldiers with enough experience to know it would be wiser to have that fight from a fortified position. The only worry was whether they would have time to make it before the enemy cavalry caught up. They gave no thought to infantry, since the Mentulaean infantry were shockingly slow, they all knew from experience. Horse, however, beat foot every time. How could they possibly make it in time? Several hours into that gruelling retreat, however, they suddenly heard another noise that hinted to them that they just might.

It was the sound of battle being joined.

The head of the Lupine division had decided to buy the Himeans the time they lacked by engaging the first wave of pursuers. Knowing she could not throw her cavalry into either a full charge or make it fight standstill because of the difference in numbers, she chose to do something that demonstrated again the immense tactical ability she had displayed at Argentum; it took advantage of both the foes' undisciplined-if-numerous ranks and her own troopers' versatility.

First, she ordered all of her men to switch to bows. Trusting that none of the first wave of Mentulae had bows or bowmen even remotely comparable to hers and also that their steeds were far inferior, she then had her men speed their mounts to what she remembered was a slightly inclined section of the road and ranged them on its crest. Once the enemy cavalry came within sight, she had her soldiers shower them with arrows from an impressive distance in a regular and precise hail. Her orders were specific to her troopers: *do not bother with the riders, but shoot down all horses.*

Her men followed her orders to the letter. As horse after horse fell from the Otomeian shafts, Natsuki's plan became clear: she had been counting on the fallen horses to pile up on each other, creating a ridge at the bottom of the incline that grew increasingly larger as more fell on it. Those following stumbled into the rising hurdle of fallen beasts and men, adding to its heft. By the time the Otomeian arrows ran out, two *alae* of Mentulaean horse had dropped this way and their huddle was sufficient to act as a wall into which the remaining four *alae* following crashed, momentum preventing these from turning to the uncluttered sides. Even as those at the very back of the Mentulaean charge began to slow enough to do that, however, the second part of Natsuki's plan was executed: the Lupine division charged down and came pouring through either side of the man-and-horse roadblock, waving their frightful weapons and screaming bloody murder.

The pursuers suddenly found their situation reversed-nay, worse than reversed. While the Otomeians had been able to flee earlier, the Mentulae were blocked by the Lupine warriors enveloping them in a noose, one part of it made up by the wall of Mentulaean dead. They fought back desperately, but the shock of the volte-face was

too great. Their horses were also still winded, whereas the Otomeian ones were comparatively fresh given the pause they had moments earlier. All the Otomeians had to do was push them inwards while attacking and their mounts began to crash into each other, the pressure in the jumble escalating as more of the beasts panicked. Those Mentulae closest to the wall of fallen horse had the worst of it, for they were so tightly packed they could barely turn their mounts, nor even draw swords without cutting each other. A death trap closing in: what had started as a chase became a setting for massacre.

The Otomeians were quick to take the opportunity and were also very ably led. Urging on her men, their captain tightened the noose on the trapped foes until there came a point where a good part of the Mentulae dying were actually those being pushed deeper into the human-horse ridge made earlier, falling on those trying to clamber out of it and crushing them and each other. They did not even realise why the Otomeians did not seem to be stumbling on each new ring of Mentulaean dead their killing noose made. By rights this should have happened, since the number of falling Mentulae was sufficient to create fresh humps of dead that could slow the mounted attackers' progress. That it did not was because of the forethought of the Lupine division's captain.

Once the noose of cavalymen had been thrown around the Mentulaean troopers, Natsuki had ordered her men to do the inverse of what she had told them earlier-that is, that they now had to kill riders and preserve the horse. This way, each time an enemy trooper had his head lopped off by the daos or longsword, one of the free Otomeians would grab the reins of his horse and pull it outside the noose, dead rider still on. The Otomeian leader had given thought to it all, and thus reaped a remarkable upset that would have made her Himean lover unbearably proud.

This bloodbath would have ended with every single one of that first wave of Mentulaean pursuers dead had it not been for the second group, the chariots. Just as the Lupine division had whittled down their trapped enemy to less than a hundred, these finally caught up and began to shoot: not caring whether they hit what remained of their own comrades or the Otomeian troopers. Natsuki gave the

signal to withdraw, and the Lupine division was pursued once more.

It was already dark then, and their flight went on into the deep hours when their foes would stop to sleep. It was not until the following day's dawn that they showed up at camp, every Himean soldier up on the ramparts and looking for them. Cheers rang out when the bedraggled Otomeians rode in the gates that had been kept open for their sake, and legionaries ran to their aid.

One of the first to come tearing down from the walls when they returned was Suou, who had been in a fit of anxiety over their situation. Ever since the last of the cohorts had reached camp safely, late in the night, she had been holding her cohort armed and ready to go out should the Otomeians arrive with pursuers still behind them. There had even been a point where she demanded that Takeda send out some of the army with her so she could fetch their missing auxiliary, but he very rightly refused, worried as he also was. If they were safe, they would turn up soon, he told her sensibly enough, and settled instead for posting an all-night watch. Suou chose to be one of those on the towers, and was thus one of the first to see the Lupine division appear with the first golden fingers of dawn.

"Natsuki!" she cried, helping down the young woman over whom she had been so agitated. The girl was filthy with gore, and there was an arrow sticking through one calf, its protruding tip even scratching her horse. The Otomeian stumbled upon dismount, then wobbled before settling all her weight on her unharmed leg and staying there with exquisite balance.

Suou yelled for a medic and led the girl limping to a stool. The other Otomeians were also dismounting, wincing as they were able to rest their feet on ground again. The Himeans rushing to help them, and Suou watched the weary troopers coming down raggedly from their horses. Not a one was without injury, although most seemed capable of standing, and even looked quite cheerful.

"How many?" she asked of their ill-looking captain.

Natsuki showed the faintest hint of a smile.

"Six *alae*," she said, voice rough with thirst.

" *Six* ?"

"Mmh."

Suou shook her head at the drained girl, her pale eyes shining with anger and emotion.

"They *are* matchless auxiliaries, damn him!" she growled fiercely, stopping the girl when she attempted to rise. Some of the Otomeian's officers were already headed their way, and the medic had arrived to elevate Natsuki's leg. "No, do not get up yet, please! I'll get some slaves to wash you after the doctor finishes, or all that blood on you shall get your wounds festering. You can get up later."

Natsuki's face moved, her eyes searching her warriors' ranks with patent concern. She was counting her men. Her hand came out to Suou's in mute supplication, and Suou saw that the bandages had been torn off the knuckles of that hand, along with the skin. She whipped to the physician, who was inspecting the arrow in Natsuki's calf.

"Well?" she snapped impatiently.

He continued what he was doing for a few seconds.

"Lucky," he grunted. "It doesn't look to have hit any arteries. Still, it's off to surgery for her."

Suou exhaled loudly with relief, applying pressure to Natsuki's shoulders again. The latter noted the touch was lighter this time.

"Your wounded will be tended to, Natsuki, never fear," Suou told the young woman, handing her a cup of water which a servant had brought. "See, our men already go amongst them! I'll be back to check on you once I've seen the status up there-but please stay here and let them see to your wounds first. Your officers are here to see you, so direct them if you need something to be done. Don't even think of getting up unless the doctor allows it. Gods know you and your men have done more than enough, compared to the rest of us! Oh, you're wonderful!"



After which heartfelt praise she ran off to clamber up a tower once more, calling out orders ceaselessly. She found the men on the ramparts still celebrating, the Seventh's morale having risen considerably after the auxiliary's victorious return. There was darkness tainting the jubilation, however: all of those on the walls could now see the glint of armour in the distance, and hear distinctly the tramp of the Mentulæan army coming ever closer to their little fort. By late afternoon, the elation over the auxiliary's triumph had all but fizzled out as hordes of Mentulæe began to line up before their eyes. Thousands of bladed chariots and horse were first, followed by even more foot warriors-and all of these spilled onto the space around the tiny camp like the forecasted spring floods. The grossly understrength legion and its allied cavalry were completely surrounded.

The siege of the Seventh began three days before the Calends of July.

# Chapter 50

## **Vocabulaire:**

**1. Assembly** - A meeting of the Roman people called specifically for the purpose of debating or dealing with governmental or legislative matters. The three Roman assemblies varied in composition: the Centuriate, which organised the people into their economic classes; the Popular, which organised the people into their tribes; and the Plebeian, which did not allow the participation of patricians.

**2. Castor's** - Actually the Temple of Castor (thus: Castor's Temple). State houses included temples, which meant many temples were used as government offices, and often had paper-filled nooks and basements.

**3. Contio** (s. L.), **contiones** (pl. L.) - Preparatory meetings convoked for **assemblies** (see note above) to discuss any one of various comitial matters, including elections and the promulgation of laws.

**4. Imago** (s. L.) - A likeness made of wax and crafted as a mask, generally used for ceremonial purposes, e.g. ancestral parades during rites like funerals, where actors were hired to play the roles of the family's ancestors. They were passed down generations, so a person with illustrious ancestors could have quite a collection. A good imago reproduced a person's features with great faithfulness, from their wrinkles down to the shade and quality of their hair: even imperfections or scars were included. Imagines (plural) were thus exquisitely lifelike... and expensive. They were hidden away from dust and corruption in a special cupboard, taken out only for special occasions.

**5. "It is because the barbarians have no Greek."** - To be understood, the remark takes both a bit of recollection regarding past notes in the story and some familiarity with Greek texts on warfare. A fair number of Greeks who wrote treatises on warfare discussed the use of fire (especially for projectiles), going so far as

to prescribe different recipes for creating incendiary mixtures. Recall then that the Mentulae are not users of Greek, which is why they are unlikely to be familiar with such Hellenic tomes. Recall too that at some point in this story, the statement "he has not a measure / an ounce of Greek" was used as a Himean (Latin) put-down for someone considered uneducated. Good Greek was expected of Roman nobles or Latin intelligentsia, and so it is too for the nobles of Hime.

When Natsuki derides the Mentulae as uneducated or unlettered by her line, she also pokes fun at her Himean allies. This is found in her ironic treatment of what she is practically calling 'the Mentulaean lack of education'. After all, the 'unlettered' Mentulae are determined unlettered in her statement only because they do not know Greek, having in place of that 'language of the lettered' another. What is this other? Himean, the language of Natsuki's allies-who are also the originators of Natsuki's put-down.

There lies the question: if a Himean (Person A) considers barbaric a Mentulaean (Person B) who has no Greek but has Himean (Person A's own language) instead, then what exactly makes a barbarian by Person A's definition? If we recall, too, that the word "barbarian" developed from the onomatopoeia supposed to represent the sound the Hellenes heard when listening to a foreign language, Natsuki's insinuation becomes more apt. She is actually jesting about what various people-especially the Himeans-consider 'unlettered', 'uneducated', or 'barbarian'. A pun with a bite.

**6. Mea vita** (L.) - Extremely affectionate endearment: "my life".

**7. Peregrinum est, non legitur.** (L.) - "It is foreign to me: I cannot understand it." Suou is referring not to the specific words, but to Natsuki's syntax effect and skip-style communication. She might as well be saying, *Otomeium est, non legitur*. "It is Otomeian to me: I cannot understand it."

**8. Pila (pl.), pilum** (s. L.) - The standard-issue Roman military spear

**9. Publicani** (L.) - Individuals/organisations hired by the Roman State apparatus (specifically, the Treasury) to farm taxes on its behalf. Tax farming activities were more elaborately discussed in an

*earlier chapter of the story-the 13th, to be precise-and can be found in the third part of that particular chapter, "parts" being delineated by the long horizontal bars denoting page breaks on this website.*

**10. Rostra** (L.) - *The name given by the Romans to the speaker's platform on one side of the Well of the Comitia. This is the place where tribunes of the plebs hold their assemblies.*

**11. Wakizashi** (L.) - *Traditional Japanese blade about the length of a forearm. Thus shorter than the katana, it was primarily used for defence, and generally held to be one of the best weapons for this purpose.*

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## ***Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae***

*par ethnewinter*

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The Mentulae took a full day to array themselves before the Seventh's camp. About half of them had actually swept past the little fort upon arrival, which manoeuvre let the watching Himeans suppose their intent. The half that passed, actually a full army by itself, took with it nearly all the artillery the Mentulae were pulling, and was guessed to be destined for one of the two Himean city-provinces to the south. The Himeans did not know it at the time, but the army that went south was led by another prince of the Mentulaean empire, a half-brother of the captured Artaxi, whom Shizuru Fujino had defeated at Argentum.

The still-enormous force that remained to besiege the Seventh was in the care of a favoured baron of Obsidian's court. Baron Procaleps was actually meant to invest the city of Sosia, but the prince with whose army he had been marching had seen fit to give him other orders after running into this Himean outpost. The baron was told to destroy it first. A worthless deviation as far as the baron was concerned, since he would have preferred to ignore such a tiny force and simply drive for the original target. Nonetheless, trusting to the overwhelming number of his troops and the excellence of his own

military mind, he settled down in front of the Himean camp and proceeded to siege it, expecting the matter to last for no more than a few days. One look at the odds would surely convince the defenders that the only thing to do was lie down and roll over.

The problem with this plan came when the doughty Himeans demonstrated they were not very good at lying down and rolling over. Part of the blame too fell on Mentulaean unfamiliarity with the Himean camp style, made clear with the first assault the invaders launched: having taken appropriate time to scratch their heads at the odd look of the enemy fort, the besiegers simply charged towards it and rolled up against its walls like waves on a rock-face. Many perished in the outlying ditches, but so numerous were the Mentulae that the waves kept on coming, a seething, screaming torrent of bodies trying to tear down or scramble up the walls. The effort was heroic; the gain, pitiful. None of the wall-climbers got very far.

The Himean camp was a good one and it bristled with fortifications. All legionaries were on the ramparts, shooting arrows and poking siege spears into enemy faces. The worst went to the Mentulae who actually got sufficient spears into the walls for their footholds, since these got close enough to the top to be subjected to the Otomeians' explosive daos. It was a terrible fight for both sides as one side refused to stop coming and the other refused to stop repelling. After only an hour of this engagement, the walls of the Himean camp were painted in red-and most of the paint was Mentulaean.

Even so, the Mentulae still had the better circumstances. They had the numbers to spend in extravagance while the Himeans were fewer and had to compensate by working double or even triple shifts. The Himeans were also cooped up in a fort, cut off from added resources until dark, when they might attempt to sneak out to forage or strip the field's dead of weapons and armour. An hour before noon during that furious first attack, the defenders began to run out of arrows and *pila*. By noon, their arms were seized by cramps. The defence on the walls looked as if it would flag.

And then one of the auxiliary heads, the Otomeian princess, started a trend: her servants suddenly produced sacks of manure they had collected from the stables and started pouring it onto the besiegers.

As the besiegers were looking up, mouths agape from panting and yelling in the fight, many of them took the rain of excrement in the face. So shocked were they at this foul repellence that that section of the wall was cleared abruptly of enemies, with the defenders in a mirthful uproar. More sections of the wall took up the example.

That happened around the time the sun shone hot. Because the day itself had also begun warm, the shit-stink rapidly heightened, sinking the Mentulae into a crashing pessimism for what suddenly seemed a futile attack. While it may not have proven futile had they kept on, any such victory would still have proven Pyrrhic. The ratio of Mentulaean dead to Himean ones in that primary, three-hour assault was shameful: hundreds were lost to them while the defenders lost none. Sobered and itching for a wash, the Mentulae retreated to their camp and their commanders into their tents for discussion.

The next day, a more standard sortie was fought. Along with the assaults upon the walls, the Mentulaean commander ordered the engineers to assemble the siege weapons left to his army. The only difficulty with this was the ground, since it had softened enough in this area for the heavy engines to sink and rut. This made it extremely easy for the Seventh-actually half of the Seventh-to harass them, since the machines could not be moved very quickly out of battle. The Himeans' Otomeian cavalry, of which the Mentulae still had a pronounced fear, proved highly opportunistic in this respect, and several engines were lost in the following engagements. Nor did the Himean infantry seem to weaken whenever the cavalry ventured out for this purpose. They had a superior-if-alien organisation and an absolutely pig-headed view of surrender that the Mentulae found both astounding and worthy of exasperation.

Had this small camp been the Baron Procaleps's only objective in the invasion, he would have won, for he would then have been willing to commit more of his forces to the battles that developed. But his true objective was Sosia, waiting some distance away, more heavily fortified and expected to have more troops as its garrison. He might be following orders from a prince, but his primary orders carried greater weight in his head, voiced as they had been by the King. So, commit more of his troops than necessary he would not,

risk more of them he refused to do... which was why the Himeans found themselves winning skirmishes they had expected to be one-sided, by virtue of the enemy's chief virtue not being used: the numbers.

Nineteen days into this fruitless and half-hearted investment, the Baron Procaleps packed up. Uttering a mighty oath to the gods, heaping imprecations on Himeans in general and one Mentulaean prince in particular, he uprooted the main force of his army and marched them off to Sosia. He left five thousand foot and all of his chariots to finish the siege, however, for he was not the sort of man who could truly stomach leaving a job undone. The forces he split off were put in the care of his son, also named Procaleps.

"Finish it quickly, but don't skimp on the result," he told the young man. "Kill every last one and burn that thing to the ground. Then come join me at Sosia."

Procaleps the Younger took up the task with the fervour of a son out to impress his father. Meeting the same resolute defence his sire had, he did not lose heart. He was convinced, besides, that the enemy was by now beginning to weaken and even run out of food. And in that last respect, he was correct. It was during his time besieging the Seventh that the Himeans experienced the first grave stirrings of hunger, from the lowest rankers to highest officers.

"We're working on less than half-rations, General," said one of the military tribunes to the Himean commander during a meeting. "The grain's almost out, and it's impossible to forage. They're tight! We can't venture far enough to actually stand a chance of finding anything, and we can't even send out messengers at night, since they're keeping close watch. They jump if they see so much as a prick dangling out."

"Let's hope it's with intent to just kill and not something worse, if they jump out for that," a senior centurion grinned wolfishly.

"We'll have to make do," said the general, his brown skin paler than usual. "And we'll keep trying, damn them!"

"Worse comes to worst, we could ask the auxiliary to surrender their

spare horses for ration," suggested another tribune. "Those are big animals. Plenty of meat on them."

But the commander rejected the idea.

"They're the only cavalry we have to cover us," he said. "Let's keep them cavalry fighters as long as possible. If one loses a horse in battle, he'll just turn into another foot soldier."

"If only we could send someone!" another centurion cried. "Just one. But the *cunni* keep watch on us like vultures waiting for the kill. If this goes on, we'll lose by plain starvation."

"At least we have water," someone answered.

"For all we know, that could dry up any day too! It's getting warmer and warmer."

Takeda looked tiredly at the man for a few minutes, too anxious to even contest this bleak outlook. And he thought of what his legate had confessed to him when he began to voice concern: that she had actually sent letters already to Sosia and Argus, the latter being one requesting reinforcements. How embarrassed he had felt at that moment-and how impossible it had been to berate her!

"Like I said, we'll have to make do," he repeated, trying to sound more positive than he felt. "Reinforcements will come. Even if the people back in Argus and Sosia don't know we're in this situation, they know enough to have noticed something's off by now... and they did get a warning from Himemiya-san. They'll come. In the meantime, we hold these *cunni* at bay."

So the siege went on. At one point, the Mentulae grew more innovative, loading flaming brush onto their two remaining catapults and lobbing them over the fortified walls of the Seventh's camp. The idea came too late, however, for the weather itself helped foil the plan: sporadic showers fell to douse the flames and combined with the overall muggy damp to protect the wood. The creative stroke even made things worse for the besiegers later, for the Himeans soon answered with their own artillery twist. By order of their legate-who was thoroughly fed up with putting out flaming meteors-the



defenders loaded a mixture of fat, kindling, and pitch into their own catapultae and aimed at the enemy's siege engines.

As the Mentulae were actually loading more flaming brush into their machines at the time, all the Himean missiles had to do was land close enough for the incendiary mixtures to break and spatter on the enemy catapults, which swiftly took flame. The Himeans waved a hearty goodbye to the nuisances as they burned, glad it had not occurred to their foes to use such substances for their own projectiles. Which relief provoked a puzzling remark from their Otomeian princess that no one could understand-save, it seemed, for their legate, who also needed time to think it over before she suddenly began snorting uncontrollably to herself. The remark that put her in that state was: "It is because the barbarians have no Greek."

The bigger worry for the Himeans was the change in seasons. While the light showers had helped with the problem of fire, they also augmented an increasing humidity paired with warming weather. Of themselves the Seventh did their utmost to keep their camp clean and free of dirt and faeces, but their enemies and neighbours outside the walls did not. This meant that the area surrounding them was ripening each day with potential nastiness. The Himeans would welcome any diseases that could afflict the Mentulaean camp, but not if the same ailments invaded their walls. Compounding their difficulties was that both camps also had a good number of pack-animals and horse, whose manure added to the general stink.

This was on the Himean legate's mind as she surveyed the grounds from the fort's highest tower, her face arctic despite the heat-which was still not comparable to the heat of the summers back home, she and her companions noted.

"Heavens, but their battlefield manners are obnoxious," she said, her eyes on the enemy tents. "You would think they'd know enough to keep an area free of excrement if they intended to stay in it for this long, but *no*. See, the bodies we killed just yesterday in their little sortie are still there! Where are their firebrands when they actually need them?"

"I think we burned them all out with their catapults, Suou-san."

"True, we might have," she grinned. "Poor Prometheus-men fail to use properly your gift stolen from the gods. All those poor corpses. Don't they look pitiful down there? Mentulaeen those bodies might be, but I feel for them."

"Aren't a civilised lot, Legate," one of the centurions on the platform grunted. "They'll leave 'em there to melt, I think, and it will be us gets the worst of it. We've got to get out of here."

"So I think too," Suou agreed. "However, our commander is doubtful about forcing a full-on fight with them still-and I can't say I don't understand. Even I have to admit it will be a bit dodgy. Their infantry still looks to outnumber us two to one and, even more importantly, their horse three to one. Given that we'll be fighting on relatively flat ground, those are madmen's winning numbers at a wager, Takashi."

She paused to look into the horizon beyond the enemy's encampment, the dark parts of her eyes shrinking as she stared into the light sky. Her sharply contracted pupils gave her the look of someone blind.

"Part of me is screaming to take them on," she admitted. "But another part is asking if it's too great a risk. If only we'd whittled them down more, from the start! But whoever's leading them now is a little more cautious than the one before, so they're not losing as many as they were earlier. A better head for siegework, this one."

"We've good boys and girls, Suou-san," one of her companions ventured hopefully.

"Oh, the very best!" Suou exclaimed. "We wouldn't have held out so long here otherwise. But we have to remember that they're also *tired* boys and girls. About a quarter are afflicted with enteric fevers. Their bellies are half-empty and they've had to fend off the attacks of thousands of enemies harassing them through weeks now. Whereas the Mentulae out there are well-fed and well-rested. Added to which is that they have the capacity to cover their flanks in any deployment. They left all those damned chariots, after all."

"Damned now, yes."

She turned to the new voice and frowned.

"Oh no-you *again*, Natsuki?" she chided the Otomeian captain, who only gave a highly-injured sniff at the censure in her voice. Two of the girl's troopers followed her ascent onto the platform. Each one carried a stool, and they arranged their superior on them after mounting the tower, helping her sit on one and rest her bandaged leg on the other. They retired unobtrusively to a corner afterwards, and Suou eyed them with palpable disapproval.

"Natsuki, what are you doing here?" she demanded of the only dark-haired foreigner. "If I recall, you were told to stay in bed and let that heal. I'm now beginning to question whether I am correct in recalling that, because you seem not to share the memory-which discriminating case of amnesia has been going on for nearly three weeks now!"

The shell-pink lips plumped into a pout. Suou knew the girl hated this sort of lecture most, but went on anyhow.

"It's because you keep ignoring what we say that your leg refuses to heal properly," she said, crossing her arms loosely before her chest and arching a threatening brow. "Haven't you grown tired of having us douse it with alcohol, then, or are you developing some sort of deviant taste for that?"

Natsuki looked at her own leg.

"Better now," she volunteered.

"Not nearly!" Suou looked too at the limb, noting the yellowish stains that had seeped again through the linen. "Look at those. It's taking much longer than I'd like for it to dry up completely, and it's all because you keep breaking it open again yourself, what with all this walking about the camp. You're like a surveyor on a rabid hunt for a building infraction! What that thing needs is a good week of rest in bed and not out of it. You have to stay off your feet, the doctors said."

The girl arched a brow meaningfully, gesturing to the stool on which she sat.

"Very obedient of you now, yes," the Himean said with patent sarcasm. "You know what I mean, Natsuki. So please, for the final time-go back to your tent and stay there, for all our sakes!"

This time, the dark brow was arched at her.

"Not for all our sakes that I leave it?" she asked defiantly. "Not for all our sakes that I have left it, thus far?"

Suou took a deep breath, knowing the girl was referring to the times she had helped marshal the defenders whenever the Mentulae came close to scaling their walls. It was impossible to belittle her value at such times because she was instrumental to their ongoing successes. Natsuki's presence in battle always galvanised her men, and their energy often infected the Himeans. Many of the Himeans admired her as well, so the sight of the obviously ill, obviously injured girl ignoring her pains to fight with them roused them into ignoring their own weariness.

Suou knew too that even more important than Natsuki's effect on determination and morale was her leadership. Natsuki knew almost mystically where to send her men next, knew which spot would soon be in danger. It was the martial streak in the girl, of course: she had the natural ability to sense such perils before they materialised, and so had proven time and time again to be an invaluable asset to the defenders. Even so, it caused a great deal of worry for both her chaperone and physicians, who would cluck angrily after the engagements were over and lecture her all the way to bed until both her ears went scarlet.

"Granted," Suou replied heavily. "But it's high time you were permitted to be a little selfish, especially given everything you've done. This is for your sake now. Go on and rest."

Natsuki insisted: "Must talk to you now."

The Himean tilted her head. "If that was all, you could have just sent a messenger to get me instead, you know. All you would have had to do was wait."

"Too important," the other responded, before adding demurely: "I

need to stay here a while, too."

"Why would you need to stay here?"

"Ah." An eager lift of the head. "We talk now?"

"My god, it's as though you haven't been listening at all," Suou said, opening her eyes wide. Her surprised irises looked like pieces of the sky, bright and feathered with little bits of white. "Just to teach you a lesson, then: *No* . I will not indulge you any longer, Natsuki-at least, not until you understand that my indulgence of you shall stop when it's your health involved. Get your men to take you back to your tent. That's all. Be off!"

She turned away and muttered the rest to the waiting centurions, who had been trying very hard not to laugh at the exchange.

"You'd think such a smart girl would understand how dangerous it is to risk a wound in this weather," she grumbled to them, aware Natsuki could still hear her. "That mess outside isn't conducive to good health either."

"I come about that," Natsuki's low voice suddenly spoke at her back. "I want to talk about that."

"I'm not going to turn around, so go away."

"Like this is fine too."

Suou's eyes met those of Takashi, who grinned his big yellow teeth her way.

"I think you better listen to her, Legate," he volunteered to the rueful-looking patrician.

"Yes, I think I better," she agreed, whirling to face the foreigner once more. The bony, severely beautiful face smiled in triumph at her surrender.

*Now I understand what you meant, Shizuru-san,* Suou thought to herself, now only a little surprised that even her estimation of the Otomeian's obduracy had been wrong. She remembered thinking

once that anyone who was not Natsuki's lover could easily see that the princess would be stubborn, but she still turned out to be wrong in thinking they could guess the extent of that stubbornness. Heavens, but the girl could be like a brick wall! Suou had not expected her to be *this* wilful, and even now the concentrated exposure to her that their situation afforded was revealing further depths of wilfulness in the Otomeian, ones that exasperated Suou to no end.

At least half of the exasperation was for herself too. Irrked as she might be by Natsuki's obstinacy, Suou had to admit she was also amused by it: sometimes titillated, even. She did not know if it was simply because of the Otomeian's childlike manner, or delicate looks, or something else... but there was a quality to Natsuki's insubordination that had you tickled even when her teeth would surprise you with a nip, or smiling even as she broke leash and rammed you like an unruly kid goat. Suou found, to her chagrin, that she was not proof to the charm of unruly kid goats-even if she did want to lock this particular specimen in a pen on occasion. Oh, princesses! Bleating, butting bundles of stubborn!

"I'm still of half a mind to order the men to cart you back to your tent," Suou threatened, flicking a glance to the troopers in the corner and wondering if they would actually obey such an order. She had long-since learned that the regard Natsuki's men gave her was fanatical. In which respect she was very like her absent lover.

Suou leaned close to the girl.

"Were you by any chance half as disobedient when it was Shizuru with you?" she asked.

" *Half*," was the wicked reply.

Suou's lips twitched.

"Which was still worse than your average army mule, I'm sure," she quipped, throwing back her shoulders and stretching her aching back. "I have a proposition. If you really want me to listen, you have to listen to me first. Mutual exchange, you might say. Otherwise, it's off you go."

The Otomeian cocked her head to indicate her attention.

"Promise me you shall spend the rest of the week off your feet," Suou bargained, fully aware that this might be the most she could get out of the girl. "Absolutely no walking. Ask some of your men or servants to carry you-or ask mine, even. I'll have mine put together a litter. And you have to listen to the doctors from now on."

She paused and heaved a deep sigh at Natsuki's face.

"I'm not trying to be dictatorial, really," she told the young woman, bending closer and speaking very softly because this was for Natsuki's ears alone. "It's for your health, Natsuki, as well as my well-being. There's at least one person who would skin me alive if something bad happens to you again."

Natsuki seemed to sigh, though no breath actually escaped.

"Shizuru-san would be very displeased with me already with just the leg," Suou continued. "What more if she knew about all this?"

The pensive look vanished: Natsuki scoffed.

"Why be angry with you?" she rebutted. "Illogical. Shizuru is logical."

"Generally, yes. When it comes to you, no," Suou retorted. "She tends to become very illogical when it's you involved."

To her surprise, the girl's face fell-but not in annoyance.

"No, not like that," Suou whispered urgently, putting a hand on the Otomeian's shoulder. "Do not take it like that, Natsuki: I didn't mean that as an accusation or anything of the kind. I just wanted to point out that I take my promise to look over you as seriously as she took it from me, and both of us were deadly serious in that conversation. Apologies if it came out badly."

The Otomeian responded by shaking her head and assuming an aloof look, one that seemed calculated to cover up the fact that she had just now looked miserable.

"The promise," the girl said. "All right."

"You agree?"

"Yes." And then a hasty addendum: "Unless it is an emergency, yes?"

Suou nodded slowly. "Of course, but only a true emergency. Not merely something like a burning need to stretch your legs or anything of the kind."

Ever the stickler, the girl enquired what Suou's parameters for identifying 'true emergencies' were.

"Let's just say that if another arrow is about to stick you, you have every right to get to your feet," the Himean answered with narrowed eyes.

Natsuki said she would abide by the pledge.

"Good! Break that and I swear I shall lash you to your bed and sit on you afterwards," Suou said in good humour, putting both hands on her hips as she regarded the young woman. "Why are you here then? What is it you wanted?"

Quite unexpectedly, the other lifted one hand and pointed over the railing. She was pointing towards the Mentulaean camp, her finger aimed towards the cluster of chariots currently unmanned.

"I want them," she said.

"Them-er, the bladed chariots?"

"Mm. I want them."

Suou tried to work it out by herself first, then finally gave up and quizzed the girl.

"You want to force battle, I know," Natsuki explained. "If so, no more need to wait. Not anymore."

"Why not?" A thoughtful frown. "Were you waiting too?"

Natsuki nodded excitedly. "Now it ends. The terra is perfect. We can



leave this camp as soon as they are caught. The chariots are no worry... just the infantry. Maybe those are no worry too."

"Go on and tell me why," Suou urged, still with a frown.

"Suou," the Otomeian very nearly whined, enthusiasm suddenly dissipating. "You said it before... when we made this camp. You really forget, maybe?"

Suou hung her head and smiled at the young woman.

"I think I do," she sighed. "Besides which, Natsuki, I fear you're not being terribly clear. Might I ask you to either switch languages, please, or simply tell me in more detail what makes you so excited to attack them now? As it is, I am left with sentences that I can tell are related, yet whose links I cannot seem to find. *Peregrinum est, non legitur.* "

Natsuki audibly sighed. It had a surprising depth of expression that said to Suou that she was being very slow and the only reason she was not being scolded for it was because the Otomeian was being very patient today. Which nice bit of irony made Suou's eyes dance wildly as she listened to the very patient girl.

"You see," Natsuki said in Greek, making another point of lenience by acquiescing to both of the legate's requests. "The chariots are the most important concern for you, no? Not actually the infantry."

"Yes, that is true," Suou said in the same language, playing along with a glint in her eye. "You understand me so well! I seem to be as a clearly written book to you, or a precisely articulated passage."

"It is so in this case," the girl nodded sagely, either ignoring or simply missing Suou's joke. "But you worry for nothing. The chariots are not a concern any longer. A new factor subtracts them from the equation."

"Oh god, you sound like an Attic version of my sister."

Natsuki's brow creased. "Hrr?"

"Go on, please, and do not mind me. Why are they out of the

equation?"

"The Mentulaean chariots are large, heavy," Natsuki said, excited as she came to her point. "Good in their lands, maybe, but not here. Before, they could work, because there was no hindrance. But now a hindrance arrives. They have not used the chariots in the last two engagements, so they may not have noticed-as you have not noticed-but, this close to the river, the soil changes swiftly. The feel of it, or the... I cannot recall the word... the quality... I was waiting for it. You observe later," she said, suddenly releasing a very soft, very pleased giggle that only Suou heard. "The chariots' wheels will sink and get stuck. A fine trap, this soil."

Her auditor was frozen, stunned by the good sense of this advice. In her mind, Suou was actually jumping up and down. Of course! The chariots were indeed likely to get stuck in mud like this, which fetched spatters all over the legionaries whenever they walked. Why had she not thought of it? Oh, but she was a Himean through and through: unused to thinking of the mechanics of chariots, which she had only ever encountered in these lands, and as units of the enemy. She had only thought of them swirling around their camp those first days into the siege, had not thought of the steadily worsening impediment to the conveyances in the very ground they walked. Ah, but to think now of how to use that in a battle...

She stayed still and quiet for so long that Natsuki took it upon herself to speak again, keen to regain the Himean's attention.

"I think if they are pressed enough they will try to use them," she told the fair-haired woman, looking as though she would give her a tug if she failed to surface from her daze. "And when they fail... I think there will be panic enough for a rout. But they must be pressed enough, Suou. You understand?"

Suou snapped out of her stupor and gave the girl a smile.

"Don't worry, we can press them enough to bleed oil," she said, now sharing Natsuki's enthusiasm. "I know just how to do it! Now all I have to do is convince Takeda-kun that this is the perfect time."

She paused to look affectionately into green eyes, then bent again

to speak in a whisper.

"You really are a pearl beyond price, Natsuki. I'd kiss you for this if I could, but..."

The younger woman smirked at her shrug.

"Shizuru would be angry?" Natsuki suggested.

"Ready to murder me," Suou enlarged. "And with good reason. Pearls beyond price should always be jealously guarded, especially when their worth proves to be beyond the ornamental-high as they already rank there."

The Otomeian blushed and ducked. As for Suou, she straightened and turned to the centurions, who had fallen into their own dialogue ever since the conversation had switched to Greek. Most Himeans had a basic working knowledge of the language of the Hellenes, yes, but very rarely understood the elite Attic argot, especially when it was rapped out at the pace at which Natsuki and Suou had been speaking.

"Kintarou, you were down last," she said to the men, who stopped their talk. "Where was the commander?"

"Checking the supply and rations, Suou-san."

"Let's go see him-you too, Takashi. I'd like both of you to hear it." She smiled and puffed at a stray lock of hair. "Besides, he's not been very comfortable with the two of us being alone ever since we got stuck here. Afraid I'll say *'I told you so'*."

They laughed heartily with her, joking all the way down from the tower. They liked their legate very much, and so their interactions were warm. Throughout the march and the time penned up in this camp, Suou had been steadily working and fighting with them, always in good humour, always ready to give a kind word to anyone needing one. As she proved so very capable, and seemed always to understand their concerns so very well, the Seventh was very quickly charmed: nearly every member of that tiny army had grown to esteem their legate even more than their current commander.

Just as Suou had planned.

This was a contingency scheme she had formulated from the start, in case their general should suddenly decide on a tactical error without room for her to manoeuvre-something even worse than this ill-fated march to Argentum, for instance, or something that would *without a doubt* see all of them dead. If it came to that, Suou decided, she would have to instigate a mutiny and take over, and having the support of the rankers and officers would make such a coup so much easier.

The idea was a worst-case resort, though. Not even Suou, results-oriented woman that she was, truly liked the notion. Mutiny in the army was ever the Great Unpardonable, its authors easily condemned to death by convention and law. Her principle in this matter was to always exhaust the full vocabulary of persuasion first... and only after proving the man deaf and herself mute, only then would she even remember there was such a word as *rebellion* .

She did not need to remember the existence of the word on this occasion, as it turned out. Takeda heard her willingly this time, and quickly adopted her suggestions. Once everything had been agreed upon, the soldiers were duly informed of the plan and given the standard pep talk-in which respect Suou actually thought the commander acquitted himself well, based on the reaction of the soldiers. The Otomeian princess disagreed with this, however, and said that the legionaries' eager responses to Takeda's speech were due more to the general exasperation with their circumstances and a desire to have an end of the matter. Smiling at the fairly reasonable assessment, Suou whispered to the girl nonetheless to be kinder. Comparing all commanders to her charismatic lover, she told her, was just a little unfair.

They set the attack for twilight, just before dawn of the next day. The infantry massed in a line and simply marched up-although they took care to do it quietly-and fell on their surprised foes, who barely received warning from the guards before they were deprived of them by Himean swords. The Mentulaeen officers were quick, however, and they rallied their still-groggy men to defence. The first few lines put together fell quickly under the relentless Himean assault, but eventually torches were lit and spines were stiffened: some of the

Mentulae finally began to wake and present to the attackers a decent fight.

The conflict seemed to hold for a time in the front lines, with neither army gaining ground nor moving backward. But then something seemed to break on the Mentulaean side, which was still half-gripped by panic and the rude remnants of sleep. The Himeans, on the other hand, were fully awake and fighting as though it would be their only chance to live-which it was. The attackers suddenly swelled, seemed to push even further. When his infantry threatened to cave in, Procaleps the Younger, commander of the Mentulaean force, did the most logical thing to save it.

His actions were exactly as the Himeans wanted them.

He gave the order for the charioteers to mobilise, sending his now-awake teams to the parked conveyances. Up the drivers and archers clambered onto the vehicles and on the vehicles rolled through the mud... before abruptly getting stuck in the sludge. Natsuki's prediction came true and her plan was carried to fruition: hundreds of her jubilant troopers rode their powerful horses through the thick slush and cut down the mired chariots, many of which were abandoned by panicking drivers. Nor were the Himeans left behind in their part of the battle: once the Mentulaean foot recovered its bearings and tried to go into the standard line, the Himeans went into their own formation and continued their press.

By this time, the first glow of light was beginning to spread on the sky. The timing could not have been better, for it was just about time for the other part of the Himean offensive to strike. Suou had hidden the artillery behind and beside the left of the infantry line, which was farthest from the cavalry charge. As soon as the Mentulae saw that weakness and tried to outflank the Himean foot on that side, the artillery shocked them with a rain of missiles. The result: the Mentulae on that side fled and piled up to the Himean right. Which left them pooling neatly between the Himean line and the Otomeians. These were still cutting down the remaining charioteers on the Himean right. As more of the Mentulae from these abandoned chariots ran to the safety of their infantry comrades, both Himean and Otomeian charges followed them inwards without breaking line. The Mentulae walked themselves straight into a

pincer.

The battle was relatively short, lasting for perhaps little more than an hour. So vigorously had the Seventh fought against its besiegers that nary a Mentulaeen might have been left on the field had it not been for the general's orders to spare anyone from high command, in order to extract information. Save for that handful kept alive, every other Mentulaeen was put to the sword. The Seventh and its allies had been cooped up in that camp for over twenty days by then, living on scrap rations and bone-tired from the vigilance of the besieged. They were not in a merciful frame of mind.

Suou shook hands afterwards with her commander, who announced he would be awarding her decorations as soon as he was able. This triumphant reconciliation was interrupted when one of the tribunes ran to them, calling out that the Mentulaeen camp was stuffed with food and supplies. The Seventh could have a decent meal tonight!

"Isn't it wonderful, Suou-kun?" he gasped, having been worrying about feeding the men ever since the siege began; he had actually reduced his own rations to far less than half, trying to spare what he could for the men. "Oh, this is a good day! And I'm glad you were here with me, since I'd not have thought of using the artillery to cover the left flank. That was brilliant!"

She shook her head and answered, gently, "Thank you, but I'm afraid it wasn't my idea. I remembered reading it in Harada-san's accounts of her campaign before this one, where Shizuru-san did it first-although she hid her artillery under cover of a fog, not the darkness."

So lifted was his mood by the combined victory and relief that this did not have the power to depress him. He nodded thoughtfully.

"Still, it's a good idea," he confirmed.

It was on the tip of Suou's tongue to say it was because Shizuru was a good general, but she stopped herself in time.

"I'll handle the cleanup, Takeda-kun," she told him. "You go see to the food before the men run through it like goats let loose in a

garden. I've one to look after already and it's more than enough!"

"What do you mean?" Takeda asked in confusion, removing his helmet to swipe his sweaty brow. "You have a goat?"

But she merely laughed and slapped him on the back of his cuirass, told him again to go on. A look at their camp stopped her laughter once he left, for she was just about able to make out a dark head of hair peeking down at her from one of the guard-towers, all its accompanying heads a uniform blonde. She shook her head.

"You were right, Shizuru-san: she really is a brat," she muttered under her breath. "I told her to stay off her feet, didn't I?"

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As events developed in the North, so did they in Hime. At the same time the Seventh was besieged, Shizuru and her allies went into the next stage of their plan, which was to call successive *contiones* for the Plebeian Assembly. This was intended to keep the plebeian people adamantly on their side by keeping public interest stoked and furiously blazing for them. Very easily handled, because they had one of the greatest-and to the Traditionalists, *worst* -tribunes of the plebs in history on their side, in the person of Urumi Himemiya-Kanzaki.

She had by now become legendary in her doings on the rostra, which meant she drew crowds consistently whenever she began to declaim. Indeed, even some senators or knights known to have more conservative sympathies attended her *contiones* not for the sake of argument, but rather to watch her antics. *Easy to hate the scoundrel*, these almost-fence-sitters said, *but hard not to love her rostra manner*. And those who hated the scoundrel most would bite their teeth and gnash, not least because they understood exactly what the almost-fence-sitters meant: Himemiya-Kanzaki really did have the most watchable rostra manner of all those they had seen in their generation.

What they had yet to understand, though, was the purpose for which the woman employed her talents. It was actually part of Shizuru's plan to have Urumi draw all the attention with her *contiones*,

because it meant that their foes would concentrate their ire upon the latter. In vain. While Urumi's role in the scheme was certainly important, the true attack was not to come from her venue but from another, which Shizuru and Chikane-working with typical subtlety and atypically severe stealth-were preparing at that very moment. So Urumi's splashing in the Comitia waters were actually performed only to throw diverting splatters in Traditionalist faces, conveniently permitting her allies to focus on other aspects.

For a while all seemed to go as they expected. A slight snag nearly happened midway through July when Chikane got wind of a suit being prepared against her best friend, courtesy of several *publicani* who had the contracts for collecting taxes in Sosia. As her informants put it, these tax farmers were fuming over Shizuru's reorganisation of taxes and loan collections when she had passed by that province and cowed the governor into taking orders from her. They had only now decided to sue her belatedly for arrogating herself such power over Sosia's fiscal matters.

Chikane agreed wholeheartedly with her friend's rearrangements-one look at the reports and exorbitant interest rates being enforced in Sosia had her scowling. Yet she had to admit nonetheless that the restive *publicani* would have the upper hand in court, because they had the contracts with the State and had no legal barriers to their usury. Worried, she went to see her friend straightaway.

Her friend received her with nary a twitch of concern, however, and answered that she already knew about the complaint. Furthermore, it turned out that Chikane was just a day late with the data: Shizuru had already dealt with the *publicani* .

"My informants must be tardy indeed," Hime's senior consul sighed then, lowering herself onto her friend's couch. "What did you tell them? This was yesterday, Shizuru?"

"Yes," Shizuru replied, while mixing some light wine and spring water for her visitor. "I invited them to a nice little dinner as soon as I caught the whispers, naturally."

A level glance from Chikane. "Naturally."



"It was then that I told them I would beat them to a lawsuit if they pursued the matter any further."

"How could they have succumbed to such an argument? They would have had the Treasury on their side, you know."

"Perhaps so, but the law actually is on mine... or, at least, it is if you go far back enough." Shizuru handed Chikane a drink, which the older woman took with a murmur of gratitude. "There is an ancient statute going back to the time of our last king that actually forbids extortionate rates of interest. You know our old laws hold, so long as they are not amended or repealed by the new ones-and no one truly wishes to repeal or amend ancient laws, given the attitude towards antiquity and tradition amongst our people. Oh, I almost wish they had not broken! Imagine the look on the Traditionalists' faces at court when they would realise they would have to support my side, much though they would love to see me prosecuted: it would have been impossible for them to go against a law actually belonging to tradition, after all."

"I do admire your capacity for levity even when discussing such a possibility."

A faint smirk. "What makes you think I am not serious?"

"Oh, Shizuru." Chikane sipped at her wine and looked thoughtful. "About that statute, however: where did you find it?"

"In Sagara-san's last book-was it last year or the year before that?-discussing her findings on ancient law drawn from that tattered old compendium she discovered in a dusty corner of *Castor's*. I shall lend you my copy later, if you wish it."

"Thank you. I wish I had known to buy one myself. I did not even know of it, that book of hers."

"You were occupied by other things then, I believe," Shizuru said. "And besides, most tomes discussing ancient law are not given much attention. There are few enthusiasts in that area, are there not? So it transpires that you may not have heard of the book coming out because few do talk about it."

She walked from her desk to sit on the couch next to Chikane.

"Returning to the *publicani* of Sosia, however, I confess I also threatened to attach to them the odium of Suda Yuuji-han."

"The disgraced Sosia governor, yes," the blue-eyed woman smiled. "Whose disgrace, incidentally, was partly of your orchestration."

"But entirely of his origination," Shizuru answered. "Well, he went into voluntary exile before the court could condemn him for his doings in Sosia. He managed to make off with a good part of his fortune. Still, his name stinks to the high heavens in Hime at the moment; it shall be a long time before he can even come near Fuuka again."

"Which is why the Sosia *publicani* quailed at your threat to connect them to him, I assume?"

Shizuru winked at her.

"Fear not, Chikane, for the problem no longer exists," the younger woman said. "They have decided to abandon all thoughts of serving me such a suit. Besides, they were also afraid of falling entirely out of the running for any concessions I might be in a position to grant in the future, should I actually go ahead with my rumoured annexation of the Mentulaean Empire. Bad business to antagonise a possible governor-conqueror, and all *publicani* are good businessmen at heart."

The other woman said nothing for a few seconds, content to nod and sip her wine. After a while, she turned to look at Shizuru.

"You always walk such a fine line," she sighed to the younger woman.

A particularly unrepentant smile came to Shizuru's lips.

"I am sorry for making you worry," she said without a hint of apology.

"Not at all," Chikane retorted. "It makes my life a little more interesting."

Shizuru chuckled. "As the audience feels about those performers who walk a thin beam over a bed of nails, no doubt, with a gasp for every wobble and wiggle."

Chikane smiled.

"Ah, my interest in you goes beyond such shallow suspense," she told the younger woman. "I do hope you are not about to belittle my emotional investment come your troubles: I invest a great deal of emotion in you, you know."

"To be sure," the other said, tongue-in-cheek. "Humour is still a form of investment."

After that problem was resolved, everything seemed to go well. Urumi continued to make trouble in the Forum as Chikane and Shizuru's manipulations below the surface progressed, and soon Chikane found herself considering a suggestion to Shizuru that their true attack should begin. For that purpose did she ready herself at home one day, with the intent of paying her friend a visit in the latter's villa just outside of Hime.

"Has someone gone to fetch the gig?" she asked her steward, while tucking her *wakizashi* into her belt. She was a cautious woman as well as a conscientious wife, and she knew that her spouse felt better knowing she always carried some article of weaponry. "I must leave presently."

"It is being readied now, Domina," the man answered. "I am sorry for the delay."

Chikane smiled her wonderful smile at him. "Not at all. It gives me time to see my wife first, at any rate, for she did say she wished to prepare something for me to bring."

"I believe the other domina is in the private kitchen," he advised. "I shall hold the gig here until you return, Domina. Would you also prefer to know when it arrives?"

"No, thank you. I shall merely return when I am ready."

"As you wish, Domina."

Off Chikane sauntered, passing through her enormous atrium and deeper into her mansion. She was searching for a specific room, the one her steward had mentioned, and her long-legged stride carried her swiftly to it. As her steward said, her wife was still there.

"Here you are," she said to announce herself, moved as always by the sight of her spouse actually using the private kitchen added to their manor. Looking far more like an unusual sitting room than a kitchen, this abnormal architectural addition was for Himeko's use alone. How her enemies had once tried to make capital out of it when they found out! Chikane Himemiya's wife made use of a kitchen, Chikane Himemiya's wife potted about pots and pans as any common slave! And so on, and so forth... until they found out that Chikane Himemiya also potted about in the same marble-countered, mosaic and gilt-decorated room-all added details that rather robbed the fact of any ignominy. It became just another of those ancient patrician quirks instead, even if everyone knew only Chikane should rightly be absolved of shame by that reasoning. Even so, the capital had already been stolen.

Chikane pulled out a seat at a table.

"That smells lovely," she commented, watching the other woman work. Himeko was transferring some steaming biscuits to a cloth-lined hamper. She would sprinkle some poppy-seeds atop a batch before depositing it in the basket, working swiftly but with enough care so as not to crush those biscuits at the bottom. Once they were all in, she took the tray and brushed off the poppy-seeds left there onto the topmost biscuits. Nothing unaccounted for, nothing wasted. Maximum economy in application.

Chikane marvelled again at how efficient a housewife was her spouse-though not in any acceptable mode of her class, of course. Himeko knew many things Chikane did not, such as how to bake bread and cook complicated stews out of meagre ingredients; how to tend to a plot of rich soil and sprout wonders that could be eaten or used to brighten up a room; how to banish all manner of pests from the dark, damp corners of a house. These were things that a poor daughter of a poor house had to learn, and they were not things supposed to fascinate Chikane in any way. Yet it fascinated Chikane how appealingly earthy she continued to find them.

*Although one must admit that may also be because it is Himeko who does them, specifically, she conceded to herself, ever the woman conscious of qualifiers. And one must admit too that Himeko does not look actually look 'earthy', for all her knowledge suited to the role;* for Chikane Himemiya's wife looked as impeccably patrician as her birth was unspeakable. As fair and purple-eyed as the products of the Armitage, she was even more nobly-cast of face-which meant Chikane could indulge in a private laugh whenever they ran into some poor-skinned, uninspiring-looking member of a Famous Family. Put one such noble next to Himeko and let a random bystander guess which one was the aristocrat. Oh, such fun!

"For Shizuru again?" she asked.

"Yes," her wife said. "I thought I'd make her some more. She likes these so much."

"Should I be envious?"

The other woman stopped what she was doing and looked at her with a laugh.

"I know the two of you eat them together, Chikane-chan," she teased.

It was Chikane's turn to laugh.

"I never deprive her of more than one, just so you know," she defended. "At any rate, this seems to be the fifth batch you've made her in just a little over two weeks. I am certain she is more than pleased to receive them, Love, but it appears to me as though you are a little more eager than usual to give her such tokens."

The other woman had gone to wash her hands in a bronze water-basin, and wiped them clean before returning. She had been married to Chikane for long enough to see the statement Chikane had just tendered not in a jealous light, but in the shade actually intended.

"I know, Chikane-chan," she said, coming over to the table as well. Her wife rose to fetch another chair and helped her into it first before

sitting again. "I'm just worried, I guess."

Chikane tilted her dark head. "About Shizuru?"

"Yes."

"Understandable, these days. But may I hear from you why?"

A nervous shuffle of the feet first, before Himeko could reply.

"Well, she doesn't look herself. Or not so much, I think," the blonde said cautiously. "She's getting so thin too, and she looks so tired, and-I don't mean she looks *bad*, of course, only tired. She's still beautiful."

The raven-haired woman suppressed a laugh at the sudden disclaimer.

"Shizuru shall never be anything but beautiful," she agreed. "But I understand."

"Also, Chikane-chan, Shizuru doesn't usually seem so..."

She trailed off and would have left it there had Chikane not prodded.

"Seem so?"

"I don't know," Himeko admitted. "How to say it, I mean. I keep remembering things."

"Things."

"Ye-es. Like-oh, like the last time I went to visit her with Urumi! Did Urumi-chan tell you what we talked about?"

"Yes, although I daresay you shall have to tell me specifically what you mean, Dear."

The fair woman shifted uncomfortably, hunching to settle both elbows on the table and brace herself on them. Chikane smiled at the pose, finding it so devoid of affect. Her Himeko was so very *natural*.

"We were talking about what was happening," Himeko was telling her. "And how people kept opposing her and saying such things about her and then-and then she said it again." She paused, anxiety suddenly settling over her bright face like an ill-suited pall. "That she would, you know, 'destroy them if necessary'."

Chikane said nothing.

"She says it so often now, Chikane-chan," Himeko continued, finally giving vent to her concerns. "That she'll *destroy* them. Maybe I'm just being thin-skinned, and I hope maybe I am-but I don't know. Something... ohh."

She sighed out the breath, looking frustrated with herself for being unable to communicate the precise notion in her head. She sent a pleading look her wife's way, but continued right after it.

"It's just the way she says it," she said. "And the way she looks when she says it. Oh, she doesn't look angry, really, or even mad, but there's something about it that just worries me!"

A hum rose from Chikane's throat as she nodded slowly to soothe her restless wife.

"Can you not clarify further, Darling?" she asked the other woman. "I have heard her say that as well, and as you say, she does not really look as furious as many others would-at least, excepting that time she said it in Senate, in the meeting at the Ogasawara's basilica. There was something truly worth some worry."

She grinned then, displaying her lovely even teeth in a smile that was just as lovely and even; one of the more objective reasons her wife loved to use her so often as a model lay there, for Chikane's smiles were almost always perfectly symmetrical. *There is a face*, had said one of the most popular sculptors of the city, who was also giving private lessons to Himeko for the art: *There is a face devoted entirely to the divine proportion!*

"She gave me quite a start that day," said the lips devoted to the divine proportion.

"I didn't see it," Himeko reminded her, giggling. "I wish I had seen *that*, though."

"Put another of those busts of me in our bedroom and perhaps you shall," Chikane replied, knowing what her wife meant.

A playful look. "You said you thought I was getting better."

"Which is exactly why I was so surprised when I saw it."

"Not because it was in the bedroom?"

"That too is a consideration. How am I to make love to my wife without feeling mocked by a haughty effigy of me looking down its nose as though it beheld some gory spectator sport? It takes self-ridicule to a new extreme."

She stopped then, having remembered something she had wanted to ask upon seeing the first trial busts of herself.

"Incidentally, Darling, they all look *like that*. I had the same impression from the paintings, but it was faint there whereas here it stands out. To be sure, they are all very exquisite of execution. And yet, I do have a personal qualm. Why is it that I seem so haughty in all the likenesses?"

Her wife had been giggling all this time and finally gave up at the last remark, bursting into heartfelt laughter. She got up from her seat and gave Chikane a kiss on the mouth, the gesture brief because she was still laughing.

"Oh, Chikane-chan," she cried when able. "Only you could ask that!"

Chikane only touched her lips in confusion. Not being addicted to peering at her reflection in a mirror, she could not fully appreciate what her wife meant by that, especially since her true personality was so contrary to the coolness of her looks.

"I suppose that means I shall have to figure it out for myself," she murmured, making a note to peek in the cupboard containing her *imago* later. She looked again at her wife. "But we stray from the point, Dear. What was it about her speech on destruction that



worried you so? Can you truly not explain further?"

The blonde in front of her sobered and thought for a while. Then, she finally produced what she thought was the best answer of which she could think.

"Her eyes," she said positively. "Her eyes don't look as calm as the rest of her face, Chikane-chan."

Chikane's own eyes regarded her wife with astonishment.

"It's when I see them that I think-well, I think she means all her threats. Or, no-it's when I see them that I start thinking her threats sound like promises."

The other woman tilted her head silently. How curious, she thought, that even her wife who knew hardly anything of politics should understand this foreboding: for Chikane understood very well what her wife was trying to say but could not articulate properly. So even Himeko had noticed! But perhaps that was not entirely unreasonable. Chikane's wife was an artist, after all, and had that intuitive and feeling perception most artists did, which sensed things without necessarily understanding the logic behind them. How swiftly they accepted these intuitions amazed Chikane, since she herself was a person who required reasoning behind everything she would deign to accept.

Her wife was smiling.

"And I'm not doing a very good job of explaining, am I?" she asked Chikane shyly. "I sound so silly. Eyes!"

Chikane returned the smile.

"No, I understand," she said. "Astonishing, however. I have known Shizuru nearly all our lives, which is why I am perhaps one of those few who may actually claim to understand her enough to see through the mask. Yet you, who have known her for only a fraction of that acquaintance, seem to perceive her quite clearly as well."

Himeko looked worried again. "Oh, Chikane-chan! Do you mean I'm *right*?"

Chikane crossed her legs under the table, but not before using one to nudge her wife's.

"'Yes' in part, and 'perhaps' to others," she sighed. "We shall see. You are good friends with her now, and I see your concern for her may well watch mine. It may be time I told you of something concerning Shizuru, Love, especially as I have longed to speak to someone of it of late. Who better than you? I have some time to spare before leaving, so I shall speak to you of it now. I never told you why she is the way she is, you see."

The other woman asked what she meant.

"Passionate without seeming it. I mean how she is actually a very passionate woman and yet manages to seem perfectly calm most of the time... or even unmoved by things that would move others to emotion. Apathetic would be another way to put it, but given her way with words and affability, it is hard to use that term. Let us say, rather, that she does not show so many emotions before others."

She added swiftly, however: "Most of the time, I stress. That incident at the Ogasawara basilica was a departure from usual-although perfectly justified."

Himeko voiced agreement softly.

"But you see what I mean."

"Oh yes, Chikane-chan. I used to think she was even more so... than you are, sometimes."

The blue-eyes twinkled. Before Chikane could say anything, however, a flash of something crossed her wife's visage. She taxed Himeko with it.

"What is it?" she asked. "You seemed troubled by some thought just now."

The other woman was reluctant.

"I was just thinking," she answered. "If Shizuru weren't so nice, she would be scary."

Chikane smiled grimly. "I think, in fact, that her being 'so nice' makes her scarier. In any case, I was going to tell you the reason-or rather, one of the reasons for her being like that."

Himeko told her to continue.

"It begins from the logical point," the patrician commenced. "You know who her parents were, by reputation?"

"Oh, yes."

"Although I would not think you had ever met them, of course."

Her wife giggled. "I should be so lucky, Chikane-chan."

"Indeed?" Chikane smiled. "I knew them. Our parents were good friends, particularly our mothers. So we knew each other almost from birth, you might say-or her birth, at any rate, since she is younger."

"That long?" A pause after she received affirmation. "So that's how you know Shi-chan?"

"Yes. From long past."

Having the artistic sensitivity, Himeko asked the correct question: "What were her parents like, Chikane-chan?"

The raven hair was pushed back as Chikane brushed away some of the locks over her brow.

"I think I need not tell you they were very impressive people, dear," she said. "Both epitomes of what true patricians should be. Everyone agreed on this, of course."

Her wife hummed.

"I liked them," said Chikane. "They were easy to like too, but then I suppose it came more easily to me as I neither felt threatened nor intimidated by who or what they were. A distinct advantage, I daresay, that many other people did not have when dealing with them-hence the wariness many others felt when they were present."

Something like what happens to Shizuru now-or me, too, I submit. A sort of insecurity before our presence that sets others on edge."

"I know how that is."

She reached to hold her wife's hand, smiling.

"I hope that does not apply to me in your case," she joked, stroking the thin, work-roughened fingers with her longer ones.

Himeko smiled. "Not now."

"I am glad. But to Shizuru?"

Her wife hesitated.

"Sometimes," the blonde eventually answered, cheeks going a healthy shade of pink. "She's just so... *you know* . Oh, I don't mean she puts me off, Chikane-chan!"

She waved her hands, growing more flustered by the second.

"I like her awfully," she declared. "And I love her too, because she's one of the first friends I ever had among the people you know. You know I don't dislike her at all."

Chikane encouraged her to go on.

"I don't know how to explain it," Himeko sighed in frustration. "Maybe it's just like you said. Shi-chan's nice but intimidating."

"Intimidating, and yet you call her *chan* ."

"Oh!" Himeko said, apprehensive. "Is that wrong?"

"No, she likes it," Chikane said, amused that her wife had reacted so earnestly to a joke. "She said so herself."

But the other woman was obviously bothered, and persisted on the thought: "Are you sure? I don't want to-"

"Himeko," said the patrician in the firmest voice she could summon in speaking to her wife. "Do not worry about it. Please do not stop

addressing her that way, or you may even give her cause to be saddened. Trust me on this, and forgive me if that jest fell flat: it was merely a jest, with nothing more to it."

Her wife gave in, nodding with only the slightest hesitation.

"All right," she eventually said. "If you say so, Chikane-chan."

"I do say so, because she did say so, My Dear."

"Mm..." the sandy-haired woman nodded. "Oh. What do her parents have to do with why Shizuru-chan is the way she is?"

"Ah, that," said Chikane. "You see, they were very hard on her."

"How?"

"It is difficult to say. Let us simply say that they were very strict and expected nothing but the best from Shizuru," was the reply. "Not that she ever failed to deliver, of course, given who or what Shizuru is. But when I say they were hard, I mean they were constantly, perpetually so, for as long as I knew them. They were hard on Shizuru, you see, in the sense that she was never allowed to make, hmm, such tiny mistakes as other parents would allow of their children. I do not mean they restricted her freedoms. Rather, I mean that certain things, things most would permit a child to do, were not permitted in her case."

Chikane stopped, frowned thoughtfully.

"I think," she added. "I think I do not remember a time when they allowed her to-if I may revert to the vernacular-slack off."

The other woman looked sad.

"Poor Shizuru," she eventually whispered. "They were cruel people, then."

But Chikane differed: "No. No, they were not."

Himeko stared at her questioningly.

"They were actually very kind," Chikane explained. "I liked them very much, as I said, and in great part because of their kindness. Especially her mother."

A pause before going on.

"And she was the hardest when it came to Shizuru, I believe."

Her wife shook her head, completely perplexed now. "But why, Chikane-chan? I'm afraid I don't understand, I'm sorry-"

"No, it may be that this is my fault: I am the one who falls short in explaining now," Chikane sighed, interrupting the apology. "Permit me to attempt again. Try to understand first, however, that Shizuru is of a great patrician family. This must be appreciated fully for the explanation to proceed."

The other woman nodded attentively. "You mean a patrician like you."

"Yes, Dear." She raised one hand, unfurling it elegantly in the air as she continued to speak. "You understand some of this already, but I ask that you suffer me to say more on it for the purposes of this conversation. It is a complex matter, best expressed only after the best possible understanding of its origins has been achieved."

"Yes, I'll listen."

"Thank you. Then I begin with this, which you comprehend to some part already: we patricians bear a great burden. The greater the nobility or fame of one's family, the greater the burdens become. The case for patricians as opposed to our plebeian peers is worse, because we have the simultaneous disadvantage and advantage of having blue blood in our veins. There is expectation there, as well as wariness. To carry these twin loads without being crushed is difficult and requires a specific personality... or perhaps a specific person."

"Patrician blood is too old, Himeko," she sighed, reaching for her wife's fingertips. "It is too thin and grows thinner by the ages. Those families among us that still insist on breeding exclusively with other patricians-my family and Shizuru's class here, you note-find

themselves producing fewer and fewer people with the characteristic strength distinguishing those clans that lorded over Hime for centuries. For every Shizuru Fujino thrown up by us, there are several hundred nonentities, with no credit to them save their aristocratic name."

"They threw up a Chikane Himemiya," her loyal wife added, provoking a grin.

"As it is, at least our blood is yet to be exhausted," Chikane replied. "But now you see the curse in the blessing, and the ceaseless struggle for patricians in a world where plebeians are growing more and more powerful. And why should they not? This is no longer a world of kings and queens, and not even we patricians want a world of kings and queens. Yet the fact remains that we are descended from those kings and queens, and all know it."

"All means both others and us. Understand, it is not enough that others know it, because the knowledge of others only grants the licence you see being given us each day, by people who brand us eccentric or weird or full of nonsensical vagary—all because they know we are patrician, and we are *permitted* to be full of nonsensical vagary. This is a shallow acknowledgment, especially if it is not paired with the true acknowledgment of the self, the patrician self in all its majesty. This shallow acknowledgment leads only to the formation of patricians you often see today, those of my peers who abuse the cachet granted them indiscriminately, and who thus fail to experience the true hardship required to forge themselves into any kind of steel. Overindulged, bored, and pampered specimens who can never be great because they have never experienced the resistance necessary for it."

She met her wife's eyes and saw the question swimming in the purple.

"The closest possible example with which you are familiar is Shizuma," she said.

Himeko looked uneasy. "But she's so..."

"Yes, I know, and when I said 'closest possible', I meant to hint I do

not count her one anymore," Chikane confessed. "Still, there can be no question she has been pampered much of her life, not meeting the resistance of which I speak. But not any longer, Himeko... not after *that*. I am sorry for the pain she endures even now, but I pray it may serve only to her enhancement, for I have long lamented the waste of such a talent as is held by that friend of ours. If it turns out as I hope, then my point is justified: you cannot make a good sword without hammering it."

There was an interval of silence between them as Himeko thought about it, her wife's thumb chafing the knuckles of her right hand. The sound of some slaves laughing floated in from the window, and Chikane smiled. *How good it is*, she thought, *to have a house where even the servants are happy*.

"I think I understand what I mean by being pampered, Chikane-chan," she heard her wife say. "So Shizuru-chan's parents were thinking of that too, which is why they were hard on her?"

"Yes," Chikane replied. "The Fujino line is one of those that have very nearly gone extinct, Himeko. Shizuru is the only Fujino of her generation; her parents knew she might well be the last, especially as she made it clear early on that she was attracted only to women. She was made to know how special she was from the day she could talk. Shizuru has always been conscious that she is very nearly the endpoint of an august lineage."

She smiled and looked immensely proud, which she was.

"Patricians do not die out with a small gasp, and the Fujino are true patricians. Shizuru was-or rather, is-their final shout, to speak. It is probable, My Love, that we have been blessed enough and cursed enough to see the last *true* Fujino live. Is that not fascinating?"

Himeko pulled her arms closer to her body. Chikane did not take her to task for the shrinking reaction, having seen the tiny gold hairs rise on the fair woman's skin-as indeed the thought she had just expressed deserved. But suddenly, another thought rose to the fore: was not Shizuru's girl from the North also the last of an ancient dynasty?



*Oh!* she said to herself, stunned as she paused to consider it. Her next blink came a touch faster as she shook her head privately at an idea. *Coincidence!* It had to be mere coincidence. Even so, she had to allow such a coincidence was surely the height of chance. To think of those two young women, the last of two mythical dynasties, suddenly meeting and quite possibly coming together in the end... Why, she thought, it was almost a pity they could not actually *make* a child, between themselves. Or should it be a mercy, rather? Well, she had to meet Shizuru's girl first before she could tell.

"Shizuru had to become an Atlas," she told her wife, who was yet shivering; little did the woman know Chikane had come close to the same. "And when her parents died, more than an Atlas. Her parents were well-pleased with her, I should think, and yet saw something else too that begged pause from that appreciation."

Himeko leaned forward eagerly, still hugging herself.

"What do you mean?"

"This is the part that is complicated," Chikane began, only to be interrupted by her grinning wife.

"You mean that was the easy part?" Himeko asked, nose wrinkling.

They laughed.

"Unfortunately, yes," the raven-haired woman answered. "I shall attempt to explain very clearly; please tell me if there is aught that confuses. Returning to what I was saying, Shizuru was everything any patrician family could hope for in a scion and more, in the sense that she was born being better than nearly everyone else at nearly everything-or everything that matters, anyway. There are various kinds of genius, Himeko, but the truest is the versatile kind. And Shizuru has it."

"So do you."

This time, only Chikane laughed.

"Well, let us set me aside for now, though I thank you for that," she told her spouse. "In Shizuru's case, however, there is something

else that even I find... hmm, remarkable. No doubt it is the reason her parents were so hard on her, because they were so afraid for her due to it. I do not think they could have done otherwise, mind you."

She squinted, then continued.

"Shizuru lacks something I have, Himeko. Or, conversely, she has something I do not, by virtue of lacking what I have."

"You know I'm not good at word riddles, Chikane," said her amused wife.

Chikane bowed her head slightly. "Forgive me, my dear. You know I am accustomed to speaking this way."

"I know. I don't really mind, so long as you explain them to me."

"Let us put it simply, then. Shizuru, from the day she was born, had no sense of the outrageous."

All that gained, as she had expected, was a befuddled expression. Chikane nodded in reassurance, then looked her wife in the eye.

"This is the confusing part, isn't it?" the blonde asked softly.

Chikane answered positively.

"Then I'll do my best to follow," Himeko sighed.

"And I shall do my best to lead," answered the patrician with a smile. "Permit me to begin with the query: you think Shizuru and I are somewhat similar, do you not?"

A nod.

"And yet you cannot refute that we are very much different from each other too, not only in appearance. This goes beyond personality, even. We are different on the most basic, most essential level of character found in an individual."

To her astonishment, that gained a positive nod.

"I always felt that," said her wife. "Although I can't really tell how, Chikane-chan."

"It is all right," Chikane answered. "I shall tell you. The essential difference is that, whereas we both function on an advanced level of ability compared to others, I have the ability to restrict mine if need be-"

She broke off, shook her head.

"No, that is not exactly right. Hmm, let me put it another way. As you see, even I find this a precarious thing to articulate. Let us say an indication would be our modes of thought. Both of us are very rational people, as I am sure you have noticed."

" Yes. "

Chikane stifled a grin at the feeling in the response and proceeded: "We are the same in that sense. We obey rules of reason, acknowledge the logical precepts. However, the difference exists even there, because Shizuru's reason has the potential to become almost irrational by its extremity."

Apparently, even Himeko was aware of the contradiction immediately: "Irrational... reason?"

"Yes," Chikane answered. "You see, reason is premised on several basic assumptions, Himeko. Such as, say, the idea that one added to one always makes up two. While both Shizuru and I recognize that fact, the difference is that I stop at recognizing it and proceed to reason or work out a mathematical formula from it. I accept the fact as *a fact* because it has always been recognized as true, and because I need an origin to continue reasoning, as Aristotle would put it. I can add one and one, get two as an answer, then move on to the next step. You follow, My Dear?"

Himeko nodded.

"Very well," Chikane said. "Shizuru, on the other hand, would go further than I in both directions of the equation. And perhaps that is where the difference truly lies. We return to the example of one

being added to one. At first, Shizuru would proceed to reason from the assumption that one and one make two, as I had. Nonetheless, if she ever reached any point in her later reasoning-and you must remember that Shizuru has faultless reasoning-if ever she came to a point where she felt that some sum in the equation was unsatisfactory to her purposes, she would not accept it as a... say, *inescapable figure of fate* that the formula cannot help but produce. Shizuru would actually go back to the very beginning and question the categorical rule of the equation itself."

Her eyes narrowed faintly as she came to her conclusion.

"I cannot call it madness, nor stupidity," she told her wife. "Stupidity would be to disdain the categorical rule-the fact, I mean. Madness would be to warp it. Shizuru does neither. I feel, rather, that she questions *factness*, with the intent of remodelling or rewriting the fact to her purpose. And the frightening thing, Himeko, is that her rewrites work! They crumble existing structures, they destroy the way things have always been figured out-and yet they work, they are logical!"

Her black brows slanted, a disturbed look coming to her eyes.

"This is what concerned her parents so deeply, I believe, for her sake," she said. "As indeed it concerns me now, for the same reason. If we return to the example earlier, I am saying that Shizuru would dare to take apart the very premise that everyone would simply accept as true. *She would ask whether one and one would really, truly, always be two.*"

Himeko regarded her wife with genuine unease, her mind still wrestling with the words and their complexity, yet her heart already understanding what was being said. She had understood it from the moment she saw that glimmer of fear in Chikane's blue gaze, a gaze that was only ever cool and composed, kind and fearless. Yet that had been *fear*, which Himeko knew when she saw it.

"I think... I see a little, Chikane-chan," she said truthfully. "A little, at least."

Chikane nodded, her immense calm settling over her once again. It

was too much a part of herself to ever truly vanish, after all.

"You see what I mean by saying she has no sense of the outrageous," she said. "Or had none, as her parents worked hard to try and put some into her, particularly by being so hard, as we said."

"Was she different before?" Himeko asked. "Was there ever a time they didn't do that-or hadn't noticed, um, that she had no sense of the outrageous?"

Chikane's brows slanted again as she gave it some thought.

"Of that I cannot be certain," she eventually said. "I can say, however, that Shizuru was a little more free of expression with others than she is now, when she was much younger, although I do not deny she was still given to being generally in control of herself. I suspect it is as much a product of the breeding as it is her actual character." Her face loosened suddenly, and she surprised her wife by chuckling: "I remember one time she fell into the ditch being dug by some workers for the garden pool."

She winked at Himeko, who gave a little gasp.

"Our garden pool?" the woman asked. "In this house, Chikane-chan?"

"Yes. My father was the one who had it built."

"Oh! And poor Shi-chan fell into the pool? When?"

"She fell into *the ditch*," Chikane clarified mildly. "That would become the pool. It was during a rather late get-together for us youngsters, all the adults discussing politics in the grand study. I was one of the eldest, which meant I was occupied by several little monsters running around the atrium and into the rooms. None of us even noticed Shizuru slink away. She has an uncanny knack for slipping about unperceived she wishes, as you know."

Chikane twisted her lips ruefully and went on: "She apparently made her way to the garden and, there being no lights in that area just yet, walked a touch too close to the edge of the large ditch. Some ground collapsed and she fell." Her wife squeaked, and she knew

Himeko was imagining it happening. "Shizuru was about seven then and she was all elbows and legs, you might say, because she was always tall for her age. Thus the poor girl was bruised so badly it was a miracle no bones were broken. And she received quite a nasty gash on her head, too."

Her wife burst out: "Poor Shi-chan! What happened? How did you get her out?"

Chikane lifted an eyebrow.

"We did not," she said. "She got herself out. No one saw her fall, you see, and we did not even know she had wandered off to that area of the house. The situation in the atrium was rather too, ah, complicated to permit even that point any notice so quickly."

"She didn't call for help?"

This time, the question earned her an incredulous look.

"Shizuru, shriek for someone to pull her up from a ditch?" Chikane said. "Surely you know her better than that, Himeko! The rest of us were in the other atrium wondering where she had gone when, all of a sudden, someone *did* shriek and pointed to one of the archways."

"And?"

"And there she was, her clothing torn and really quite frightful, her face positively awash with blood. But, whereas everyone was rushing towards her in a panic, she simply busied herself with arranging her mussed clothes as well as she could. Oh, she was wincing, yes-but very faintly. So there we were, making an absolute fuss and screaming for the doctor. And do you know what she did?"

Himeko asked what it was.

"She just lifted her chin like so-you know the way she does it-and then made a wonderfully elegant bow, as if to apologize for causing so much commotion. And then she said: 'Your new pool shall be deep. What manner of leviathan do you intend to put in it, Chikane?'" Chikane sighed reminiscently. "She was wonderful."

Himeko laughed. "So that's why she always jokes about finding a sea-monster in our pool!"

"Mm." A sudden smile. "Which reminds me of some news that may come as an interesting aside, *mea vita* : Shizuma told me that Shizuru has been making arrangements for builders to enlarge and deepen her house's pool, as part of a remodelling of her courtyard garden. Mayhap she intends to tease me after all these years by actually getting a leviathan before I can? It would be so very like her."

Her wife giggled.

"But she's not going to be there to oversee it, is she?" she asked Chikane. "I mean-if you're talking about the garden pool in her manor inside the city. She can't cross the city boundary yet."

"She is apparently leaving most of the actual design to the architect," was the answer. "I doubt her faith shall prove misplaced, since I know the man and he happens to be a genius of good taste. I collect she shall merely specify what things she considers necessary, such as that whim to add apples," she said, with a faint smile for her friend's vagaries. "She is original, is she not? Ordinary apple trees in a garden already adorned with the rarest plants from other lands?"

"The apple trees look pretty when they blossom and the fruits come."

Chikane conceded that. "At any rate, we have spent quite enough time on this aside, have we not? I was telling you of Shizuru when she was young."

"And I was laughing at it," Himeko smiled. "Yes, Chikane-chan. So that was how Shi-chan was."

The other woman hummed, then went back to the first topic as though there had never been a divagation.

"That was how she was. All the same, she also turned into who she is due to her parents' handling. She was instructed to never show

more than the very minimum of emotion necessitated by propriety, to be as reserved in her opinions as possible, and so on. They held her in an iron grip, so to speak, without crushing her. To that degree, we can say her parents did very well with their responsibilities."

"But an iron grip is still a cold one, Chikane-chan."

A chuckle, followed by a kiss.

"That was a very good play on words you just made, my dear," Chikane praised her spouse.

The other woman laughed. "Thank you."

"And, yes, an insightful one. It could be considered cold, considering how they began treating her that way almost as soon as she could speak. They were brilliant people too, after all, and they could sense it - I mean what their daughter was. I do not blame them, nor do I think they ever had anything but her interests at heart. They were frightened for her."

Her wife echoed the word.

"They had good reason to be frightened, I think," Chikane expounded. "Every now and then she shows what she is, Himeko, which is-for lack of a better term-a perfect radical. Not in the negative sense! I mean, rather, that she would take apart everything that seems to be... unsatisfactory to her reasoning. I know her well enough to know that she is only biding her time until she gets to the consulship before she really begins to draw blood from the conservatives' flesh. She would attempt to change Hime drastically, given a chance."

"You make it sound scary."

"It is, in a way. Although I am fairly certain that she would probably be right in the sense of bettering things, whatever she does, I cannot help but be a little worried about it, all the same."

Her wife enquired why.

"Ah, well," she sighed, with a tiny smile. "It is simply that I am still



more a product of our class than she is, so I still have a modicum-small, but still there-of reluctance for destroying certain traditions. That is what it is, I suppose."

The other woman grinned impishly.

"I know someone who destroyed an important social tradition," she quipped.

Chikane burst into laughter.

"Oh, a touch!" she cried, holding a hand to her chest. "Very well. As it is, I am a radical too."

"Chikane-chan."

"It is true," Hime's senior consul allowed. "But with the caveat that I am little less radical than Shizuru is, or so I would maintain. I did manage to stay under the Traditionalists' radar for a good while, you know. Whereas they sniffed out Shizuru almost from the beginning. Such an exquisite sense of smell Armitage-san and the others have, when it comes to that! They marked her from the outset."

Himeko got to her feet and went to fetch a jug of water.

"So I was the stink that let them smell you?" she asked teasingly, handing her wife a cup.

"I would prefer to say you were the fragrance, my dear, that led them to me," Chikane answered. "Nothing so tickles their noses as a lovely perfume they would like to have themselves."

The other woman shook her golden head, blushing in spite of herself as she filled up Chikane's cup.

"Furthermore, you were an exception," the other continued, suddenly growing solemn. "Before I met you, I must confess that I never thought I would fall in love with someone beyond the upper stratum of Hime's social sphere. All the same, it matters nothing to me, since I had always thought of the social prescriptions for relationships as rather preposterous. I am speaking, rather, of other traditions."

Himeko poured some water for herself, then went to put away the jug.

"So while I still have that little adherence to some of the rules of our class, of our tradition, Shizuru does not. Never mind that she seems to, now. I have always felt that the relative forbearance she has shown thus far is merely an act, a sop to the factions she needs to pass through before she attains her ambitions. And she will attain them, make no mistake of that."

She met her wife's eyes as the other woman sat again.

"Sometimes," she said in a lower voice to answer the question in Himeko's countenance. "Sometimes I get the feeling that there is something lying dormant in that friend of mine-something almost terrible. What would be the fallout, I wonder, if that were ever unleashed?"

Himeko frowned in thought.

"You mean..." she started. "If the-the sense of the outrageous that her parents put in her just *let go*?"

Chikane responded to that with a strange smile, her head tilting to one side as she looked out of the window and to the sky.

"The truth of it is that I think that she still has no sense of the outrageous, Himeko," she admitted. "In fact, I do not know if she ever shall."

## Chapter 51

*Thank you to all, and yes, this is very late. Thus, fifty pages.*

*A special note of thanks to **mountains from molehills** for pointing out oversights in past chapters. It must be embarrassingly clear now that one (generally) neither edits chapters before posting them nor rereads most past chapters before writing succeeding ones. The latter is particularly because they were so long ago and one admits to finding it tedious to reread one's work each time: it has something of the masturbatory stripped of jouissance. My gratitude for taking time out of your undoubtedly busy day to point out errors, which I shall rectify if time permits. However, I advise that the conservatives' offer to Shizuru in Chapter 49 be reread through the conservative lens; at least one part of the offer was also implicit, not explicit, but certainly not buried severely enough to be six feet deep.*

*As for the remarks on Natsuki's incredibly glowing portrayal, my thanks for the note. The point notwithstanding, I would gently request both a little patience and a little faith, though the request may seem vain as we know not each other. Certainly there are many in the story who would (and, temporally and within the 'unmentioned' spaces of the extant text, already do) take issue with Natsuki for many things; still, I have not mentioned them in the text because I find it not yet necessary. The time shall come for that: it is inevitable given the circumstances.*

*A minute discontent here must be confessed, however, for the critique and suggestion were a touch pre-emptive of something I had intended for the future. Pray do not misunderstand. I flinch not at the critique, but rather at its inadvertent usurpation. It may be denounced by some, but I admit there is yet something of my pride that rebels now at the thought of writing something I had originally intended-something actually relative to your suggestion-given that it would no longer seem of my conception. I admit to my own vanity here, of course, so I apologise not for the conceit, especially when I am the one who suffers most for it.*

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## **Illustration:**

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## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Aedile** (L.) - One of the magistracies of Rome not on the **cursus honorum** (the Way of Honour) but important nonetheless because aediles were responsible for Rome's general upkeep, the public grain supply, and the yearly games. As described in the text by Urumi, it is a very expensive office to have.

2. **Augur** (L.) - A Roman priest of divination, belonging to the College of Augurs that had about 12 members, half being patrician and the others plebeian. They took the auspices (i.e., checked the omens) before most public or formal occasions, interpreting favourability or its opposite according to very strict rules laid down in the augural texts; the Roman augur was not a person of supposedly mystic nature, as opposed to the Greek seers. In the present setting, members are co-opted by their fellows, not elected by popular vote. Note that part of the augural costume was the **lituus** (s.v.) and the **toga trabea** (described in the text). Pontifices (priests; members of the College of Pontifices) were also entitled to the toga trabea.

3. **Pila** (pl. L.), **pilum** (s. L.) - The Roman army's spear. It was modified at some point such that the head would break off from the shaft upon impact, preventing the enemy from picking one up and throwing it back at the legionaries. The modification is sometimes credited to Gaius Marius; in the story, it is credited to Shizuru.

4. **Comitia centuriata** - Also **Centuriate Assembly** ; one of the assemblies of the Roman people, it marshalled them in their classes and was convened for several purposes, including the drafting and approval of legislation as well as the elections for **curule magistracies** (s.v.). It held its meetings outside the pomerium, on the Campus Martius.

**Voting in the Centuriate Assembly** was slanted heavily in favour of the upper classes, especially the First. Citizens were organised into centuries (originally a group of a hundred men, but generally expanded later on to keep the number of centuries constant, even if the number of men in them were not). Each century can technically cast only one vote that counts in the assembly: that single vote is the majority result (or winning vote) of all its members' tabulated votes within the century.

5. **Contio** (s. L.) - A meeting of one of the assemblies of the Roman people.

6. **Corona graminea** - Also **corona obsidionalis** ; the highest and rarest military decoration of Rome.

7. **Cunnus** - Latin profanity referring to the female sex organs.

8. **Curia** - In full: **Curia Hostilia** ; the meeting-place of Senate.

9. **Curule magistracy** - A Roman government position vested with **imperium** (s.v.). Examples of curule magistracies include the praetorship and the consulship. Tribunes of the plebs were not curule magistrates.

10. **Equestrians** or **Equites** - Members of the **Ordo Equester** , called "the knights" as opposed to "the senators". Those of knight rank were usually as well-born as those of senatorial rank, but the difference was that they chose not a political career but a commercial one. Recall that there are restrictions on senatorial businesses, which is the reason the knights are generally the richer of the two ranks. One may consider them the equivalents of the modern "business sector" of the community, with the senators being the "government or political sector", for a simplified but convenient categorisation.

11. **Ethnarch** - The Greek term for a town leader/magistrate.

12. **Fellatores** - A Latin profanity referring to "those who suck a penis".

13. **"Founding Fathers and Mothers"** - Address for the members

of Senate, modified from the original "Founding Fathers" because the story accepts female senators.

14. **Forum** - In full, **Forum Romanum** ; the area where most of the primary Roman state houses and government venues were located.

15. **Imperium** - The authority possessed by a Roman curule magistrate or promagistrate, specifying that said magistrate possessed the authority of his office and thus could not be gainsaid in that capacity. All commanders of Roman armies are also vested with imperium.

16. **Lituus** - The curved staff of an **augur** (s.v.).

17. **Military tribune** - Officers within a Roman army who often generalised cavalry; also known as prefects.

18. **Nec nefas nec noxam optamus ergo negamus!** (L.) - "We want neither sacrilege nor harm [done to us], so we decline!"

19. **Publicani** - Individuals/organisations hired by the Roman State apparatus (specifically, the Treasury) to farm taxes on its behalf. Tax farming activities were more elaborately discussed in an earlier chapter of the story-the 13th, to be precise-and can be found in the third part of that particular chapter, "parts" being delineated by the long horizontal bars denoting page breaks on this website. Publicani tend to be involved in other businesses like usury too.

20. **Quiris, quirites** - The proper terms for a Roman citizen or citizens.

21. **Senatus consultum** - A senatorial decree (a decision reached by the House in one of its sessions) that would then be sent to one of the assemblies to be voted into law. The Senate was not a lawmaking body and so needed the assemblies to endow its decisions with strict legal status, but most of its consulta [plural form] were often accepted immediately, even if not voted upon by an assembly.

22. **Vestals** - The Vestal Virgins, priestesses of Vesta who kept the fire burning on her sacred hearth. They constituted Rome's luck, and

*were also responsible for holding Roman wills. When a Roman made his will-and even the poorest Romans actually made them-he would go to the Vestals to lodge it for safekeeping.*

**23. Voting in the Centuriate Assembly** - See **Comitia centuriata**.

**24. Well of the Comitia** - The traditional meeting-place of the Plebeian Assembly.

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## ***Inter Nos II: Inde Ira et Lacrimae***

*par ethnewinter*

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In the days of waiting to be returned to her Northern campaign, it was rare for Shizuru to indulge in sleep. Partly because she was so saddled with worries; partly because she was developing a newfound aversion to it. This latter was because of the dreams that plagued her nightly, and which she could not seem to shake. Aware nonetheless that she needed her rest, she would take to reading tome after tome in an effort to fill her mind with a different topic from the one she dreaded to dream. As her mind was both large enough to accommodate several topics comfortably as well as sharp enough to retain focus even when inundated with avowed miscellanies, these efforts proved vain.

She dreamt often, and usually about the same thing. Sometimes she had the good dreams where she could do the things she missed, like putting a cheek against raven hair and smelling-how was it she could smell that in dreams?-the unforgettable scent of the woman she loved. She dreaded these dreams too, but only afterwards, when the waking reminded her of the reality. But this was still better than the bad dreams, because those were dreadful even before the waking.

There were many beginnings to the bad dreams, but they all tended to end the same way, and it was this that made them bad. Sometimes they began as battles, sometimes they started merely

with her walking in a crowd. Whatever it was, it involved a mass of faceless persons surrounding her, each of them bent on walking his own way. She would walk about aimlessly in their midst until it would occur to her that she had somewhere to be too, and that her purpose was actually waiting in the opposite direction from her walk. She would turn to head for it. The throng always moved against her at that point, and she would be stayed, crying out because she knew-although nothing and no one in the dream told her this, and she merely knew it-that someone else was heading for her purpose as well and was getting closer to it while she could not. *"She is mine!"* she would shout over the crowd, praying the warning would reach that unseen enemy heading for the unseen girl. *"I am coming for her, so stand back!"* But the crowd would hold her in its torpid mass, and all she could do was struggle.

It was during one of these dreams that her cousin came to see her in her study, and found her asleep in the comfy seat at her big desk. A rare sight, thought the visitor, who was tickled by the frown on the sleeper's brow. She could not say it sat ill on Shizuru- *very few things could*, the guest admitted dispassionately, *on such a face* -but she did take issue with the tiredness so very patent around Shizuru's eyes, the faint lines starting to carve themselves on either side of the younger woman's mouth. And when Shizuru stirred, when Shizuru's mouth deepened its frown, she decided it was time for the obviously unhappy dreamer to wake.

She came around the desk and touched a lean arm. The reaction was immediate.

As soon as the hand made contact, the sleeping woman jumped to her feet and placed her own hand on the one that had woken her. Shizuma suddenly found her wrist on the receiving end of a grip so strong it surprised her into fighting back, and it ended with the two cousins grappling.

It took two seconds for them to finally realise what they were doing and to whom.

"An unusual way of waking someone in their own house," Shizuru said with a frown, releasing the other woman as if she had been burned, and stepping away; her cousin followed suit.



"An unusual way of waking up, even in your own house!" Shizuma snapped testily. "Is that how you usually greet people who wake you?"

The younger woman blinked, shut her eyes for a moment, and then blinked again. Hazel eyes narrowed irritably at her.

"No," she eventually said. She lifted a hand and used her fingers to press on her eyelids. "No. I am sorry, Shizuma. You surprised me."

"I gathered *that* ."

After which they stood for an instant in silence, Shizuru looking away and Shizuma inspecting her sore forearm. She could still feel Shizuru's grip, and a faint silhouette was already emerging where it had landed. That would undoubtedly bruise because she was very fair, just like her cousin. Her cousin would not be likely to get similar bruises from her, however, because Shizuma had gripped by the tunic and not the skin. And that galled her more than a tiny bit.

"You're stronger than I remember," she said curtly.

Shizuru was running a hand through her mane.

"What you remember must be years ago," she replied, going to fix her upset chair. "And we have never wrestled. Always with swords."

"Well. But you've yet to beat me with a sword."

"I've yet to try."

Shizuma's frown deepened. She watched the younger woman going to sit again and noted the tremor in Shizuru's hands. It was also present in hers.

"Your servants let me in-I said I wanted no herald," she said, still wary.

A weak smile. "Did you bully them into it?"

"Perhaps. But what," Shizuma demanded, "were you dreaming to make you react like *that* ? Not even you are naturally that paranoid,

for all that you've a share of caution."

Shizuru, who looked very tired for someone who had just been asleep, batted a hand.

"Nothing," she said after the gesture. "I was not dreaming."

An impressively loud snort. "Everyone dreams. Some merely forget."

"Then I merely forgot."

Shizuma let it go at that, not so much because of the words but rather because the look in Shizuru's eyes killed any further questions. So she made a remark instead about the papers littered on the desk.

"Ah, yes." Shizuru extended a hand and pointed to two book-buckets on the floor, both of them full. "I intended to send those to you today. I shall send a servant with them later, of course, that you may not be burdened by the load."

"What are they?"

"Copies of these."

Out came Shizuru's hand, lightly touching one of the many parchments and sheepskin charts on the table.

"These are maps and notes of the Northern territories and the adjacent terrain," she explained, keeping two fingers on a tiny drawing of what seemed to be a fortress. "The most up-to-date records we have. Not as detailed as I would prefer, to be honest, but not useless either. This one we have here, in particular, is merely what I call a basic map."

Shizuma repeated it as a question. "Basic?"

"A purely geographic visual, devoid of other references. Over here, however-" And she stood up to pull closer another map. Shizuma observed it to have the same geography as the one before, but with additional scribbles, symbols, and lines plotted on it. "This is an example of what I call a true cartographic document. This particular

one is for last year's movements."

She put her hand on the new map, pointing out some of the symbols written on the landscape.

"You see that I have ordered the scribes to include here all relevant movements in the past year," she told her relative. "The legend is at the bottom right, and notes include intelligence about the Mentulaean movements relative to ours. Here we have the march from Otomeia to Argentum, for instance, along with the Mentulaean marches to that city as well-all dated and coded properly. The supply routes used last year have also been encoded in the document."

The silver-haired woman stared at the carefully-inked sheepskins, fascinated.

"Very detailed," she murmured.

"Other pertinent charts and notes having to do with the Mentulae and the North are included," Shizuru went on. "Please study them once you have the time, so that you may begin to familiarise yourself with the terrain in advance. And commit the information to memory. It would be too bothersome to have to keep referring to them all the time, after all, when there is so much data-which is changing all the time. Mental records are always superior to written ones, for the revision of the latter is so much more troublesome."

Shizuma said, voice hollow: "Yes, it *would* be troublesome."

"After that, please go over your copy of this." A sheet of paper was dug out from under several others, shown to her. "Tell me how you feel about them and if you would recommend anything or anyone."

"What is this?" Shizuma asked, taking the sheet.

"The list of military tribunes whose services I intend to request personally."

The other woman lowered the paper in her hand and fixed her with a look.

"It reminds me, Shizuru," she said, "to ask if your roster of legates has been filled. I have at least one suggestion, if you are willing to take it."

"Who?"

"Miyuki," said the silver-haired woman, naming one of her oldest friends.

Shizuru frowned, though not in displeasure. "As I recall, she is recently married. This is only the first year, is it not?"

"Her husband is unlikely to mind-he spends most of his time in Sicily due to his posting. She, on the other hand, is merely stuck here." A twist of the mouth. "And that's the true pity. I don't think her spouse understands exactly what sort of woman Miyuki is, for if he did he should have exerted his connections and found her a posting of some kind as well, or at least taken her with him to help in the job-she is the type who would moulder without work on her hands. A dependable woman, cousin; you would do well to help her in pursuing the career she deserves. I guarantee you she shall make it to consul come her time."

"True, she would go far," Shizuru replied, making her decision. "I would be delighted to ask her to be my legate. If you have any more recommendations you would like to see working with or for you, then please be so good as to tell me. For now, however, please do read that list."

"Hmm." Shizuma took up the list again and scowled. "Some of these names are from very conservative families."

"I know," was the response, an odd sound in the woman's voice. "What do you think?"

"I think I have no idea how you hope to get them for your campaign."

"Oh, I have my ways." The odd sound again, even more pronounced. "Displeased by them?"

"I'd rather not work with a rabid little Traditionalist-in-the-making, to be honest," Shizuma sighed, finally looking up from the parchment.

She caught sight of Shizuru's twinkling eyes. "What is it?"

"I picked at least one to please you," the younger woman said. Shizuma finally identified the odd sound in her cousin's voice: it was amusement. "Direct your attention to the bottom of the list, please."

Shizuma followed the direction and read the name. It was unfamiliar.

"Well?" she demanded impatiently. "Why is this to please me? I only recognise the family-staunchly arch-conservative, although not among those with the greatest clout."

"The Aoi," Shizuru informed her, "are related to the Noboru. Very closely, in fact, to the red-headed branch."

"Oh!" Shizuma read the name once more, a smile slowly dawning on her face as she thought of Noboru's insult all over again. Revenge, and finally! The prospect was enough to have her absurdly eager to go traipsing off on campaign. "I see... So you *were* listening when I was talking to Chikane."

Shizuru was still delivering information about the name on the parchment: "That one's mother is Noboru-han's sibling. And I hear she herself is his-and I quote-most beloved niece."

The white-blondé laughed. "And you propose to get her, even so?"

A nod.

"Excellent." Shizuma returned the sheet, then seemed to catch herself. "Ye gods, how *is* she? I have never seen her."

"I have." A lifted eyebrow. "You do not trust me?"

Again Shizuma laughed, tingling with excitement.

"I admire your taste in women, cousin, so I daresay I shall," she answered. "That is one piece of enemy territory I shall look forward to invading. Now if only I could be sure all parts of this future venture would be as enjoyable!"

"Why should they not be?" her cousin asked, all innocence.

For answer, Shizuma looked at the dauntingly full book-buckets intended for her and shut her eyes to them, as though attempting to vanquish them that way. Naturally, there was no such luck: when she opened her gaze again, they were still there.

"You *are* a demanding commander, aren't you?" she sighed. Not a question, but Shizuru answered as though it were.

"I have been told that before, yes."

"Irritating."

"Is it?"

"Very. I suppose it is too late for me to withdraw my pledge to come with you on this campaign?"

"You suppose correctly." A thought seemed to enter the tawny-haired woman's mind, and caused her lips to quirk. "If it helps, however, being senior legate has a great many perks. Not least being that you could have your pick of women from conquered cities, before they are sent to the slavers."

"What an enticing consolation," Shizuma said unenthusiastically, and collapsed into a seat.

The younger woman smiled, then went to the door and stepped out. A moment later, her head poked back through the doorway.

"You shall stay for dinner?" she asked.

"Shall you have anyone else?"

"No."

"Yes."

Shizuru vanished again, presumably to give instructions to her servants. Her cousin inspected the room meanwhile. It looked, she thought, like every other one of Shizuru's studies: scrolls to the rafters, a random sword hung somewhere with other legionary paraphernalia rested nearby, the latest odd contraptions her cousin

found interesting dissected for autopsy on a table, all of it looking like the room was shared by different people of different professions and interests, like a soldier sharing space with a writer sharing space with an inventor... Yes, no doubt about it, the study absolutely reeked of Shizuru and her eclecticism. *Thank the gods her furniture at least is consistent in taste*, Shizuma thought, sinking deeper into her comfy seat.

An inhale deepened the smell already in her nostrils: the warmly voluptuous scent of leather from the many book buckets, the odour sharpened by the acrid notes of good paper. Not scents that Shizuma, also a reader, found alien. However, so many books were in Shizuru's study that she found the smell faintly cloying, too strong for personal comfort. She knew, of course, that Shizuru sent servants every week to the Argiletum, where the educated slaves scoured every bookshop on that street and bought nearly everything new in stock. Ponderous exercise bringing their hoards back! Yet even more ponderous, thought those in the know, was the notion of reading all those tomes the slaves bought. Which Shizuru did as soon as the slaves brought their cart home. All of that and she still found time to go over maps and work! If that nap earlier had not been an unplanned one caused by sheer tiredness, Shizuma would say she knew nothing of her cousin. Why was the fool killing herself by doing so many things anyway?

"You should be getting more rest," the elder woman said when Shizuru returned.

Shizuru walked over and said nothing, having been hearing that piece of advice so often that she preferred not even to acknowledge it. Reaching her desk, she began to set some of the sheets and maps upon each other in neat stacks. Shizuma watched her in silence.

And then, after the papers were in order: "But when I see you working this hard, Shizuru, it does give pause to those remarks that are always going on about your fortune."

At the younger woman's puzzled face, she explained.

"Your bizarre luck, I meant. How some try to explain how you get

through things that seem unnatural-as pulling down how-many enemy fortresses in one forced march, or defeating an army thrice the size of yours, or single-handedly bringing up from the Underworld a vanquished Cerberus."

"I single-handedly *what* ?" Shizuru said, bursting into laughter.

"Thus runs the expanding litany of your valorous deeds," Shizuma returned, dry in her humour. "It ruins the image of the blessedly unruffled pet of the gods that people make you out to be, cousin, when you reveal that such effort actually goes into the production."

"Blessedly unruffled pet of the gods," Shizuru echoed softly.

She set her head at an angle while giving thought to it, and her cousin noted curiously that she looked neither pleased nor displeased.

Finally, she said: "Certainly I agree that that sort of bestowed luck is a wonderful thing to have, but one also makes one's luck, Shizuma. My armies do the 'unnatural' not because of some arcane appeal to divine forces-though I scorn it not, should the gods be good enough to grant it!-but because I train my army to be better than normal. My centurions know I expect them to work as much as the average ranker, and my men wear out the dust on a drill field until they pack it into rock."

She stopped to smile here, for she was proud of her legionaries and their efforts.

"To attribute our successes to purely esoteric reasons is something of an injustice, I think," she concluded. "Superior organisation and discipline, superior leadership and training. My *luck* lies in professionalism and hard work." A teasing glance at her cousin. "At least, I would expect people of our status and education to understand that."

Shizuma rolled her eyes. "Oh, of course! Although I doubt you make a point of subjecting your rankers to this explanation of your luck."

"The lowly are far more superstitious than even we are," the younger



woman sighed with conscious drama. "No sense in attempting to disabuse them of their belief, as I assure you it would fall on deaf ears."

"And besides, why disabuse them of it when that belief operates on them profoundly enough to have them following you even to the gates of the Underworld, correct?"

A brilliant smile. "I wonder if people do think I could single-handedly vanquish Cerberus."

"And I wonder," Shizuma drawled. "Is it part of your 'professionalism and hard work' that you have the Fourteenth lending assistance to practically every state construction project outside of the *pomerium*?"

The fawn-haired woman tapped a finger on one cheek.

"They *have* been making themselves useful, have they not?" she said, walking around her desk and settling herself on the chair opposite her companion's. Her plain white tunic slid up one white and well-formed thigh as she crossed her legs. "It makes for a very nice public image."

"Not to at least one group." Shizuma hummed. "I ran into my predecessor yesterday."

Shizuru asked whom she meant.

"As your senior legate, I mean."

"Ah! Chie-han."

The older woman nodded.

"Did you know she was paying suit to the second daughter of the Senou?" she suddenly asked, sitting up straight and looking puzzled. "There is a politically-ironic match if ever there would be one! I like Harada well enough, but it boggles me that she should choose to go after one of the Senou, of all people. Ye gods, Shizuru, I know I might be one to speak-but snobs, the lot of them!"

"I have met Aoi-han already, actually, and she is not like her family," her cousin said. "Trust me, cousin. That one is not in the same mould."

Shizuma sniffed, looking doubtful. "I suppose... but the father represents the pattern faithfully. And at least the eldest daughter and son, whom I *have* met. Insufferable!"

"You have met the eldest daughter?"

"Oh, please," Shizuma said to that insinuation, amused. "I'd not give the woman the satisfaction."

"No doubt she would love a Hanazono coming after her," her cousin replied, smiling too.

"Thank you, I think she'd not scorn you either," Shizuma riposted. "You know, most of the brood does well enough when put with someone they consider of their level, but I find Hikaru Senou insufferable because he's one who would mark his level higher than anyone else's, given a chance at the chalk. The man is as puffed-up about his aristocracy as the most arrogant Fujino-Hanazono-and with less excuse."

Chuckling at the taunt to the extravagance of her own nobility, Shizuru answered equably enough: "Unfortunately so. However, Chie-han has hopes to win him over yet. I admit I have my own reservations, but would prefer to hope for the best."

"Oh, so do I... But she shall need a great deal more hope than either of us can provide, I would think."

"Indeed. You were telling me about running into her yesterday," Shizuru prompted gently.

"So I was," the white beauty owned. "Apologies for being diverted! I told her I was going to see you today, and she asked me to warn you that the Treasury is sounding some noise already about how much it currently spends for your soldiers, who should by now have been discharged. Soldiers kept on the state payroll, they say, and kept on to fight a nonexistent war. Talk is going around that your debt

little trick with the Ninth and Eleventh-sending them out to handle a sudden security threat in Upper Fuuka, I mean-is just that. A trick."

"That much suspicion I expected," Shizuru said, tranquil. "Even so, I imagine none of them would be willing to have me pull back those legions from their post seriously, in the absence of more tangible evidence that the threat *does not* exist. That is an area known for suffering raids from the barbarian tribes nearby."

"True, they cannot be sure about that. So the more scathing critiques are actually for the legion you have here, where no security threat can be so easily alleged," Shizuma went on. "The Fourteenth has been bivouacked in the Campus Martius for three months now. The only apparent reason for not disbanding it is the postponement of your triumph, which makes its presence even easier to attack compared to that of the ones you sent out by-supposedly-Chikane's edict."

She folded her arms and finished: "I sounded out some other quarters, and they carry the same news. No amount of public works by your legionaries can stop the Treasury if it sets up a howl."

"Let it!" the younger woman said viciously. It was clear to Shizuma that her cousin had been expecting this, for the disdain in the younger patrician's face was a cold, unsurprised thing. "The Treasury carps about cost all the time-even though we all know that it is full of money!"

The other woman made a face. "It does whinge like a blubbing brat, I'll grant."

"Whinging is what it does best," Shizuru sneered, genuinely irritated with that state institution's predictability. "I tell you, Shizuma, that the Treasury and the people who run it make me despair sometimes of the quality of Himean business sense. For, as it is, the fools generally have none! If they ran up the numbers correct, they would have realised that the money they are paying to feed my soldiers is actually not an additional cost. Rather, it is back-pay they owe them from the added months of service in the North. Convenient of the Treasury officials to forget that it was their senatorial masters who decreed those added months for me and my army, hoping to

hamper me by failing to send with the decree the added money required to fund it-which, of course, I had to cover during that time! Hence, what they are paying now is actually what they owe me for those costs"

She folded her arms and looked what she was: a very handsome woman with a very handsome indignation for shabby behaviour.

"How many times have I had to fund campaigns in the Treasury's stead, due to its admirable frugality when it comes to paying for soldiers?" she asked rhetorically. "As for the public works, the fact remains that my boys and girls have finished more construction projects in the past months than those overburdened and inadequate labourers to whom they give the contracts. Why do they not hire a decent number of workers for their projects, anyway? Parsimony without gain is simple folly."

Shizuma shrugged at this speech and did not pursue the issue any further, it not having escaped her that Shizuru was becoming quicker to annoy these days-if not to the red-hot boil she had displayed so famously in the Ogasawara villa, then at least to a skin-peeling simmer.

"And the work on those construction projects keeps your boys and girls from going soft?" she chose to say, knowing her young cousin very well and guessing this would be the best way to deflate said young cousin's ire.

It worked: the predatory gleam in Shizuru's eyes subsided.

"Pre-cisely," said the woman.

"A wonder your soldiers do not complain," Shizuma noted. "You do keep them on the hop!"

"Have people hopping enough and they shall be too busy to think about sitting down," was the answer. "Which is why so many others are capable of so much complaint, incidentally. All they do is *sit*."

The elder of the two slumped even deeper into the chair, as though seeking to add a comical note to Shizuru's criticism by portraying it.

"You mean the Senate," the frost-fair woman muttered. "Well, we both know they're the ones egging on the Treasury to complain, do we not? An attempt at reducing your bargaining position by forcing you to disband and part with your legions is perhaps only natural... if certainly *a foregone failure*. Do they really think you of all people would meekly consent to part with your legions at such a juncture, and with the knowledge that you head three of the only four legions currently in Fuuka? Either they do not credit you with the intellect they should or they are trying to live out some fantasy."

"As I said, they do let their imaginations run wild on their comfy couches," the other smirked.

"Quite so. Couch generals in general and of the general! Well..." She gave Shizuru one of her wickedest, most infectious smiles. "At least I shan't be classified in that category any longer, once you have your way."

Shizuru's eyes danced.

"Why, cousin," was her reply, positively dripping humour. "You almost sound excited to campaign with me."

It gained an airy lift of the silver brows.

"Perhaps I am," Shizuma admitted coolly enough. "Before you say it's all due to that niece of Noboru's, you may think again. I'm not yet such a beast that it's only my fleshly-or malicious, I shall admit it-desires that rule me." A haughty sniff. "You know I've yet to serve as a legate with anyone before, though what terms I have served I did not find myself disliking. Perhaps army life is just what I need to distract me these days."

Shizuru regarded her favourite relative.

"I have always known," she said. "That you have the stuff of a good general, cousin."

"Thank you," Shizuma said with simple grace. "I know you mean that, else-family or not-you would never have asked me to be senior legate. Still, that means I must prove myself in the position before

taking on actual generalship, naturally." A shrug, eminently casual. "I know what people shall say when you announce my appointment, of course, and I know it shall not be entirely baseless, Shizuru. My name is not known to be linked to anything military, and my last campaign was ages past. Not that it matters to me. At least this campaign of yours shall be a major graduation in my record and experience."

"Come now, you speak as though your time as a military tribune had been without distinction."

"Wasn't it? I didn't get a *corona graminea*, did I?"

"What an injustice!"

They traded grins.

"I shall have you on the hop too-don't think I shall not," the younger warned, eliciting an abrupt grimace.

"I can see it already with this pile you want me to study, so consider me warned," Shizuma said, drawling again. "But I meant to ask earlier: what is this? I expected you to be entertaining guests tonight."

"Because of the upcoming *contio*, you mean?"

She was speaking of the *contio* that would draw a close to the seventeen-day waiting period required by law to elapse before a bill proposed to an Assembly could be voted upon: specifically, the bill recently proposed by Himemiya-Kanzaki to finally decide Shizuru Fujino's matter. As Urumi had managed to put the bill to the Centuriate Assembly, the decision would come down to the votes of the First-and possibly, though not very probably, the Second-Class. It was an extreme rarity for the Third or Fourth Classes to be called to vote at all, so lobbying for motions put to the *comitia centuriata* generally focused on the higher strata of society. Which meant a different kind of lobbying from usual: invocations of blood or political-alliance instead of spectacles and inducements for the People, persuasion-laced dinners rather than distributions of bribes.

"Relaxed you are," Shizuma said. "Only three days left before the vote and here we have you, blasé as ever. I truly thought you would be spending these days charming some undecided knight or senator out of his boots, which is why I did not expect to find you napping when I passed by. Not worried at all, are we?"

Shizuru shrugged her shoulders very slightly.

"Of course I am. But a few dinner parties at the last minute shall not do much for that," she admitted. "And I have actually done all the lobbying I feel possible. Admittedly, some of it was held over dinners, so you were not far off the mark just now."

"I heard... you had Kanade and her posse over last night, right?"

"My, but women *do* keep you informed of who goes where!"

Shizuma ignored the tease. "Are they sympathetic?"

"Kanade-han seemed to be. But then, we may yet be uncertain." Shizuru frowned gently, folding her long, white fingers atop her thighs. "You know it is very difficult to elicit anything that may be construed as a commitment from her."

Shizuma looked critical. "The Jinguuji are always very careful about not overtly taking sides."

"Well, the clan *is* split in half: although the more powerful members are on the conservative side, save Kanade-han herself. A disadvantage to us. At the very least, she is not nearly as hidebound as some of her relatives."

"But bound anyway to her clan," Shizuma countered. "Who else? The Ootori?" she asked, naming another of Hime's powerful equestrian families.

But the younger woman shook her head. "Futile trying to treat with them. Have you ever met an Ootori whose promise could be trusted as oath?"

Shizuma smiled.

"I know what you mean. That family's absolutely no sense of political honour: funding the conservatives when requested to help bring down radicals like you; founding at the same time a new manufactory that produces *pila* according to *your* radical new design. Animals!" Shizuma exclaimed, laughing along with her host. "They don't begin to dabble in politics unless you give them a commercial reason for it. Knights first and senators later. The economics of our world rule them."

"And vice versa."

"Mm-hm. But I think their attitude makes them more likely to vote your way, you know. All those business prospects in the North. The more voracious *equites* are already lusting after the idea, and the Ootori are voracious about their businesses, if they would be anything at all." She drew a breath quietly. "The knights, in the main. It shall be the knights who tip the balance your way."

"So I believe. Whereas it shall be the senatorial families who shall tip it back," Shizuru admitted. "I have been keeping abreast of events in Hime from here, and I do know what is going on, not least the lobbying being made by the conservatives against my cause. Very busy bees, our conservative friends."

A pause; her lips thinned.

"Especially Yuzuru Nakao-han, I hear."

Shizuma looked at her cousin, remembering how angry she had been when Nakao's man, Hitagi, had tried to denounce her in that fateful House meeting. How surprised everyone-herself included-had been!

"He's an unthinking fool without any class feeling," she spat, referring to the patrician Nakao.

"He would undoubtedly say the same of me," replied her cousin grimly, before suddenly gripping both arms of her chair and pushing herself forward. "Oh, no matter, Shizuma! I shall deal with him another day. For now, Nakao shall keep. The more important issue at hand is how the centuries shall vote in three days' time." She



rested an elbow on the table to her right and leaned slightly towards it, propping up her chin with one hand: "Sosius-han came to see me the day before last."

"Your chubby little banker? To, what, inform you that you're still rich?"

Her cousin was chuckling. "No-although I am still that, fortunately! No, his visit actually had to do with two things: first, to inform me of what is happening among the Eighteen; second, to finish the purchase of this house and several others on my behalf."

Shizuma was puzzled. "You've been buying real estate? Why?"

"It is a good investment, as I see it," Shizuru answered. "I never realised until now-staying in this villa and hiring it for so long-what a good market there is for properties like this. There are countless others staying in hired villas near mine this very moment, many of them ambassadors from other nations. Some others are overseas governors returned to Fuuka for some reason, yet required to go back to their provinces afterwards and thus prevented from crossing the *pomerium* into the city. And, of course, there are the generals awaiting triumphs or ovations to be granted: although I am currently the only example of this type, this has been an unusually quiet year. And I predict that my choice to rent this villa instead of putting up in a tent with the soldiers shall start a trend from now on-you know our peers!"

"Yes, that's so."

"Thus I thought about it. If I buy the properties from the original land-owners, all those rents go to me directly and I also have an investment in prime real-estate I can sell off in the future, should I ever need to. As it is now, I shall no longer have to hire *this* villa. It already belongs to me."

The hazel eyes regarded her with a fair dose of befuddlement and Shizuru lifted an eyebrow curiously. Not that the other woman intended to give her an explanation: Shizuma was actually trying to understand this creature she called her cousin, who was already a brilliant politician and general, yet was also turning out to have a

great deal of plutocrat as well. To have one of the aforementioned qualities was noteworthy, and to have two of them excellent... but *all three* ? No wonder her cousin sometimes sounded insane! To be so superlatively gifted in so many fields, Shizuma decided, could not be mentally healthy. Maybe that was why her temper was turning out to be so destructive?

"What did your Sosius say about the Eighteen, though?" she said, changing the topic.

"That the conservatives are bringing every ounce of influence they have to bear on the First Class," Shizuru revealed. "Naturally. As things stand, the vote is just as likely to go my way as it is theirs, although I still believe I have a slight edge."

"I wonder you can still be so calm with only a slight edge."

The younger woman's expression turned feline.

"Because I have faith yet in Hime's First Class," she purred. "I am quite willing to gamble that, after they hear what we have to say during the *contio*, they shall show themselves just as self-preserving as mortals of whatever rank or stature."

"Oh, I see. You've something boiling in the pot."

"Urumi-han does."

"A queer fish, that one."

Shizuma adopted a pensive expression, her mind occupied with the image of the queer fish's decidedly queer stare. A few more seconds of this had her looking grim. Shizuma had all the Himean distrust of overly intelligent young women-a distrust she often-but-not-always spared her cousin.

"A very smart queer fish," she concluded. "She's dangerous, Shizuru."

"Yes, without question."

A level glance. "But you are still unworried about using her, eh?"

Truly *relaxed* ."

Shizuru threw back her head and laughed, producing an image very few of her peers knew and loved because very few of her peers could see it without feeling envious: either of her youth, or of her beauty. But this cousin sitting with her at the moment felt no negative emotion at the sight, and could look on in nothing but comfortable and affectionate appreciation.

"Please never forget, cousin," the woman reminded Shizuma with a winning smile. "Never forget: I am a very smart, very queer fish as well."

Shizuma smirked at her relative, who was also her friend.

"Which is why the conservatives refuse to swallow you, Shizuru," she said. "Queer fish make for spiny morsels."

By the time the *contio* arrived, however, the spiny morsel looked as mild and unassumingly dignified as any upstanding member of the patriciate could hope to be. She could attend the meeting since gatherings of the Centuriate Assembly were held outside the *pomerium*, the invisible barrier of the city she could not cross . Thus she was able to make an appearance for this meeting in full augural dress, from purple-and-red *toga trabea* to curlicued *lituus* . As with most fair men and women, Shizuru showed best against a backdrop of dark, rich shades as could be found on the *toga trabea* . Which was exactly why she had worn it. Besides, it reminded everyone that she was an augur, which was a further distinction. Her cousin made much of her conceits as they bantered with each other before the meeting-a familial display very much appreciated by many in the crowd, ravished by the cousins' appearances.

The presiding magistrate was the senior consul, who soon called down silence. The auspices were taken by Shizuru herself, after which the senior consul did not dally long and reminded the gathered citizens only that the bill upon which they were voting was not being put forward by her, but rather by her cousin. Before any voting would take place, however, she announced that said cousin would be allowed to have her say and refresh everyone's memories as to the content of the law for which she sought passage.

Urumi Himemiya-Kanzaki's appearance on the podium was not hailed with the usual raucous support it usually met. That regular adulation was given her in her fief, the venue of the Assembly of the Plebs, specifically the Well of the Comitia. The Centuriate Assembly was not made up of such elements as might frequently be found in its plebeian counterpart, where majority attendance was actually constituted by the plebeian lower and middle classes. To be sure, many of these were present that day as well, and still shouted their support of her from the sidelines. But they were on the sides and could not actually set the tone of the meeting. They were not the power in the Centuriate Assembly, where the only votes that mattered belonged to their superiors, not prone to being half as vocal. Most of the crowd clustered nearest to the podium were such subdued specimens, *senatores* and *equites* mixed together.

While a good number of the faces nearest Urumi were open enough to indicate willingness to listen, there were also some very dark ones. The darkest belonged to a cluster of senators to her right, many of whom were the leading members of the Traditionalists. These had good reason to glower at the speaker: the days leading to this *contio* had shown them the full extent of Urumi's menace.

The very first *contio* convoked for discussion of this bill had not actually been held in this Assembly, but rather in the Assembly of the Plebs, and several weeks ago. On that day, as soon as word spread that the President of the Plebeian College had called a meeting about Shizuru Fujino, every last archconservative had come running to the lower Forum, their tribunes of the plebs in the lead. The response they had in mind had been simple: the conservative tribunes would veto the proceedings before they went any further, the Fabian strategy adopted by the Traditionalists would continue, and any bill proposing resolution to the Fujino issue would never see the light of day-or so went the idea.

There had already been a good thousand in the Well of the Comitia by the time the conservatives arrived, which meant that their tribunes of the plebs had had to squeeze through a crush to get to the rostra that day. They had pushed and edged through the crowd, screaming vetoes as they went. Not that they had needed to scream to be heard: the convoker of the meeting had gone silent at their

arrival. *Strange*, the panting conservatives had thought, *but also understandable*, given how she had just been muzzled. Far stranger was that many of the gathered plebs had also been silent, faces ugly.

Just as the conservative tribunes had finally reached their destination and the Traditionalists had started to pat themselves on the back for yet another successful delay, the strangest and most terrible thing of all happened. At the time, no one had noticed that it happened only after Urumi Himemiya-Kanzaki put a hand to her fair hair and began to scratch as one would when put-out. A natural enough gesture, but not one normal to Urumi Himemiya-Kanzaki's nature.

A convulsion had followed Urumi's scratch. Suddenly feet had jumped, hands had hauled one of the conservative tribunes from the rostra and into the mass-where she had then vanished amidst a swarm of people shouting, pinching, slapping. Of actual punches or kicks none had been dealt: merely pinches or open-handed blows were meted out to the hapless tribune, whose face had soon swelled into unfamiliarity from the slaps of what seemed hundreds of hands.

Many of the senators and some of the uninvolved plebs had fled. Many others had stayed and watched, rooted to their places in horror, and unable to do anything against the sheer power of the mob and its violence. Violence against the sacred person of a tribune of the plebs? Violence against one of the officials every other official dared not touch, so protected were they? Unthinkable! Yet there it was, right before them!

The two remaining conservative tribunes had been sensible enough, at least, to back away from the platform's edge. It was at that point that the president of their college had sidled up to them:

" *That* is the real plebeian veto. Isn't it a sight? I suppose this means we shall have to discount your friend's veto today, since the Plebs themselves have spoken disapproval through their actions. They've gone rabid! I can't blame them, though... What's government coming to when tribunes of the plebs use their vetoes to block a motion that would see an end to a problem crying out for solution?"

And, stepping bravely to the fore of the podium, she had lifted arms and voice.

"Cease, Plebs!" she had cried, tone indicating she had no fear of being ignored. "I implore you to cease! We understand your wishes- her veto is null and void! Leave her be, for I believe *we all* understand this!"

She had turned to the remaining conservative tribunes behind her.

"You two over there, speak! Tell them you understand this and withdraw your vetoes!"

What else could the conservative tribunes have done, save to say yes? After this the crowd had immediately ceased and, letting drop the bruised and split-lipped tribune to the ground, dispersed at the behest of the President of the Plebeian College. Every senator still present had rushed to the aid of the unconscious woman, too horrified yet to realise how coolly the Plebeian College's President had acted, and how swiftly the abusive elements of the crowd had obeyed her wishes. It was much later in the evening that many of them had remembered the premeditated look of the event, and understood fearfully which senatorial wolf had just shed its skin to reveal an even more beastly aspect. How they had cringed! What was happening to the Republic when a single tribune of the plebs could muzzle the rest by threat of mob violence? For Urumi Himemiya-Kanzaki had shaken her head at the end of that horrid spectacle and, taking the arms of both her conservative colleagues, had said,

"What a good thing you two were standing far back from the edge! They might have grabbed you too. In any case, look on her well." She had pointed where someone was lifting their insentient friend. "It serves an object lesson, doesn't it? I really, *really* hope that does not need to happen ever again."

So when word came out soon after that another meeting was being convoked to discuss the Fujino issue-albeit in the Centuriate Assembly and by the senior consul this time-the conservatives had come running once more... but could not persuade a single one of their tribunes to veto the new *contio*. They coaxed, cajoled, tried to

convince their tribunes with promises and money. All to no avail, as the grey-faced tribunes took one look at the podium, shook their heads and fled from the scene in a tearing hurry. Veto, they said to their leaders, with that monster of a woman grinning at them from there? Veto, with all the raffish elements lurking on the fringes? Veto, and have the sacred body of a tribune of the plebs violated again? No, no, no, no! *Nec nefas nec noxam optamus ergo negamus!*

Haruka Armitage was so incensed she had one of her fits right there on the Campus Martius, tearing out hair and rending toga in front of a fascinated public. But that was because the trait Haruka Armitage possessed to a fault was courage of the most bull-headed kind. She alone could say that she would have lodged a veto regardless of the peril, and be believed in that statement. As for the others, they knew that they could not completely fault their tribunes of the plebs for knuckling under. All very well for Armitage to rave about principle and lily livers! Any kind of liver was fine so long as you lived to use it, and majority liked to live better than they liked principles.

Hence this day, and the days that had led up to it. There was much resentment simmering in the crowd Urumi faced. But it bothered her not a whit. It was not in her nature to be troubled by bad opinions of her, especially when those harbouring said bad opinions happened to be people she had by the balls. She also knew that, outside the Senate, more were eager to see a resolution to the issue that had been on the public table for the better part of the year, if only because the public was starting to tire of chewing on it.

"Greetings, *quirites*, " she began, pitching her voice high and clear. "I thank the senior consul for affording me this venue to discuss the bill I drafted with her assistance. For clarity, the bill to be voted upon today states that Shizuru Fujino shall be invested with her proper praetorian office, but be denied the traditional honour given to those praetorian candidates who come in first at the poll, which is the urban praetorship. This owing to the plot executed by Tomoe Marguerite, who is not now in this city and is reported to have fled prospective charges by boarding ship to Greece. Said plot, we note, does not involve Shizuru Fujino as an accomplice, and indeed shows her to be a victim. I pray this much is already clear. If so, may

we proceed?"

She made a show of waiting for any protests to be registered, although not expecting any.

"Then let me address first a remark I've heard over and over lately," she said. "There's been much talk of this setting a precedent. Very well, I say. Why do I say very well? Because *it should* ! It should set a precedent, *quirites* . After all, the very problem it aims to remedy is one that does set a precedent! A very dangerous one, whose growth we must nip in the bud this second."

"I've spoken of this precedent before, the first time actually being to my fellow senators. However, I fear I wasn't very well received. But it was not merely my audience to blame for that. It's possible that I phrased what I said too circuitously, still a touch too delicately for most. It's possible that, when I talked about this pernicious little seed thrown into the soil of our beloved Republic, I made a mistake by not putting my warnings direct! For I chose instead to hint at it by reminding the Founding Fathers and Mothers of our responsibilities to the creation and consolidation of law, regardless of the fact that the Senate does not-strictly and as a body-directly pass the laws of Hime."

She held out a hand and shook her head.

"I thought the hint would be taken then, but I miscalculated," she said gravely. "That miscalculation is an error that should fall on me. Feelings ran high due to events at the time, and so it was only natural that many would have the veil over their eyes, even if said eyes are normally far-seeing and clear. Even my eyes were partly veiled, in the sense that I failed to consider this veil over my audience's eyes when I gave my first warning. Now I see what I should have said and done. I should have given my warning in frank and plain speech! Thus shall I give it today, in hopes that you as well as my honoured colleagues see the justice of my statements and my proposition."

She paused to bow humbly to her cousin and those allies standing nearby. The same bow was given to the huddle of Traditionalists, regardless of their glowering faces.



"First, let me say I am a tribune of the plebs," she stated. "I became a tribune of the plebs in the last elections and, upon becoming a tribune of the plebs, I also became a senator. It is my duty to speak out if something endangers the interests of these two bodies, whether it be the Plebs concerned, or the Senate. What I have to say today concerns all these, in fact, and a greater body that has my full allegiance: the body made up of Hime and all Himeans themselves. What I have to say concerns none other than *the Republic*. This is why I implore you to listen, for this issue touches on and endangers every one of us."

" *Cunnus!*" spat Haruka Armitage. "She's the one who endangers the Republic! How dare she?"

Her friend the junior consul held her by one arm and whispered her into subsiding. They needed to hear what this maverick was going to say.

"Let us review what I have said in the past on the subject. In the past, I spoke of this as an illegality of dangerous consequences. To be sure, each time I was speaking of the illegality in this electoral travesty, I was indeed speaking of Shizuru Fujino's unusual case as perpetrated by the deceitful Tomoe Marguerite. However, I *was not* drawing the line at Shizuru Fujino's case alone! There is a far bleaker, darker future to which this case leads, and it is that which concerns us."

"When Shizuru Fujino's name was put up in the list of candidates for the praetorian elections, it was without her knowledge and consent. It was something that took her by surprise, for it had not been her intention to run for praetor yet. Yet there it was-her name put up, the votes for her counted, the victory complete! It was a grave wrong to Shizuru Fujino, yes, in the sense that it violated her right to decide for herself which office to seek and when to seek it. But it is an even graver wrong to the Republic as a whole, for the implications it carries."

She turned suddenly to the direction of the huddled conservatives, peering into their faces with her mismatched eyes.

"Let us take an example to illustrate these implications, *quirites*," she

announced. "Let us pretend that, say, a certain senator or knight or citizen found the same thing happening to him as it happened to Shizuru Fujino. Granted, a good number of my senatorial colleagues might not think it such a bad thing: it is said there is honour in simply being permitted to serve Hime, in any capacity. Yet would the same be thought by our good knights, who serve Hime in their own way-no less than the senators!-yet not in any elected position and of their own choice? Would the same be thought by any odd citizen amongst us, who surely serves the Republic in his or her own way as well? We choose our niches, *quirites*, because we know best where we can serve and serve well. Should another be arbitrarily given this right to choose the way we take?"

Her shoulders squared; a frown came to her face.

"Something must be mentioned here, of course, as an exception," she told them. "There have been rare cases where circumstances of the greatest urgency made it necessary to elect leaders without their prior knowledge or consent-as with the case of several consuls and war leaders elected during pressing times, chosen by the People to take command of the army when the Republic was imperilled. But that was in a specific context, *quirites*, which we do not currently have and did not have during the last elections. In times of peace, the respect for the rights of citizens cannot be abridged; in times of peace, there is insufficient reason to do so. The Republic is not threatened, which means that the only viable justification for such an exception to be made-the safeguarding of the Republic as a whole, I mean-is inapplicable. Furthermore, those rare cases I just mentioned had been determined in the nature of mandates from the People, who ratified them with the assistance of the Senate and obtained the subsequent permission of the concerned persons afterwards. So much can we say about a legal history of the issue."

She nodded solemnly to her audience, which had gone completely quiet. Even the conservatives listened with furrowed brows, their faces indicating they were actually giving thought to what she was saying-little though they liked the one saying it. They were by no means all stupid: the sharper advocates and experts of law were beginning to realise what she was getting at, and realised too that they were in agreement. Oh, but why had she not spoken of it this

frankly before now? And, even more galling to think about, why had none of them seen as far as she had?

"Returning to the issue itself, when I talked about the illegality being committed, I was not restricting its violations to the sanctity of our elections alone," Urumi said, her eerie eyes flashing. "The even greater violation was actually to something all of us must cherish-to every citizen's representative integrity! If we put it in blunt speech, *quirites*, what happened to Shizuru Fujino was no more and no less than a *frame-up*. It was an entrapment that can never be permitted to happen again else it lead to worse liberties taken by others who would use our names for purposes other than our own!"

"Let us keep going along the logical path of the example I gave a moment ago. Let us say you were nominated and elected an *aedile* ahead of the time you had wished to seek the office, with your finances in bad shape and your affairs not ready for the aedilician drain on your purse. You did not know of the nomination, yet suddenly found yourself obliged to ascend an office you had not yet intended to ascend. Jinx to your plans, and perhaps even your career! The aedileship, we all know, is an office that can prove ruinous-and has in fact ruined several of our worthy fellows, who found themselves experiencing in the office what every aedile throughout history has had to suffer: the disastrous drain of money for the sake of the games, which the aediles are expected to put on each year with only a bit of help from the Treasury. How many have we seen riddled with debt after their aedileships, never again to rise to the level of financial security? How many careers have we seen destroyed by only a year in this office? Would you be compelled to undergo the same even if you were not prepared financially, mentally, politically for it? Would you permit yourself to be compelled simply because some liberty-taking criminal arrogated himself the right to put up your name in deceit?"

A brief pause, a turn, another slant of the brows.

"That is only the beginning," she said threateningly. "For see! What if-just what if-we indeed allowed this sort of liberty to others? What if we permitted this illegal use of our names by others? I ask you to think on it, *quirites*, and imagine if you will the many situations such permission could breed. If we permit Shizuru Fujino's case to go

uncontested, what shall happen? If we allow someone to put up another's name so cavalierly without the other's consent, then where does this permission stop? Where else are we allowing this someone to put up the other person's name? Whose names are we allowing to be put up so insidiously? And what does it look like if we allow all this?" she asked, looking fierce.

She took a deep breath.

"I shall tell you!" she thundered, hands held out as though to embrace the gathering, or perhaps to take it by the arms and shake it into seeing what it needed to see. "It looks like we are saying that *it is now legally permissible to employ the name of another for a purpose unknown to the true bearer of the name!* It looks like we are legitimising frauds and forgeries ever after! It looks like we are removing not just Shizuru Fujino's but *every - single - citizen's* inalienable ownership of their legal personhood, destroying the concept of proper self-representation to the public and the state!"

"Can you not see then where this leads?" she roared, managing to make it sound both worried and angry. "Can you not imagine any of your enemies-for we all have enemies!-taking advantage of this? Were a person elected to a position without his consent to candidature, would we then oblige him to take it, even in an absence of the most urgent circumstances compelling his acquiescence? Were some treacherous family member to submit a new will to the Vestals boasting his name on it, would we then be obliged to honour that will without proper verification of his consent? Were his name posted on the doors of the *Curia* in a pronouncement declaring revolution against the Republic, would he then be damned as a traitor of the state immediately, without any investigation made to confirm his complicity? Are we to do all of this? Are we stupid savages and base barbarians, that we should fail to investigate allegations made in a person's name? For, I warn you, this is where sanctioning the illegality in Shizuru Fujino's case will lead! It leads to forgery of the most horrid possibilities, of entrapment and liberties taken against the individual personhood of every lawful citizen of our great Republic!"

She paused after the last word, letting it echo portentously over the gathering. Oh, the silence! Urumi used her pause to listen to it

reverently; she knew she had all of them hanging on her speech. Now all that was left was to let them down, soft as dandelions dropped by the wind.

"That is the precedent I warned of earlier, my beloved *quirites*," she said, lowering her voice and adopting a painfully concerned look on her face; most of those present had an even worse variant of the same look, for that which Urumi was warning of had such immense gravity.

"That is the precedent. It is but a short step from this sort of disregard for personal determination to the disregard for the person itself. If we allow people to use our names without our consent, we are giving up our ability to speak and decide for ourselves. We become no better than slaves whose masters decide everything for them. And we cannot allow ourselves to be slaves. So we acknowledge the crime in this issue and prevent it from establishing a case for future criminals to get away scot-free. Hence this bill."

She paused to swallow gently, throat dry from the summer heat. How nice it would be to get a glass of cool spring water! She could not stop yet, however, nor even pause to ask for a drink: it would be a weakness, and she could not afford it.

*A little more*, she urged herself, hiding discomfort behind a bitter smile. *Just a little more!*

"Now, I can hear some people asking about the provisions of the bill. Why must we give Shizuru Fujino any acknowledgment as an elected official at all, if we cannot deem her candidature as legal? Because, fellow citizens, despite the illegitimate nature of her candidature... her election itself was *legitimate*. The forms were observed. You and none other than you elected her in a lawful assembly. If I may remind everyone of the legal processes of our Republic, that which has been decreed and approved by we Himeans in our valid assemblies-whether those of the Plebs, the People, or the Centuries-is Lawalready. Thus, barring the contentious nature of the nomination, the election itself of Shizuru Fujino was lawful. The gods signalled acceptance of it when the auspices were taken on the election day and showed to be perfect. You yourselves ratified it the moment the votes were counted and

she was declared first on the elected praetors' list. Her election became legal the moment the members of the Centuriate Assembly voted her in and had those votes counted, expressing through the polls *an electoral mandate which is equivalent to a bill.* "

She shrugged exaggeratedly-to ensure the gesture would be seen even by those far away-and assumed a helpless grin.

"So much do we know: we cannot gainsay the outcome of the elections on that point," she said then. "The only way to do so would be to allege that the praetorian elections themselves had been dirty or to accuse the elected official of bribery. But have we heard a single murmur of any such thing? Any allegations against Shizuru Fujino on that count?"

Here the junior consul had to be glad that she was standing right next to her dearest friend, because it permitted her to yank the woman's arm with unexpected strength when she saw the latter's mouth twitch.

" *Don't*, Haruka-chan!" she whispered furiously, unaware of Sergay Wang issuing the same prohibition to some other hothead in their midst. "It won't do to raise accusations of Fujino-san having bribed-unless you have something right now to prove it! And you know there's nothing to prove she did!"

Haruka stared, quite taken aback. A good thing she found Yukino's actions so stunning, for nothing else could have cooled her head sufficiently to prevent her bellowing out an accusation that very moment.

"But they'll beat us!" she protested, in a voice she had not even known herself to possess: quietly plaintive, not boisterous and brassy.

"Yes, but they'll beat us more extravagantly if you do what you're thinking," the other hissed, too afraid for Haruka to even contemplate how unlike herself she was acting. "Please, Haruka-chan! We'll think of another way after this, but for now just let it be."

Urumi on the podium was still asking questions in provocation,

actually wishing Haruka Armitage-whom she had seen on the verge of an outburst-would get up and scream bribery.

"Even one whisper of bribery?" she asked, looking terribly expectant as she peered into the crowd. "No? Nothing? Never? That's quite rare, isn't it? I wonder why that is!"

A call from someone in the crowd made her cup her ears to his direction, and she asked him to repeat his words. He did so quite cheerfully.

"Oh, yes!" Urumi clapped her hands together after the second call and pretended to bow in courtesy. "Quite so, *quiris*, thank you for reminding all of us here! Shizuru Fujino *was not* even in Hime at the time of her election and could not have done any bribing, considering that she was unaware of what was happening! Not that bribery could be expected from her, mind you, had she known about it: I would like all to note that this selfsame Shizuru Fujino, in every election she has ever contested in the past, has always and ever placed at the top of the list, absent a single allegation of bribery! Every-single-election, *quirites* ! Statistically-speaking, the outcome of her candidacy had to have been no surprise, even if her candidacy was."

Another shrug, as eloquent and beautifully executed as all her other gestures-for Urumi's mastery of rhetoric extended to the rhetoric of the body, and each turn of her head, each extension of her hand, was done in superb accord with the effect her words were making.

"Now, a praetorship is a curule magistracy, vested with *imperium* . It cannot be stripped so easily from one who has been elected into it. If anyone at all can do so, needs must be those who elected the magistrate. As it was with Katsu Hitagi, former tribune of the plebs, whose case did not even involve the matter of *imperium*, and is thus less weighty . Hitagi's downfall began in the Senate, but it concluded in the Plebeian Assembly. As it should have, for it was there that the Plebs voted him into office, and it was also there that they voted him out of that office by ratifying the Senate's decisive recommendation, strictly a *senatus consultum* . You remember this, my fellow Plebs who are here! As I remember it, having been there when you voted to support the Senate's recommendation! As illustrated by that

instance and legal tradition, an elected official can only be stripped of elected status by the redress of law-when under charges of bribery or treason-or by the legal mandate of the proper Assemblies."

"So Shizuru Fujino *cannot* be stripped of her status as an elected official. She is *not* under accusations of bribery or treason. She has *not* requested this Assembly to pass a law undoing their votes of her, specifically. Or would she? I have been talking so far about the right of every citizen here to represent himself lawfully. Far be it from me to turn hypocrite! Let's ask the woman here, now, what she says of this. Shizuru Fujino, please step forward!"

The woman in question detached herself from the side of her cousin and their allies, the people around them clearing a path for her to walk up the podium. The crowd sighed its appreciation, finding the summoned woman a treat: decked out in the augural robes, her head of gorgeously thick, loosely curling hair finally bare (she had had to cover it with a fold of her toga for taking the auspices), Shizuru looked sumptuous. Upon ascent, she faced Urumi.

"Were you aware of your candidature in the last praetorian elections and was it with your consent?"

"I was not aware and it was not with my consent," Shizuru declared, her voice carrying clearly.

"Do you nonetheless consent now to occupy the position of praetor, into which you were voted by the members of this Assembly?"

Again from Shizuru: "I accept it, as it is the people's wish."

"Shall you not request that they undo their election by creating a law waiving their votes in your case?"

"I shall not, for my only desire is to serve the people of Hime," the woman answered modestly. The summer light pouring over them showed her to full advantage, and she looked haloed with honour, incorruptible. "But if there is any part of my election or candidature that shall not serve Hime, I myself urge it to be redressed. I would not own an honour procured at the price of Hime's interests."



"Oh, well played, Fujino!" hissed Sergay Wang to those in the audience who could hear him.

"I thank you for your honesty," Urumi answered loudly, as Shizuru again stepped away. The tribune turned to her audience once more.

" *Quirites*, we are answered. She has agreed to accept the mandate of your votes. We are then justified in considering her an elected official, despite the doubts within her candidature. *But!* But we cannot be justified in giving her the full *traditional* benefit of the elections. As I said earlier, we must rectify the illegality buried in her candidature, and do so in such a way that makes clear our disapproval of the deceit involved in it. Yet we cannot tamper with that which has been established lawful already, which is her conclusive electoral victory."

Her eyes gleamed, and she flicked her gaze very swiftly at the Traditionalists.

"I talked earlier about people misunderstanding my first speeches about this issue," she said. "And now I come to yet another of those misunderstandings. When I asked the Senate for a *senatus consultum* removing her from the topmost praetorian seat, I was misunderstood again, I fear. They thought I was asking for a special privilege for Shizuru Fujino. Let me clear up the misunderstanding today!"

Her voice boomed again.

"I was not demanding special privileges for a senator whose misfortune it has been to be caught in between two cliffs without even intending it. I was and am not giving Shizuru Fujino anything she does not deserve or have already! In fact, *I was and am denying her the only thing I can deny her* -it not being provided by hard, written law but by more flexible, unwritten custom. I am denying her an honour that I firmly argue she would have achieved legitimately, if only her name had not been unknowing party to deceit. I am denying her the highest signal honour of the praetorship, the choice position of being the urban praetor. It grieves me to have to do this to one actually innocent of the crime we have been discussing, but I have been left only two paths due to this situation! Think on them, fellow

citizens, and see which one I had to take and why I took it."

She turned carefully this way and that, making sure to pretend to be peering in supplication to every side of the crowd she faced. She had every appearance of a woman troubled, pained by the hard road she was forced to take for justice.

"Witness the questions I had to ask from the beginning," she said to them. "Was I to allow an ulcer to take root and fester within our beloved Republic, one that could harm every person here in the future if let be? Was I to keep silent and permit a well-deserved honour to a woman who would doubtless have gained it even without the pre-emption of an outside deceit? Or was I to cut out that ulcer instead to preserve the rights of every man and woman in our Republic, and in doing so deny a signal honour to a woman who-even given the situation-of herself deserves it?"

A despairing shake of the head.

"Oh, yes, *quirites* ! The choice was clear, much though it pained me. I had to speak and deny that innocent woman an honour that unsolicited others had contrived for her to gain dangerously: I had to cut out that ulcer planted on that one innocent woman because *I could not permit worse danger to cut the innocent many* ."

She stopped here, her face covered with lofty sadness, and shook her head again.

"It cannot be helped, but this is the only way. At least, our learned senior consul has informed me she shall propose legislation soon that imposes more stringent requirements on the declaration of candidature for our electoral process, that this may not happen again," she disclosed, drawing some to him strongly in approbation. "I am in agreement that it is high time someone formulated better, stricter laws for this, given that we have experienced such a travesty recently. For now, however, I am asking you to pass a more immediate prevention to similar travesties, also a resolution in its own way. I ask you to pass the legislation we have tabled today, which shall make an example of this case as an instructive lesson to all would-be forgers and falsifiers in the future."

"Let Shizuru Fujino-lawful praetor-elect-be marked," she said, her chin held high and her stature seeming almost to increase. "Let her be singled out as the only praetorian candidate ever elected first in the poll not given the distinction of being named the urban praetor. Let this much be withheld from her, much though it should grieve all of us to single out for such a denial she who is actually a victim. Let this much happen, our grief notwithstanding, because we have no other choice but to deny her this to signal our disapproval of the illegal element in her candidacy. If we do not make an example of her case by this denial, we shall imperil every citizen of our Republic by implicitly *condoning* the misdeed through which Shizuru Fujino was manoeuvred into gaining that which we deny her now. And that imperilment to all of us, to the whole of the Republic, we cannot condone. Nor indeed, as Shizuru Fujino said earlier, can she."

After which words the senior consul permitted no others to speak and simply commenced the voting. She wanted Urumi's words to be the last ringing in the audience's ears, had they truly listened and understood. And, as it turned out, the Centuries *had* listened and understood. The bill divorcing Shizuru from her *praetor urbanus* position was passed by century after century called to vote-including those centuries, in fact, with the strongest ties to the conservatives. Shizuru and Urumi's gambit had paid off. The First Class voted unanimously for their proposal because it was shown that to do so was not really about supporting Shizuru Fujino: it was about preserving its own skin.

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Takeda Masashi's senior legate, Seigo Ushida, received the letter carried by Nina nearly a fortnight after the young woman left Takeda and Suou's Seventh. If the bedraggled Otomeian who handed Ushida the letter failed to impress him, the letter's seal did. An eagle with wings curved out, bordered by thorns and bearing the striking contraction HIME between the open talons-no mistaking those letters! Only one family in the Republic could have so impressive an ellipsis for their name. Ushida was sensitive enough to sit up when a letter came from the sister of the current senior consul, even if he did wonder why the packet had not also carried a letter from their common general, who was his friend. A question that grew stronger

once he perused the letter's contents: it should actually be Takeda writing to him demanding that he bring up the rest of the cohorts, not a woman whose military rank was below his, and who was not even a senator yet, into the bargain.

*Oh well*, he shrugged, quickly weighing the matter. Chain of command in an army was one thing and tended to be temporary, whereas the social chain was another... and was more or less permanent. He was acutely aware of the duties of the upper classes to each other, and aware too of which families had the claim to the uppermost stratum. Here Suou's name stood her in good stead, since the very well-born and patrician Ushida might have ignored her had she not been a member of her clan. As it was, he had to admit her clan made even his look just slightly above pedestrian. Besides, to give his fellow patrician her due, he also noted that Himemiya Minor had written a letter full of good, sound military sense. If there was anything Ushida understood aside from Himean social ranks, it was good, sound military sense. If scouts had disappeared and someone as obviously capable as a Himemiya scented something foul underfoot, it was obviously time to get on for a sweep!

In truth, he was also relieved. This letter had come at the perfect time, giving him just the opportunity he needed to uproot from his post. Ushida was a man of action and had been hankering so long for something better than staying in Argus and cooling his heels, his fantasies full of leading the legions to some outlying foreign territory and snatching up the fabulous treasures sure to be discovered therein.

Seigo Ushida had taken this mission in hopes of finding wealth in the rich North: his family's fortunes had gone bad, and there was enough of the brood to make funding their political careers terrifically costly. Seigo was the eldest and had to be the one to find the money. Just his luck he happened to have the talents that would help him find his fortunes in the military. Ah, for a nice foreign war against a wealthy foe! He thought, when Takeda offered this post to him, that he had found it. But his old friend had proven an unexpected hurdle, had turned out to *genuinely* mean what he said about working towards a peaceful concession with the barbarian

Mentulae.

Nothing daunted, Ushida had then proposed to plunder the vaults of a different nation, said to be just as rich, if not richer: Otomeia. But Takeda had shrieked like a plucked fowl, told him to stop jumping to ideas of war, and to look over the Argus garrison quietly. Subsiding, Ushida had then tried to content himself with the tiny gifts he managed to solicit from the local upper crust, with his dickerings with the *publicani*, whose collection of overdue taxes he aided by having the soldiers do the confiscations, taking a work of art or something of value for his cut here and there... and conscious all the while that his purse was only growing plumper by inches, while he himself was growing bored by miles. It was not even so much about the sluggishness of the financial trickle-simply that he needed action! He was a military man, in command of an army, yet was being left to waste away!

So after Suou's letter, Ushida wasted neither words nor time. After composing a brief reply, he told his officers to mobilise the army straightaway. What he would have liked to do was take the legion garrisoning Argus with him, but he had sufficient sense to know he would not be likely to obtain it. Argus held the main Himean ports in the North, and was too strategically important. As the legion garrisoning it also happened to be understrength, the governor naturally regretted to say she could not peel off any cohorts to lend him. She did, however, offer to send messengers for him to Otomeia demanding the recall of the auxiliaries that had been sent back there recently.

The Argus governor was actually another recipient of Suou's mail. Aside from Ushida, Nina had been carrying letters for two others in Argus: one being Midori Sugiura and the other-though Nina made sure to let no one know about this-being that enterprising Greek that Takeda disliked so sorely. These two were also informed of Suou's inklings of Mentulaean foul play, but asked to take different courses of action from Takeda's senior legate.

The Argus governor was adjured to prepare for any outbreak of conflict by training militia and shoring up defences in the province, as well as barring all Mentulae in her territory from leaving. Not that this meant she would be putting all descendants of Mentulae or

Mentulaean nationals under house arrest: rather, one could call it provincial arrest. They would not be allowed to exit or enter the Argus boundaries from that moment, to help reduce the possibilities of treachery. All ships passing by or docking at the ports and found to be carrying material bound for the Mentulaean territories were to be detained indefinitely, their cargo to be seized in the event of outbreak. And, finally, the governor was to be ready to send an official letter to Hime in such an event, to help light a fire under all those sluggish and sceptical senatorial arses.

The other recipient of Suou's communication, Yamada, found himself reading a missive that did not so much suggest as it directed. He was ordered to cull whatever information he already had, get more immediately, and write to Hime to inform Shizuru Fujino of all that had already taken place. He was also commanded to request orders for himself from Shizuru Fujino: so that he could, she said, prove himself "not entirely superfluous".

A powerful man in these lands and a veteran in his field of expertise, Yamada could have chuckled at this young aristocrat's acidity and her smugness in ordering him. That no laughs escaped him was for two reasons: first, quite naturally, was her ominously powerful name; second, not as naturally, were the equally ominous and powerful paragraphs she had tacked onto the end of her letter.

*Now, Yamada-san, I've been telling you to do this and that thus far, but I think it's time I told you why exactly I can tell you to do this and that. Being that you are a man who makes a living on intelligences and traded knowledge, let me put it to you in terms of my knowledge so that you may better appreciate it.*

*I know Fujino-san came to an agreement with you about your services. I also know the terms of your service to her were not as fully outlined as they would normally be, had she only had the time to finish all matters with you. Circumstances being what they were during her departure, this has not been the case. So I think it's possible this lack of clarity is to blame for your subpar showing of information so far, and the indistinct nature of what little you have provided: most of the information you've given me has been about a lack of communication from some of your travelling agents instead of actual communication from ones still heard-from and possible to*

*send out for the purpose.*

*Now, do not worry. I'll not think this evidence of sluggishness to invest more of your resources to Fujino-san's cause, of course. And I definitely will not think it evidence of you doubting Fujino-san's ability to get you the citizenship you wanted, or her word that she will. After all, I'm sure you are taking the initiative required of you and sending out more of your best people this very moment, are you not? Of course you are! I never doubted you for a second, you know.*

*At least, when I see Fujino-san again, I can tell her you have every indication of having held to whatever minimum of loyalties your standing agreement demands. That's good: it might make her a little less dangerous when she questions why you've taken so long to be more proactive about taking the risk of sending out more of your agents. I'm not sure it would really make her less dangerous, you understand, although I am sure that Fujino-san considers loyalties to be important things. As do I.*

*But times like these are not very healthy for loyalties, are they? Such periods of uncertainty lead many to question loyalties, especially fresh ones, when the scales of power seem to hint that they might tilt. I personally feel a word of caution is always better during such times, so I shall help by tendering you a few to use for points of certainty, us being allies and obliged to help each other.*

*For the first point of certainty: do not imagine the scales shall ever tip against Hime. No foreign nation has ever triumphed against it, no foreign nation ever shall. Do you remember that silly country that tried anyway? It was a long time ago. That nation was actually quite large, I believe, and led by far better generals than that King of Kings the Mentulae have. But what was that long-ago nation's name again? Oh dear, I seem to be forgetting! Let me see... Oh, yes, now I remember: Carthage. It's so easy to forget them when they are written so conclusively out of existence.*

*Second point of certainty: do not make the mistake of thinking that you are the only head of clandestine operations in the area or that your network is insulated and-should you get into hot water, say, with a disgruntled client-that your network can insulate you perfectly.*

*I have noticed that separate and sometimes conflicting intelligence groups actually tend to work with and around each other, even if they have (whether technically or according to appearances) only one master. For instance, even if Fujino-san often employs local intelligencers for her campaigns, she also happens to be very fond of grabbing officers and rankers raised in the Sulpician territories for her legions... which you should note because she's the type to actually use tools she gets. Very good at checks and balances, Fujino-san is.*

*Finally, to add just one more point of certainty to the list: do not imagine that anyone who makes an enemy of Hime can ever escape. We have very long arms, we Himeans, and Fujino-san herself is-as I said earlier-very fond of grabbing.*

*That having been said, I do have a great deal of certainty that you are currently doing as Fujino-san would expect: jumping all over to find the information you should be providing us. At least, this is what I'm certain you are doing if you still want the citizenship. It's good practice for being a true Himean too, in that you'll not count the costs to your business in this matter, and count yourself glad instead to be of service to Hime. And-just like a true Himean!-you'll not even think of switching loyalties to some ambitious thug just because he calls himself King of Kings and he and his soldiers happen to seem nearer to you at the moment. What is such temporary proximity compared to a more enduring and significant one, after all? Remember our long arms, and Hime's inability to be beat. Remember too that this King of Kings is the same creature Fujino-san sent home with a mere word-whipping. Not a very attractive alternative to Hime, is he? Ah, but nothing is.*

*But what am I doing? Apologies: my quill ran too long and superfluously. After all, you already know many of these things! I know you know them, just as I know you're a paragon of loyalty to us, and to the woman whom you asked to become your patron upon enfranchisement and to practically function as your patron while you prove the worth of your enfranchisement. I know you're so dedicated to this woman's cause that you're simply killing yourself finding a way to get information that can help her, even without me coming to administer a neat kick to your bottom to help get you moving. I know*



*this, just as I know you appreciate me sharing all this knowledge with you. Fear not about the trade: I share all this information completely free of cost. As your ally in the enterprise, it is the least I can do.*

*I will repeat your orders: infiltrate the Mentulæan Empire and command, by any means necessary. Get all your agents, including those on other missions, and rededicate them to getting information that can help us here. And report everything-your recent actions and inactions included-to Fujino-san.*

Yamada took the hint. His efforts, he admitted, *had* been flagging recently: a spate of doubts had coincided due to the absence of Shizuru Fujino and the increasingly precarious local situation. Suou Himemiya's letter had dried up the spate, and Yamada gave his intelligence network the neat kick to its bottom the letter had threatened to give him. While he bore no grudges against the writer of that menacing epistle, he was honestly taken unawares. The claws that had written it! He remembered the author from prior encounters only as a very attractive and affable woman, rather sociable but not flamboyantly so. Not unintelligent, but with an inclination to be easy-going. Uncomplicated.

It seemed he had to revise this impression quickly. For some reason, Suou Himemiya had managed to keep from him the more acute traits in her, now manifest. Clearly one more patrician who bore watching: another very young aristocrat with very sharp teeth!

Yamada deemed it high time he impressed both his sharp-toothed patron and her sharp-toothed friend. The packet he sent to Hime was thus a very fat bundle, full of culled reports and letters besides his. His ownmissive imparted both information and inferential advice, aside from apologies for his sloth in reporting. *Best to assume*, he wrote anyway to his patron, *that the Mentulæe are planning on attacking*. Aside from the odd lapse of communiqués from his agents, he cited too one of the last pieces of information his agents had been able to intercept and report: one of the royal princes, Calchis, had been summoned from his station and instructed to bring his army with him to the capital. Significant, especially considering that the army that prince carried was the largest force belonging to the Mentulæan King.

Another piece of information he shared and cited as support for his assumptions was the fact that some of his agents had recently tracked large shipments of charcoal to the Mentulaean towns of Arvern and Comus. These were the Mentulaean towns with the highest number of steel foundries, he explained.

*While I don't intend to be arrogant, I'm still obliged to explain everything for clarity and to ensure your satisfaction in my work, Fujino-san . So please forgive me if I seem to be making an assumption you don't know the things I have to say next, because that's not what I intend. In reality, I'm only going to say them because I'd rather you know that I know them. I'm aware I have to prove my worth to you, so I'm making sure to prove it wherever I can from now on.*

*Everyone in the steel and metalwork business knows that it's not the amount of iron available that actually determines the productivity of a foundry. It's charcoal, of course, since the amount of charcoal needed to make steel is considerable. So I think it's fair to say that the spike in Arvern and Comus's charcoal imports is indication there's a sudden spate of production going on there. Arvern and Comus generally produce ploughs and ladles and pots, but why not swords and mail-shirts? I'd guess that's what's happening over there right now in all those manufactories.*

*If this guess is right, this tells us that the Mentulae have plans for a massive and extended military investment. Their current armies are already equipped, so this indicates that they intend to raise more armies in the future. And wherever they intend to send out armies is likely to be within the area adjacent to their borders, given the tactical recall of Prince Calchis to the capital. Obviously, the Himean territories are included in the potential area of deployment-as are, a little further along, the Otomeian ones. The Mentulae are likely thinking of going to war with us, and very seriously.*

Thus Yamada's letter to Shizuru. About the same time his packet was halfway through its journey to Hime, Takeda Masashi's senior legate was discovering further complications that would compel a far more urgent letter to be sent presently. Twelve days into Ushida's march to honour Suou's request for reinforcements, the messengers he had sent ahead returned, racing back down the path they had

just travelled. Their reason: a Mentulaean army sighted marching on the road to Sosia, its ranks looking ready for a siege.

The news threw Ushida into a fury of reorganisation, as it gave him to understand he would now have to proceed in a state of high alert instead of relative security. *Not*, of course, that he had thus far conducted himself like someone just on a nice little stroll. A good man with an army, he had been sure to observe the requisite amount of suspicion a march in foreign lands necessitated. If it was the *foreign* part that raised the bar for "the requisite amount of suspicion", his officers said to each other, what did that matter when it actually improved the commander's vigilance? The trick was to try and keep his suspicion of the foreign from getting to the archers travelling with them: little regard though Ushida had for auxiliaries, he had still brought up the remaining Otomeian cavalry archers in Argus with him. For which instance of military caution overriding prejudice his officers were grateful indeed.

So Ushida carried with him one squadron of horse archers and the last five cohorts of the Seventh-the last in terms of number and standard position, since the Seventh's leading cohort down to its fifth one were the ones with Suou and Takeda. Desperate numbers, Ushida knew. But Ushida's case had a lucky advantage over Suou and Takeda's: to all appearances, the Mentulae had not yet detected him, whereas his messengers had already detected them. There were thus no enemy troops fielded to impede him on his march. He could follow them to Sosia unhindered, making smokeless camps the whole way. That he headed to Sosia instead of trying to find Takeda and Suou was because he knew they would likely be headed there too, gods having been willing to preserve them wherever they were!

More of his messengers went out, some sent to make contact with the general's group. More were deputed to reach Argus, informing the governor and advising her to "buckle down", because Suou's premonitions had become more or less a reality. Similar messages were sent to nearby towns too: the small, Himean-allied communities near the main fortress cities of the Sosia and Argus provinces. Whenever he encountered any of these small settlements on the march, Ushida spoke with the local authorities or town

leaders-people usually of Himean descent-in order to warn them of what might be on the way.

"Raise your militia," he told these. "Send them to Argus to get equipped or send to Argus for equipment if you feel you want to make a stand here, though I'd not advise it. If you don't fancy being run down by the Mentulae, though, clear out quick! Help will come eventually, but it won't be quick enough to help you if the Mentulae decide to pass through here."

"We will go to Argus," replied one such *ethnarch* to him. "But what of the harvest? We are only halfway through gathering it."

"Then get all hands on it, man!" Ushida exclaimed. "And bring all of it to Argus. It will come in handy with all the extra mouths going there to feed."

"We will send word to the neighbouring towns as well," the man suggested deferentially.

"Good. Tell them not to fanny about, or they'll be lost before they know it! The Mentulae are coming and there're enough of them to swarm the place."

And in afterthought, he added, "Take with you the treasures of your community, naturally. You can billet them with my people: I have very roomy quarters in Argus, and they'd make a safe storehouse for your things."

He doubled the number of his scouts. It was only here that Suou might have disagreed with his military actions, for the scouts he chose were purely Himean and Argus locals, not a single one of the Otomeian stock Suou had grown to prefer. To be sure, Suou did not actually mind using Himean and Argus locals as well, especially those who had years of experience. But she had come to prefer the Otomeian scouts for their skill and military sense.

The Otomeians were a people so used to the area as well as to the military that they all knew what things to note ahead of time for army purposes. They knew what things to preserve without being told, and also what things to kill. They also had a near-fanatical notion of

honour and duty that more or less ensured they would prefer to die rather than turn traitor or divulge information. Their belief in the hereafter apparently demanded that they die honourably to enjoy a good afterlife, and this made them very difficult to break (it was dishonourable for a warrior to break) in torture.

Whatever the case for his scouts' nationalities, Takeda's senior legate nonetheless managed to follow the Mentulae quietly. The complement to his half of the Seventh, meanwhile, was creeping about not too far away, having abandoned their old camp and moving to a new and cleaner location. They had sent reconnaissance teams out to better inform them of the situation, since Takeda was wary of running into the enemy again. While waiting for the teams to return, his group kept a vigilant perimeter check to avoid detection, and worked on recuperating those who were wounded.

The scouts they sent this time operated under extreme stealth, and were the very best the Otomeians could field. One group, the one sent to Argentum to find out what had become of that city and the legion in it, was led by one of the sub-commanders of the Lupine division; another group, the one scouting the camp perimeter and nearby paths for enemy threats, was led by the division's commander herself. It was for the first group that everyone in the command tent waited, for it would decide if they would proceed to Argentum or head to another destination. Everyone was too restless to wait patiently, however, so the Mentulaean officers taken captive after the Siege of the Seventh were routinely subjected to questioning. Unfortunately, to little effect.

"One's brains are gone from being coshed too hard on the head and the other one's acting a fucking warrior-prince-just the sort of *cunnus* too proud of himself to break," the officer in charge of the two captives growled to Suou when she checked. "I've had the men beat him up good enough to crush a nose but he's not saying anything yet about Argentum. All he does is smirk-and that's enough to get the men asking if they can beat him up again."

"You broke his nose?"

"Yes."

"I see," Suou said with a faint look of derision. "If our dear-what's his name again?"

"Carus." A grunt. "Says he's some noble or something. Hah!"

"He might be. Anyway, if our dear Carus is smirking about Argentum, broken nose and all, that means we can't expect anything good from the scouts when they come back."

"At least he admitted they're hoping to surprise Sosia and Argus."

"At least," Suou said dryly, thinking that admission little better than useless. She wished again that she had Nao here; Nao would know what to do to get a man talking. "Well, I don't know about Sosia and Argus, but they caught *us* by surprise, all right! I myself knew they were about to start something funny, but I thought they would do it in late summer."

"It's these bloody odd seasons," the officer answered. "Spring was slow, and that kept the rivers fordable between them and us for too long. The Otomeians say the thaw usually arrives later here than it does back in Fuuka."

"I wish we had known that before," Suou sighed. "If the thaw had only happened earlier, I doubt they would have crossed so easily and without detection."

"Would've liked them all to try even then, just so they could've drowned."

"Quite. Get more out of him if you can, would you?" she said. "Something a little more concrete... like how many troops are being sent out, what other movements they plan."

She started to turn, but not before sending a glare over her shoulder.

"And leave their faces alone, " she added frigidly. "It's an idiot who smashes in the parts most important for getting answers to questions. Have a little finesse about it. If I come here next time and find one of them killed from the torture, I shall flog to ribbons the man responsible-right before sending him off to execution."

Three days before the Calends of August, the scouts who had gone to Argentum finally reported. The Mentulaean curtain had come up, it seemed: the enemy's scouts had grown complacent as soon as the Mentulae penetrated deeper into Himean territories, deeming their work half-finished. Most had gone home, and those who did stay operated so slackly that the sneaking Otomeians not only managed to evade enemy patrols all the way, they also captured one Mentulaean scout while returning. Thus did the Otomeian troopers get to fill out the story whose bare bones they discovered in Argentum... which they had found in ruins, a city devoid of life. From the captured scout came the story Carus had refused to tell: the Mentulae had taken Argentum from inside even as Takeda had marched for his peace treaty. Argentum and its people were no more, including the legion that had been garrisoned in it-Shizuru Fujino's Eighth.

The news fell like a thunderclap. The Himeans were deafeningly silent as the Otomeians passed word, and a heavy pall descended upon the camp. *The Eighth!* A legion whose standards groaned when carried, so heavy were the decorations upon it; a legion that had once trampled down three fortresses in one legendary march in another country; the very legion with which the Seventh had fought at Argentum to make military history. That had been a year ago. To think that only a year had passed and already there was no longer an Eighth in the legions of Hime! A new one would have to be raised to take its place. But that new Eighth would not be Shizuru Fujino's, would not be the legion that had come to achieve the status of legend.

*The Eighth can't be dead*, the aghast soldiers muttered to each other, saying it over and over as though it could disprove the reality. It was just so hard to believe! What all *could* believe, at least, was that the Eighth had stayed true to its repute: the scouts said the area around the legionaries had been littered with even more Mentulaean than Himean dead, each member of the Eighth seeming to have determined that the price of his life would not come cheap. But oh... the pain of imagining the Eighth's bodies strewn around the place where they had triumphed, the very field where they had sent thousands of Mentulaean dogs running! How the General-not this general, but *their* general-would weep!

Shizuru's former legate did weep, but in a strangely composed way, without a sob or a choke to her. And in her eyes was the hardening frost of anger already, promising retaliation for the deed.

"Really some shades of Homer at work here," she remarked dispassionately, voice smooth though the tears still ran down her cheeks. "Of the legate Aidou-san there was no sign, so we must presume him either dead or captured. Either way, this is a travesty."

Takeda, too shocked to even grieve, agreed. They were in a meeting with the rest of command, trying to decide what their next course of action should be. Morale was low even among the faces in the tent, for the fate of Argentum and the Eighth rammed home the point that this small force of theirs, combined with the small forces garrisoned in the Sosia and Argus provinces, would be the only Himean armies present to contend with the enemy. The outlook was too bleak to even contemplate winning. The question most of them were asking was actually *How can we possibly survive this?*

"What do you intend now?" Suou asked the commander, dabbing at her eyes with a cloth.

For some reason he could not entirely plumb, something in the reasonable query felt threatening. He looked into her eyes-trickling water, yet never thawing-and saw suddenly that if he something wrong, this coolly grieving patrician would not hesitate to strip him of position and primacy.

A shudder at the idea, a blink. What was he thinking? This was Suou, cool and steady Suou who could not be capable of mutiny! But to look in her eyes was enough to have him doubting, and he wondered again if he was right in his fears. Or was it merely that his nerves had been stretched so thin lately?

"We march for the nearest relief we can have," he said, aware that his shaky voice made it sound less of a command and more a proposition. "Sosia. I'd like nothing better than to go and get the Eighth properly burned with ceremony, but we can't risk exposing ourselves on a flat plain like Argentum, especially if the Mentulae are passing through it. So it's Sosia."



He cleared his throat and explained: "It's close, and even if we know the Mentulae are besieging it, at least we'll be assured there's a garrison there to support us, and maybe food to spare for us too. Though we'll also have to forage as we go, naturally, to be safe. At least we still have the food we pillaged from the Mentulaean camp after we broke up their siege! If we go now, we can help relieve the siege the *cunni* have at Sosia by falling upon their rear. It's not too long since they went, and I'm sure they can't take Sosia so easily. Shigeru Oni's the commander of the guard there-a good man. He's one can hold them until we get there to help."

Suou nodded approvingly. Relief coursed through him, and as though by contagion the faces in the tent suddenly looked a little less despondent.

"We've got to send for reinforcements," said one of the centurions, seizing eagerly on practicalities: the grief over the Eighth would not be forgotten, of course, but could be indulged in later. At the moment, it was just necessary to live long enough in order to make the Mentulae pay for their treachery.

"It'll do until we get more Himean legions here," the same man went on. "They should've got word of it by now-no doubt Argus is sending to Hime already! But right now we need auxiliaries to fill up the gap. Cavalry, archers, infantry. Anything they can give. We'll take 'em because we need 'em."

Takeda pinked uncomfortably, as he had been the one to send home most of the auxiliaries his predecessor had garrisoned in various cities. To his relief, no one saw fit to remind anyone of it, although he did spy a wicked gleam of the eyes from his Suou the Ever-Steady.

"Better do it now. We're not that far from Stych Gorge," said a tribune, naming the nearest route to the Otomeians' mountain citadel and general territories. "Whom should we send?"

"It makes sense that it would have to be the Otomeians themselves, probably with some tribunes," the commander replied. "Yes, some of the horse troopers. They'd know how to get around fast and without getting caught in a trap. If they could get through to Argentum and

back, they could get through anything."

Suou's cut in.

"Stych Gorge was swarming with Mentulae the last time Obsidian tried to invade," she reminded the group. "And I hardly think the Mentulae will desist from doing the same thing this time, no matter the failure of the previous attempt to hold the gorge. Their interests in this region are contested by only two forces: Hime and Otomeia. That pass is probably invested again."

"So what should we do? Surely we can send some through it... you know, just sneak through if they can."

Suou got to her feet. "Let me get Natsuki-san. She's the highest-ranked Otomeian we have, and head of the division we're carrying. She should be here."

After a quick summons from the outside of the tent, the Otomeian in question limped through the entrance. Suou motioned to one of the non-combatant servants, who brought up a stool for the head of their auxiliary.

"We're sending for troops from Otomeia," Suou informed her. "We need it to plump out our troops since we're heading for Sosia."

Takeda suddenly received a quick, very meaningful flicker from the cut-emerald eyes, and reddened again from mortification. No doubt *she* remembered whose decisions had necessitated this second summons of auxiliary!

"I think Stych Gorge is going to be invested again, which means I'm against sending the couriers that way. What do you think?" Suou was asking.

"Likely," the girl answered, before offering the alternative: "Another route exists."

"Yes, I recall hearing about it before, and it was actually there that I was inclining. Tell us about it."

"It is longer," Natsuki said. "Curves around the high parts of the

range."

"I expected it to be longer. It's far to the north, right?"

A map was produced and the girl traced the route with her finger. All heads huddled around the table to look.

"Would you say it's safer?" Suou demanded.

A frown was directed to the floor, followed by a furious chew on the lip.

"Is it less likely to be invested? Yes, because it is hard to invest," Natsuki answered slowly, clearly focusing on her words to ensure there would be no misunderstanding. "Too long, too open, too far from these lands to concern the Mentulae. Not an easy investment or one to see many returns..." A thinking pause, the beautiful eyes narrowing. "And also far from their area of - ah - *speculation*."

Eyebrows shot up automatically. Rhetorical metaphors from their Sphinx? What a day this was turning out to be!

"But is it safe?" the appropriately enigmatic creature before them finished. "That, I cannot say."

"Fair enough," Suou replied, tears completely dried. "Any ideas, however?"

A sharp nod, darkly glossy hair rippling. "I would suggest some things."

"What are they?" Takeda blurted out.

"Send through both routes," Natsuki answered. "Men in disguise, small groups, to be fast and less likely to be noticed. My best men, I will choose them. They will be slower than normal, even if they go fast, because it is so that... it may be necessary for them to *hide*, most of the way."

"What's the point of having them in disguise, then?" someone asked, drawing a roll of the eyes from several people.

Natsuki still humoured the query.

"Better to avoid discovery if possible," she said to him. And then, with a faint downturn of the mouth: "Also, Otomeians are - are *recognisable* . Very tall, unlike the other local peoples... and also very fair of hair."

No one bothered to note that she herself did not display the latter attribute.

"So they must hide often and will be slow," she said again. "But it is better to be slow than to never arrive."

"Or, as we Himeans say," Suou smiled, " *better late than never*. Yes, the main idea is to get word to Otomeia, anyway. The troop deployment itself can make up for any lost time, once the call for reinforcements is conveyed. I like it. What do you think?"

She addressed the question to the gathering, which nodded and voiced agreement.

"But," spoke one of the other officers, "this means we'll be some tribunes less, since we're sending out two separate groups of couriers with the same request. Whom should we send?"

This remark provoked the Otomeian into tugging at Suou's arm, bringing the patrician's attention to her effectively. She asked a question in Greek, voice so low it was hardly a voice, and Suou murmured an answer. Something seemed to displease Natsuki about the reply, however, for she shook her head vigorously and started muttering. The conversation in the tent proceeded for some moments without them.

"Oh, I see," Suou suddenly said loudly. She straightened and faced the company, which had turned its attention to her again. "She is asking me to tell you that she feels it would be wiser if you did not send any tribunes at all."

That provoked eyebrows to go climbing up foreheads again.

"Why not?" Takeda enquired with relative mildness: it was technically Natsuki he was quizzing, after all, even if he addressed

the query to Suou. "It's normal policy to send at least one Himean of suitable rank for such purposes."

Natsuki's brow creased, although she said nothing.

"She has a point, you know, which is the necessity of speeding up where we can," Suou said in her place. "She already said the messengers would be slower than usual because of the circumstances. Why hamper them further by tacking on tribunes to their care?"

"That presumes the tribunes are incompetent," one of the tribunes, Kaori, retorted. "In which case we shouldn't be sending them at all! The commander's right in that it's a formal delegation to an allied nation, therefore it should carry at least one Himean of appropriate position in it. This is for certainty as much as formality, too. How do we know the urgency of the request will be heard properly unless a Himean member of command is there to say it?"

Natsuki unexpectedly replied to this.

"You do not trust us?"

That drew the speaker's eyes to hers in a flash, and the Himean's mouth clicked shut at the glitter in the green. Everyone stared at Natsuki.

"That's not what I said," Kaori replied, feeling at a disadvantage. The foreigner rarely spoke, so to have to be the one drawing out her voice and in such a confrontational manner was awkward.

"It's partly a matter of form," she explained to the young lady, whose face was dangerously impassive. "And also insurance. They can help organise any reinforcement troops sent out from Otomeia, as well as lead them to us."

"But we have leaders too, capable of that much," Natsuki protested, colour rising on her cheeks. "Or you would not have me here, no? My men will be slowed if you make a tribune go with them."

"You said earlier that they'd be slow already. The tribunes should be able to keep up, especially if several of your men are there to help

them."

"Are they trained in such things?" Natsuki demanded. "Can they ride as we do? Can they climb trees so fast? Creep up a rock face?"

"No!" Kaori snapped, goaded. "But they can learn as they go."

"Learning, it takes time," was the obstinate murmur. "There is not much time."

"That's exactly why we need to send the tribunes, Natsuki-san," another officer tried, seeing that both women looked to have tender tempers-and after the news of the Eighth, who could blame them?

"To make sure the deployment of reinforcements from the capital is as speedy as required and to ensure it all the way by commanding them on the march to the place where they are needed."

"That, it ignores my point."

The Otomeian was agitated.

"You ask my men to take one more consideration when there are already so many," she said in her husky voice, looking both exasperated and angry. "And it is not a consideration that is required. Why is this? You risk so much for so little? You do not trust us even now?"

The occupants of the room gazed at her stare, finding the green of it incredible-almost as much as the fact of her speaking straight to them, in fact.

"If you will take my suggestions, you have no choice but to trust," the Otomeian was saying in her slow but deliberately-pronounced fashion. "You may trust us and let only my men go to Otomeia. Or you may say you do not trust us... send tribunes with my men to Otomeia... but then still have to trust us after, because my men will have care of your tribunes with them anyway."

She swept them with a darkling look.

"If it is about the one to command the reinforcements," she continued, "it is *strange* . Strange because you did not do this on the

march before... when first you came to our citadel... but want to start now." Her chest heaved. "So in times of great - of great - great *urgency*, we are not to be trusted to command ourselves on our own lands? We are so incompetent? Our leaders are so untrustworthy?"

A silence followed this impassioned speech until one of the *primipilii* broke it.

"Pardon general, but I've got to agree with the lady," he said to Takeda, swinging about to turn his stubbly face to the general. "I think they'll be fine getting to us. The real problem is us getting to 'em."

"But... it's irregular," someone from the back countered weakly. "A Himean should command the reinforcements."

"Even for just the march?" Suou demanded, deeming it high time she returned to the conversation. She had actually gone quiet out of fascination, for this minor argument had finally shown her something Shizuru and her sister had warned her about before: that Himeans tended not to get anything done sometimes because they brought bureaucracy even to military tents! How many other natural military men had she heard complain about it, without understanding in full because she had yet to experience such a thing? And here she was finally seeing what they meant for herself, but only after her third spell in the legions.

*Suou Himemiya*, she told herself, *you have been atrociously spoiled.*

"To insist that only we can command them is nonsense!" she said. "It's not unheard of for allies to have their own commands, especially when marching instead of engaging. It's normal, in fact. We've been fighting with the Otomeians for months now-almost a year for those of us who've been here since Argentum-and if there is anything we have seen from them, it would be that they are good allies and their leaders are dependable."

A tip of her head to Natsuki, to remind Takeda's staff of what the girl had done for them during the flight to their old fortified camp, before the Siege of the Seventh.

"See, I think we shall be needing all our officers here, given the sorry state of our forces. Our men need their leaders more than ever, so why peel away more just to send for auxiliary? I don't think the Otomeians have ever failed to honour any requests we've made to them on that account, have they? You were King Kruger's attendant, besides being a relation of his, Natsuki-san. What do you think? Would he have any reason to hesitate in sending more auxiliaries this time?"

Natsuki shook her head vigorously.

"There you are, then."

She looked at Takeda, who had pulled in both lips and looked to be thinking.

"We need a decision now," she pressed him. "We're wasting even more time."

Takeda frowned, then sucked on his teeth in that irritating way Natsuki had noticed he did when trying to make up his mind about something. Takeda understood what those who wanted to send tribunes were saying but also agreed with Suou in that it was just as normal to allow auxiliaries to command themselves for a march as it was to send them an actual commander. So he weighed instead what Natsuki- *beautiful, sensible girl* -was trying to express. Should he send tribunes along with whatever troopers she sent, the whole delegation would not only be slowed but also endangered. Which meant the possible loss of not only the delegation's purpose but also of some tribunes who would be of noble birth, valuable members of the next generation of Himean senators. Yes, quite easy to see which way was best. It just happened to be a bonus that it would also have a certain princess thinking better of him.

"We'll keep the tribunes with us: I'll need all the officers with me," he finally decided. "Send messengers to Otomeia now. Suou, can you organise it this moment with Natsuki-san? As you said earlier, the sooner they're off, the better. The rest will get the men ready for march."

A nod of the head, and the two women-one limping on her walking



stick-were out of the tent.

Takeda turned to the rest, his tones hard to show them he would brook no more extended debates.

"We move out tomorrow, at dawn," he directed. "And stiffen them up, would you! I don't want to bring a group of broken-hearted legionaries to Sosia. Remind them of who they are and how they've survived thousands of these Mentulae not a week ago. Tell them they'll survive the *fellatores* again and put paid to the bastards."

So the rest of the officers spent as much of the day reassuring the men as getting them ready, while Suou and Natsuki worked on the deputations to be sent to the Otomeian king. Suou composed the missives herself and spoke with the barons the girl chose for the purpose, making a point of explaining the situation in detail. It was dark by the time the delegations left, and both women retired to their tent: they were sharing one these days, for the sake of practicality.

"Well, that's that!" the Himean said, massaging her nose's bridge. "I only hope your troopers can make it and make it quickly, Natsuki."

The Otomeian hobbled over to her cot before answering. Not for the first time, Suou was struck by how *wrong* it felt to see the girl hobbling. There was something inside her that insisted against the idea of Shizuru's girl limping, found it almost profane to either atmosphere or aesthetics. For a second she was tempted to help the young woman instead of suffering the display any longer, but she resisted the urge: the last time she had tried to do it, the Otomeian had been so incensed Suou counted herself fortunate an ear had not been bitten off. The princess had a royal temper, apparently!

"I hope too," Natsuki said, finally depositing herself on the cot. She looked tired, Suou thought.

The Himean took a chair. "What, not going to assure me at all?"

"My men are skilled."

Suou was wry. "Your idea of assurance is still too practical, but

thank you anyway."

" We will make it, you think?"

Suou looked at her with cold assessment, noting that the girl would only ask such questions now, when they were alone. *Good girl, really* . After all, having the legionaries overhear their superiors discussing the possibility of defeat was not exactly confidence-building.

"I wish I could say yes for certain, but I can't," she answered candidly. "Yet it's far from impossible to get to Sosia without conflict. If we speak in terms of probability, we're in fairly good shape." A slow, charming smile. "Especially because of your people's work. Keep it up, and we shall all reach Sosia safely."

"And when we reach Sosia?"

Suou laughed without amusement. "Well, Natsuki, that's quite another bridge to cross, isn't it?"

"Uh... mm."

They were quiet for a moment, Suou in rest and Natsuki in thought. Suddenly, an expression of excitement dawned on the latter's face, lighting up her remarkable eyes from within.

"I have an idea," she announced, practically shivering with enthusiasm. "Suou. *I have an idea* ."

"Then say it," Suou grinned.

"Why not go to Otomeia?" the young woman suggested eagerly. "Pick up the reinforcements and supplies there, directly, yes?"

But the face Suou turned to her was apologetic. "If I thought we could last long enough, Natsuki, I would be all for it. But, as you said to us earlier, the safer path is longer... and we're watching rations as it is. The Seventh's also too low at this point: I would like it to regain its spine again, and I believe the best way to do to that at present is to have it in sight of allies. The knowledge that the Eighth is no longer here as a back-up force is working on them, so they

need to be reminded that the numbers aren't all on the Mentulaean side. Thus Sosia, with its garrison."

"But if the goal shall be reinforcements, Otomeia too has them," the girl countered. "For provision, there are a few posts if we detour a little along the way. Also, I thought we could curve."

"Curve how?"

Natsuki nodded eagerly. "To cross the upper boundaries of the Mentulae. It is not very fortified, the area near their upper boundaries. They have no great cities there. But they have many small towns, also farmlands on the outskirts. Why not hit them and seize food and stores, then run?"

"You sound like a bandit."

"We destroy the towns is what I would like," the Otomeian replied haughtily. "If it is to be a bandit, why not? The Mentulae work so. It is good for your men too... since they feel much sadness now, but the feeling can be turned to - to *ultio*."

Suou was smiling broadly by this time. "Vengeance?"

"Yes, vengeance. We give them that through burning some of the Mentulaean towns. Such vengeance will make your men confident. We can also forage on the way. Too, it is a good thing for the war if we strike now. Maybe the Mentulae will be shocked - will be a little distracted, no?"

"True. It's unlikely they would even think of having any of their towns suddenly come under fire while they're so vigorously on offensive. Not at this point, at any rate." Another smile, even as Suou shook her head. "Even so, I stand by the decision to head for Sosia. It's still the best and safest option."

Natsuki made a sound in her throat, looking thwarted but not overly surprised at this outcome. Studying her surreptitiously, the Himean guessed why.

"You're thinking Shizuru-san would have done it."

Natsuki was stunned.

"So I think too," the blonde admitted readily, before the younger woman could deny it. "And, doubtless, she would have done it successfully. Perhaps even our ill-fated march to Argentum would have gone well if it had been Shizuru-san heading it. But I'm not Shizuru-san, and neither is Takeda."

The pale brow furrowed.

"Never mind him," Natsuki dismissed. "But *you* are good too at war. You can do it, I think."

"Thank you for that. Although, if I may say it myself without sounding an arrogant prat, I also believe this past year has shown me that I am not a complete disaster indeed," Suou said, managing to say it without sounding like she was bragging. "At warmaking, I mean. I confess I'm pleased-or should it be *relieved*?-to be able to live up to expectations there."

Natsuki's ears perked at this. "Expectations?"

"Since I would hate to disappoint either Shizuru-san or my sister in this posting." A pretend-shudder, theatrical and reminiscent of Shizuru to Natsuki. "And with the two of them so very good at it! War and tactics come to both of them without effort, you know. They happen to be naturals, so they tend to be hard on those who are not. They also expect people around them to be naturals too, is the problem."

She looked at the Otomeian, ruefulness and amusement vying for supremacy on her beautiful face.

"Can you imagine," she said, "what it's like to have two elder sisters, especially sisters of their ilk?"

Natsuki actually grinned.

"I was the only child of my parents," she disclosed.

"Consider yourself lucky."

Natsuki chuckled, causing the Himean to do the same. It was a moment that Takeda would have given a fortune to have, for the atmosphere between the two women had by now become very comfortable. To many who noticed it-Takeda included-it tempted comparison to the one shared by the Otomeian princess and Shizuru Fujino, which meant there were a few already eyeing this new pair with suspicion. However, most still refused to countenance the idea of anything romantic between the Otomeian and her new charge. And with good reason: the atmosphere between Natsuki and Suou was different from the one shared by Natsuki and Shizuru, as anyone with experience could attest. As opposed to the latter, the former held no crackle, none of that odd and subtle aggression that came only with sexual liking.

Natsuki herself understood this, which made her discovery of Suou all the more important. The Himemiya actually reminded the girl of her lover in many ways *but* without the unbalancing romantic element that had always come with Shizuru's presence. To be with Suou was easy in a way it would never be easy with the other Himean, she apprehended, and that made Suou attractive company on her own merit. Natsuki yielded with what she thought surprising ease to that attraction-but then again, the circumstances may well have made the surrender unsurprising.

Suou was only the second Himean with whom Natsuki had ever been able to converse freely. She was also the only Himean Natsuki had seen able to converse freely with her awesome lover. The Himemiya had known Shizuru since childhood, and was not averse to dropping shreds of information or anecdotes about a person Natsuki wished she had had the opportunity to meet: a Shizuru adolescent, with a faint tendency to impudence, prone to getting scolded by her parents, a touch reckless because her bravery lived with an unregulated curiosity... and yet, with all that, still made of the same stuff as the final, polished product that had walked all over Natsuki's life last year and conquered it: that powerful woman who had ruled Natsuki with the gentlest word, or the slightest twitch of her lips. *Shizuru, Shizuru*, cried the amazed Natsuki, listening to Suou's tales: *She was also once such a filly?* She could not imagine it-had only ever wondered, never wandered in her mind about it. But how much she had wondered, and how often! So when Suou arrived

on the scene, armed with the information she craved, how could she possibly repel the opportunity?

That was how Natsuki had found herself talking to Suou regularly. And, through those talks, had found her like for Suou growing. Natsuki had always found the woman interesting, in fact. The first reason was physical: dazzled by Shizuru as she had been in those early days, Natsuki also had to confess that her first sight of Suou Himemiya had left her blinking. One of the most good-looking women she had ever seen, she thought, and actually very close to the Otomeian ideal due to the colouring. Even standing next to Shizuru, the woman held her own. And anything that could stand next to Shizuru and not be cast into the shade, the girl decided firmly, was worthy of notice.

That having been said, Natsuki was still not the kind of person whose interest could be held long by physique-with the exception of a certain pair of red eyes, naturally, because those were just so strange you had to marvel at them every time. When it came to Suou, however, what Natsuki had found so enduringly interesting was actually *the character*.

She had watched her from first acquaintance, unerring nose picking out a whiff of something original under the classical facade. And was not disappointed. Suou turned out to have an oddly coldblooded and sensible style that was all her own, often hidden under an easy-going cover. Natsuki thought it helped this concealment that the woman did not have Shizuru's intensity. As appealing and urbane as her lover, Suou was yet hardly as overpowering or dominant. Nor, Natsuki assessed, was Suou half as passionate.

Even if the woman lacked Shizuru's fire, however, she did seem to have the same makeup of metal. And she was *so very* level-headed! Natsuki did not know precisely what made Suou's level-headedness worthy of distinct comment, but sometimes... sometimes she had the feeling that the woman might trump even Shizuru on certain occasions when it came to the trait. And anything that could trump Shizuru in any way, the girl decided again, was worthy of distinct comment. Thus the criteria for anything Natsuki deemed worthy! Had Suou known of this, she would have split her sides laughing: few knew better than she that to use someone like Shizuru as the

baseline for evaluating personal merit would disqualify all but one from a hundred. And that was if the hundred you got was already top-quality.

At any rate, Suou passed Natsuki's scrutiny. And as it turned out, it was actually Natsuki who had more reason to be glad for that. The blonde and blue-eyed woman was the only Himean approved by Shizuru to be Natsuki's company, as well as due to said blonde and blue-eyed woman's collusion with Shizuru's verdict-practically the girl's *only* company. Suou seemed to have adopted some of Shizuru's jealousies recently, because this second of Natsuki's charges did her best to separate the princess from all other Himean officers, watching over Natsuki like a hawk in place of Shizuru's hydra. When Natsuki first noticed it, she had paused to appreciate the irony: odd to think she was now being chaperoned, when it had originally been she supposed to do the chaperoning! But even odder for her was that she did not genuinely mind it. Not as much as she would have expected to mind, anyway. Why was that?

Because she was a creature who truly did try to keep her own level-headedness, she eventually settled upon a self-confession to answer this: *because she had desired it* . It was possible, she admitted painfully, that she had not yet taught herself to stop going after such things . Gods knew she had tried! But hope was a difficult thing to extinguish: give it a tiny spark, and up it flared. Thus it came hard not to welcome the hope Suou was offering, which was that Shizuru had not yet finished with her and would return, that Shizuru would end the agony.

The loss of Shizuru had gone hard for Natsuki. She herself was aware that it showed, even if she tried not to show it. The trouble was that most of her attempts had to be focused on her already-heavy mind, and that left her little strength to deal with her mutinous body. Her body seemed to know and insist, on some wordlessly primitive level, that it was *missing* something. Even as she struggled to keep her thoughts from dwelling on memories, her body persisted in recalling the same things: a non-intellectual, not even purely sexual recall that hollowed out what was under her skin and made leaden weights of her feet. It was animal and undefeatable and sometimes it made her gasp, *Why can I not control me?*

So it was her body that betrayed to the outside world her pain-or part of it, at least. People kept noting that she had lost so much weight ever since the Himeans sailed off, but they did not know, did not understand. The Himean who sailed away had taken along such a part of her that she actually had reason to be relieved that the Her left behind had *only* lost weight. For what Shizuru had spirited on her ship was something so very important to the girl's being: the Natsuki she had helped to discover, the one who was not completely fettered by that ancient guilt and not resigned to the dungeon built by it.

It was this Natsuki that went with Shizuru because it was the Natsuki on which Shizuru had focused, the one that fit in best with what she wanted: something she could liberate with a view to catching it, something to draw out from a hole only to tempt into her toils. To be fair to the woman, she had meant to ensure its liberty to its benefit. Shizuru had known that all liberties came with a chain and that she was best equipped to provide the gentlest chain for this creature. Thus had she concentrated her efforts on it, staking her claim while lighting its progress through the labyrinth... then tying it forever to her by being *the one to push it up* and into flying, *the one to help it sing* by giving it the music. She got her wish: it was welded to her permanently because it defined its freedom inseparable from her aid.

But Shizuru missed something. When she had pushed up *that* Natsuki, the winged bit, she missed that she pushed it separate from the rest, leaving another bit stuck in mud and mired to the heels. This land-locked Natsuki had tried to follow after the winged bit, and even had a moment where it seemed that it might catch up, where the distance might be diminishing... but then Shizuru had sailed away and off to her native land. Not knowing that she had left something behind, stripped of the only thing that had been keeping it from sinking.

Natsuki understood this to some extent, but did not blame Shizuru. Dignity and reason went against it. How could she blame Shizuru when she knew she had been the one to surrender whatever Shizuru had taken unknowingly? In any case, she had surrendered willingly, she admitted, and had even done so to indulge herself. So



why blame anyone else for it? Could she even blame that part of her that had gone away, when she could understand so well why it had followed the woman on that ship? So someone had come along and found a part of her that could take to the air and sing; so someone had gone and that part had gone away with them. Nothing left to do but to accept the facts... unless she herself boarded a ship and went after that singing, soaring bit. But that she would not do, because it would mean going after *Shizuru's* soaring bit and pulling it down with her weight-and that was so selfish it was actually pitiful.

And Natsuki absolutely refused to be pitiful, whatever else she could be.

So she would not do that, nor would she blame Shizuru for what she now suffered. Just as she would not call out Shizuru's name aloud whenever the pain erupted inside, because to call it aloud would mean subjecting it to other ears that would not understand its significance. Call that name outside, before the people who did not know what Shizuru had meant and had been? Call that name before these Himeans, some of whom looked at her with that strange and impersonal curiosity? Call that name before her own people, many of whom thought she had taken up with the Himean only to secure the King's interests with the foreign army? How could she call that many-laden name before them, who heard so much but understood so little?

No, Natsuki decided. She would not permit anyone to diminish either her or her lover by misunderstanding what the call would mean, or reducing it to far less than all the significations it carried. She would die first before such a thing! But a voice in her head would laugh, counter that she *had* died already, so what was the difficulty? The death returning: in her mind, with ships going out at her back-in a big room, a request killing her each time she spoke to refuse it-in the brush, with her feet chilled with snow as she listened to two voices-in the stuffy darkness, once for each body falling- *Shizuru, help me, I am confused by this-* and all the recollections would shift as something in her died all over again, her body a worn-out weary thing and her heart in a powerful throb saying only one word, which was a name.

Thus had been the situation. Reeling from the age-old disease,

feeling like a stopped-up fumarole stuck between finally spewing or caving in, Natsuki had grasped at the relief Suou was offering. All of Suou's attentions had a message, and it was this: *You are not yet excised, so do not fear.* This was a lifeline and not something Natsuki could so quickly dismiss, for it was reeled out by the only person the girl had ever seen to speak to Shizuru with no misgivings, a person Shizuru had even trusted enough to leave as an agent-emissary. Suou's opinion *mattered* -and Suou's opinion was that Shizuru would undoubtedly come back. And with her, perhaps, the winged part Natsuki knew she was missing. It was a thin thread, practically a straw, but a straw nonetheless in a landless sea. Weak as she felt for grasping at the straw, Natsuki found to her shame that she could not yet hold back from it.

"If you agree you have the skill for war, why not go?" she asked now of the woman saving her from drowning. "You fear that - um - that the skill is below the necessary?"

Suou shook her fair head, setting the longish fringe over her brow waving.

"Such fear? No, never that. I'm not known for that sort of self-doubt, after all," she said to Natsuki. "And it's not because I'm afraid I lack experience, or not chiefly because of it. Lateral experience is best accrued in ventures of that kind, anyway. The actual reason why I turned down the idea is because there is a shortcoming not in my skill but instead in my aura."

Natsuki's brows went up. But before she could ask anything, a voice announced that her servants were waiting outside the tent, and she had to bid them enter. They were bearing buckets of water and an old tub that they set down behind a shade: it was meant to shelter her from view when she bathed. Suou did not find the shade necessary, but she supposed she had to allow for the girl's great modesty.

Once everything had been prepared, all but one of the intruders left. This was the servant who always helped Natsuki bathe when she needed to be assisted, who dressed Natsuki's wounds when Natsuki needed it. Natsuki trusted her deeply, and the woman honoured that trust by never saying anything about whatever she saw when she

stripped Natsuki's clothes and bared her body.

Natsuki resumed her dialogue with the Himean on the other side of the screen.

"Aura?" she said aloud, seating herself on the low stool provided by her helper. "You say it is a shortcoming in your aura? What is it you mean?"

Suou tried to recall what she had said earlier.

"My reputation or hold over the men, perhaps?" she eventually supplied. "I know no better word for it. The confidence they have in me, is what I meant."

"What? Buh-but you have it." And with obvious scorn: "More than that man."

"Takeda. Maybe, but I find that little achievement, to be frank," Suou drawled, inwardly laughing. "But the point is that their belief is not... worshipful enough, I suppose. That, combined with my lack of experience in proving my skill, is what advises me not to entertain the idea."

Natsuki's brow furrowed again. When enough time had passed without her offering a reply, the other woman realised she was waiting for an explanation.

"Consider how they believe in Shizuru-san, for example," Suou said, listening to the sound of water from behind the partition. "Shizuru-san is a walking superstition to them. Better to say, rather: a walking *idol*. She's a good luck talisman to the men, who have an assumption that she shall always win, no matter the circumstances or obstacles stating otherwise... which means they have unassailable confidence under her aegis to do whatever absurd thing she asks. Who cares about absurdity, after all, when one is certain of backing the winner?"

She paused suddenly and frowned, finding something to pick on in her own explanation.

"Or perhaps that's oversimplifying it," she admitted. "I'd not like to

belittle the love they have for her as a mere matter of practical certainty founded on a mythic premise. It's a love that would see through a lot of impractical risks if you said they would be for her sake. Every one of Shizuru-san's soldiers would let her tramp about the filthiest, most excrement-filled soil in Fuuka and then let her wipe her feet on them after that. Ye gods, they might even welcome being her doormat! It's not that they're backing her simply because she's a winner. There's a great deal of the unexplainable involved, and that's what I mean when I talk about their belief in her being worshipful... She has their confidence as well as their love."

The black hair was flicked over a naked shoulder; Natsuki's servant worked on her chest.

"And you?" Natsuki said, shivering a little from the cooling water on her skin. "You do not?"

"The soldiers love me now, yes," Suou answered equably. "Perhaps they even love me now nearly as much as they love Shizuru-san. But only after the Siege of the Seventh. And only after so much conscious effort on my part to foster that love. I had to work for that, whereas Shizuru-san did not. The soldiers love her in a way they have never loved me... or any other commander, I suspect. I don't doubt that the Seventh would fight for me now with every ounce of their being if I so asked-and that is not something Takeda can say at this point. However, I also don't doubt that the Seventh would fight for Shizuru with every ounce of their being if she were the one to ask, and do it with *something even more than every ounce of their being*. I'm not sure what that something more is, but I know that it exists. I have seen it before, in Argentum. You were not in the city with us before that battle, Natsuki, but you should have seen it: she actually made a point of reminding the rankers about how outnumbered they were, but without even beginning to destroy their confidence. There's the irony. They would die for her, even while believing that being under her command means that they don't actually need to die."

Natsuki nodded sagaciously.

"Shizuru," the raven-haired girl said in Greek, "is ever of the paradox."

Both her Otomeian servant and the Himean had to smile at this, although the former hid it by ducking and starting on Natsuki's limbs.

"I would agree with that," came Suou's voice.

"Then... you would never attempt such a manoeuvre as I suggested? Even in the future, after more experience?"

"Perhaps things shall change in the future, and then I might," Suou replied. "And perhaps things shall change in the future such that experience shows me I truly don't have what it takes for what you proposed and with only such resources as are available now. Either way, we can't be certain."

She said this with perfect equanimity, as though she did not wish for a specific choice among the two she had described, but did not scorn a specific choice among them either. Natsuki's eyes narrowed, for she knew which possibility she herself would prefer.

"What is it?" Suou asked, for again a while passed without the girl offering a reply.

A splash. "The second possibility... It does not trouble?"

"Well, not really, though it goes without saying that I would prefer the first," the Himean laughed. "Still, it does not bother me unduly to entertain the idea, if that is what you mean. Why would it?"

"In the same situation..." There was hesitation here: "Shizuru would be troubled."

"Or, more precisely, she would hate it and herself," Suou replied shrewdly. "But Shizuru-san's aspirations are bound to her own unassailable excellence in the fields prized most by our kind-or perhaps by the world in general. Whereas I don't require myself to be unassailable, just excellent. Perhaps even our notions of excellence differ, which is just as well because what suits her-or my dear sister, for that matter-would not necessarily suit me. For example, I'm not in the Senate yet, even if I am currently a legate, whereas Shizuru-san actually set the record for the youngest person to ever enter."

"Nineteen," Natsuki said without hesitation.

"Correct," Suou said, swallowing the laughter: Natsuki still blushed behind the screen. "That's at least one thing that suits her but not me, because it's not in my nature to seek distinctions the way she does, so flamboyantly. It's not in me either to go running off to what seems to be the worst part of a battle my first time in one, and then come out with the highest accolade for it! I don't think I'm a coward, but I'm certainly not as big a risk-taker as Shizuru-san when it comes to my own skin. I may be a good fighter, but there are many who would still be better."

She leaned her back against the hard, thick edge of the table.

"There are other examples. Like engaging the rankers in chats so personal she addresses each one by name. It doesn't really suit me to have to remember each soldier's name, to be honest, although I don't mind a friendly chat with them when offered the opportunity. It would not suit me to show my rage the way she does when she's driven to the limit: I'm not naturally passionate and I don't have the corporeal faculties to replicate her delivery," she quipped, knowing Natsuki would realise she was referring to her extremely chilly eyes, the antitheses to Shizuru's blazing ones. "Fire, you see, does not become my style."

A laugh out of the Otomeian.

"As for the touch she has with soldiers," she said. "That is something no one has ever been able to explain and no one shall ever be able to explain fully. Which does not take away its potency. It is not something I have... or, rather, even if I do end up ever having it, I still know it shall never be anywhere near as much as hers. And truth be told, it suits me just fine. Shizuru-san paves her way as her nature and tools dictate; I do the same with mine."

A muffled sound from behind the screen. Suou waited for the girl to explain it.

"Your self-knowledge," Natsuki finally whispered in Greek, sounding awed. "It is merciless."

That brought out Suou's widest smile.

"Why thank you," she chuckled. "For that is the greatest compliment anyone ever gave me!"

"Also... you know *her* well."

"As I said, she is my other sister," Suou replied. "However, Natsuki, I just now remembered something. Since we are talking of knowing the self as well as others, I believe you know your king well. So I shall ask a question that I beg you not to misinterpret as lack of faith, given that I asked it of you for argumentative effect earlier."

Natsuki hummed, which she took as permission to continue.

"Would your king really be so quick to send us auxiliaries again, and of a number sufficient to stay the Mentulaean advance? When I say *quick*, I mean it: I doubt not that he'd send them, but ask rather if he would send them in all urgency. Your people's complaints about the switch in Himean commanders have already reached him by now. Might this not affect his eagerness adversely?"

Natsuki was wincing, for the other Otomeian had started to work on her leg. She waited for the wince to pass, because she did not wish it to affect her tones when she answered Suou's query.

"He will send them quickly," she eventually spoke. "Have no fear."

She paused to let a second sting finish.

"How can he wait?" she continued. "Otomeia has also interests in this part of the world. It is in its interest to - to have your people keep your provinces. The Mentulaean king, he is ambitious. Your provinces stand between us and his ambitions. The stronger is your hold here, the safer our own. We aid you as much to honour our alliance as to aid ourselves. So, when His Majesty responds, he will respond with - with as much haste as he would for a threat to us. Because he knows that if Obsidian is not stopped, the Mentulae will come next to our lands. So if you ask if he will send in all urgency, the answer is that he must, because the urgency is also his."

All of which was said many wincing and cringes that Suou could not

see from behind the screen.

"Oh, you've a head for politics!" Suou applauded after Natsuki had finished. "Did it not go against Shizuru-san's desires, I would hope you to be in the running to become your people's next regent, Natsuki; sensible rulers tend to be in short supply when it comes to our allied nations, and a sensible ruler you would definitely make."

"He is sensible." Another wince, her breath catching even as she strove to sound natural. "Our - our king."

Finally Suou noticed.

"Is she working on your leg, Natsuki?" she asked abruptly. She heard Natsuki's soft inhale and the way it caught at the end. *Was it fear*, she wondered. *Worry?*

From Natsuki came a mumble: "Uhhm."

Suou frowned, growing more suspicious. "Then wrap yourself up with something. If she has finished bathing you, cover yourself, please. I want to check your wound. It's been a while since last I looked at it."

The worst cringe from Natsuki yet.

"Why?" she asked, unease obvious. "It is... healing."

"Good news to me and all the more reason to see." The sound of her rising from her seat. "Cover yourself now, please. I am coming over."

"No-"

No sooner had she thrown around herself the cloak given by her servant than Suou walked around the screen.

"Excuse me," said the Himean, crouching beside the seated Natsuki and moving the other Otomeian aside. Her eyes fell on that which she had insisted upon seeing and she bit the inside of her cheek.

*It's not gotten better at all since last I saw it* . She eyed it with worry.



The flesh around the ragged stitching was inflamed, pink at the edges and shading darkly reddish. *Damn it all, the skin is livid-are the stitches holding?* Careful perusal assured her that the surgeons had indeed done a good job, and that the flesh, even though it was swelling badly, was not becoming necrotic. She wondered how the inside was for a second. The arrow responsible for this might have missed the major veins and arteries but it had not spared the muscle.

She looked at the apprehensive and fidgeting Natsuki.

"When did you last get the army physicians to look at it?"

Natsuki looked guilty. "Juh-just earlier."

"When?" A pause as she thought of it. "While I was writing the letters?"

"Mm."

Suou blew through her nose.

"If it was swelling like this, you need not have come with me after that," she said ruefully. "I would have been fine doing the rest of the errands on my own." She flicked a glance at the other Otomeian, the one kneeling to her left. "Has she finished cleaning it?"

A twitchy nod from Natsuki.

"Does it still hurt?"

A twitch of head again: this time, unreadable and vague.

Suou's pale brows slanted, a frown building. *Of course it hurts*, she thought angrily, directing her displeasure towards both their commander and herself. But Takeda was expected to be thoughtless: he had been the one to get them in this situation in the first place, the commander and culpable. She herself was the greater disappointment. She should have known better! Letting Natsuki lead so many reconnaissance and scouting trips herself, not taking as seriously the duty to keep the girl off her feet... And why? All because she knew Natsuki's skill contributed so much to the

preservation of their little army, because Natsuki was truly the best when it came to the tasks she had been doing. But because of that, could one say she had a choice in it?

*No, not really, she said to herself grimly, feeling no relief at all in having been absolved by the circumstances. I cannot repine if I acted as my lights saw fit. It was not just the tasks she was doing but also the move from camp to camp that has worsened this... and for that I cannot be blamed, as that much was both unavoidable and necessary. But would it really have been so bad to ask that she make another of her sub-commanders take over more of her duties temporarily? Am I sure I have not erred there?*

Well, either way, there was no use repining. All she could do was handle what she had before her at present. So she turned the full force of her apologies in the smile she gave to Natsuki.

"All this moving around hasn't helped you in the least, has it?" she said.

Natsuki returned her smile, shy and uncertain. And still, for some reason Suou could not fully see, terribly apprehensive.

"No... It's all right," she offered.

"It shouldn't be," Suou answered, smile fading. "Ye gods, we shouldn't have asked this of you too! Once all of this is finished, I shall do everything I can to make it up to you. So do I promise."

She put a hand on the Otomeian's shoulder and squeezed it. As she had picked that spot to squeeze because she knew it had no injuries, it surprised her when the action brought a flinch, Natsuki's eyes squinting briefly.

Suou lifted her hand, mind racing even as Natsuki twitched.

*Pain?*

"What is it?" she asked, bringing down her hand again to slide off the cloak covering Natsuki's shoulder. The Otomeian reacted swiftly, but still fell late. Suou had already pulled away the wrap by the time she tried to tighten her hold on it, so all she could do was freeze as

the Himean's unwelcome scrutiny fell on her body. And when the stunned Himean gently took away the rest of the wrap, knuckles white against the fabric, she remained still. No use now in struggling: her current state told her she would not win and Suou's face told her that what she had been hiding had already been seen. So she would brazen this out, since to do any other thing would diminish her dignity.

As for Suou, she was still staring. Staring at the body her friend had loved so tenderly, the pale whiteness of it marred by scores of foreign marks. Dozens upon dozens of crescent shapes, stark and reddish, some haloed by a sulphuric yellow glow. Ghosts of heavy fingers-some marks actually leading to trails that had broken the skin-racing down an arm or around a side-the streaking welts of abuse painful on the still pitifully thin girl. And Suou's mind too, streaking: throwing up the countless possibilities that might have led to this image disgusting every part of her genuinely civilised being.

For the briefest instant, the ever-composed Suou looked as if she would vomit.

That instant did not last. An extraordinary change came over her that amazed even Natsuki.

Suou spoke to the other Otomeian present, not moving her eyes from where they stared at Natsuki with that new and glacial intensity.

"You are dismissed," she said, practically droning. "Leave."

Such was the expression on her face that the woman got up and left immediately, saying nothing.

"Natsuki."

How dead was that voice!

"Who did this?" she asked, cold hands lifting the wrap she was still holding and replacing it gently around Natsuki's frame. "Who is responsible, Natsuki?"

Natsuki shivered, but said nothing.

"Who did this?" Suou repeated, still staring at Natsuki in that dead but unwavering way. "I need to know. Tell me."

But again there was no reaction to this, save the girl's head turning away. So Suou did something she would never have done under other circumstances and touched the young woman in a manner she knew would have had Shizuru growling.

"I asked you a question," she whispered, keeping Natsuki facing her by holding the Otomeian's chin. She could feel Natsuki's head fighting her grip, but she tightened her fingers and held on with rude insistence. "It's bad-mannered to ignore a person asking you something, you should know. You might dislike this manner of interrogation, but I daresay dislike should not make you forget your breeding."

The feral green eyes narrowed, became less apprehensive, more angry. *Good!* thought the actually-furious Himean, who had been provoking her on purpose. *There would be something intrinsically wrong with her if she is not angry!*

"Who did this?" she demanded again, wondering who would have the temerity-and brutishness-to have done it. Who could had been animalenough to dare? Dead and all though her anger might appear, it was genuine and it was *deep* . How could it not be? Whoever had done this to her charge had not just made a fool of her by doing it: he had also committed one of the most despicable acts in a Himean noble's eyes. There was no greater scorn amongst Suou's kind than for those who attempted to impose themselves on women by abuse, and Suou was a true example of her kind. So from the moment she had imagined the implications of those marks on Natsuki, her gorge had risen in time with her rage. It was murder roiling in her head as she stared at Natsuki, murder tightening her uneasy jaw and moving a muscle on the lower part of one cheek.

*I am not a hot woman*, she thought while closing her eyes, teeth so tight together her gums ached. *But whoever did this shall find I can be. A repugnant act, one of an impotent coward! It has shamed me and the promise I made. Who could have done this-and to Natsuki, of all people? Even were she not important to me and to my friend-even were she not important to this army-she would remain a*

*princess, and to have laid hands on her would still be the height of political inanity. Yet Natsuki is important in all these ways. So what class of imbecile would have had the impudence to lay hands on her anyway?*

She opened both eyes and mouth, the latter baring for an unintended moment her clenched teeth.

*I shall kill whoever did this. And I shall do it very slowly.*

"Don't be afraid to tell me," she said to the still-silent Natsuki. "I shall let nobody touch you again. I swear it. So please tell me who did this."

Natsuki looked again as though she would say nothing. Just when Suou thought she would have to shake it out of the young woman, a reply finally came.

"No one," Natsuki's husky voice said, tense and wary. "Tuh-touched me."

Suou scowled, let the Otomeian remove her hand from where it had been holding the chin. She repeated the question quietly, not moving her eyes from the other's face: "Who did this?"

Natsuki repeated her words too, eyes just as deadly: "No one."

" *Who did this?* "

"I said *no one* !"

"Oh, well, then I must be imagining these, really!" Suou snapped back stiffly, still rigidly controlled even though she was very close to giving the girl a good slapping. She set her teeth and grinned humourlessly for an instant.

"I don't want to be angry with you, Natsuki, especially as you are the victim," she said. "But I can be angry with you if you start treating me as though I'm stupid! I might have slipped in my duties to you, judging from this, but it shall not happen again. You tell me now who did this! If you are afraid of the consequences, I told you already not to be. I swore that I shall handle everything, and I meant it. I cannot

let this pass, and you know why."

Still only the glaring defiance, the incomprehensible resistance to her justice. Suou was flabbergasted by it, and this helped the Otomeian because it was the only thing keeping the blonde's rage from breaking. But what in the world was the matter with Natsuki?

"Tell me already, or I swear I shall find out for myself," she growled with impatience, voice soft because she was grinding her teeth again. "I'm capable of doing my own inquiries-and I've no problem with breaking several legs while at it! I tell you now and plainly that I'd go through the entire army. Would you like to have that on your head?"

Natsuki flinched as though she had been slapped. But then she seemed to redouble in rebelliousness and apprehension in the same breath, face turning a hostile shade of red. Her lips pulled back from her teeth as a cornered animal's, and she tried to push Suou backwards feebly.

"Not your concern who did this!" she said, a bitten-back scream.

"Not my concern?" Suou reared in chill incredulity, finding this one of the hardest things she had ever had to do-and finding the hardness of it as unbelievable as it was irrational. " *Not my concern?* Now, of all times, you have taken to speaking plain idiocy! You seem to have forgotten that you're one of the reasons I'm still here! If you have, then recall it! Recall that my friend made me promise to look after you-which means my honour is now compromised, from the looks of this! Oh, do imagine how pleased Shizuru would be! What do you think she'd say if she found out I'd let someone lay hands on her girl?"

" *That is not all I am !*"

Suou fell back a little, surprised.

"That is not-" Natsuki choked, trembling in some great emotion before trailing off and shaking her head in wild jerks. Whatever emotion seemed to have birthed her explosion, Suou could at least see that there was more of it still swelling under the Otomeian's skin:

so she held off any reply out of an inexplicable intuition that whatever Natsuki was trying to get out needed to be said and that she herself needed to hear it.

She stared at the Otomeian for a moment, fury sinking slightly because of a growing confusion. As for Natsuki, she only continued to shake her head and wrestle with her tongue.

"Nuh-nuh-not all I am!" the young woman managed to get out, her stutter so violent Suou thought it a wonder she got out anything.

And then she astounded Suou further by dropping the cloak wrapped about her, letting it fall around her hips and lap as a last nod to modesty. Her hand went up: she threw it around her other arm as though hugging herself tightly.

Her fingers went to one set of marks on the skin.

All of Suou's dread imaginings, all of her disgust and rage suddenly vanished. She watched in mingled horror and fascination, lips parting slackly, as the carmine and crescent welts corresponded to the tips of Natsuki's digits in a perfect meeting. When the display was over and Natsuki's arm fell again, Suou hissed a breath of comprehension.

A horrid instant of silence; Natsuki's lips so tight they were trembling; Suou shutting her eyes just as tightly.

"No," she groaned, opening them again. "Oh, *stupid* !"

She reached to the Otomeian on an impulse born of mingled remorse and sympathy. No time did it spare for her to think on whether Natsuki would welcome the act or not-if Natsuki would try to avoid it-if Shizuru would have called her out for hugging the near-naked form of the woman she claimed so jealously. Suou did not think about the action because she did it innocent of any malice and guilty only of the rashness of her compassion. So the gesture when achieved had no awkwardness on her part, and the sincerity of it did much to allay the instinctive stiffening of the other woman.

"I've been so stupid, so very stupid-prize fool," she rambled, for she

was overwhelmed. "I've been such an idiot! Please forgive me, Natsuki. I'm afraid I didn't think of that, and I'm sorry. I was just so worried, see, and if someone had done that to you I would have been angry. I was worried."

Natsuki said nothing. Her face next to Suou's ear was very hot, almost distracting.

"I'm really so sorry," Suou repeated, wishing she could take back what she had said and done earlier. If only she could hit herself! But that would be both an addition to her follies as well as a useless thing, so she settled for guessing instead: "Was it in the nights?"

It took a while, but she eventually received a nod, rough and ashamed.

"I see," she whispered, voice as gentle as she could make it. "I see. I failed to notice even that, and I should have."

She put a hand on the hot scalp, hoping that Natsuki had not been clutching at that as well and wounding it. Who could have known Natsuki had been feeling it like this? Or perhaps she should have guessed it from the self-starvation? Of course she should have guessed it from there! If eating itself was an ordeal, then of course the nights must be terrifying. Surely a more perceptive person would have thought of it. Yet Natsuki had been so quiet every evening, betraying her torment by neither shuffle nor groan. Or had she done that to herself in an effort not to shuffle or groan? Ye gods, thought Suou, how lonely it must have been for her to feel like she had to claw herself that way just to keep quiet! And how painful, how very painful.

*I said to write yourself into her, she thought, talking now to the Shizuru in her head. Well, you've done it. This proves, more than ever, that you've certainly done it. But how would you feel if you knew this would be the fallout? Would you still have done it? I would still have told you to do it, and I believe you would still have done the same. I believe this firmly...*

So why then could she not help but feel as though she and Shizuru were guilty here?



"You have to stop that," she murmured, her normally clear voice showing suddenly that it could be throaty. "I understand why, Natsuki... but please don't do that. Not anymore, all right?"

The warm body against her suddenly stiffened again, went through a brief shudder.

"See, if it becomes painful, it's better to talk about it," she continued, wondering what she could possibly offer and worried by the feeling of inadequacy. "I think it's better. You should not have to... to do that. Please just talk to me if you feel so and I promise I shall try to help you stand it until it passes. We don't even need to talk about it. We can talk about anything you wish."

The corners of her lips turned downwards as she considered saying she would not mind holding her like this either if Natsuki needed the warmth, but then thought better of it. That was not something to be said because it was not something the princess would ever ask for.

"I know I'm not Shizuru-san, but I do know she would not like to know or see you doing this," she murmured. "Still, when I ask you not to do it anymore, it's not actually because she would not like it."

She drew a sluggish and heavy breath first before concluding.

"It's that you don't deserve it."

She felt Natsuki shudder again, stronger than before.

"Please promise me that first," she requested, ignoring the sharp and shallow breaths by her ear. "Do not do it any longer. And I promise I shall do all I can to see you through without you having to do such a thing. I ask you this because it pains me too. I don't ask you simply because Shizuru asked me to look after you in her absence. Indeed, I would never have agreed to her request had I not liked you from the beginning-and now I like you even without your relation to my friend as a referent, because I have come to see you as a friend too. But that's vain of me... I should ask first. So I am offering you my friendship now, Natsuki, though I have been offering it all this time, really: only I shall say it aloud now. Would you think of me as a friend? Would that please you, even if only a little?"

Natsuki's head moved, nodded jerkily on her shoulder. Suou smiled and smoothed her palm on the dark hair.

"Thank you," she whispered. "So I return to my other request: would you please agree not to do this anymore, Natsuki? What hurts my friends hurts me. I do not like seeing you hurt. So would you please spare yourself and me, as a friend?"

Another jerky nod. The neck pressed against her shoulder moving convulsively, gulping angrily the way people gulped when they were trying very hard to keep from sobbing. Suou held the young woman a little tighter then, vexed with herself and with everything that was happening around them, and vexed too by the knowledge that this sole comfort she could offer was also making it harder for Natsuki to hold on to her pride. But it was such a mistaken pride! Natsuki should understand that there was no shame in it, that it would not kill her to rely on someone else for such things-because, really, everyone had to at some point, did they not?

"I'm sorry about earlier," she said again, suddenly reminded of her sister by the dark hair brushing her cheek, the soft strands tickling her nose when she leaned in. *Chikane!* she thought. Chikane's face flashed before her eyes, and she felt for an instant a tickle of the same awful longing Natsuki was experiencing as she thought of her dear sibling. She had not spoken about Chikane earlier to Natsuki in their conversation, during the time she was expressing her self-knowledge: she had chosen to use Shizuru for her comparisons instead, because Shizuru was the one Natsuki knew so intimately. But now she found herself wishing this girl could also know Chikane. For with the longing for her sister came what she believed to be an enhanced vision or insight into the foreigner she was holding, a sudden articulation of why she had always liked this girl so instinctively.

*They are like*, she reflected in amazement, softening further with each comparison of the Otomeian to her beloved sibling. How could she not have seen it before? One only had to look past the shallow differences, the tiny variations made by each woman's life. And would see all that stubborn devotion, the lonely majesty, that mad and beautiful martyrdom... Oh, they were so very like, really.

A sad smile as she had a thought: *That only makes it worse, doesn't it?*

She inhaled deeply at the idea, was surprised and then astonished by the smell she caught from Natsuki. Was that pine and snow she smelled in her hair?

*Chikane*, another voice in her head edged in, *smells of roses*.

"One day you shall meet my sister, whom Shizuru-san calls her best friend," she said suddenly, still trying to soothe the shaking girl. "And she will love you, Natsuki."

Natsuki's throat kept swallowing.

"You would love her too, I know it," Suou went on, pretending she did not notice. "I hope the two of you can soon meet. You would be amazed by Chikane, I think, as she would be amazed by you: the two of you have the same unusual colouring, although my sister's physique is closer to Shizuru-san than yours. She is a very beautiful woman, you know, or perhaps Shizuru-san has told you."

She went on in that warm and friendly way.

"Shizuru-san would be there during that meeting, of course. Proud as a peacock, the peacock I've heard you tease her. Chikane would tease her about that: I know my sister well enough to know it would be irresistible. Would that not be wonderful, to see our forever-teasing Shizuru-san get teased unmercifully? I daresay you might get in on it too. It would be such fun-do you see?"

She did not know if the tiny movement Natsuki's head made was a nod, but she treated it as one.

"What fun it would really be," she said. "I will make sure you get to that day, Natsuki. So trust in me, please, and talk to me if you ever need to talk about something. You are my friend, which means I love you and you are entitled it. It's good to expect much from yourself-you do, I have noticed-but you should know that you should feel justified in expecting much *for* yourself too, in return. This cannot be called selfishness, Natsuki. How can it, when the relation merits

such an exchange? So I don't mind at all if you talk to me. And you need never worry about me misconstruing any of your speech, because I would never be so foolish as to think anything from you evidence of anything unsavoury or weak, I understand the difficulties of thinking in one language and having to translate as you talk..."

Suou rattled on, talking away and into the night, never once by word or deed acknowledging that Natsuki was crying on her shoulder. But when Natsuki finally went limp and quiet, going to sleep out of sheer exhaustion, she lifted the girl tenderly to the bed and kindly wiped the tear-streaked face clean. And after she had ensured that the prone body was sufficiently covered by the sheet, she went to get some ink and parchment, then sat at the table and began writing.

## Chapter 52

*My gratitude to the readers and reviewers, as well as apologies to those who sent me messages enquiring about the deleted stories. My silence on that subject was since I had yet to decide, and I would politely ask to be allowed that silence for a while.*

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### **Vocabulaire:**

**1. Dictator** - An office rarely granted and granted a senator only on special occasions, when Rome was considered to be in such grave danger or facing such peril that such a political animal was deemed necessary. The Dictator was appointed by the senate and had a fixed/limited term; he could not be prosecuted for any actions afterwards, because the dictatorship's special nature was not simply in the vesting of chief authority in the man chosen to have it: it lay in his indemnification for all actions taken during the tenure of the office. Not even consuls were so indemnified after their terms.

**2. Fasces** - Bunches of birch rods tied together by red leather straps and borne by the **lictors** (a type of public servant I have chosen to eschew almost entirely for this story), the fasces signified **imperium**. In the case of the consuls, whichever consul was officiating over senate meetings for the month (they alternated in this duty by month) held the fasces through his lictors.

**3. Pedarius** - A backbencher senator, one of those who sat in the House but was not permitted to speak.

**4. Heres superstes** - Latin for "surviving heiress".

**5. Ides** - The third of the three fixed points of a Roman (Himean) month. The days of the month were not named or given numbers, save for these three points. The day of the Ides varies by month. It is the 15th day of all "long months" (the months reaching 31 days in total) and the 13th of the others. For example, the Ides of February would be February 13, since February is not a "long month"...

whereas the Ides of March is March 15, as March is a "long month." Note that this story's universe uses the modern-day names and lengths of the months, thus establishing months like August as long months.

**6. Imperium** - The authority of a curule magistrate's office, indicating he could not be gainsaid within the bounds of his authority; also the authority given to Roman generals or leaders of armies.

**7. Ineptes** (L.) - Fools or incompetents.

**8. Nones** - The second of the three fixed points of a Roman (Himean) month. Its placement varied, like the Ides. For July it is on the 7<sup>th</sup>. For more on this story's calendar, see the note for the **Ides**.

**9. Socii** - The Latin term for a llies or comrades.

**10. "Tace!"** (L.) - "Shut up!"

**11. Temple of Bellona** - The temple where the Senate met to discuss foreign wars. It lay outside the pomerium or sacred boundary of the city.

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## **Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae**

*par ethnewinter*

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The same day that Takeda uprooted his army and marched them towards Sosia, his senior legate reached that city and dug himself into a near hill so fast that the Mentulae had scarcely noticed him than he was finished. The enemy was also with another engagement with the city's defenders at the time, and so were unable to harry Ushida properly. Had the second group of Mentulae-the Baron Procaleps's, coming from the Siege of the Seventh-only arrived earlier, they might have kept the hill from him. But the Baron arrived two days later, by which time Ushida had entrenched his

army behind fortifications on his advantageous location.

Ushida's army was actually slightly larger than it had been when he set out from Argus. Whenever he had passed towns on the march, he had not scorned to take all men and women with military experience and training. Admittedly there were not very many, but this only meant it was easier to equip those he took with him. These he slipped into his five cohorts, plumping them out as much as possible.

His progress to Sosia had been marked by unease at the advance of the Mentulae before him. Typical of barbarian peoples who relied on numbers, they seemed to have rolled on carelessly, killing and burning instead of capturing, trampling unthinkingly over town and country. Oh, certainly they seized what wealth they could find, and what wheat-but did not think to preserve what was still sprouting in gardens or fields. Such a waste! Ushida made sure to pick up all provisions he could scrounge up before getting to his destination, of course, in case the Mentulae made it hard to forage. He knew Sosia had food-it was originally built as a fortress town, and was always kept stocked-but he also knew he was unlikely to get at that food, for the besiegers would be standing between him and the city. Thus the heft of the baggage train he put in his camp, filled by his scramble to forage while marching.

Before, during, and after the entire business of camp-making upon getting to Sosia, he had observed the siege. Many were the curses he and his officers spat on the Mentulae, and many the praises for the Sosia garrison-which was holding out extremely well, all considered. That famous military man who was the garrison's commander, Shigeru Oni, was evidently proving his worth. Mind, he had strong reason to prove it, said Ushida's officers. Head of the Sosia garrison for seven years, Shigeru Oni had grown so used to life in the North that he had moved his household there permanently: both his husband and adopted child were in the city he was so stoutly defending.

As Ushida himself was not without military skill, he and the Sosia commander were able to join their efforts against the besiegers to good effect. Assiduous in their skirmishing, the two of them prevented the Mentulae from ever making real headway into the

city's investment. They could not entirely repulse the invaders, however, for they were still awesomely outnumbered. They would have to hold and wait for reinforcements from Argus-or from Otomeia-or even from Takeda's still-missing half of the army. Or from anywhere! For stocked-up food would run out eventually and the Mentulae were looking to be obstinate.

Ushida actually set up camp before Sosia's city only a day after his first message warned Argus of his Mentulaean sighting. As the Argus governor had been prepared for it by Suou Himemiya's warnings, she had her province buckling down without delay, and also sent off the message Suou had adjured her to send to Hime. It was just a preliminary notice to the Senate, of course, since Ushida's message had not yet confirmed any hostilities from the Mentulaean side.

The message with that confirmation would be sent twelve days later.

The Argus governor thus sent two messages, twelve days apart, to Hime. As Midori Sugiura used only the swiftest riders to carry her dispatches, they spent a mere twenty days on the new *via Fujino* before reaching their purpose. However, this still left a dozen days between the two missives-one warning of possible conflict, the other confirming it had happened. So when the earlier missive arrived, the Senate deliberated over a possible resumption of hostilities with the Mentulae instead of an actuality.

Both the consuls received Midori's message, for the Argus governor had sent dispatches to a good number of senators in order to-as she put it-"spread the sparks". Even some conservatives, those who could claim friendliness with her, received similar dispatches. In the end, it was the senior consul who got in first of all and called a meeting, even if the month was August and it was the junior consul holding the *fascēs* .

"The report holds no verification of conflict yet," said Chikane to the House. "Yet I have called for the meeting to take place here, in the Temple of Bellona, for I believe Midori Sugiura-san's report prefigures a strong probability of conflict soon breaking, if it has not broken already. Those of us who have not received letters from Sugiura-san have been informed today of what her reports



contained, and should consider the rest of this meeting in light of that and all other information we have on the Mentulaean Empire thus far-which we have just reviewed."

"Yes, yes, it was all very *edifying*," drawled Hikaru Senou, one hand flapping lazily. "It's considerate of you to share Sugiura's reports with us, Himemiya-san, but I fail to see why a senate meeting had to be called just to discuss them! Even now, I do not understand what you are even suggesting we do about this 'strong probability of conflict'."

"Oh, learn to read between the lines, do!" came from the woman in the middle of the tribunician bench, with an upswing of her queer eyes. "Though I understand it's hard to get the subtleties when your own nose is that far up your rear, isn't it? The senior consul is *obviously* suggesting we consider preparations for war abroad."

"I thank you for the clarification, but ask you to keep order," the senior consul said to her cousin. "As the President of the Plebeian Tribune has just expressed, we must make plans for such a possibility. A march by the Mentulae that deep into our territories cannot be taken lightly."

Several people attempted to address her at once, and she called for order.

"Princeps Senatus, you wished to speak," she prompted, settling her eyes on a man sitting in the first row.

Reito Kanzaki rose from his seat.

"I was thinking that-for all that I agree this is worrying news-we do not have any more than a sighting, Himemiya-san," said the Princeps Senatus, his handsome face in a frown. "They might be marching *through* our lands as much as marching *on* them, and at this point, we don't know which it is. Surely it would be just as great a mistake as unpreparedness to prepare for something for which we have no confirmation? I agree the reports from Sugiura-san lean more towards the probability of some bad business, but it's ultimately inconclusive. Is there no more evidence?"

"As regards that, Kanzaki-san, we have yet another reason for

meeting outside the *pomerium*," Chikane responded, stifling the urge to shake her head at him. "For the person holding the additional evidence cannot yet cross our city's boundary. She shall deliver the evidence requested and give us her expert opinion. I am calling Shizuru Fujino, praetor-elect, to take the floor."

Whereupon a groan arose and the senators threw up their hands.

"Of course!" Haruka Armitage roared. "Of course it's Shizuru Fujino!"

"Of course!" the senior consul said to the interruption, lifting her brows with a grin. "After all, she was our chosen commander for the deputation in that area last year, the one most knowledgeable about those lands and the Mentulaeans she battled. I am pleased you agree with me on that score: *of course* it must be she."

Before the woman could spit out anything more to this, Chikane urged Shizuru to rise.

"Thank you, senior consul," said the young woman, who chose to stay by her seat instead of walking the floor. "Before I begin, I must say I am honoured to be able to assist the House today in this matter... though I cannot say I am pleased to do it. For, fellow senators, what I have to say is not cheering. Yet it needs to be heard, so I ask that you bear with me."

She drew herself up to full height, back straight as spear, left arm crooked slightly so her hand could cuddle the folds of her blindingly white toga.

"A year and some months ago, this House sent me on a mission to defend the North and our allies against the depredations of the Mentulaean king, Obsidian born Artai," she intoned smoothly. "Almost exactly a year ago, I defeated his son the Prince Artaxi at the Battle of Argentum, after the prince sought to take that allied territory by main force. A little under a year ago, I intercepted the King himself on his way deeper into our territories, and commanded him to return to his capital under threat of reprisal from Hime."

"Ten months ago, I received a letter from this House thanking me for having prevented war-which wording I would like now to correct, it

being quite obvious that I did not so much *prevent* a war but *end* one, against over fourteen Mentulaean legions that breached our territories and entered hostilities with us. Ten months ago, this House charged me with a second mission to add to my first: fortifying the northern territories against any other possible incursions from the Mentulae. Thus, ten months ago, this House admitted the possibility and probability of further attacks coming from the Mentulaean king. There is no other way to interpret the second charge that was given me, and I caution the House that to challenge it now would be tantamount to this House retracting its *official* words on the subject."

A challenging look blazed at the archconservatives, whose faces darkened at the pre-emption. *You could not have actually thought I would fail to use that*, Shizuru smirked to herself.

"These things happened last year, and they are common knowledge," she said, her gaze searing into their heads. "Yet there are other knowledges that are not so common. That I am privileged to have access to them myself has to do with some presentiments I recently had. When I was summoned by this House after election to the praetorship, I was not yet completely at ease with the defence of the Northern territories. That is, I was not yet satisfied we had seen the last of the Mentulae. Considering the matter, I thought it my duty to leave behind what might be called a rudimentary intelligence network in the north... made up of people who would keep me informed if anything untoward happened, so that I could communicate it to this gathering. Most of our contacts in the north are friends, fellow senators, Himeans and people allied to Hime. Some are even members of this august body."

"About six months ago, I left the docks of Argus. A month after that, I received the first communiqué from my contacts. They related some questionable dispositions by my successor, Takeda Masashi, including his dismissal of the auxiliary legions I left garrisoned in the allied city of Argentum. The dismissal of those auxiliaries thus weakened that allied city's guard. The allied city that happens to be closest to the Mentulaean borderline and thus logically the first point of any hypothetical Mentulaean attack."

She heaved a long-suffering, weary breath.

"Now I cannot speak for the man," she said dryly. "I neither know him well nor have known him long. So I know not why Takeda Masashi saw fit to send those auxiliary legions home. Perhaps he thought they were no longer needed, there being no conflict at the moment- *even though* they were there in case they would become needed, in case conflict should suddenly come. Perhaps he thought it would be more practical or parsimonious to pack them off- *even though* they were costing us nothing, given that our Otomeian allies were paying for their own keep."

She shrugged with supreme hauteur, the gesture telling them without words exactly what she thought of her replacement.

"It might be any of these things; it might be none of them. I know not what Takeda Masashi thought, although I do know that I disagree with what he did. As I disagree with his *further* weakening of the Argentum garrison by paring away five cohorts from the Himean legions there, bringing that city's guard to a mere legion. For those who have forgotten their military terminology, that would be ten cohorts, or roughly five thousand men. At the risk of sounding repetitive, I shall restate that the last time Argentum was besieged, it was besieged by no less than fourteen legions. That would be a hundred and forty cohorts, or roughly seventy thousand men. I hope it is clear why I disagreed with Takeda Masashi's dispositions. Most of my contacts from the North felt the same way, but I shall not expand on that, as I believe others here have been receiving mail to the same effect."

A wave of sound from the ranks, which knew she was referring to the letters that had been pouring in from the North the past few months. At least they now had another explanation for the prevailing disapproval for Fujino's replacement!

"So Takeda Masashi's decisions rendered me uneasy, fellow senators," she said, passing a sigh. "But what could I do? I was no longer head of the defence mission in the North: that command had passed to him. So all I could do was sit here and deal with matters in Hime, even if I remained uneasy. And for a while, there seemed to be a reprieve. No further complications seemed to appear, no hiccups in the communiqués sent to me."

She cleared her throat delicately: "That is, until two months ago."

The House tensed, shifted in its seats.

"Two months ago, I received another communiqué," Shizuru narrated. "And it returned my unease in full force. For it said that Takeda Masashi had received a message from Mentulaeen ambassadors requesting him to meet them in Argentum. To what end? Apparently, to obtain a treaty of peace. The Mentulaeen ambassadors claimed to already be in Argentum when they sent their invitation to Takeda Masashi. And according to my contact, Takeda Masashi accepted the invitation to participate in such treating."

Amazed murmurs among them. She nodded with understanding.

"Not long after I received this communiqué, I received another," she said conversationally. "Informing of several very odd things my source had noted on the march towards Argentum-for my source went with Takeda Masashi on his journey. Apparently, from the moment they sent a message to Argentum that they were on their way, Takeda Masashi's people were no longer able to get in touch with anyone from that city, be he Mentulaeen or Himean or one of the *socii*. Furthermore, all scouts and couriers sent from the beginning of their march to the date my contact wrote the message failed to return. Takeda Masashi was carrying five cohorts of veteran legionaries with him, which means his couriers would have been military, the very best and most reliable in Hime. Yet none of them returned, including the auxiliary scouts sent ahead of the column. And that, fellow senators, is *not* normal."

She paused to look from left to right of the rows and was satisfied: all of them were listening closely.

"In brief then, this is what we know," she concluded. "Past four months ago, Takeda Masashi made depositions whittling down the Argentum garrison to one legion only. About three months ago, Takeda Masashi set out from Argus to meet the Mentulaeans at Argentum for supposed treating. And yesterday, two days before the Ides of August, we received letters from Midori Sugiura stating that Seigo Ushida-Takeda Masashi's senior legate, posted in Argus-

detected a Mentulaean army bearing siege engines and headed towards Sosia. These events must be considered together. And there lies between the last two a disquieting discrepancy. You see, if Takeda Masashi did march troops towards Argentum, he would have needed to pass the route to Sosia. If so, he should have run into the Mentulaean army taking the same route. It would have been an unexpected encounter, for my source wrote nothing in all her missives about a Mentulaean army known to be coming."

She scowled, looking puzzled even though she was actually feeling grim: to have to outline such possibilities, especially when she knew they touched on the woman she loved, was enough to sour her mouth while talking.

"Again I must say I know not well my successor in the Northern command," she said. "I know not the precise calibre of the man, so I know not what he must have done upon meeting that Mentulaean army. I know not if he did what I-or any of us worthy senators here, I think!-would have, which would have been to see the commander of that Mentulaean army and tell him to turn around and bolt for home. It is not our policy to permit foreign armies to go traipsing about our lands, even if they are only 'passing through'. Caution has always been the Himean watchword with such matters, and it is only one of the many reasons Hime's and Himeans' holds have so long been secure."

"But then again, this particular Himean was going to meet the Mentulae to make a treaty," she said with a withering grin, which developed into a smirk. "A treaty I would not have sought, seeing as the Mentulae have had so many other treaties with us in the past, each one shortly disposed of after creation. Repetitive demonstrations of bad faith from one party, fellow senators, do not make for wise treaty-making! Indeed, this House demonstrated famous good sense when it refused to grant a certain Mentulaean prince another such 'disposable' treaty when he came last year. But Takeda Masashi was not here when the House was demonstrating its good sense that way, was he?"

She smiled, lifted her shoulders in the tiniest shrug possible, and looked supremely ironic.

"Well, I know not the man, so I know not what he would have done had he been here then," she said. "However, in an unexpected encounter with a foreign army within our territories, I do know that there are two things a Himean senator can be safely expected to do, even for a Takeda Masashi. The first of these things I have already mentioned. The second thing-not an alternative to the first, but an even more natural reaction-would be to send a dispatch informing the nearest Himean governors and other Himean notables nearby that a Mentulaeen army was or is on the march in Himean lands. Yet neither Seigo Ushida nor Midori Sugiura received any such dispatch, although an estimate of the travel times averaged against distances shows that they should have, had Takeda Masashi sent out such a message. For those who do not believe me, I am willing to provide verified maps and calculations proving this assertion."

"No need-we all know you're so *wonderfully good* with numbers," Jin Akagi said waspishly.

"Why thank you, Akagi-han, and I echo the praise," Shizuru answered without blinking. "We all still remember your stellar performance as a quaestor of the Treasury, naturally."

As all did indeed remember what a shambles he had made of the Treasury's account-books at that time, giggles resounded through the tiers and Akagi subsided in embarrassed fury.

"As I was saying, evidence leads us to conclude that there was no warning from Takeda Masashi about the Mentulaeen army heading to Sosia," Shizuru said coolly, as though no interruption had taken place. "Which means that we may safely assume that something happened to prevent Takeda Masashi and all his officers from sending out such warnings. What exactly that *something* is, fellow senators, I cannot say for certain."

She drew a deep breath, not liking what she was about to say next.

"However, we have information before us that makes it possible to conjecture just shy of perfect certainty," she told them. "It would not be unreasonable of us to assume for now that Takeda Masashi and his five cohorts have been caught in an ambush or trapped. No nation, Members of this House, sends an invitation for peacemaking

and then sends an army right after it! At least, no nation does so if it truly wants peacemaking, and I personally doubt the Mentulaeans want it. In light of this, it would not be unreasonable for us either to imagine that Argentum has again been imperilled by some foul dealing. And within Argentum, the Eighth legion along with the consular Aidou Yuuji. You are right in what you said earlier, Princeps Senatus, when you say there is no confirmation yet. But I repeat that we have all the evidence we need to make a conclusion, only short of actually confirming it! And the logical conclusion is that we shall be-if we are not already, in fact- *at war with the Mentulae* ."

Ending with this frank pronouncement, Shizuru resumed her seat amidst murmurs of discord and disbelief, too conscious of her heartbeat to hear the murmurs. She had given the House much to think about and could only hope now that the House was truly thinking about it. Oh, was it truly too much to hope that? Pray that today, of all days, it had actually listened! Pray that it understood what she was saying and felt at least a tingle of that immense fear that had been living in her bones ever since these last Northern missives: the fear that something had happened to the legions she left in the North, to the excellent people she had left there. That something had happened to her friend, Suou. And, worst thought of all, that something had happened to a certain young woman for whom she would have sold over half her peers in this sacred and governing body.

She flexed her hands and held them on her lap with the palms down. She hoped her tunic would sop away the sweat on her fingers.

A voice suddenly rose above the mutters.

"This is a dangerous set of assumptions, Fujino-san, but it's all predicated upon information you claim to have about Masashi-san's experiences in the North-information the rest of us, for some reason, do not have! We would all feel more confident in this news if we knew who your contact is," said Sergay Wang with some difficulty: he was one of those who had supported Takeda Masashi's bid for the Northern command, and was conscious of that ally's swift drop in popularity among the senators after Shizuru's dry speech about him.



"Who is this source and why does he know all of this? None of us have received word from Masashi-san about such a treaty."

It was the senior consul who answered.

" *She* is one of Takeda Masashi's own legates, Wang-san," said that formidable woman. "She possesses the senatorial census and is slated to be formally accepted by the censors into this body upon her return to Hime. My sister, Suou Himemiya."

This provoked no replies, but much humming.

"As to Masashi-san's silence thus far about such a treaty, I believe that very easily explained," the senior consul continued. "He might have desired to obtain the treaty and present it as a surprise at the end of his commission. A coup of sorts, if you will. I would also remind everyone that, ever since his assumption of Shizuru Fujino's former command, Masashi-san has not exactly been flushing us with correspondence. As opposed to my sister, who has been sending letters steadily to Hime-as several others aside from me may attest."

The House saw the truth of these statements and hummed again, but more quietly.

"Then, if I'm to understand you and Fujino-san correctly, Himemiya-san," Sergay answered. "And I'm actually *reading between the lines* here, take note! You're suggesting that we send more legions back to the Northern territories under pretext of guarding against what you think a possible war with the Mentulaeans, *and* you're suggesting we send these legions under another commander besides Masashi-san?"

"As the evidence indicates that Masashi-san may be lost to us, that would be wise," replied the senior consul. "I am yet hoping very strongly that he and his officers may be recovered. Even so, I believe we must replace him anyway given the questionable nature of his recent decisions."

"Oho! And we all know whose name you want to replace his with!" Haruka Armitage boomed from where she had been sitting on her fists, her redoubtable jaw thrust forward. "None of us are going to be

surprised when you say your recommendation, though *she* might have the ball to look surprised for effect!"

Shizuma Hanazono turned to her neighbouring *pedarius* and whispered, "Gall?"

"Most likely," the other whispered back, giggling.

"Could be 'balls'," another neighbour suggested. "Though I'm inclined to think your cousin doesn't have them."

"Not physically, anyway."

Blissfully ignorant of this joking talk from the back rows, Haruka continued in a fever of indignation.

"Why is it," she roared, "that everything we discuss these days goes back to Shizuru Fujino? Shizuru Fujino this, Shizuru Fujino that! Why, I can't even go out of my house now without hearing her name being said by some backstreet hawker! The next thing I know, I'll be hearing it on the way to the latrine!"

"Oh, go to it, Armitage-san!" Urumi Himemiya-Kanzaki yelled merrily. "That's drumming them on the dirty!"

Haruka's glare should have crushed the laughing tribune, but did not.

"Now we hear about something happening in the North," Haruka went on, shaking a fist in the air in thwarted anger. "Which could be just because of miscommunication as about what Fujino's alleging! Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm not ready to believe it yet! Clear we're at war with the Mentulae, eh? I don't think it's as clear as all that! What's clear to me's that, ever since Fujino returned to this House, we've had nothing but headaches from her and her allies manipulating us into one thing after another thing! She gets elected *in absentia* and suddenly wants to give up the urban praetorship but keep the praetorship itself-and she gets it! Off she goes to the northlands and back-and off she wants to go again!"

"Wake up and see what she's doing!" she roared, a rain of spittle prompting the woman sitting in front of her to hide ostentatiously

under a fold of toga. "Wake up to what's going on! Are you about to let her get this too, after you knuckled under to the last demand she made? Do we exist only for Shizuru Fujino's sake? For one ambitious patrician's whims?"

She was glaring at her foe now, who smiled bitterly in quiet anger. The House was watching, utterly transfixed: so much time had passed since these two had knocked heads in front of them that they could only sit and listen, privy again to one of the most famous dislikes ever seen by Hime's senate—a dislike so strong, some of them knew, that it had begun at first sight.

"I was wondering when Fujino would get around this," one party to that dislike seethed, throwing up a hand and slicing it in Shizuru's direction as though doing so would cut the other woman. "Why else would she fight to keep a praetorship she says she didn't want, if not to get another jab at commanding? And now that she's got that praetorship, why else would she keep her allies working to postpone her triumph, unless to keep her *imperium*? Now we get this - this - this insane case she's making just so she can get at it! Well, I'm unconvinced! *I am unconvinced!*" she howled, drawing out the word into a doleful echo.

An accusing finger jabbed at Shizuru, who sighed loudly.

"Why should we believe this, eh? For all we know, Sugiura might've made up what's in those letters so that Fujino could make her case! Everyone's aware that Shizuru Fujino is fairly thick with Midori Sugiura. The same with Suou Himemiya!"

"And what has that to do with the information itself?" Shizuru finally replied, eyeing the purple-eyed woman with the ominous calm for which she was famed. "Given how tiny our world is, about a quarter of us are always fairly thick with another quarter. You yourself might be considered fairly thick with Sugiura-han, depending on the conditions for what is 'fairly thick'. If we dismissed everything reported to us on such a pretext, we would end dismissing everything."

"Not a bad idea to me," said one of the famous idlers of the House, earning dirty looks from all sides.

"Some relationships are more suspect than others!" Haruka screeched. "Remember that Shizuru Fujino's mission in the North was supposed to be fortifying it against foreign raids-so it ought to be laid at Fujino's feet if even she finds it likely that the Mentulae are up to something. We'd not even be talking about this if Fujino had done her job properly!"

"As I said earlier- *Armitage!* -some very nasty people angled me out of that post before I could finish," Shizuru retorted with utmost sweetness on her face. "Which reminds me that there was a certain Mentulaean prince getting very cosy with several persons here, around the same time. Is it merely coincidence that he left soon after that scheme to get me elected urban praetor, which was the scheme responsible for my work in the North getting cut short? I do wonder. Or should I say, rather, that ' *I am unconvinced* '?"

Silence fell after the insinuation; even the blustering Haruka was quieted. Everyone caught Shizuru's meaning, and those who had fraternised most with the Mentulaean prince looked embarrassed and indignant by turns. It was such an amazing suggestion!

*And yet, could it be so*, some wondered. Could that smooth and smarmy prince have been behind Tomoe Marguerite's work, angling Shizuru Fujino-as she put it-out of her command in the North so as to be able to march and wreak havoc were they would? But no - impossible - it was too daring and diabolical a scheme! How could the Mentulaean prince have predicted who would replace Shizuru Fujino, after all? Unless, of course, he had helped arrange that too.

But that was taking the conspiracy too far for their credulity. *No Northern savage could have thought of it*, was what the senators told themselves, *no matter how smooth and smarmy said Northern savage could be* .

"That accusation is unfounded," Hikaru Senou said between a mewl and a whine, suddenly losing his drawl. As well he might, thought some amused senators, for they remembered he had been among those playing host to the Mentulaean prince at the time.

"I accused no one of anything," said Shizuru, opening her eyes widely. "I was merely pointing out the exquisite timing, the puzzle-

piece order of all these events. At any rate, I would like to point out too that Armitage-han's speech bore little material of consequence to this discussion."

A twinkling look for Haruka, who looked on the verge of another explosion at the remark.

"Certainly it had a great deal to say about *me*, but very little about the topic. So I reiterate my opinion about the subject: we should prepare for war with the Mentulae."

"Actually, I think what Armitage-san was trying to say, Fujino-san," said the junior consul suddenly, "is that we can't help but think of the rumours going around that you would like to *annex* the Mentulaean Empire yourself. Which, I agree, can't easily be separated from this discussion. But that aside, it's also that it seems an overreaction to jump into war preparations for evidence this scanty."

"Scanty!" a fresh voice exploded. It was Mai Tokiha, shaking her bright head of hair.

"For shame, Kikukawa-san!" she said, face torn between exasperation and despair. "How can you call it scanty after everything Fujino-san just said? And the last time we had such 'scanty' evidence, Members of the House, you said much the same things. Then-after prolonged dickering-you finally sent off Shizuru Fujino on a nearly suicidal deputation to investigate and repel all prospective invasions from the Mentulae. Well, you sent *her* off wisely enough. But not rightly enough, given how many Mentulaean soldiers she found there. Fourteen legions! My god, and to think some of you would have sent her off with nary a legion at all, given that what we had then was mere scanty evidence!"

"I note the 'you', Tokiha-san," said the junior consul, whose cheeks had flushed at the red-headed senator's reproach. "You seem to be separating yourself from those decisions, which were collective decisions of this body."

"There's no need to remind me, Kikukawa-san," the other retorted without rancour, but still with a great deal of exasperation. "I spoke that way because I wanted to remind *you* and everybody here that I

wasn't among those who endorsed those foolhardy decisions then. I strongly recommended a decent force-more legions than we actually sent, that is-to be sent with our emissary. Well, we came through that all right, and that we did come out at all is due entirely to Shizuru Fujino's genius. If you need to be reminded of that too, then please take a look at that tiny circlet of grass on her blonde head!"

She was sitting up in her seat now and frowned at the body, so agitated that one of her feet tapped the floor in a staccato.

"What we have here is likely to turn out a repeat," she said. "With the exception that instead of a meagre five legions-which was pitted against fourteen then!-we now have a meagre two, led by a minor senator with a far less impressive record than Fujino-san's. A fine thing to forget how that *scanty evidence* turned out last time! Do you mean to say we should wait and see how many Mentulae show up to besiege our lands first, before we start calling up whatever legions are available? To test that point might be inviting a massacre! Think for a moment, my fellow senators, and remember what happened last time. Remember what happened before, when we found out how many Shizuru Fujino had to face at Argentum."

There was quiet after she had finished speaking, and the listening Shizuru began to hope that they would be swayed, would actually see the reason in Mai's speech. But when too much time went on without anyone seconding, she realised the truth: the senators were waiting. Waiting for someone else to speak and tell them one good reason to fight against the good sense of what she and Mai had said. Her fists clenched on her toga as she bit back the anger. Oh, the idiots! Cooped-up hens waiting for a rooster to lead!

The first rooster to start crowing was Sergay, again.

"We do *not* forget the things Tokiha-san has pointed out," he declared. "However, we do not forget either that, as Armitage-san said and the junior consul pointed out, Shizuru Fujino has been giving out lately that she has every desire of bringing the Mentulaean Empire to war, such that she could then annex their territories. Barring the possibility of such a venture coming to defeat-which is still a possibility, mind you, given how large the Mentulaean Empire is!-there is still the matter of what Shizuru Fujino would

possibly want with those territories. Well, I think we all know the answer to that, don't we?"

He got to his feet and drew a deep breath, boomed in his largest voice:

"I stand with Armitage-san when she says she is unconvinced! Hime doesn't go to war with foreign nations just on the whims of a single senator who would use such a war to obtain the support of the knightly community by promising concessions she has no business promising! Hime doesn't get ready to go to war just because of that single senator's say-so, with the connivance of her allies and friends! Hime doesn't send out legions, react unnecessarily, or replace one of its generals just because we think there could be a potential war on our hands, but not an actual one!"

He squared his stance and faced the curule dais, glaring at Shizuru's eyes for a moment.

"I believe the army in the North is ably led," he stated firmly. "Takeda Masashi might indeed have a less impressive record than Shizuru Fujino, but only by a margin! He has won his own awards, he has his own crowns from the military. Do not forget that when we chose him, fellow senators, we did it because he had sufficient experience to be the successor to the Northern deputation! We put our trust in him because we reviewed his experience and found him deserving. Thus we should give him-and the time of year and communication delays-sufficient latitude, sufficient *trust* to wait for an actual confirmation before jumping straight into replacement and recruiting!"

His feet pushed apart as he took a fighting stance, not knowing he did it because of the look in Shizuru's eyes: that look that left the rest of her face expressionless and concentrated in the eyes every possible malice.

"The army in the North too," he continued, no less firmly than before, "is sufficient. It is not merely two legions strong-which actually makes a full army, Fujino-san, as *you* know since *you* obviously remember your military terminology. It's more than two legions strong because it has at least two more Himean legions acting in

support, both garrisoned in the sturdy citadels of our provinces. And they are within reasonable distance of the allied nation of Otomeia, from where they could easily fetch more auxiliaries if they should be needed! So how can we possibly send more legions to the North again without a confirmation, knowing that the North is actually well-defended, by an army within reach of auxiliary and generated by someone whom we put in command because we trusted him as we trusted his predecessor before him?"

He looked from left to right sternly while concluding.

"We take note of the evidence and opinion presented by Fujino-san today," he told them. "But more than that we shouldn't do! It's excessive to act as recommended by the senior consul and Shizuru Fujino by preparing for a war and replacing someone in a command tent just because of some suspicions. If a confirmation of war comes, Members of this House, I swear to you I shall be among the first to say we should send more legions to wipe out the Mentulaeans and their king. But before that I can't condone sending anyone or anything! Except for a letter to Masashi-san, putting forth all questions this House should be addressing to him. And another letter directing Masashi-san and his officers, Seigo Ushida included, to tell that sighted Mentulaeen army to return to their side of the borders. That is the only prudent decision here. That is the moderate and *correct* decision."

The senior consul listened to this from the curule dais, her inscrutable eyes turned to the distance, her dismay closed to all but herself. She was actually unhappy at having to call this meeting, because this was the time of year where Himeans were most preoccupied with internal affairs, from the imminent elections to the spurt of lawmaking those entailed. The senators had difficulty thinking of anything like foreign wars at the moment, and had all the conservative disbelief of foreigners being daring enough to start such a war with Hime besides. No matter that such things actually happened and had happened in the past! Himeans were not prone to caring overmuch about lands too far from Fuuka-or Hime itself, for that matter. Especially when the summer heat weighed down their heads with plans of taking off to the seaside, or to their country villas. Many who had come to the day's meeting had come only to



have some excuse to leave the city, currently suffocated by the summer fug. A fug that remained in their heads, unfortunately, making them even more negative than they usually were.

All of which meant that Sergay's speech turned the tide against Shizuru easily, and Chikane knew it.

*As does Shizuru*, she thought with worry, noting the thinning line of her friend's normally-sensuous lips. Well, that settled that: she could not allow her overanxious young friend to go off and give the House another rage-inspired speech pregnant with threats. It would not be the wise thing to do today, especially when she had a feeling the senators might be persuaded to their side with a little more diplomatic lobbying, a little more out-of-session work.

She rose, giving the assembled House one of her frigid stares.

"I do not think this House has been given enough time to consider the ramifications," she announced. "Some of the objections I have heard thus far have been shallow, by and large. You have been given evidence that strongly suggests our people are beleaguered in the North, yet the remarks passed have been so literary that I must wonder if the very likely reality has even been considered. Moderation is wise, I agree, but moderation of the sort some speakers today have advocated is ill-named."

"My only sister is affected by this, so I myself pray to the gods that my fears are for naught. But I do not persuade myself that mere hopes and prayers would make it so. Nor do I persuade myself that a *denarius*'s worth of senate dispatches will suffice in place of an army. Not to consider the possibility is not moderation: it is wishful thinking. Not to plan for the worst simply out of an unnecessary financial stringency is not moderation: it is self-defeating tight-fistedness. And to repeat almost exactly the same line for a situation in which you were once proven mistaken, Sergay Wang, is *not* good rhetoric."

This rebuke for Sergay was followed by a hard look at the Princeps, whose eyes widened in surprise. Chikane ignored the expression, for she was still irked by his words earlier in the meeting.

"As for preparation being premature," she said. "I must confess that such must be among the worst pieces of logic that I have yet to hear. You suggested earlier, Princeps Senatus, that unpreparedness is an equivalent error to preparedness without a confirmation of its necessity. I beg to disagree. Who can deny that action admitting a possibility is always wiser than inaction denying it? Is it not always wiser to err on the side of safety than its opposite? Do we not place measures to secure our homes even though we have no confirmation we shall be burgled? Or are your own measures for your house so lax that you permit all and sundry to enter?"

The Princeps blushed, but set his jaw and would not look away.

"We shall convene again in three days, after the Ides," she told them. "This body is not made up of unthinking people, and a moment's reflection on the things said today should serve to separate the sensible from the nonsensical. Think on what you have heard, if you please. And think well. I am not the only one here who has family in those areas that are very likely beleaguered. Let us consider too that some of our friends and *families* may even now be in danger. I ask that you think well about that probability at home, for I am closing this meeting. Go home and think on it, as I will." A wicked gleam of her eyes, which swept the gamut of them dismissively. "If I must listen to Wang-san repeat his talk of 'potential, not actual wars' again, I believe I shall be sick."

Shizuru was among those to exit the temple quickest once the senior consul closed the session, and she exited in such a haze of anger she even failed to appreciate her best friend's digs at their opponents. Chikane was right in thinking the younger woman had been close to an outburst: ever since receiving the latest Northern dispatches, Shizuru had been wound up to the highest pitch of anxiety possible, her own understanding telling her that, while the House blathered on in these interminable sessions, their people in the North were already at war. And all she or any of the senators could do was talk! *Talk, talk, talk*, she drummed in her mind, the natural autocrat in her wishing she could just nail their mouths shut and make all the decrees herself. Wishing she could have a power that was given only to kings. Or to the Dictator of Hime.

That office that had never tempted her tempted now, all of a sudden.

She was standing outside the temple, near the doors but off the path, for she had paused to wait for Chikane. Though her face was calm, such was the atmosphere around her that none of those exiting the temple dared to strike up a conversation and all found valid reasons for rushing past her with only fleeting nods and greetings. The first one to actually approach her was not among the first to leave, and was actually a surprise for her to see.

"Shizuru," said the senator, in a voice so beautiful it was generally acknowledged unique.

She held out her hand, and Shizuru took it instantly.

"Sachiko," Shizuru said, kissing the ebony-haired woman-whose lips, she noted in the returning kiss, were tight with displeasure. It did not seem to be due to Shizuru, for which the fair-haired patrician was glad: she was genuinely pleased to meet Sachiko after a House session, because the other senator was one of those friends she had known since childhood. They had fallen out of touch with each other during the past years but Shizuru still harboured fondness for her old friend.

"I had not even noticed you were here," she said, squeezing the other woman's hand. "This is a pleasure."

The woman's strikingly attractive face-as beautiful as her voice, it was also generally acknowledged-flushed as she drew Shizuru away from the crowd. Sachiko Ogasawara was one of those people who, in any gathering, did their best to keep well away from the thick of the action: only one of the reasons she and the flamboyant Shizuru might have grown apart as they came into their political birthrights. Famously reclusive and socially reluctant, Sachiko was regarded as one of the greater eccentrics in the pool of senators who would eventually form the next generation of Senate fixtures.

"I slipped through as the rest of them were filing in," Sachiko admitted with a cool glance at their peers crowding nearby. *Oh that dark arrogance!* thought a longing Shizuru, diverted from her anger by the echo of Natsuki there-and the echo of Chikane too, come to

think of it. What was it about these women that they could look like that so effortlessly, she wondered. Was it that natural tendency to reclusiveness that did it? Was it something as simple as lovely eyes and an ebony-framed face?

"I know I do not often attend," Sachiko said, as though apologising. "But I am running for the aedileship next year. I must show more often."

"True. As I said before, I shall support your candidature," Shizuru said with warmth.

"Dare I hope you support me in what was discussed by the House earlier?" she followed with her most tender voice, knowing this woman was sensitive and responded best to tender treatment.

The sensitive woman's eyebrows drew close and produced an expression none too tender.

"*Inepes!*" Sachiko sneered. "Of course it is war in the North."

Shizuru was a little astonished. She had not even thought Sachiko to be very interested in the Northern question, for all that it had been her family that had been lending its basilica thus far for most of Chikane's out-of-citysessions. Why, for most of those sessions, Sachiko had been absent anyway!

"Do you mean you believe me?" she asked in wonder.

"Yes! Yes, I do," the other said with slight impatience. "I am not an idiot, as opposed to those dense characters in our senate who would prefer to see our provinces made charnel houses before they listened. I was tempted to speak out earlier and would have, had it not been for Senator Tokiha and Chikane-san doing so. They spoke my thoughts well, as did you."

Her eyes were dark now: the same deep shade as Chikane's blue, thought Shizuru, but infinitely stormier, more prone to flashes of internal thunder and lightning. Another part of the bundle of contradictions making up this woman's supposed eccentricity. Sensitive as she was, well-mannered though she could be, Sachiko

Ogasawara had a surprisingly rude temper. It snapped easily and snapped with a crack.

"It is not merely that I would place my faith in your opinions, you understand," the woman told Shizuru hastily. "Although it does strengthen my conviction here that you believe the same thing I do. That aside, it appears natural to me that matters should come to war given everything that has happened. Furthermore, I think the very author of the report prompting this meeting should be setting off warning alarms!"

Shizuru tilted her head at the hiss. "Midori Sugiura?"

"In her six years of governing Argus, Sugiura-san has never once been the kind to send out messages for every little problem that comes up under her watch, as any of them would remember if they had half the memory they were supposed to have been born with," Sachiko huffed, showing that she actually paid more attention to political matters than would be believed by her peers.

"Unfortunately, our fellows have longer arrears records than they do memories," Shizuru sighed. "Is that why you looked irate just now?"

The other woman was startled.

"I suppose so," she confessed, finally bending her reserve enough to smile. "I looked irate?"

A returning smile. "You rather did."

"Please pardon me. I might have seemed rude in my approach, if so."

"Not at all. I myself was angered by the density earlier."

"Chikane-san was too, it seems." A low, attractive chuckle escaped Sachiko's lips, her eyes turning humorous at the memory. "One has to admire the way she expresses herself. Kanzaki-san was taken off-guard when she set on him, but I think Haruka-san was even more surprised that Chikane did not set on her. She never has, I think."

Shizuru explained, "Because Chikane feels Haruka-han needs no one to set on her, it being that the woman destroys her own points without needing anyone's help. The only reason I even bother answering when she gets up to speak is that most of what she says is often about and addressed to me. A courtesy, you might say."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a silver-gilt flash. She glanced and saw a typically bored-looking Shizuma surrounded by a group of far younger senators-about Shizuru's own age and most of them backbenchers-and several, Shizuru noted, were actually sons or daughters from conservative families. Not typical! Shizuma seemed to be holding court among them, she noted. What new mischief was her cousin doing?

Deciding she would find out eventually, she turned to her companion.

"Oh, it is good to have sensible friends in the midst of this coop of hens!" she laughed lightly. "Do you know I was beginning to worry no one would believe me? You know how the Senate can be when it comes to talking about 'distant' foreign wars."

"They forget our world grows smaller-'distant' has become a useless adjective," Sachiko said, unknowingly echoing some of Shizuru's opinions. "Would I add so much to your confidence rating, however? We might be considered *thick* with each other too, Shizuru."

Shizuru returned the smirk. "Indeed."

Suddenly the other senator stiffened again, seemed to regain her earlier wariness.

"I did not have a chance to sit and talk with you very long, before," she said quietly and with apology. "It was remiss of me... especially as we are old friends."

Shizuru's interest was piqued, and she leaned down to better hear: not by much, because Sachiko was also tall.

"It is a pity we have both been so busy, although understandable, especially in your case," the woman continued softly, her voice

wonderful in Shizuru's ears. "I would invite you to dinner if you could come into the city."

"As I cannot, I am pleased to be the one extending the invitation," Shizuru said without hesitation. "You are right, Sachiko-it has been too long since last we truly had the opportunity to speak with each other. It seems to me that all our recent encounters have been pure business-the last certainly was that!-and the business has been mostly mine, too. I have been very selfish."

Sachiko shook her head, and the fringe above her eyes waved before sloping again to one side.

"No," she said. "As I said, it was understandable. Please do not be concerned on my account. If I was able to help you with your business recently, I required nothing in return for it, and did not grudge the doing."

"And I thank you for that all the more," Shizuru said. "Would you happen to be free this evening?"

"Yes."

"Then it would give me great pleasure to have you over for dinner." And on inspiration, recalling some of the rumours, added: "And anyone else you might wish to bring, of course. My evening would be merrier with more company."

That anxious, secretive face lightened suddenly. "Thank you. I may take you up on that offer to bring a companion."

After that, Sachiko took her leave. Shizuru stayed to exchange words with a few more senators before leaving too, and heading for her temporary home.

It was her steward who met her at her villa, and she ceded her toga to him with a quick shrug. He took it and rolled up the cloth in one hand.

"Hermias," his mistress said, still walking. "Would you fetch my riding tunic?"

"At once, *domina*," he said, snapping his fingers at one of the waiting slaves to do it. "Shall you be going somewhere?"

"Only for a short ride," she told him. "Have Albinus saddled and waiting outside as soon as I am ready."

Another snap of the fingers to another waiting slave.

"The white stallion-the largest," he told her.

"The one that looks like it eats people," Shizuru said teasingly, given a shy smile in reply.

Said Hermias, "Would it please you to take anything else with you, perhaps? Refreshment?"

"Merely some water."

She stopped in her trek to the bedroom, to his relief: his mistress sometimes forgot that she was taller, which meant that he had to take longer steps to keep up. And something must have happened to displease her in the House, he guessed, because her steps were always faster when she was displeased.

"I shall have Sachiko Ogasawara over for dinner later," she was saying, staring for some reason at a mosaic wall depicting the argument of Achilles and Agamemnon, a wailing Briseis being torn from the former by the latter. "She may bring a guest, so please inform the kitchen staff. I shall require a hot bath as well once I return, along with my clothes ready. Be aware I shall not be long: an hour, perhaps, and no more."

"Shall you wear a dress or tunic?"

"A dress-you may choose which one, Hermias."

"As you wish, *domina* ."

"And Hermias?"

"Yes?"



"Have someone over tomorrow to take that out," she said, pointing to the mosaic at which she had been staring. "I never noticed it before, but now that I have, I do not particularly care to look at it. It looks coarse to me. Have them replace it with something else. Something *lighter*."

And though Hermias was shrewd enough an observer to note that the mosaic was excellent, a work of art as finished as the top-of-the-line mosaics done in Sicilia, he nodded.

"I will have someone take care of it, *domina*," he said.

Later, astride Albinus and tearing through the countryside, Shizuru let her fretful mind ease to revel in the wind, in the sun soaking her with heat. And in the animal between her legs, whose powerful and shifting muscles had also shifted once under another woman. A *great horse*, that other woman had called him, and she had been right. Shizuru knew the trailing stares given by the people she passed were not merely for her alone, but also for her showy blue-white mount. *I ride on a bolt of ice*, she thought to herself, and was amused by the fancy.

Himeans were not a horse-people by nature-which was why they sought cavalry from allied nations-but Shizuru was a natural rider. She liked horses and had demonstrated the liking reciprocated the first time she got on one such beast. It had pleased her then to find it so, as it had her parents. All for the same reason.

"It's difficult to be a good general or officer if you find riding difficult," her father had remarked those many years ago, looking up at her from where she sat on her first steed. "The rankers never get the opportunity to appreciate it. But all officers have to work from atop their horses in the army."

*Although I do break that rule very often*, she admitted, smiling. Nevertheless, it was never out of dislike for the riding: she loved being on a horse in full gallop, finding a perfection in it similar to the perfection of having a weapon in one hand and a vanquished foe on its end. It was the unity of purpose, tool, and achievement that gave things like this their flawlessness.

*My girl always understood that well.*

She sighed deeply, involuntarily, and it sobbed against the wind. Everything came back to that these days, she thought. Her dearest Natsuki. How was she? Was she well? Was she safe? Shizuru knew her girl had gone on the march to Argentum but refused to think that anything might have happened to her, for all that she had tried to impress the probability upon her peers earlier. In Shizuru's mind, Natsuki was alive and Natsuki was safe. She could not permit herself to think otherwise because such permission would prove apocalyptic to her own thinking. The only thing to do, she decided, was to trust to her fortune. She had always been beloved of Fortuna and knew it: surely there could not be a world where the goddess would not also extend that love to Natsuki?

Thus in Shizuru's mind, Natsuki had to be safe. So Natsuki *was* safe. However, Natsuki would be much safer once she herself returned to the north and ensured the girl's security, which was why it was killing her not to be able to go sailing to the north immediately. Oh the lethargy, the bucolic imbecility of the senate! Why was it that they could not see what she herself saw so clearly? What gave them that foolish confidence that Hime's name alone could roll up a foreign army every time? The name was not always enough-the night was all too often required as well.

*Wait just a little more for me, little one*, she thought, hoping the thought would somehow take wing to that beloved pair of ears. She hoped very much that Natsuki could wait a little more. Ye gods, and tomorrow was the girl's birthday too! *If only she were here with me*, Shizuru wished all over again, *I would give her such pleasure, such things*. She knew she would even try to give the world did the girl ask for it. But then, Natsuki never did ask for too much from her, did she?

An unselfish girl . Sometimes Shizuru had wished the girl had been more selfish. For her lack of selfishness had made Shizuru feel sometimes inadequate, a scratchy feeling of being unable to give back something to equal what she took. Indeed, this separation had shown Shizuru just how much she had been taking from the younger woman, for she was not blind to the changes her friends had been noting in herself: the growing lack of temperance and rising

impatience. Things that had threatened again only earlier, when her imagination had run riot during Sergay Wang's speech and the House's turning away from her. She had imagined murder in her frustration, imagined getting her hands on Sergay Wang's accursedly *moderate* throat and tightening slowly until she heard the satisfaction of windpipe and gorge crunching under her thumb.

Yes, she needed her girl. It was not that she was weaker without Natsuki; rather, it was that she was less controlled in her strength, intemperate. It never occurred to her that she might not have become so intemperate had she never met the Otomeian. Before Natsuki, after all, she had never wanted anything so forbidden or difficult, and even her only other want-to become the First Citizen, the most powerful and influential woman in her world-had seemed easier. Her mother, who had known her best of all people, would have said that even the path to that latter desire might have eventually shown up Shizuru's intemperance anyway: Shizuru shed restraints according to whatever obstacles came against her goals, and her mother had always said that a creature of Shizuru's ilk would always have more obstacles than normal.

Shizuru knew that she needed Natsuki not merely for her sake but for the sake of all those around her.

*What binds me to her is inside even my mirror of self, she mulled. I need her in my reflection, a safeguard for myself. I too can be pushed too far, and I accept now that I shall always be pushed too far. I can do little else but become as the situation demands it. But it becomes dangerous when the situation demands too much. I need her now: I need Natsuki. Who was my girl, just as I was ever her woman. I need her here if I am to avoid becoming her monster.*

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The Ninth and Eleventh legions, sent back out from the Campus Martius four days before the Nones of July, had an easy time of their march back up the road they had built, because they had built it well. The new *via Fujino* was firm, its polished and packed-down surface smooth as polished wood, travel on its length easy as a walk up Fuuka's best-kept roads. When they had received the order to move out again, the troops had miraculously refrained from complaining.

*They're well-disciplined troops*, thought some of their newer officers. Whereas the older ones thought: *they're smart troops, more like, and they know their general*. For the two legions were Shizuru Fujino's soldiers at heart and sensed-on their vague, uneducated terms-what it was that Shizuru Fujino wanted. To beat the bloody Mentulaeans out of the North, to reclaim for themselves all the glory of that foreign war they should have been given. Had the general not said words to that effect, that last time she addressed them? It would have been the perfect war: rich and red and right. And if the general had thought, while giving her boys and girls that stirring final address, that all wars were always seen as rich and red and right, the general had naturally made no mention of it.

So the troops that travelled up the Fujino road were Fujino troops commanded by Fujino leaders, the head of whom was the legate Shohei Nagayama. And if there was a Fujino man to the core, it was he. A member of the plebeian Nagayama, a decently old Himean family if another of those impoverished, he had begun his political career in the plebeian tribunate. And had found himself wondering what the next step up the ladder should be, since he was not a stunning-enough politician to make the splash needed. Then Shizuru Fujino had come along, remembered him from his stint in the army-for he had also been in the first army in which she had served-and correctly identified where Shohei's real talents were: in the military, not the Forum. She offered him a position in her army and he took her as his patron.

He had served with her in a campaign before and had never given cause to disappoint, which was why she had chosen him specifically to lead the Ninth and Eleventh-with her most senior primipilus to assist-back in the direction of the northern territories. Trusting that these two favoured subalterns would be capable of divining for themselves what action to take if action became necessary. Which trust was tested on that day, the day before the Ides of August, while the senate itself was busy testing Shizuru's patience.

Midori Sugiura's couriers from Argus had to travel the road that the Ninth and Eleventh were taking, moving south while the two legions moved north. It was thus inevitable that the couriers would run into or pass by the legions. That the first courier-the one bearing the

news that prompted Chikane Himemiya into calling the first Temple of Bellona meeting-had not stopped to share his news with them was simply because he had not the brains to see that he should have. He had been, besides, very eager to finish the wretched journey on time because the governor had promised a flogging if he did not cover the distance within the stipulated days: and he had suffered an accident along the way that had lamed one horse and forced him to lose a day while seeking out the nearest farm-stable.

The second courier, however, had both better luck and a better mind. He also needed a new horse, for he had been burning out each one at an accelerated rate, being aware that the news he carried was news that needed to get to Hime as fast as news could get. Nothing more sensible than to stop at the proper little marching camp he encountered, and demand to see whoever commanded the place.

He rode into the camp while the first primipilus was by her tent, holding forth with her latest human property and protégé. The former whore from Argus, named Pollonia.

"Not," Nao was telling her. "That you'll stop using your body yet, Poll. It's still a tool of the trade you'll be going into now, you know, along with everything else you have."

"You've not seen me stop using it yet, have you?" said her cheeky acolyte, who slept with her on a regular basis. "So what's it today, Nao? More sword-stuff?"

She was referring to the lessons the primipilus gave her each day.

"No, that'll do later. For now, just a little review," was the answer. Nao eyed the other woman with approbation. "You take good to the work, Poll, and I'd bet my arse you'd do it well enough in the actual lurch."

She brought down one hand to her seat and chipped off some wood with a nail idly.

"Though you can't be sure of that until you try it, really," she continued. "Especially killing a person. At least I'd not expect you to

have to do any of that-or *much*, anyway, if you do the rest well."

Noting that the other looked faintly pleased, she added: "What, got a problem with killing after all?"

"Only if it's meant for me."

"Smart mouth! But that's right enough," Nao laughed. Suddenly, she sobered and looking sharp.

"Quick," she rapped out. "Pretend I'm someone you need to kill."

Pollonia got up and approached her. " *Need* because I should only kill if I need to."

"Good." That fiery head of hair bobbed up and down, the freshly-cut tips spiking. "I'm sitting on a bench. You're behind me. You've got to kill me right now."

Poll went to the prescribed position; Nao yawned.

"What have I got to hand?" the dark-skinned, auburn-haired woman asked the fair-skinned, red-haired one.

"Nothing."

"Step... and twist of the neck like this." One hand held palm-flat on the collar, the other on the neck just below the base of the hair. "Though it's better with a weapon, always. Especially if you were much bigger than I am."

"What weapon?" her Himean mistress demanded.

"A knife. Sharp and thin point, about four inches of blade." Pollonia was warming up now, and went through the motions without further prompting. "Quick step and cover the mouth." She held her palm against Nao's mouth and quickly turned the other woman's face sideways, the motion so smooth there was no jar to it. "Thrust knife and walk away."

She felt something wet draw against her palm and released, giggling.

"Where?" the centurion demanded, not looking around.

Pollonia reached over with one olive arm and touched the other woman on the space where the collarbones met, the tiny hollow. The movement was superbly fast-Nao was pleased by that-although the woman lingered in place after it.

A chin rested on Nao's shoulder.

"This notch above the bones of the breast," Pollonia said. "If I'm coming from behind, because it's easy to stick a knife in and downwards." She made a controlled side-to-side motion with the fisted hand holding the imaginary weapon. "The knife ought to be wiggled, because I'm supposed to make sure I tear whatever I can inside before I walk away, making it harder to fix."

"Good, though if you get the heart it's already a done thing-that's hardest to fix. That's just for safety, the tearing, in case of a fluke. Where else?"

The fingers drifted up, played with Nao's neck. "Here, to slit the throat. Best when no one else is near, because it's messy, so always a second option."

"That it is." She let Poll nuzzle for a moment with that beak of a nose, then pushed her away. "What if you're coming from the front, just to be fair?"

The other woman had walked around to look her in the face. "Juno take fair! I'd go to the back."

They grinned.

"Good," Nao praised. She told Pollonia to take a seat. "Though it's a truth, you know, that if you do end up having to kill you'll have as much chance of being forced to go from the front as you will from the back. Not like you can pick and choose everything, though you can set it up a bit."

Her lime-green eyes wiggled, set the question wordlessly.

"Then I aim for the place just below the bones of the breast,"

Pollonia recited, leaning forward to touch the spot on the centurion's torso. The flesh rose and fell slightly, in time to Nao's steady breathing. "There and smoothly up, in a swing. It's the best because the knife goes up the heart without having to go through bone and because-for some reason-a man usually can't scream when it goes through there."

"Good. How strong is the stroke?"

"Light. Don't need to force it and forcing it sometimes gets a scream too."

"Again 'for some reason'," Nao ended, purring like a pleased schoolmaster. "We don't know what's in there that sings a tune when it's struck too hard, but that's for them surgeon types to know. The point for us is just to know how to keep it from singing."

"Do you think it's a lung?" Pollonia asked.

"No, the lungs go to the sides of the heart. Like I said, no use worrying our heads off about it, Greek-like. We're not Greek."

"It's funny," said her half-Mentulaean, half-Jew companion, "that your people don't like the Greeks too much. But you've taken a lot of things from them."

"*Tace !*" Nao growled, irritated by the slide towards philosophising-or whatever one could call it. "What we did take we made better. Them spittle-arsed bum-fuckers aren't practical, and we are. Back to what I said before! Remember all of this, but remember not to kill if possible, you hear me? I'm not teaching you to be a straight-out murderer."

"But an intelligencer," Pollonia answered, good student that she was. "I know."

"You'd better."

Rapid footsteps alerted them to someone coming. Both looked up to see Nao's body-servant round their tent's corner, her oft-cheery face earnest.



"Nao-senpai," she gasped, putting her hands on her bent knees and supporting herself that way. "Shohei-san said... to get you. Another courier just got in-passing by-he said to meet in the commander's tent." Another gasp. "They're both there."

Nao got to her feet; as did Pollonia, coming to throw an arm around the newcomer's shoulders and lead her to a seat.

"You get your breath back, Ers-why you're running like that when I'm this close to the commander's tent, I'd like to know," said the *primipilus*, letting Pollonia cluck over the youngest member of what she jokingly called their family. She nodded to them, her little household, so loyal and so friendly with each other.

"Give her water, Poll," she said. "I'll go see what the legate wants."

She found the legate with a sweat-soaked courier who told them his tale so succinctly that not two sentences had passed before Nao and Shohei looked grim.

"Why didn't the first courier stop to tell us?" was Nao's first query once the man had been taken away to get a fresh horse and she and the legate were alone.

"Might've taken a little detour or passed us out of haste-could be anything," the legate answered. "But I'm damned glad this courier stopped here!"

"Damned fool the one who didn't."

"I agree."

"That wanker of a replacement's at fault."

"You'll not get an argument from me. How in all the hells did a Mentulaeen army get far enough to siege Sosia?"

Nao snarled. "The Eighth's in Argentum."

"Let's hope it's *still there*," Shohei said, speaking in a deep rumble. "As for the Seventh..."

They sat for a moment in silence, comrades of old acquaintance and old battles, and weighed the problem that had just arisen.

"This is a fine pickle," Shohei said.

"Bugged is what it is," Nao said.

"We'll have to send a message to Hime requesting instructions, of course."

"Of course." The primipilus scowled. "That's not all we'll have to do, is it?"

"Oh, this is me you're talking to, Yuuki-san!"

Shohei folded both brawny arms across his chest and pulled in his chin to his neck, like a bull girding itself for a charge.

"I know our general as well you do, and I know why she sent us on this walk back up the road we just built," he said solemnly. "We'll send a message requesting instructions. But we'll send another message to our general telling her we've gone and marched on to Argus, bearing for Sosia. Fujino-san wouldn't thank me if I didn't do a thing to relieve the siege... yet she'd commend me if I requested the order first from her and Hime to relieve it. She's our general, so she's the one who has to deal with the rest of those cantankerous *cunni* in the senate. Which means that we carry out her orders-anticipated or otherwise-but we always have to make it look to the rest of them that we asked first before moving."

He got up from his chair and barked an order to the soldier outside to get the officers ready.

"To Argus, then Sosia at first light," he told the primipilus. "And it'll be a forced march the whole way. I don't care if we scorch the fucking road we built with our feet."

Nao left the tent satisfied and went to hers. She sought out Pollonia.

"Get up, Poll!" she said to the woman, baring her teeth in a thing that could not be called a smile. "You ready to earn your keep?"

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*This, Suou told herself, is going to take some doing.*

She was standing with some other officers in a clump of forest poised on a rise of land near Sosia's citadel, surveying the plain infested with Mentulae at arms. Thousands and thousands of them, littered in front of the bulk of Sosia's city, massing to a clumped camp that was actually made up of two camps, two armies right next to each other. And not too far from that, another, far smaller camp standing atop a small hill, on the far side of the plain. Seigo Ushida's camp. Which Suou and Takeda would have to find a way to join, somehow bypassing the Mentulaeans standing right in between.

"We'll have to skirt the long way around and offer to the gods that they don't have any secondary units hiding behind," the commander said, chewing furiously on a piece of twine.

She grunted an agreement. "That's what scouts are for."

Takeda nodded.

"But Jupiter," he whispered. "Look at them! I can't believe they brought so many."

Suou's smile crusted on her face. It irked her when *he* expressed any wondering disbelief about their enemy, particularly when it was his disbelief that had put them in this situation in the first place.

"Indeed," she said dryly. "We'll hear from our scouts in the morning, let's hope. For now, we can't do anything else."

He agreed, then saw her turn around and saunter off. "Off to bed already?"

"I have to talk to Natsuki," she said, with intentional cruelty.

He bumbled something indiscernible and Suou escaped.

Later, reaching the tent she shared with her Otomeian companion, she went in to find the girl sitting on a bed. Both legs were extended and the injured one was elevated by a pillow, as per the surgeons' orders. There was a lamp next to her: Natsuki was reading.

"I was just taking a look at the enemy," Suou said in greeting. "A veritable horde. We shall probably be able to move tomorrow."

She held up something red and glossy. It was an apple.

"It's a touch bruised, I'm afraid." She handed the fruit to Natsuki. "But this is the best one. I remembered that you like these."

The Otomeian took the fruit with the red-cheeked gratitude she always did upon receiving a gift, and bowed her chin in thanks. However, she then did no more than stare at the round red object she was holding.

Suou angled her head curiously.

"Would you like me to cut it up and peel it?" she offered.

"Nn-no," the girl replied, flustered. She regarded Suou with some embarrassment and said: "But... I thought we should cut it? So you can eat too?"

"Oh no, I don't care for apples myself," Suou lied cheerfully. "Go on and eat it all. It's clean, don't worry." She looked wistful. "Now if it had been grapes-!"

Natsuki grinned.

"Shizuru," she explained to the bemused Himean, "said once that she liked grapes."

"It would be natural. Himeans tend to think of them first when it comes to fruit." Suou shrugged, sitting on the bed as well after requesting and obtaining permission. "Grapes... It's all about the wine, really."

The other woman nodded and admired the apple again.

"I know," Suou said very casually. "It's your birthday."

Natsuki looked up.

"I was wondering if you would tell me," the Himean continued. "But

either you're as silent on that score as you are on everything or you forgot owing to everything else going on. But either way, I'm still a little surprised you said nothing about it."

Natsuki made no reply to that, and looked very guilty. Suou smiled.

"I wish it could be better," she said. "And I'm afraid it's not easy to obtain something worthy of being a present in our circumstances. Still, I hope this makes up for it. Here you are."

She handed over the other thing she had been carrying: a long object wrapped in cloth, obviously a sword. Natsuki took it silently and, to the Himean's amusement, did no more again than stare at the thing in her hands.

"Unwrap it," Suou told her. "Or is this the one you would like to cut up and peel?"

The girl frowned.

"How?" she retorted stiffly. "I do - *do not* know if it is such as you can cut and peel."

"Which is why you should unwrap it to find out," Suou pointed out gently. "Go on, please. I doubt it can be cut and peeled, though it should be capable of doing the same things itself."

The Otomeian undid the cord tying the bundle, her thin fingers trembling.

"Aah," she breathed.

She had unwrapped it. In that bolt of cloth had been a sword, as she expected, but not a sword of a type she had ever owned. It was a sheathed Himean katana, its handle bound in indigo, its scabbard of finest wood inlaid with silver detail. She made as if to touch it where it lay on her lap, but held back at the last moment.

Suou understood.

"Please inspect it as you like," she said.

Holding her breath, Natsuki ran the pads of her fingers first over the sheath. Then she slipped both hands under it and lifted.

"It..." she said, marvelling. "Heavier. Than I thought."

"Oh, yes," Suou told her. "They are heavier than they look. And it's not merely due to the scabbard either. Go on and unsheathe it."

Natsuki did just that. And gasped at the sight of fine blue steel, its diamond edge winking at her. Suou cautioned her that it was sharp and she nodded absentmindedly, hardly able to take her eyes away from that winking blade.

She returned it to its sheath with quiet reverence.

"Suou," she whispered, obviously falling headlong in love with the gift. "It's *beautiful*."

Suou smiled. "I'm glad you like it."

"Yes." She bowed as well as she could from her position and could not hide her flush, which stained even her ears. "Thank you. I like it. Ve-very much."

"You're welcome. If you try it and find you like its use as well, I would be honoured if you carried it with you at all times, as your sword."

The Otomeian nodded bashfully and returned to her inspection of the sword, looking wordlessly overwhelmed. Suddenly she froze. Suou tried to see what had startled her and saw that the girl's eyes were on the engraving on one side of the sheath, the side that had been facing downwards earlier.

"*Hime*," Natsuki read.

"Actually, *Himemiya*," Suou told her. "That is how my family contracts our name for our seal, remember?" And she proceeded to point out the tiny detail of thorns engraved around the letters. "This is actually a modified version of our seal, see? The wings have been amended to frame the edges instead of being bounded by the thorns."

But Natsuki twisted at this information.

"The-then," she stammered. "I should not-"

"You would break my heart if you said you could not accept it," Suou said, cutting her off and thus sparing her from that painful sacrifice: it was clear Natsuki wanted to keep the sword badly, even if the girl would not lower her pride to do it without protest. "Please do take it. I am giving it to you in all sincerity, after all, and would feel deeply rejected if you declined. It is as much a gift for your birthday as it is a gift made of our friendship, you know. That is why I said I would be honoured if you carried it with you at all times."

What she did not mention was the other, even more important reason for giving her the sword. Ever since the scare two weeks past-a scare that had proven false, admittedly-she had been thinking of something to prevent anything of the kind that she had mistakenly imagined. After all, if she could still worry about something like that, she decided she needed to institute more safeguards and prohibitions shielding her charge as well as her own peace of mind. The trick was in not showing her charge these added safeguards. She needed something subtle, soft as fur. It needed to be so sleek a prohibition that it would slip in without friction and spare Natsuki the chafing.

The sword was her elegant solution.

Like most of the other august patrician clans, Suou's family held several heirlooms that were actually items commissioned by some ancestor and passed down along the line. The most famous was perhaps the huge bow of the Himemiya, which went naturally to her sister, the current head of the family. There were others, and-as is the way of things in the world-some of these others were already falling into disrepair, succumbing to the inevitable devaluation imposed by time and the elements. In place of these decaying objects, however, were always new ones: items commissioned by later generations and passed down to even later generations again, imbued with the magical and sentimental value of time and some long-ago kin with some sort of achievement, some measure of fame.

The sword she gave to Natsuki was one such, a sword that had

been commissioned especially for her and should have been passed down the Himemiya line instead, at some point in time. That Suou did not even hesitate to give up such an artefact to the Otomeian-not even *her* Otomeian!-was indication of how much and how little she had in common with Natsuki's lover: the lack of insularity, they shared; the lack of sentimentality, they did not.

In giving the sword to Natsuki, she had actually given the girl a shield. She had been thinking for some time now that there might be a possibility-very faint, but still a possibility-that some might be tempted to interpret Shizuru's abandonment of her as a permanent disposal. And that, combined with Natsuki's currently weakened state, made her feel anxious about such a temptation. If, however, the girl carried with her a more physical marker, a *tangible and immediate* brand to ward off all comers, Suou knew she would rest easier. Hence her sword, which could actually be passed on only to members of the family. Natsuki did not realise it, but what Suou had given her was one of the greatest gifts a Himean could give: Suou was proclaiming, to all seeing the letters on that sheath, that Natsuki was henceforth under her family's wing. And whoever could be ignorant enough to disregard that the girl was Shizuru Fujino's could not be ignorant enough too to disregard the name on that sword.

"If so," Natsuki said, finally yielding. "If so... then... then I will give you something too!"

Suou's eyes went wide. "Why, no, you're not obliged to do that. I did not give it expecting anything in return."

"You said to me before," the girl replied slyly. "It is just to expect for oneself too when one gives much, as a return. You will not say now that you are not giving much, yes? Because that would - would *contradict* what you said about the value of it."

The Himean laughed.

"You have the most irritating habit of throwing people's words back in their faces," she noted, having experienced this with her several times before.

"You say it is also a gift of our - um - our friendship," the dark-haired



one said. "So, I give you one too, for that."

Suou thought it over for a second and succumbed.

"Well," she said. "If you feel you must, it would be churlish of me to refuse, I suppose."

A fierce nod from the Otomeian.

"I see. Then I shall look forward to that gift." She gave her a smile; something else caught her eye when she looked away. "Oh, they brought it while I was out! Good, good."

She got up from the bed, followed by Natsuki's gaze.

"Armour from the Mentulae," the girl identified.

"Yes, one of those we stripped from the battlefield last time." Suou lifted the torso-piece, more a set of broad plates than the moulded cuirasses Himeans wore, and examined it to find the latches. "I gather this is the one most used, so I asked for one to be delivered here."

"Why?"

"For a little experimentation." She looked over the rest of the gear. "I thought it might give us some fresh perspectives. Where the weak areas are, what the disadvantages and advantages would be for someone wearing this... and using their weapons, of course. I have already handled a falx, so I daresay imagination can suffice for that point."

She shot a glance at Natsuki.

"Would you help me with that? I shall put it on first," she said.

Natsuki agreed, and resumed her reading while she waited. When Suou had finished, she called the Otomeian's attention.

"Well?" she said, holding out her hands. "What do you think?"

But all that earned for her was an amazed look, followed by hilarity.

"You barbarian," Natsuki said laughingly, once she recovered enough to get out some words. "Oh, you *savage*."

The other woman grinned-but rolled her eyes upwards too.

"Don't you start." Suou clunked over to a stool, finding the exercise as slow as it was ungainly. "Though I'll warrant it must look odd on me. Or is it that it looks odd on anybody?"

Natsuki finally swallowed the tag-ends of her mirth and smiled. She had laughed not just at the thought of a Himean of Himeans like Suou donning a Mentulaean outfit: that amusement had come later, while she was already laughing. It was actually the image of someone so *Otomeian-looking* in a Mentulaean outfit that had sent her into merriment

She looked Suou over one more time.

"I thought before," she said reflectively. "And now, too. It looks... cumbersome. That is the right word, cumbersome?"

"I should say so!" Suou exclaimed. "If you mean that it seems awkward or unwieldy, that would be it-and yes, that means I find it awkward and unwieldy. Of course it is my first time to wear it, so that must be accounted for. That aside, however, this still suffers compared to the Himean uniform-or yours, for that matter. To think this is what their main infantry troops wear... I suppose this is just another reason they are such turtles on field and road." She patted the broad plate covering her chest. "Not that they would be of sufficient sophistication to find any advantage in that. They would not know their Aesop."

Natsuki sniggered in appreciation, although she did point out jokingly that it should be a tortoise, not a turtle.

"The pieces here and here are awkwardly placed," Suou said afterwards, making her notes aloud. She pointed out specific areas to Natsuki. "They chafe, you see? It restricts pivot movement, and this is probably another reason it takes so long for them to recover when their slice misses."

She turned her head experimentally and tried to nod.

"The helmet has a slightly smaller range of vision than ours," she went on. "This could be turned into an advantage."

The Otomeian listened to her observations, humming and adding her own remarks every now and then. When they had finished their note-taking, Suou divested herself of the armour and changed into a fresh tunic, wiping herself with a cloth and some water from a basin. Natsuki kept her eyes firmly on her reading the entire time, a little rebel colour brushing over the slopes of her cheeks.

"I'll have the centurions spread the word tomorrow," Suou said, once done with her ablutions. She dried her face with another cloth. "Every little bit helps. Better for the men to know exactly what they will be facing."

The look in Natsuki's eyes told her the girl approved mightily.

"Now," she sighed. "If only we could be sure we'd get to Ushida-san's camp without a cry being raised by some especially sly scout hidden in the trees."

The younger woman put down the scroll she had been reading.

"About this, I have an idea," she announced. "You will listen?"

"Always." Suou had come by now to respect Natsuki's opinions greatly. "What is it?"

As was her wont, the girl established first the premise and the problem: "You are concerned some of them will notice. When we try to slip through the woods and go the long way."

"Yes."

"It is so that we shall try to go in the dark, yes?"

"Yes."

"Then we light the way we do not take," Natsuki said with her beautiful simplicity. "Start a fire in the woods, on the side opposite."

They will stare at it and go blind. And also forget to look the other way."

Suou gasped, suddenly stripped of her breath.

"Ye gods," she whispered later, drawing a raspy lungful of air. She looked as though she would get up from her seat, but was too winded to do it.

"Ye gods, Natsuki, you're amazing," she said finally, still speaking in an awed whisper. "So simple! Yet I doubt it would have ever come to me. It's absolutely brilliant, all the more as it might drive the Mentulae to distraction for the other reason that they worship the trees or something of the sort. And all that racket will drown out other sounds, say that of us skirting round-or even being discovered by a scout. Wonderful! Still..."

"Still?"

"Shizuru-san said something to me before," the Himean said, looking at the younger woman closely. "Your original people, the Ortygians, were worshippers too of the forest, much like the Mentulae we fight."

She did not have to go on. Natsuki understood her.

"I do not think the gods would side with the Mentulae," the girl said. "I think... more now, after all we have - we have - um - *endured*... that they side with us. So they will understand. If we make offering and prayer in exchange, the forest gods will understand. The gods are not unreasonable."

"Oh, well said!" cried the Himean, who understood the idea of making contracts with the gods; but to think this foreigner would understand it too! She gave the young woman another of those penetrating glances, the ones that said she was trying to figure out something about Natsuki that she found puzzling. No stranger to such regard, Natsuki contented herself with frowning a little and just waited.

"Have you ever generated?" Suou asked. "A full army, I mean."

The girl shook her head.

"Only my division," was her answer.

"You should be a general." Suou shook her head to dispel a shiver and clawed the skirt of her tunic. "Oh, I hate this! You really would have been *such* a Himean!"

The younger woman was astonished by the statement.

"Excuse me for that," Suou said, though she still looked regretful about the tricks of Fate. "At any rate, I shall put it to our commander later-he's on the Watch right now, so he'll not be going to bed early. By tomorrow, the scouts should have come back. And then we can work out how to do this."

She smiled one of her slow smiles, which Natsuki rather liked. "I hope Ushida-san and whoever's generaling in Sosia-Oni-san, I should say, though Toshi-san's there too-will have enough gumption to attack when we do that little diversion."

Natsuki agreed with her.

"And no matter how many times I have said it, let me say it again: I am profoundly glad *you* are on our side, Natsuki. If nothing else indicates the gods are on our side, your presence at least proves it."

The Otomeian predictably coloured, and looked away.

"I... am glad too," Natsuki admitted suddenly.

"For what?" Suou asked, correctly guessing the girl had moved on to a different thing.

"That the Mentulae are still stupid."

A startled chuckle. "What?"

"With such machines... with such an army," Natsuki said, flicking her eyes away and back. "Shizuru would take Sosia in a day."

Suou puffed through her nose.

"I believe you're right," she conceded immediately. "Which is why we should also be glad they do not have a Shizuru of the Fujino among them. Or a Natsuki *Heres Superstes* of Ortygia."

"Or a Suou of the Himemiya?" the girl said provocatively, amused by the title given her-especially since Suou had unwittingly hit a mark that the Otomeians purposefully kept quiet: Natsuki truly was, in a way the foreigners did not know and Shizuru had guessed at but did not understand fully, the solesurviving heiress of Ortygia.

"Perhaps so, Natsuki."

But Natsuki's face changed all of a sudden, one of those swift clouds of mood shading it over.

"Only..." she murmured. "Only, Suou, I am worried still."

"Of what?"

The Otomeian shifted restively.

"You agree the Mentulae out there are stupid?" she said, bringing another smile to Suou's face.

"Yes, I rather do."

"Argentum was not stupid."

That snuffed the amusement out of her companion. For Natsuki was right. The presumable infiltration of Argentum, the invitation to draw out the commander from Argus, the complete extermination of every soul in Argentum when it was taken, to prevent any tattlers from spreading the word... it had been base, certainly, even if only the baiting of the commander was confirmed, but it was also an inspired strike in its own way. Whoever had come up with the grand scheme for that blow had been intelligent-and malignantly so, if the perfidies of that scheme were considered.

"No," Suou agreed sombrely. "It was not stupid."

The Otomeian chewed on her bottom lip, her face still dark with that gloomy shade.

"Not stupid," she said, and asked the question Suou was also asking. "So *who* thought of it?"

## Chapter 53

*Thank you again to the readers and reviewers. Perhaps some of the longer-standing ones shall recall that this time of the year is worst for me; I would apologise in advance, as I cannot answer most reviews at the moment. Therefore, I wish all of you well this season now.*

*Oh, and to explain to certain persons why I chose "Mentula" as the name for the enemy when I first wrote the story-with no gravity for myself and my work at the time, else I would certainly have chosen a more respectable name-it is because "Mentula" was arguably the most commonly used Latin profanity at the time during which this story was set, and far eclipsed the saltier "Cunnus" in terms of usage. As the Conscript Fathers-a nice point, by the way: Conscript Fathers -were not averse to referring to Rome's enemies (or theirs) with a casual "mentula/mentulae" even in session, one shrugged one's shoulders and used the term they used so often.*

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### **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Consultum, consulta** - A recommendation, specifically a senatorial one in the context below. Decisions of the senators reached in House sessions were strictly senatorial recommendations or *consulta* because the Senate did not have legislative power: it needed one of the various assemblies to ratify its *consulta* for them to carry actual legal weight. Many *consulta* were not ratified, however, because they were immediately carried out under the assumption that the ratification was implicitly given by the assemblies ( **the comitia** ).
2. **Fasces** - The bundles of birch rods considered symbols of imperium and passed from one consul to the other in an alternating sequence each month.
3. **Gladius** - the short sword of the Romans, standard military issue



for a legionary.

4. **Hortator** - Officer aboard a galley (ship) responsible for coordinating the rowing, usually by producing a beat.

5. **Imperium** - The degree of authority vested in a curule magistrate (e.g. praetors and consuls) or promagistrate (e.g. propraetors, proconsuls, generals in command of an army). It must be noted that the story has altered some parts of the complicated construct through which the Ancient Romans granted or conferred specific kinds of imperium upon their magistrates or commanders.

6. **Pedarius** - A member of the Senate who had not yet occupied sufficiently high office to be granted the privilege of speaking in a House session. In Parliamentary terms, a backbencher.

7. **Praetor peregrinus** - The foreign praetor, the second-highest seat among the praetors; he dealt with matters involving foreign nationals (which would include Fuukans in this story because Fuukans are not technically Himean).

8. **Praetor Urbanus** - The urban praetor; given traditionally to the praetor-elect with the highest number of votes.

9. **Provinces (praetorian and consular)** - Roman magistrates of the offices praetor and consul often took provinces to govern after their term in office, although it was also considered fairly normal to assume that governorship even before the term (or political year) had finished.

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## **Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae**

*par ethnewinter*

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The confirmation of the Mentulaeen siege of Sosia knelled the end of the senatorial scepticism. Barely eleven days after the first meeting in the Temple of Bellona, the senators were returned to it,

this time to discuss the war that had been thrust upon them all of a sudden.

"Although to call it sudden is folly," muttered Shizuru to her old senior legate. "Only that they have their eyes screwed so shut that everything comes as though it did not creep slowly up the horizon."

Chie smiled sourly. "The rising of the sun must be a regular surprise."

They were seated next to each other and listening to their friend, the senior consul. She had again been the one to call the meeting, even though the month had not turned over and the *fascies* had yet to pass from her junior colleague. Though the latter's conservative allies might have raised a ruckus at this usurpation any other time, they were currently too chastised to protest. Furthermore, in the words of the Princeps, who still remembered Chikane's public rebuke to him in the previous meeting,

"It is apt that the senior consul was the one to call the session. I mean no offence to her most honoured colleague, but tradition has it that the one to direct meetings of the senate during wartimes is rightly the senior consul, supported by his or her junior colleague. Also, and again without offence to the excellent junior consul, it is our current senior consul who has the edge in terms of war experience. Although I shall not move that the *fascies* be taken off Kikukawa-san and given to Himemiya-san in this instance, please take notice that I, the Leader of the House, ask for the senior consul's guidance in this meeting and request her to exercise it fully. She called our attention to it last time and we failed to take heed. As one of those who so failed, I profess my utmost support for her today, as well as whatever *preparations* she might recommend."

Which had Chikane Himemiya's eyes full of suffocated mirth-as well as Princeps Senatus Kanzaki's.

Chikane opened the session with a straightforward speech and dealt with questions in her usual capable way. Again Midori Sugiura had sent multiple missives, so most people were actually fairly informed already; that Chikane even bothered to speak of details by now well-known was simply so that there could be no confusion later and for

the senatorial scribes' transcripts. When she had finished with the overview, Sergay Wang asked to speak.

"I thank the senior consul first of all," he told his assembled colleagues. He was as embarrassed as the rest of the archconservatives, but was not without his share of courage: he swallowed the chagrin manfully and stood tall. "For both her promptness in calling this meeting and the good sense with which she has handled the situation. The Princeps spoke of our failure to take heed of her earlier warnings, and I admit I was among those who did not listen. In fact, I spoke against her case and questioned her evidence! Now it looks like I was wrong, fellow senators, and I'll be the first to admit it myself, since I remember it keenly now."

He lifted his chin and stared straight ahead, a handsome man of wonderfully patrician bearing.

"I also said, last time, that I would do another thing first of anyone else here," he said in his clear-carrying tenor. "I claimed I would be the first to move we should destroy the Mentulae if the warnings proved real. Well, I remember that too, fellow senators! The warnings have been confirmed. We know the danger is real. What path we must take is obvious. I shall speak it now and thus make good on my earlier promise."

There was some stirring. Everyone knew, more or less, what to expect.

"I move," he said, "that an army be raised to war with the Mentulae and eject them from our territories. And, taking into account the notes of our senior consul and other learned senators who have spoken on the subject, I move that this army be set at a minimum of *ten* legions."

There was a ripple of murmurs.

"Excluding foreign auxiliaries," he clarified. "That is the minimum number of Himean or Fuukan legions for this campaign I am proposing. Going from what we know of these Mentulae's numbers, ten shall be *just about* enough! Which is why I propose it to be the minimum. I add that the ten legions are to be recruited as well as

funded immediately, the Treasury paying out the full sum of the cost of ten legions for ten months at the beginning of the campaign. This is to avoid the commander being hampered by financial issues, as so many of our recent overseas commanders have been. Well, not in this case. When our own territories are threatened, we can't let ourselves sink into the mire of bureaucracy even before we get to the battlefield! Never let it be said that we do not learn from our mistakes! Let us show these Mentulaeans what Himeans can do when pushed to do it!"

Applause and cheers broke from the tiers. He waited reverently for it to die down before continuing with his speech.

"Furthermore," he boomed, "I move that the senior consul be given the command. The junior consul shall remain in the city to deal with matters political and administrative, as well as with the recruitment of more legions if necessary. The supreme commander on the field shall be the senior consul, however, as is right and proper."

He cleared his throat and inclined his head to Chikane.

"Just as the Leader of our House remarked earlier," he said, "it's only appropriate that Chikane Himemiya should be the one to lead today's meeting. The senior consul of Hime is the one on whom Hime relies when she is most threatened, when incursions are made against her territories. In which case, it's only appropriate too that the senior consul should also be the one to defend Hime on the field, to head Hime's brave soldiers against her craven foes. Let Chikane Himemiya, senior consul, lead the army going to the North, where she shall repulse Obsidian and all his arrogant cronies. Let her be given a mandate to wage war with these foreign savages, so that they can learn the might of Hime at the point of a Himean *gladius* !"

Again the House broke into cheers.

"Order!" Chikane suddenly called, rising swiftly from her seat. "I shall speak!"

They quieted obediently at their senior consul's command, faces still flushed from excitement. All heads craned towards the curule dais, a

very few turning towards another place where another woman was seated. What did *she* think of this, those few staring at that other woman wondered gleefully. What would those red eyes say when they looked up from where they were trained about the floor, to regard the ironic twist of this second northbound campaign? For all knew she wanted to be returned to her command in the North, and had been using the promise of such a return to woo many of the knightly communities to her side recently. To lose that promise would open her to all sorts of assault. Even should she accompany her friend the senior consul-who could not possibly refuse the commission-as a legate, that lowered position would not suffice for the promises she had been making. Her only chance would then be for the senate to choose her as the successor to that command should the senior consul exit it without finishing, but that was very unlikely indeed: Chikane Himemiya was known to be a brilliant general herself, and would handle the job so well that her command would be prorogued. Oh, raise your head, Shizuru Fujino! The prospect of seeing that too-perfect face lose its too-perfect confidence would be all too perfect, really!

"Wang-san's proposal is admirable," the senior consul was saying. "I could hardly do better myself. The advancement of funds covering ten months, in particular, is wise. The Treasury's reserves can certainly extend that far at the moment-please note that the officials of the Treasury are nodding-so I would support that condition."

She stopped and suddenly looked apologetic.

"The other conditions can be debated shortly," she said. "I fear, however, that there is something that must be mentioned this very instant."

There was a slight pause before she said it.

"There was something in Wang-san's proposal just now to which I object strongly."

Sergay shot up from his stool, hands shaking so hard his immediate neighbours stared up at him.

"You object, Himemiya-san?" he demanded, eyes wide and

unblinking. *Ye gods*, he thought, *would she actually do it?* The woman would have to be mad if she did! No one turned down a commission of the sort he had proposed, particularly when it had been phrased the way he had phrased it: as a duty of the senior consul of Hime, and done in exchange for the lasting fame the task would give along with an assurance of extended authority without having to seek further office immediately after the year. Oh yes, she would have to be insane indeed to pass this up. And no matter how eccentric he agreed her to be, he had never been among those to think her actually insane.

His eyes wavered, itched to snap to the place where Shizuru Fujino was sitting. No mistake in his mind who was the beneficiary in this seeming insanity!

"To what do you object?" he asked Chikane. "To which of my propositions, senior consul?"

"Only to the last," she told him.

He frowned. He could hear Haruka Armitage wheezing next to him, and vaguely wondered why he was not doing the same.

"The one that moves that you be given this new northern command?" he said, calmly enough.

"Quite so, that proposition."

Confused looks appeared on some faces now. Sergay held his breath.

"You mean to say," he ground out, heart pounding, "that you *decline*?"

Chikane seemed almost puzzled. "Yes."

Among the tiers, a pair of red eyes finally looked up.

"I am honoured to have been suggested for the position," Chikane told the House, which was beginning to growl, the sound rising from a hundred displeased throats. "Yet I am also honour-bound to decline it. All circumstances considered, I confess that I do not feel

myself to be the best person for that post."

*I don't believe it*, thought Sergay, so astonished he was unable to check his jaw as it dropped. Himemiya had actually done it! He had foreseen what she was now doing, yet had not *seriously* expected her to do it. In a world where even the best of friends were rivals and peers strove to rise faster than their peers, what Chikane Himemiya had just done defied every path of logic. Who in their right political mind would refuse command over such a venture and such an army? Who would pass up such a chance for glory? Especially when the person refusing had every legal entitlement to it?

*I still don't think you're insane, Himemiya... but what are you then?* Sergay asked the woman on the dais silently, every blonde hair on his body stiff and shrilling alarm. *What in the world are you? No fool and no slacker, yet what you've done can only be credited to either type. What would lead a woman like you to surrender such an opportunity in favour of a friend? I can't credit you've no ambition-otherwise you'd never have made it to the consulship-but what is the extent of your ambition? Or of your friend's, who was willing to surrender even her own triumph-the height of ambition for any true senator, the event of pure adoration most of us want so much? She surrendered it because she was chasing after another command, the one you're about to try and give to her, but at least there's a possibility of another triumph in her path. At least if Fujino wins this gamble, her chances can still get what she just cast off. But what can you get if you cast this off? The gratitude of your friend? The chance to stay in Hime with your still-new wife? The passage of those several new laws you've been pushing? And what are those compared to the possible rewards of that campaign I've just proposed, a campaign so big it would undoubtedly go into the history books? Compared to that, what are those things you'd be gaining? Worthless, pure nothings. Yet they're the only things you'd get.*

His upper lip curled with distaste, for the only reasons he could imagine her having were so ludicrous: yet it remained they were the only reasons to be seen.

*They call Fujino mad all the time*, he thought, furious at the conundrum he could not solve. *And Fujino is mad, barking mad. But*

*it's Himemiya who bears watching. It's Himemiya that's the real abnormality.*

"You can't object," he protested. "The senior consul must lead the army at times like this. The Princeps said as much earlier, I believe."

Chikane actually looked at him sourly, having seen something of the intense aversion for her that had just filled him.

"I can object and I did," she answered with immense hauteur. "Do you now presume to tell me, the senior consul, the bounds of my activity? As for the Princeps, he was speaking about my leading this meeting, which is quite another thing from my leading the mission. I actually have reasons for declining, which the House would find most sensible."

"Then by all means," he said dryly, sweeping one arm in a lavish gesture. "Let us hear it."

Chikane's cousin cleared her throat showily from her bench.

"I believe she used the plural," she said. "So it should be 'let us hear them'."

"*Tace !*" shrieked Haruka Armitage; she had had enough of Urumi's malicious penchant for correcting the grammar of the senators-especially since she was the most common target of said penchant. "Rein in your cousin, Himemiya, or I'll wring her neck from here!"

Urumi stared at the woman, who was about nine metres away.

"How do you propose to do that *from there*?" she said with false incredulity.

Haruka prepared to unleash her most blistering invectives.

"Order," sighed the senior consul.

Urumi straightened her posture, folded both hands atop demurely closed knees, and shut her mouth with a smile of beatific superiority.



Haruka subsided, as stunned by the senatorial chameleon as she was appalled by it.

"For Juno's sake," chuckled Chie beside Shizuru, muffling the sound with her hand. "Doesn't she realise by now that Himemiya's cousin does it only to get a rise out of her? I saw it after only one meeting!"

"Did I not say it earlier, Chie-han?" Shizuru whispered back. "Their eyes are too tightly shut to see anything."

Meanwhile, Chikane had begun her explanation for refusing to lead the army.

"I would remind you it is already halfway into August," she told the assembled senators. "Only four months are left of my consulship, out of which two shall be spent in preparation and conduct of the elections. You would recall I swore to refine our electoral processes and legislation during my time in office. If I am out of the city, the compound of laws I have already drafted-which I was scheduled to present in the next session, as you recall-would most likely be set aside and might moulder away. And when would I get another opportunity such as this to ensure their passage, fellow senators? Ten years from now? Five? Even only one year away would be far too long! Too many elections have been delayed and questioned in the past years for comfort. Whether it is on allegations of bribery or some other foul play, these issues stain the very machinery of the state. I shall have no more of these electoral travesties, dearest colleagues, especially when the last one threatened to collapse the very foundations of the Republic! I shall have an end to such problems, so I swear again!"

The look on her face told them that she was determined to make good on her words.

"The upcoming curule elections are also best overseen by the consuls," she said. " *Not* by other magistrates, as I was forced to do last year when both consuls were absent and I was the urban praetor. The untimely death of the junior consul and the senior consul's inability to return to Hime quickly created a situation where I-and several other officials-had to take over the tasks that the consuls should have overseen, thus adding to our duties and

creating a backlog in many offices. The absence of both consuls also delayed last year's elections so badly that the final election day actually coincided with the first day of this year. Far too late for comfort. And all because of overly relaxed laws on electoral policy and a series of unfortunate circumstances."

"It is obviously bad for the consuls to be out of Hime," she told them, while ignoring Haruka Armitage's glare: obviously that worthy had taken the insinuation that last year's electoral travesties had been her fault, owing to her failure to return on time from her African campaign.

"The consuls," she said, "are the highest of our magistracies, which is why their names are put up forever on the consular *fasti* after their term of office, there to be remembered forever. And they deserve to be remembered forever. To be a consul is not merely to be responsible for Hime the city: it is also to be responsible for Hime and all Himean provinces and peoples everywhere. The consuls are chief over all the spinners forever crafting and recrafting the growing web of Hime's influence. It stands to reason that, as chief overseers, they should remain as much as possible at the heart of the web."

"Now, if a threat arises close enough to the heart to facilitate swift congress between the threat's location and the centre, I would say it makes sense for consuls to be sent on the field," she continued with a conciliatory tone. "But the Northern Provinces are not so very close; the Mentulaean Empire is even farther away. This is further complicated by the fact that the consular and praetorian provinces have already been decided and all of them are located in contrary directions, bearing south to the east and to the west. Whomever we send north must be someone who can leave now and shall not evacuate the northern area suddenly out of a commitment to another province or office after his or her term."

She was coming to it; everyone listening tensed.

"Thus whomever we send to fight the Mentulae requires several things," she concluded. "First and naturally, experience in that area's terrain and skill on the field. Second, immediate availability and sufficient authority to act on behalf of Hime and her consuls, whom he or she would be technically freeing up to execute their proper

tasks in office. Third and most importantly, a guarantee of command for at least five years, subject to extension should it prove insufficient to finish the task in such time. The task is not simply to drive the Mentulae out of our northern lands. It is also to subdue them and ensure the future peace of that area in perpetuity."

"Senior consul," wheezed Jin Akagi, gasping from the speed of Chikane's speech. "You are talking about *invasion and annexation*."

"Yes, I am talking about those. Surely no one expected we would do otherwise with the Mentulae, especially after the news that brought us to this meeting here?" Chikane's lips turned up faintly at the corners. "As is clear from this, the person we send must have occupied an office no lower than praetor at least once in his or her life-current occupants of such offices are to be preferred, naturally, save for the present consuls, for reasons I have already given. The person we depute cannot undertake a task as large as annexing a new territory otherwise, for it would require, at the very least, a grant of advanced gubernatorial *imperium* extending for five years and extendable thereafter if needed. In other words, whomever we choose shall have to function as both general of an army and military governor of what shall become Hime's newest territories."

"I see what you mean, though I don't think you're going far enough, senior consul," someone cut in.

A quick search told Chikane the one who had spoken was the current *praetor urbanus*, who had been recently moved up into that position from *praetor peregrinus* after the resolution permitting Shizuru to escape the top praetorian seat.

"I agree," the urban praetor continued, "that whomever we send has to have an advance grant of gubernatorial *imperium* to function as annexing governor in the lands currently part of the Mentulaean Empire. But the mission would also involve going through the provinces Sosia and Argus. They already have governors, and there could be a question of whose *imperium* outranks whose. As to why that question would arise..."

A rude snort from among the ranks.

"Don't think you need to explain why, Ginga-san," said the man who had snorted. "I think even we have to admit that our generals and governors often butt heads over who's got more authority in one place or another. Even when there are more important things to be done than play ' *My stick is bigger than yours* '."

"Quite so, Hajime-san," Chikane said to the sarcastic remark. "And thank you for pointing out that difficulty, Ginga-san. I was coming to it, in fact. Given the breadth and demands of the campaign, the mandate for the future Mentulaeen Province shall carry with it a proconsular imperium, comparable to that given for the governors of the Spanish Provinces. That would make it a higher imperium than the proprætorian ones granted to the governors of the Sosia and Argus Provinces. This is sensible and satisfactory, I hope?"

The *praetor urbanus* nodded thoughtfully.

"These provisions should be added, I think, to Wang-san's earlier proposal," Chikane went on. "And the part about me being the commander of the deputation should be excised, of course. There are others better suited to that role, truly."

"Say her name," said Sergay, shaking in fury. "Say her name already, senior consul!"

Chikane turned to him again.

"Whose name, Wang-san?" she asked mildly. "You seem to have a distinct idea of whose name I shall suggest, or so I would think."

Everyone shot bolt upright. Sergay's teeth were grinding close to powder inside his mouth.

" *Shizuru Fujino*," he muttered.

The wave crested over the senior consul's head. The senior consul smiled at it.

"Shizuru Fujino," she said.

The wave broke. Suddenly chairs were scraping, and every archconservative or Fujino enemy found his voice and feet with a

vengeance.

"Again the senior consul panders to her friend!" shrieked someone the listening Shizuru later identified as her old foe, Nakao. "What a day for Hime! Overrun by barbarians in the north and conscienceless plotters at home!"

"I won't allow it!" chorused Akagi, hands on his toga as though he would rip it. "Shizuru Fujino won't get that command, she'll never get it-unless she gets it *over my dead body* !"

"And mine!"

Sergay alone was silent among those in protest, though he remained standing to indicate his solidarity with the dissenters. He also continued to stare at the person dominating the curule dais: his gaze resentful and wondering.

"Please, fellow senators!" the Princeps was shouting. He too was up from his chair. "Order, I say! Speak one at a time!"

But the furore continued unabated. The other senators were struck dumb by the torrent of resentment the senior consul had unleashed and could only look about themselves wildly, lost eyes seeking a quiet corner where the arrows would not hit. How the Traditionalist missiles were flying today! And only Shizuru Fujino, thought some with wry amusement, could sit there so calmly as though all the bows were not aiming for her ears.

Amidst the gabble, one voice dominated.

"Now we get to what you really want, don't we?" Haruka screeched towards the curule dais; she kicked away her chair and it toppled to the centre of the floor in a clatter. "You're mad if you think I'll let you gift-wrap a present for your boon companion while we're dealing with a serious issue here! You should be ashamed of yourself, Himemiya! *Ashamed* !"

"It's you who should be ashamed, Armitage!" hollered Chie, who had had enough by this time. She jumped up from beside Shizuru, who continued to look unconcerned.

"Block it from the only person here who'd stand the best chance against the Mentulae?" Chie yelled, showing she could produce a voice to equal Haruka's when needed. "And for what? For whom, even? The senior consul's at least put up a recommendation with her objection, but you haven't even put a name to yours, have you?"

"I shouldn't need to!" Haruka roared in response. "It's obviously the junior consul who must go! The junior consul takes precedence over a mere praetor who'd only use that command to enrich herself! If the senior consul won't do it, then the junior consul can!"

"That's so!" agreed Sergay shakily, finally coming out of his silence. "Himemiya's already denied the job, so it should be offered first to her colleague, Yukino Kikukawa."

"Ye gods, Kikukawa couldn't general herself out of a barroom brawl!" someone groaned.

" *Tace, cunnus!* "

"He has a point, Armitage," Chie yelled again. "Our junior consul's no mean politician, but not even you can imagine she's the equal of Shizuru Fujino as a commander. What makes you think she can lead an army against a horde of savages? She hasn't even been leading this senate hearing!"

"All because of you and your cronies, Harada!" Haruka yelled back. "If not for you and the rest of the Fujino pawns, it'd be obvious that Yukino Kikukawa deserves that position first of all! It should be the junior consul, fellow senators! If Shizuru Fujino really wants to wage war in the north, let her offer her services to the woman who deserves the generaling position! Let her apply as a legate to Yukino Kikukawa!"

Which actually had Shizuru coming out of her abstraction enough to glare at Haruka, and the usually laid-back Shizuma on her feet, silver hair a halo about her head.

"Are you daft, Armitage?" she shouted to Haruka, ignoring the fact that she had no right to speak, being a backbencher. "My cousin, a subordinate? And to *that*?"

The junior consul's face contorted. It was Haruka who replied: "You shut your mouth, you *pedarius*, you philandering whore!"

"And you shut yours, you suppurating sack of cant!"

"It stands to reason," Urumi announced, when a pause during which all participants finally ran out of breath. "The only praetor with an undecided province as of yet is Shizuru Fujino! She's also the only one here of sufficient experience to lead the army against the Mentulae and in those territories. The legions stationed there and near the area are already and still her veterans, soldiers who have worked with her successfully. Who then has a better claim to that command?"

But Haruka had found her second wind and was again screaming.

"Those soldiers are only still hers because she still won't give up her imperium, a year after the whole business! This is blackmail, fellow senators! Don't give that command to the blackmailer! Don't give in to her! Give it to Yukino Kikukawa, senators, not to a woman who only wants to do it so she can use it for her own motives!"

"Oh, Armitage-san," said a disgusted Chikane from the dais, voice actually rising too. "You harp so much on why she would do it, when the *why* does not matter here! Why she would do it is not germane to the present conversation. Any one of us would have a good reason to take the command! Be it the prospect of earning a triumph, or some other military coup for the undertaking, or the simple monetary reward of booty, every one of us would have a Why To Do It! What separates Shizuru Fujino from the rest is that she also has a How To Do It! You talk so much of the motive that you forget no one is untouched by them, which means that we should cull our commander not by virtue of his or her aims, but rather by virtue of his or her talents and experience. And in the total compound of those terms, Shizuru Fujino outstrips everyone!"

But the Traditionalists had started to pound their feet on the floor and howl, led by a Haruka who kept the beat up like a *hortator* going wild on the drum. Echoing an unyielding "No, no, no!" The sound shook Bellona and the people outside it gathered, wishing the lictors would open the portals already and let them have a peek. Wishing

the senators would give them a treat and come out of those great doors swinging fists at each other.

Had the session gone on any longer, the last wish might have been fulfilled, so hot was the mood of the House. But when both consuls and the Princeps realised that no amount of shrilling for order would make the cries cease, and when some of the hotheads of either faction began to get up and push their way towards their opponents in search of more physical expression, Chikane swept from the curule dais and cried that the meeting was ended and that she was ordering-not asking, but ordering-everyone to leave. With the aid of the lictors and some of the calmer senators, the command was finally enforced.

"By rights you should have stopped some of the hysteria with the lictors, Kikukawa-san," she told her miserable-looking junior colleague afterwards; they were watching the stream of toga-clad bodies dwindle through the doors. "You are, after all, the consul bearing the fasces for the month, which means you had more leeway to use the lictors than I did, in the absence of an extreme situation. Of course I understand that it would have been difficult for someone in your position to do as I wish you had. And for that, I *am* sorry."

She left her colleague more miserable than ever.

"A pox on Himemiya! How did we ever elect such a senior consul?" demanded Akagi of Yukino later, when the Temple of Bellona had cleared of all but the heads of the archconservative faction. He could not know he was fanning the flames of unrest gnawing in Yukino's mind, so he continued to address his diatribe to her.

"Can you believe she was to give it to Fujino instead?" he ranted. "I would have said she was in the pay of the woman had she been of a different family! Jupiter, she shames her name!"

"The woman's not right," Sergay said. Yukino thought he sounded puzzled for some reason. "Really, not perfectly right in the head. Not perfectly wrong either, though, I think."

"Curse them!"



It was Haruka, who came up at a rush and was still puffing with anger.

"Did you hear Fujino's cousin?" she demanded of the rest, who had indeed heard. "How dare she say that!"

Yukino flinched as her best friend snatched her arm with painful strength. Why was it Haruka always forgot she was flimsier, more brittle?

"Ginga spoke earlier," Sergay brought up, recalling the urban praetor's words. He ran a hand through his hair, tousling the carefully barbered strands. "From the way she talked, I'd say the Jinguuji faction is in support of Fujino and Himemiya's scheme now."

His friends stared at him, aghast.

"But the Jinguuji are conservative!" Hikaru Senou cried.

"Essentially, but not so conservative they would miss an opportunity to expand their interests if offered it. We have to assume they got such an offer, since Ginga is known to be their latest paid pawn."

Yukino had a qualm.

"I wouldn't call her a mere pawn," she qualified, looking very thoughtful and sombre.

"Never mind what we'd call her!" Haruka finally let go of the scrawny arm in her hand. "What does it matter?"

*I think it matters*, Yukino answered in her mind. Haruka went off again on another rant and the discussion proceeded for a while that way, with all of them venting their spleen on their foes. All of a sudden, Yukino said something that silenced their talk.

"Would it be so bad if she got that command?"

Her companions all gaped at her, shocked.

"I was thinking," she said hastily, "that Fujino-san's dangerous already when she's far away. But she's ten times more dangerous

when she's here in Fuuka, because she can actually respond immediately to our actions. So would it be so bad if she got sent away due to an overseas command?"

"Giving her that command," said an outraged Akagi, "would be giving in to the woman. How can you even think of it, Yukino-san? Can't you see what a-a- *a danger* Fujino is? The woman would keep pushing for more if we gave her anything now! She represents every danger that exists to the Hime, every radical element we've sworn to guard against. We have to stop her soon or else she'll bring the whole Republic crashing about our ears!"

"But it would be harder for her to do that if she weren't here," Yukino persevered. "She was easier to deal with, you remember, when she wasn't here. So I can't help but think it would be wiser for us to let her have her way and go back to the North. Then we can manoeuvre more comfortably. At the moment, I don't really think we're doing much aside from keeping the thorn close to our side."

"Better in our side than in the heart of the Republic!" Haruka trumpeted, wondering what was the matter with her best friend.

"According to Himemiya-san earlier, this *is* the heart of the Republic," the junior consul responded with spontaneous dryness, catching herself at the sight of Haruka's face. So much concern! And so much fear, so much real terror at the idea that her faithful Yukino might be losing nerve. Ah, poor Haruka! Yukino knew she could not do this to the woman at the moment, not in front of their other friends.

"But maybe you're right," she said quietly, calming some of the terror in the purple eyes. "It was just an idea."

"Not a very good one," Hikaru muttered.

Yukino gave him a sickly smile in response. The discussion proceeded again without her participation save as an auditor, and after only a few moments she heard the sharp crack of realisation break upon her.

*Oh!* she thought, still listening to them. *I see why we never get*

*anywhere! They're so adamant about standing ground. Even when I explain that giving ground in some ways can become an advantage, they refuse to do it. Everything has to be done by force and advance. No concessions to the enemy at all costs, which tells me they're not really fighting the enemy to win-they do it just to harass. Haruka-chan herself is the best example for that. She would never give Fujino-san an inch, even if giving that inch meant a later gain of a mile. And if I can't change Haruka-chan's mind, how can I hope to change the others'? They don't know how to bend, and I can't bend them by my will alone. No one could.*

But then she remembered their foes and the awesome will some of them seemed to radiate by nature.

*Is it just that I don't have enough will for it, then? How much will does it take and why do I not have enough? Can it be gained? Can it be found by some method or procedure? Or is it just another of those things on the lap of Fate, which throws beauty to some and brains to others, then proceeds to dower the rest with mediocrity or downright ugliness? Is the will another of those things you have in abundance by simple luck of the draw?*

If that was so, why was it that some people seemed to have such luck that they drew all the good when they were born? And why was it that there were others who seemed to have come to the draw late, like her?

"Our problem is that we're not just coming up against one political mastermind," she said aloud, to reinsert herself into the conversation and take herself away from her thoughts. "It's two of them, working together. Or perhaps I'd better say three, considering the President of the Tribunes of the Plebs."

"Don't tell me you're still considering giving in!" Haruka's scowled in exasperation.

"If you all are against it, I know I can't do much about that," Yukino smiled in exasperation. "Only..."

"Only?"

She took a deep breath and came out with it: "Only, I wish that you hadn't mentioned Fujino-san applying to me as a legate earlier."

Haruka was stunned.

"That would be the proper thing for her!" she squawked. " *You're* the junior consul."

"I know that, Haruka-chan," Yukino soothed. "I just don't think it was a - a very good idea to throw something like that in her face."

" *Don't you want to bring her down?* "

"I do want that. I do, yes." The junior consul pressed wearily on the lids of her aching eyes, suddenly looking far older than her years.

"It's not that I'm losing my resolve, Haruka-chan, I promise. I'm not giving up. It's just that I don't think it's wise to taunt a giant before its face hits the ground."

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The giant of Yukino's remark stalked home in high dudgeon, every footfall a tremor upon the earth.

*How dare she!* she raved while on the way to her villa. *How dare Haruka Armitage?* How could she have spoken such a ludicrous thought in the session earlier? Did she-do any of them, even-think Shizuru would take an offer that condescending? A suggestion that laughable?

The junior consul was correct in thinking her taunted by Haruka's remark about volunteering her subordinate services to Yukino Kikukawa as a superior. Not even for Chikane would Shizuru lower herself to the position of legate, after all. Why, her dignitas would be devastated beyond repair! She, possessor of several military awards including the *corona obsidionalis*, a yet undefeated commander, to take a legatal position subordinate to an untried general? The fools would put a donkey's harness on a war charger! Damn them for thinking she would deign to play the ass!

*How my girl would laugh*, she muttered. *And how she would weep did I ever agree to such a proposition.*

A vicious shiver went up her spine.

Very well then, she decided. It was time to teach the archconservatives a lesson. Time to take the question of command to the Centuriate Assembly and teach the Senate something it had forgotten: that although it decided on matters military, it was not actually the final word on them. Prior to this she had harboured some hesitations over going so far so quickly, not least because she was the sort of woman who genuinely refrained from crossing lines until circumstances forced her to cross them. Part of the hesitation too had been her own inability to believe that the archconservatives would deny her even now. She had credited them with sufficient sense at least to yield after Chikane presented all the reasons to their very faces. It was so unreasonable to resist the reasons! Yet their hate of her apparently outweighed all good sense in such matters... and did she do nothing, Hime would be the one to suffer.

"I did not think they would actually push me so far," she admitted to the friends she had invited over: a circle made up of those she trusted and needed most for what was to come. "I planned for it too, of course, which you know. But I did not want it as the first measure, merely as a reinforcement of the senatorial decree granting me the mission. I did not genuinely believe I would have to do it the other way around. If only because for them to make circumstances thus would have been, I thought, the height of folly."

A pair of tempestuous eyes flashed across the table.

"Well, you *would* be generous, cousin," sneered Shizuma, chin on her hand. "You credit the bastards with more intellect than I ever did."

Shizuru's face softened as she eyed her cousin, thinking of how the older woman had stood up for her earlier. And been called a whore by Armitage for her pains-oh, how that made the blood curdle!

"That aside," Shizuma went on. "Your plans look rather troubled."

It was another voice that responded.

"That is an unexpectedly mild way of putting it."

Shizuma turned to the lounging senior consul.

"Not in character, was it, Chikane?" she smirked. "I suppose I should cease the poetry then, and go on to the prose."

She faced her cousin again.

"Shizuru, your chances at that command suddenly appear bleak. I expected difficulty, yes, but not opposition *that* obdurate!" She pulled a face. "What I saw today was the archconservative mob up in full force, and marshalling even more support than usual, in fact. I predict the number of people on their side should have doubled by the next meeting, as we can expect them to be trolling all avenues of blood and ties tonight, down to the last dead-end alley!"

There was a chuckle from the fourth member of their meeting.

"Oh, wonderfully enough," she said to their enquiring gazes, "that was more poetic than before."

"My cousin has a naturally wonderful turn of phrase, Urumi-chan," Shizuru answered.

Shizuma spared a dry glance for both commentators-who, she thought, would wittify and waft rhetoric even to their deathbeds. These *intellectuals* !

"You'll pardon me for being blunt," she muttered. "What I was trying to say is that we all know from the exhibition today that you stand little-to-no chance of being given that command by the House, I believe. I must confess that the last scheme you pulled-the bill settling the issue of your praetorship, that is-has not endeared you very much to the other senators. They are currently predisposed to siding against you and thus with the conservatives because a lot of them still feel, even though that bill was passed in assembly, that what you did was highly unconstitutional. The only reason that bill passed was because your popularity among the knights is elevated, whereas your popularity with the senators drops further and further."

"In this situation, however, it's the latter popularity you need," she continued. "And since it's unfortunately the one that is

uncomfortable, I fail to see how all your support among the knights can help you. No doubt it's why the Traditionalists felt justified in throwing that sort of display earlier. They shall pull at every string they have to swing the senators against you, cousin... and sheep, even given an idiot of a shepherd, swing easily enough. Especially when you have that much weight concentrated on one end of the motion."

Her cousin sighed once she had finished.

"Summed up admirably," Shizuru said through the sigh.

"And irritatingly, I'm sure," was Shizuma's retort. "So what do you intend to do now?"

"Still to get the command, of course."

Shizuru set down her goblet on the console table and let her gaze touch the other three faces in the room one by one.

"Shizuma, only you have never heard me discuss this option among the people here," she started. "Chikane and Urumi-chan have already heard it, for the reason that I knew they would prove necessary were this plan ever to be implemented the way it must be now."

Shizuma was curious, but also wise enough not to feel left-out.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I plan to gain the command not by decree of the senate, but rather by decree of the *comitia* ."

Shizuma's eyes went wide. The other two visitors, knowing it already, said and did naught.

"I shall have to bring the issue up in the Centuriate Assembly now," Shizuru explained. "Because the Popular Assembly would, I estimate, take more time-and I have not time to spare any longer, you understand. Furthermore, a decree from the Centuriate Assembly would come from the people considered Hime's best, the upper classes, which at least allows for some satisfaction of

exclusivity and privilege. The intent is to have the Centuries decree me the commander of the Northern Campaign. My command shall then be passed into law, a safer thing by far than a decree of the House that can be taken away at the senators' whims."

"It's a very neat concept," Urumi complimented, smiling with sheer intellectual pleasure. Shizuru nodded, genuinely gratified by her fellow prodigy's approval.

"Hold. Hold, the both of you." Shizuma was still reeling from the novelty of the idea; she flapped a hand in distraction. "What do you mean? How can that even be *possible*, Shizuru? The Centuries have never dealt with issues of command or campaigns."

"Yes, but they've always had the legal right to do so," Urumi answered before Shizuru could. "The only reason the Senate has handled those issues for so long has been an implicit assumption that its decisions on such matters are automatically ratified and thus don't even need to be sent to the assemblies. But all the House's decisions, from a legal standpoint, are strictly mere *consulta* or senatorial recommendations. Not laws, which is why many *consulta* on other subjects are still sent to the assemblies to be ratified by the People."

She wriggled with enjoyment of the subject she was explaining.

"The People leave the issues of command and campaigns to the Senate without ratifying them because they don't really care about issues like that," she proceeded. "At least, usually, they don't. But in Shizuru-san's case, the Centuries representing the People in the Centuriate Assembly would actually care because they expect commissions in the Mentulaean lands she intends to open up during the campaign. So they're far more likely than not to give Shizuru-san the command. And the House, for all it would shrill outrage at that, would have to give in because a ratified decree yet supersedes a mere *consultum* ." She laughed and clapped her hands in delight. "As you can see, it's terrifically legal and the conservatives shan't be able to do a thing about it!"

Her auditor was still brooding over the irregularity of the notion, however, and faced their host.



"But this is neverdone," Shizuma objected. "It has never been done. Shizuru, tell me you are not serious!"

Crimson eyes flashed at her.

"What, cousin, not got the stomach for rebellion?" the younger woman baited.

Shizuma's beautiful face, already so marmoreal, hardened even further at the provocation.

"That's not my concern," she drawled. "I was thinking of the *precedent* it would set, to remind you of a term that just recently worked in your favour! If you do manage to get such a law tabled-

"I shall."

" *When* you do get such a law tabled," Shizuma amended, growing even cooler. "It would stay there as a model for others in the future. Not even so much through the Centuriate Assembly, I'd think, as it's too unwieldy and generally fractious for most to even have a hope. The only reason it would work for you now is that everything has come together at the right time to pitch the equestrian lots in your favour-and you are you, besides, which no one else in the future can become."

She glared at the three women before her.

"What if someone does it through the Assembly of the Plebs next time?" she demanded. "Once an assembly begins to legislate who gets commands, it creates a precedent for the rest to do the same, which means others can also seek command through the Plebeian Assembly. And you know how the Plebs are, damn it all. Give them a demagogue with a golden voice and a silver tongue, and they run riot!"

"They do do that, don't they?" Urumi chuckled, ignoring Shizuma's irritated glance.

Shizuru answered.

"I hardly think it shall ever be taken that far," she told Shizuma. "The

Centuriate Assembly has powers not given to the other assemblies, after all, not least being the election of the curule magistrates. Which is the reason I can take up the question in the *comitia centuriata*. The People in their Centuries-or rather, let us be honest- *the First Class* was given the right to elect the consuls and the praetors because most of those who govern Rome, be it politically or economically, are already in the First Class, thus concentrating control over imperium and governance in the hands of those already at the top. The Centuriate Assembly is far more elite in its constitution and powers than the other assemblies, particularly due to the fact that it elects all but one of the imperium-owning magistracies."

She raised a thin eyebrow.

"So one might argue the Centuriate Assembly can legislate a military command," she said. "Because a military command is essentially an extra-metropolitan curule magistracy, and an office whose entire existence relies on imperium. I disagree with your supposition that the Plebeian Assembly can ever use the same argument because-as you know!-the Plebeian Assembly has never handled questions of imperium, nor does it even have the power to elect any offices bearing imperium. It does not even serve the interests of the whole People, technically. All it serves would be the interests of the plebeian members of our citizenry. So *no*, cousin: I must say I cannot see the justice of your inference. Such a matter as I intend to take to the Centuries could never be justifiably taken to the Plebs. At least, not with the legal virtue what I intend to do shall have."

Shizuma responded by looking her cousin up and down, changeable eyes shifting to a hue best described as acidic.

"Granted," she grated out from between her teeth. "Yet it remains dangerous. I see your argument and agree with it. To some extent! Very well, so it would remain in the province of the Centuries in the future, should you do it... Most likely it would remain there, that is. But not certainly, because all it would take is some bit of political deftness to extend it to the Plebeian Assembly, and you know that! But for now I shall let you have your assertion and we shall assume it shall likely remain with the Centuries. But it's not supposed to be in

the province of the Centuries, is the point! It is meant to be in the province of the Senate and our fellow and future senators!"

"Why should it remain there forever?" Shizuru asked, lifting her other brow. "Do our peers always choose the best candidates for such missions? Have they always chosen the best generals for military commands until now?"

"Would the Centuries do any better?" Shizuma shot back.

The younger woman rested her head against the edge of the chair's back, and closed her eyes.

"Sometimes and sometimes not, I suspect," she admitted. "There is nothing to recommend either body over the other if the question is about an overall-historical, that is-performance in such a matter. Both are made up of mere mortals, and mortals are intrinsically *flawed*. So too their decisions."

"If you confess the lack of recommendation for either one, what is there to recommend your proposal?"

"A great deal," Shizuru said. "You are missing my point."

She lifted her head and met the green-gold glare head-on.

"It is not about the general performance in this case," she said. "It is about the specific. In this case, it is obvious that the Centuries stand a better chance of picking the right candidate for the job in question. That would be me! The Senate, on the other hand, obviously has a worse candidate in mind. That would be Kikukawa-han! And I am certain I do not merely flatter myself in saying that surely everyone would agree such a choice is one between a greenhorn and a veteran!"

She continued to talk, face dark with lingering anger.

"Remember that a fair number of the members of the Senate are also in or belong to families in the First Class. Which means the composition of either body does not really vary so much from the other's. Simply that it is business that speaks stronger in the Centuriate Assembly, whereas it is politics that speaks stronger in

the Senate. And gods know which one currently disgusts me near the point of vomiting from its stupidity. How can one defend the Senate's exclusive privilege when it abuses it this way, I ask? The matter at hand is too vital, Shizuma, to let the inanity of one body take precedence over the other, simply because it is the body that has always decided on this. The matter is too important."

Shizuma twisted at the last part of this speech.

"You mean, cousin," she said deliberately, "that it is too important *to you*."

The other woman paused.

"I shall not deny that," she finally admitted.

"Then you shall be doing this simply to privilege yourself."

"You seem to be forgetting I am making it to save Hime's Northern territories as well," Shizuru said dangerously, rising to the challenge with a hiss of air through her nose. "Or do you really think Kikukawahan can do the job just as well?"

For answer, Shizuma whipped her head to the senior consul, who had been listening to all this unperturbed.

"And you, Chikane?" she demanded of the woman. "All those other reasons aside, do you really think *you* cannot do the job as well as she can?"

But Chikane smiled one of her maddeningly slow smiles and looked languorous.

"As well as someone who has been in those territories and has fought the same enemy already?" the senior consul chuckled. "Hardly, Shizuma!"

The thwarted woman snorted in disgust.

"Why do I even bother?" she said, slamming her goblet on the console table with a clink. Some of her wine spilled a bloody mark on the polished surface. "Shizuru, please reconsider. I am saying

this out of concern, I assure you! Setting this precedent will not just get you that command: it will also make more enemies than you already have now. Cousin, they shall hate you for this!"

"Let them," Shizuru said. "I understand that and accept it."

"And the future?" asked a despairing Shizuma, seeing that nothing she could say would change the woman's mind. "Can you accept the future as well? Can you accept it if one of them tries to use the very same precedent you are making against you-or against some other general, down the line? With less than your reasons, cousin, and far less than your right to such a command, far less than your skill?"

"I shall deal with that when it comes."

And having disposed of her cousin's objections, Shizuru turned to the two Himemiya. They were nursing their goblets with differing expressions: one looked serene as was her wont, seemingly engrossed in the lovely crimson world swishing in her cup; the other looked like she was suffused with some electric and inner light, and held her cup in quivering fingers.

"Are you with me?" she asked gently. "My cousin has put forward a contrary argument, and though my mind is made up, I shall admit that what Shizuma has said is not without its own reason. I have already discussed this with the two of you before, but I would prefer to be certain now, because I would need your help to do it. I can do it with others still, but not even half as well or as easily as I would with the two of you. So I ask you... my good friends, most precious allies... would you give me your help now? Or must I seek the others of which I spoke?"

"Seek no one else," said Chikane.

"We're with you," Urumi added.

Shizuru smiled at them and at her dejected relative, who dealt with total defeat by picking up her goblet again and draining its contents like a woman perishing of thirst.

*Sometimes, Shizuma Hanazono reflected during her second cup. Sometimes I feel as though I'm the most prudish person with this company, which is saying a great deal for the company's composition. Even I can use up my quota of irony for a day, thank you very much! My cousin is hell-bent on throwing more people against her, and our senior consul is hell-bent on helping her do that. As for this other queer fish my cousin seems to like so much, all I think she's hell-bent on doing is making a hell out of the Forum. Oh, what quirk ever prompted chance to put these three together? And what in the world am I doing in the middle?*

"You're all mad," she said to Shizuru later, once the Himemiya cousins had left. It was already well into the evening and Shizuru would have invited them for dinner had they not already made plans elsewhere.

Shizuru bade her be seated again, this time on a couch in the atrium so the two of them could be served dinner. The elder woman did as requested and pulled up her feet so as to stretch on the cushions.

"I wonder what I have done to bring me into such a gaggle of madwomen," she groaned, head on a comfy pillow.

Shizuru smiled. She knew her cousin was now past the point of contestation and was just venting.

"I do love it," she teased, "when *you* are the one to defend the conservative policies."

The older woman rolled her eyes.

"Your facetiousness must be a thing of legend," she told her host, before her mouth twisted in a sudden motion. "This is serious. I swear that by the time all this is over, Shizuru, Hime shall no longer be Hime as we know it."

"If you mean that it shall be vastly improved, certainly that would be the aim."

A deep frown. "You did not even bother to ask me earlier if I am with you on this."

Shizuru's eyes lost their mirth, trained upon her cousin as though the older woman were some prey she had long been hunting.

"Does that mean..." she said slowly. "I must?"

Shizuma was unaffected.

"No, when it comes to the root of it," she admitted irritably, one white brow up. "And do not think *that* works on me, cousin, for I have known you too long to suffer such menace from you now-or ever! Do not dare do that to me."

The poison in the bloody eyes was diluted, although Shizuru's expression did not relax.

"I know you are displeased with me," she told the older woman all of a sudden, her voice going very quiet. "You made it clear with your protests. I am only asking that you try to see it from my perspective, even so. You said it earlier: I shall be turning most of our peers against me once I go ahead. I know that, of course. I planned with it in mind because I know I can bear it! But if you too turn against me, I would..." She stopped long enough for it to be considered a pause, though not long enough to be considered a silence. "I would not bear it as well as I would for all the rest of our fellows, Shizuma."

She was staring at her feet the whole time, so she did not see Shizuma's face soften at the profession.

"I do not make decisions lightly-you know me," she continued pleadingly. "You know that is so. If I willingly incur the wrath of my peers, it is because the alternative to that is one that is worse. Did I let this pass now, I would be seen as beaten. And I would sink so far so quickly that it would take me a long time to recover. Indeed, given how much I have staked on this, it might even be that I would never recover again. I would prefer to be hated by all the world before that, cousin! I do this only because there is simply no other way. At least, no better one."

"Oh, I know *that* !"

Shizuru looked up.

"I'm not a complete fool, Shizuru," her cousin said, seemingly talking to the air above her head. "Acquit me of that class of density, please. I do see that this is the only way you can get all that you want in time for it to matter. I also know that, even if I did manage to talk you out of it, some other enterprising senator would eventually come up with the same idea, ten or twenty years into the future. And would act on it, perhaps, in which case all these protests might well be moot, even did they work."

She turned her head so she could face the younger woman, who looked a compound of relief, surprise, and interest.

"I said those things earlier because someone had to," Shizuma went on slowly. "And I'm not averse to acting my role in the production sometimes, I suppose. It's not as though I claim you shall collapse the Republic with all the things you're doing. No, doomsayer, I... and people have always been claiming the end of the Republic with every little thing, anyway. Yet our Republic exists to this day. Certainly people prophesied an apocalypse the last time you came up with another such scheme, but again I note the Republic yet exists. You're a mad sort of woman, Shizuru. But that takes nothing away from your brilliance or the sincerity of your feelings for Hime the city, or Hime the *idea*. I highly doubt you'd rush into one of your mad schemes without considering the costs to our world first."

She looked at her cousin, who gave her one of the smiles Shizuma remembered of old. *I am still not immune to it*, she thought. Even when they had been children, and Shizuru had just been a tot left under her watch. Every time the younger girl had managed to slip from her sight only to be found after a panicked search, there would be that beautiful smile. And Shizuma would succumb, forget about the scolding she had prepared, promise not to tell Aunt and Uncle Fujino.

"All these protests, then," said the troublemaking woman who had been that troublemaking girl. "Are only for the production?"

"In a way." A careless shrug. "And in another way, they were because I was thinking of the depth of the changes you make as you go, and had to admit to some concern."



Shizuma let a small smile pull at the corners of her lips: her form of apology.

"You must grant me a little latitude sometimes, cousin," she told Shizuru. "I've not your capacity to look change straight in the eye so equably, although I can come to live with it given sufficient time. Whereas you would chat it up and get into bed with it upon first encounter."

The two shared a laugh at the image.

"But at the end of the day, I walk with it and with you," she went on, turning her head as the servants entered bearing dishes. "Worry not, cousin, about my displeasure. I truly see that what you shall be doing is the only way for you to get there. I couldn't be angry with you for walking the path you must. My anger is all for your enemies, who are blocking all the other roads."

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The day after Takeda Masashi's half of the Seventh came within sight of Sosia, the messengers they had sent to Otomeia reached destination, having made better time than expected. There these found they were actually the second Himean-sent dispatch to request urgent reinforcements of Otomeia within the month, for another auxiliary summons had preceded them by about two weeks: the summons coming from the governor of Argus.

When this worthy had first been informed that the legate she had been hosting, Seigo Ushida, had been requested by Suou Himemiya to bring up the rest of the Seventh, she had offered to recall the auxiliaries from Otomeia. Ushida had not known yet of the Mentulaean army going to Sosia and had all his xenophobia unmitigated by martial exigency at the time, so he had declined the offer. To which the Argus governor had responded by nodding cheerily, then going off and sending a dispatch to Otomeia anyway. With the result that the Otomeian units sent home by Takeda and used by Takeda's predecessor had found themselves travelling back to Argus again, their arrival in that province predicted around August's end.

This meant, however, that the messengers bearing Takeda Masashi's request for auxiliaries-actually Suou Himemiya's request, as the letters were in her seal and writing-found an Otomeia without any ready and available military, for all those armed and equipped for battle had already gone to Argus. An enlistment and equipment of fresh units had to be carried out. It could and would be done: but in time to meet the request's urgency?

Still, luck had not run out yet for the Himeans. The arrival of Natsuki's men in Otomeia coincided with the return of an eminent personage in the citadel, one who had been away for over a year and had been due home for some time. It was one of the royal princesses: the third daughter of King Kruger, also his fifth child. With this princess had come one part of the royal armies, and it was this part that the king decided would answer for now, buying time to muster more troops from both the dwellers of the citadel and their other provinces. This available army would meet the Himean request under command of his daughter, who took the royal directive with a mixture of reprieve and resentment.

"Ever since my return," she told him plaintively, "I've been greeted with news only of these Himeans and their quarrel with the Mentulae, and how this quarrel has had our military running up and down aimlessly. Those that recently headed for Argus were sent away from there only some time ago, and now they want them back. Who do these foreigners think they are that they can order us so freely?"

"They think they are the most powerful people in the world-or our world, at least," the king responded, not taking umbrage. He was a patient man, King Kruger, and did not hold with most kings who controlled their people under a constant thrill of fear. Indeed, most Otomeian kings and queens had been noted to hold the same forbearance in their rule: some said it was because of the political structure, where ascension to the throne was gained through electoral politics. Whatever the reason, it meant that his daughter could safely speak her mind to him... within relative boundaries of diplomacy, naturally.

"What you call their quarrel with the Mentulae is also ours," he told this daughter, who was his favourite. "Be you reminded that their

territories rest between ours and those of Obsidian, which means we have every interest in assisting the Himeans. They have long been our allies. In exchange they have always been the buffer between us and the Mentulae, Alyssa."

The Princess Alyssa shut her blue eyes away and breathed deep.

"Yes, Your Majesty," she said. "But I would rather we had more competent allies and buffers than *them*."

A rumble from the throne.

"I agree their newest general does not have much of my confidence," the king conceded, shifting on the Tyrian purple cushion atop his elevated golden seat. "Nor does he have much of our men's confidence. What letters we have received from our people serving with them has spoken of discontent under his command, so Hyodo has said."

"Then is it wise to send more of our people under his command?"

"Is it wise not to do so?" He watched her walk the floor of the chamber back and forth, a prowling movement more than a pacing one. "The lesser of two evils, daughter. They do not say he is a complete buffoon. Simply that he is far less inspiring than his predecessor. Who was a very great general, all are in agreement. Perhaps the problem is that she was *too* great." A thoughtful look came to his face. "A woman said to be descended from the gods, her lineage traceable to both Ares and Aphrodite."

He paused and stroked his snowy beard.

"It is only natural," he said philosophically, "that anyone appears less inspiring when compared to divinity."

She stopped her walk.

"I've heard of her," she said slowly. "This Shizuru Fujino."

He noted her care. "You do not like what you have heard?"

"I would prefer to hear *your* opinion of her, Your Majesty. I trust your

perceptions better than anyone else's."

"A very strong woman," he said instantly. "As intelligent as she was powerful, and she was-no, I mean that she *is* -very powerful. Yet I did not find her abrasive as most creatures of power are. Of all the Himeans I have met in the past, I would even say I liked her best, for all that she was also the most imposing. The men agree."

She had resumed her walk.

"They told me what she did at Argentum," she said.

"Argentum, yes." His face lit with respect, whereas hers darkened. "Was it not inspired?"

She stopped her prowling again, turned to fix bright blue eyes on his faded blue ones.

"Why did you send Natsuki with them, father?" she asked all of a sudden. "Why did you send her to be that Himean general's apprentice or attendant, whichever one might be more appropriate?"

The king exhaled, shoulders coming very close to falling. *So he regrets it*, his daughter guessed, her own hackles rising. *Or almost regrets it*.

"To learn," he answered. "There is much to learn from them, Alyssa. They have such learning and power. And organisation. Such organisation! Not for nothing have they become as great as they are now, to the point that they could defeat-as at Argentum-an army outnumbering them by the thousands upon thousands."

Again he stroked his beard, a natural habit that came when he was deep in thought.

"The woman who did that is the other reason."

"The woman?" she said quietly, urging him to say more.

"Shizuru Fujino." He said the name in a peculiar tone, fingers dropping from the mass of white hair on his chin. "I say it again: a great woman. She shall continue to become greater. I would have

hesitated had it not been she to whom I was entrusting Natsuki's well-being, but it *was* she. And I could see nothing but advantage in having Natsuki learn from such a person."

He looked at her and the sharpness of old returned to his washed-out irises, reminding her for an instant why it was he and not the other eligibles in his time to have become ruler of all Otomeia.

"Natsuki is not of our line, not directly," he said. "But she is part of our House now. She has much talent, as you have noted several times before, even when she was a child come to us from the Great Forest. She is different in that she has..."

He paused, seemed to think for a while before setting upon the word.

"Broadness. Yes, she has a broadness of intellect. It permits her to learn more than most of our kind can from these foreigners, Alyssa, and she has the youth to learn better than those of us who are more set in our ways and thoughts. It stands that we would do well to keep our alliance and relations with Hime if Otomeia is to continue prospering, and Natsuki's learning shall become an asset to that."

Alyssa digested this with reserved agreement, the worry never leaving her expression.

"Your Majesty's far-thinking ways are admired by all of us," she bowed. "It's true she does have such *intellectual broadness*, as you say. But her life now may be imperilled right now, and it gives me cause for unrest."

She shifted her weight to one leg and looked at her father beseechingly.

"I intend no impudence, father," she said, holding out her hand. "Truly, I do not. But I think you too would grieve should something happen to my cousin, in the course of the lesson she is learning-or has already learned, perhaps. It would grieve all of us deeply. Natsuki is... *special*."

"Of course she is, else why would the gods intervene to preserve

only her when all her kinsmen were slaughtered? That aside, it remains she has made her home with us and been adopted by us. She is an Otomeian princess now. And even you, Princess Alyssa, were subjected to such as you would call peril at that age."

A level look from her. How wonderfully stern was her face, thought the approving father, whose own features were actually far less attractive, yet also less forbidding.

"I meant," said his daughter, "that she is special because I intend her for my wife."

That actually made him blink twice.

"You intended to marry Natsuki?" he asked.

"I *intend* to marry Natsuki, Your Majesty," she corrected smoothly. "I intend it still."

The king sat back, amazed. He wondered how long Alyssa had been planning this. The look in her eyes said for very long time. Marriage to Natsuki? Oh, what an idea! To think he had been wondering for a while to whom of his available children he should marry that young woman, so as to keep her in his family-and here Alyssa had stepped up and said he should have thought of her first. But Alyssa had always been the royal child whose life he did not manage, for she was the one who had lived it early on by her own decisions, never showing him she needed it managed. At some point he recalled he had hinted Natsuki's availability to her, but she had brushed it away at the time, as though she had not cared for the idea.

Now it had come out. She had brushed it away so quickly then because she had not needed the hint at all. She had been planning this for an age-and his mind flickered briefly over the possible evidence that detailed some parts of that plan. He put it away for the moment, deciding he would think on that later. At the fore of his attention was still Alyssa's purpose in the notion, for he knew his daughter was not the sort to take up notions without great purpose to them.

Her purpose here did not escape him. How could it, when it was so very political? Alyssa wanted Natsuki's political value as a lever. Such a good lever too! It was true Natsuki could not become elected Otomeia's sovereign, being an Ortygian by birth, but there would be no objections to her being the wife of the elected sovereign. For that was what Alyssa wanted to become, perhaps even *needed* to become. And Alyssa would use marriage to the final member of the Ortygian Royal House to get what she wanted, use the prestige of Natsuki's blood and lineage to increase theirs...

He had always known Alyssa to be the most ambitious of his offspring, and in fact liked her the more for it, instead of liking her less. Yet he saw now that he must have underestimated her ambition, if he had not seen the extent of her planning for this. Was it all her doing that every noble to have dropped hints about proposing for Natsuki's hand had withdrawn eventually, sometimes even executing the withdrawal by expiring on some battlefield? Ye gods, how deft she must be, that even he had not noticed until now!

"I see," he said, and did.

She nodded, glad to see the idea-and his realisations, whatever they were-did not displease him.

"Then, may I ask that you endorse my proposal?" she followed keenly.

But the king hesitated, realising from her words that she did not know something very important yet. Alyssa checked her elation, guard rising again.

"Before that, there are some things you should know about Natsuki," he said to her. "You have been away a while, daughter. Some things have changed."

She stared at him blankly.

"What things, father?" she asked.

He told her. The only thing he did not tell her was about the letter he had received some time ago from Shizuru Fujino, who had

requested-formally she had *requested*, although the underlying tone had been one of *direction* -that the Princess Natsuki not be married or betrothed to anyone in anyway. There was a missive that had seen him sitting up in his seat!

He had been astounded to receive such a letter from that Himean. It was not from anger at the highhandedness of the missive, for Kruger knew his Himeans and knew they were a highhanded people to deal with. He also had sufficient knowledge to guess that any other Himean would have been far more abrasive in writing than letter than Shizuru Fujino had been. No, Himean highhandedness was water off the royal hide. What had really titillated him was the implication beneath it: Shizuru Fujino, the Red-Eyed Conqueror herself, wanted their Natsuki!

He had hardly been able to believe his good luck there, for the result had been better than what he had expected from his gamble. He had noticed, even before assigning Natsuki as the woman's attendant, that Shizuru Fujino's famous eyes had been drawn to Natsuki. *A normal thing*, had been his thought then; Natsuki was attractive and had always been attention-getting, even in Otomeia. His own people had stared at the orphaned Ortygian all her life, for she was so exotic and interesting-looking-dark-haired and green-eyed amongst a people never dark-haired or green-eyed, whether the traits were taken separately or together. So it did not occur to him to ascribe anything immediately sexual in Shizuru's interest. Had he not caught himself staring at those green eyes too, many times in the past? That he had always seen Natsuki as an adopted granddaughter skewed his perceptions, for he did not fully appreciate how many of his people who stared at the girl had done it with thoughts of devouring.

The king had also done his research. He had learned from his intelligencers that Shizuru Fujino was considered by most of her people *asexual*, endowed with an immaculately clean reputation when it came to affairs of bed or heart. Contributing this to his observations, he had thus failed to expect anything beyond Shizuru Fujino liking Natsuki as a capable attendant or a faithful foreign protégé. Yet Shizuru Fujino had apparently liked Natsuki so well she wanted the princess reserved especially for her sake. Amazing!



King Kruger was a thinking sovereign. And it did not take long for him to think over the development and determine it to be advantageous. After all, his first thought upon seeing Shizuru Fujino in Otomeia had been that she was a woman who would eventually rule her people. Oh, not as a *queen* : he knew Himeans did not believe in kings or queens. But something much, much greater. The woman had greatness oozing out of every pore! His eyes turning to the future, he had known it wise to make of her a good ally. Otomeia needed staunch and strong friends to perpetually remind Hime of the alliance between the two nations. For the thinker in Kruger understood that even the longest-standing alliances could crumble at a moment's notice, if not attended to properly.

He had decided his course that very moment, flapping the Himean's letter on his luxuriantly gold-entwined beard. For so long as Shizuru Fujino fancied Natsuki, Shizuru Fujino would be given Natsuki. While ever Natsuki's spell over the woman lasted, Otomeia could at least rest easy on where it stood with Hime. He imagined Natsuki would not fare too badly either, for Shizuru Fujino did not strike him as the sort to be cruel to a mistress. It did not enter his wildest dreams to think that Shizuru Fujino was actually thinking of making his charge more than a mistress. The king of Otomeia was realistic, and understood that Himeans did not think an Otomeian-royal or not-worth even their meanest beggar's little finger; a mistress was all someone in Natsuki's position could hope to be. In the same mode of hard realism did he ignore the possibility that Natsuki might not want to be Shizuru Fujino's mistress. He might be a kind surrogate grandfather, but he was still the supreme ruler of Otomeia, and had all the autocracy of those with supreme power.

All of this meant, unfortunately, that he could not yet endorse Alyssa's plan to marry Natsuki. No doubt he would have done it before, but Shizuru Fujino had indeed changed a lot of things. And famously doting a father as he was, he had not stayed king of all Otomeia simply by privileging his children's wishes above greater interests. It was more important for now to secure Shizuru Fujino than to secure Alyssa's claim to Natsuki.

When he had finished speaking, Alyssa stared at him with a face gone unusually slack. *So that*, she was thinking to herself, *was what*

*people have been hinting to me ever since I returned!* Why had no one written of this to her while she had been away? Why had no one said it to her face until now, when she had to hear of it direct from her father? Oh, someone would pay for this, damn them!

She shook her head with fervour.

"Natsuki?" she said incredulously. "Natsuki *with* a foreigner?"

"A Himean," he said, reminding her that it was not just any foreigner. "And a member of their high aristocracy."

"A foreigner."

She exhaled a growl, hardly able to tamp down the outrage; her fists clenched against her thighs and beat on them once, a reflexive action.

"Forgive me, father," she cried. "Again I mean no disrespect. But this is - this is - insupportable! Not to mention unbelievable! Natsuki has never once shown interest in romance or sentimentality, never mind anything so tawdry as fleshly passion! Not in all the years I've known her, and I've known her since she was a child."

"As have I," he said. "You said it, Alyssa. She *was* a child."

She shook her head again, bewildered.

"Father, how can we know if it's true? I refuse to believe it," she said, though she already did.

"Then perhaps you should speak to Natsuki's troopers. They will tell you what everybody else will."

He exhaled heavily and smiled-with some ruefulness, she believed.

"Gather your men and set out today, Alyssa," he commanded. "We have sufficient food for you to take as provision, along with what you brought with you. We shall gather more troops now and send to your brothers and sisters as well. You and your men will have to hold for now. And not just for the Himeans' sakes, you understand?"

She bowed and left her father's audience chamber upon obtaining permission. Having already sent messengers to her officers, she tarried in the palace a while longer to speak to Natsuki's men. They were commanded to recount their story for her benefit. Afterwards, she demanded to know exactly what had become of her cousin.

"She is attendant now to the woman who wrote the request we carried," said one of them. "The Himean known as Suou Himemiya. She was well when we left her." An uncomfortable shift of the eyes from him. "Although she was injured-but it was healing."

The addendum had the princess looking severe, the note about imminent recovery notwithstanding. Otomeians, like any other warlike people, brushed over injuries regularly. If an Otomeian said another was injured, the injury had to be significant. And that did not bode well for Alyssa's Ortygian cousin.

"She was injured?" Alyssa seemed to be asking them silently how they could have permitted the princess to be injured if they themselves seemed relatively unscathed. "How badly and where?"

"The gravest would be on the leg," said the most senior of the group, a baron who was also one of the subcommanders in the Lupine division. "An arrow went through her calf. But the foreign surgeons saw her and she was well enough to walk with a staff when we left."

The princess hissed.

"That suggests to me there was a time where she was *not* well enough to walk with a staff, Shura-while I note all of you in front of me don't need anything to help you shuffle along. Was the bone spared, at least?"

"By the grace of the gods, yes."

"She could still mount her horse? She was surely kept out of the fight afterwards to heal?"

The men and women before her shifted uneasily again.

"She seemed able to ride still, for a while," Shura said, taking the role as the official spokesman. "Although she had stopped by the

time we left. And she was still fighting."

She glared the question at him.

"We were outnumbered," Shura told her.

"And you left Natsuki there in such straits?" The blue eyes were very cold, disparaging. "Forced to fight although she was wounded, and on behalf too of those incompetents we call our allies?"

"We had to," he said defensively. "It was under her order that we were sent."

"I thought it was under those foreigners' orders?"

"So it was, but it was directly under her order, else we wouldn't have gone," said Shura, persevering. "Had she been well enough to ride so far and in such perilous stealth, we would have persuaded the Capt-the *Princess* -to come with us. But she would have been in danger, and she herself chose which of us should be sent for this mission."

She exhaled slowly, understanding what he was saying yet immensely frustrated by it.

"That I can see," she told him. "But it's still a travesty that she should be so injured and placed in such hapless circumstances. In case it bears reminding, Shura, Natsuki's blood alone is worth a hundred of yours. And lest you think I make exception for myself, I know it may be worth a dozen of mine too."

She sighed with great feeling, though with less displeasure than before. What she had just said was no embarrassment to admit, for everyone knew the Ortygians had never resorted to election of their sovereigns, unlike the Otomeians; the Ortygian Royal House was a less watered-down, more concentrated aristocracy by virtue of a strict and unyielding line perfectly traceable throughout the ages. Besides, the Ortygian House had also been founded by a member of the ruling family on that ancient island the two nations shared in their histories... unlike the Otomeian Houses, whose founders had only been minor aristocrats from that long-ago place.

"All of you here know better than most, all of you being related to the aristocracy, that the noble Houses of Otomeia have it as our duty to preserve the last of Natsuki's line," dictated Alyssa, reciting the old lecture. "We can't keep her from the field. It would be an affront to both her talents and her lineage. So we watch over her even in battle. It's true all of us have to fall sometime, and that an honourable and glorious end in battle is never a disgrace... but if her bloodline is extinguished so easily under our watch that it cannot be called honourable, we have failed in our duties to her and may be accursed by the old gods and the gods of her dead people. You know this."

The warriors before her shuddered and murmured apologies. They were familiar with all she said but took the rebuke with reverence nonetheless.

"I know she's obstinate and has great courage," Alyssa continued wearily, indicating that she would no longer belabour the question of Natsuki's injuries and how they could have permitted them. She *could* imagine how they had come about, as it was a constant source of both vexation and pride to her that the woman she would marry was so courageous in battle. She might be enough of an Otomeian to revere Natsuki's martial daring, but she also had a very strong and very real interest in having the girl live long enough to come of age.

"So it's this - er - Himemiya that she's attending now?" she said. "This woman they call-what do they call her again, her position in their military?"

" *Legate* . She's the one Natsuki is now attending, yes."

"And she's the one who wrote the instructions, not their present general." She looked thoughtful. "Her instructions make sense. But what can you tell me about their general?"

"Takeda Masashi," said Shura, with a curl of the lip that fascinated Alyssa. Oh, they *did* dislike him! And as Shura expounded on the reasons for that dislike, she found that she shared it.

She patted a hand over her shaggy long hair. It was a very bright

yellow and braided away from her face, a style in favour among many of the Otomeian warriors. A low growl crawled up her throat after Shura had finished.

"I see why he's considered an idiot," she spat. "A good thing it's this legate who wrote to us, then, instead of him. Who knows what he'd have asked us to do?"

They spoke agreement.

"Shizuru Fujino," was what she said next, and in a tone that had them quieting instantly. Alyssa asked it. "Is it true that she has been living with my cousin?"

"Yes," the baron said, looking uneasy again. He could see that the idea displeased her, though for what reason he was not entirely certain-though he *could* guess at it. "She was the Himean's attendant, by order of His Majesty."

The blue eyes narrowed until they were slits. "Don't pretend to misunderstand me, Shura. Are my cousin and that Himean really having an affair?"

He did not bother dissimulating any longer.

"Yes," he said. "And Shizuru Fujino returned to Hime."

"I know. It was the inevitable conclusion."

But he looked troubled, as did the rest of them.

"Is it not a conclusion?" she asked, staring at him with suspicion. "There's something else?"

"Well," said Shura, rolling a muscular shoulder. "It's true Shizuru Fujino is not here, but I'd hesitate to call it a finished thing."

"Obviously you do, else I wouldn't have asked what I just did," she snapped. "What is the reason you'd hesitate? And tell me *everything* succinctly, because I don't have the time to pull it slowly from your mouth. I have work to do, Shura. So do all of you, as you're coming with me."

Thus Shura told her what he and every other member of their delegation knew, having been around Natsuki ever since the beginning of Natsuki's acquaintance with the Himean, and privy to the changes in that relation. And more importantly, privy to the changes the foreigner had caused in their captain.

Not one member of the Lupine division was unaware of what had caused their leader's silent grief. Did they have feelings about it? Of course, for all of them held the princess in high esteem, especially as many of them were actually related to the aristocracy, which had a keen sensitivity for their leader's station. Natsuki was also the youngest of their group, which meant that, while she was their captain, she was also their child.

So even from the beginning of the liaison with Shizuru Fujino, the Lupine troopers' feelings had run high. Most were simply shocked. There were also many who had very negative opinions. Of these, the common reason was that it should not have been a foreigner to claim their captain-especially given who their captain was-but there were also those who simply admitted that it might have been anyone of any race, and they would still hate the idea. That none of these displeased warriors had voiced their qualms within Natsuki's hearing was due both to their unwillingness to risk their captain's hurt *and* their own hides: their captain might be famously kind, but she was also famously stern at times... And there was something in her eyes that dried out the throats of all those who intended to take up the matter with her even before they began. Moreover, there had also been a highly believable rumour going around that the affair was part of the king's intention in assigning the princess to the foreign general, an act definitely unusual enough in itself to lend strength to the rumour. Thus it contributed more to the impossibility of speaking to the captain about the topic. One did not question one's superiors about high political matters! And an affair with a Himean like Shizuru Fujino, if it had indeed been under the king's order, was definitely a high political matter.

"Putting it bluntly," Alyssa said once Shura had done. "My cousin had an affair with a foreigner. They my cousin pined after that foreigner enough to take ill, only to recover when that foreigner exchanged letters with her-seeming to say they intend to continue

the affair. My cousin then got injured soon after, while remaining ill and pining still for that foreigner's return. That's about it, I believe?"

Shura said nothing this time and hung his head in a show of shame. Alyssa dug her nails into her palms.

"Today," she told him, "is the Princess Natsuki's birthday."

She said it as though pronouncing another damning criticism, then turned on her heel and stalked off.

The gods, she thought, must have been indulging in a laugh at her expense. So many things gone wrong, and all because of an irregular extension in her absences from the capital. One time she stayed away from Otomeia Citadel longer than usual-just one time! And see how it had turned out.

She had planned to marry Natsuki this year. For this reason had come with her and her army so many unnecessary burdens, so many fanciful gifts. There were twenty new horses, ten of them breeding stallions and mares, all of the finest and most gigantic Otomeian stock. There was a cart of expensive spices and perfumes, some of them mixed with the finest gold dust, with which to gild and powder the skin. There was even a beautiful, dauntingly heavy necklace of genuine emeralds from Scythia, the largest stone the size of a small chicken egg and coloured the most unearthly, uncorrupted green.

She had expected to come to the capital, seek her cousin and present the gifts, then come out of that conference with a bride. *It would have been*, she thought ruefully, *so expedient*. That it was expediency that she used to characterise it was since love did not figure highly in Alyssa's reasons for wanting the marriage. She did not love Natsuki, even if she did like Natsuki quite well. She set the issue of love aside because she knew she could not force herself to love Natsuki on a wish to do it, and did not think she needed to love Natsuki either for them to get married. She believed her distant cousin was the kind one could eventually come to love, and so merely expected that to solve itself *after* they were married. Her primary reasons for the marriage were far more immediate and had naught to do with that foreign concept called 'romanticism'.



Of all Kruger's children, Alyssa was the one who wanted most to be the next ruler of Otomeia, and that meant being crowned queen of the capital. Her other siblings, she knew, were either not as eager to assume the mantle of responsibility or had not the strength and the skill to have a chance anyway. As luck would have it, the only siblings she did consider capable of rivalling her claim were already ruling over the other regions of the crown: kings and queens in their own rights and subordinate only to whoever ruled the capital. These minor rulers did not often feel their inferior status because it was the practice for the capital to leave be the other regions' administrators, issuing instructions or intervening only now and then. So for these siblings ruling over their respective cities, to be a sort of suzerain over the whole was unnecessary. They were satisfied with their lot, and Alyssa had spent most of her life checking that they remained that way.

So she knew she would be in the lead when the next ruler of the capital was elected. Most of the nobles liked her and even those who did not had to admit that she was by far the most capable of the eligibles-even with her province-ruling siblings included. Alyssa was both mentally and physically impressive, and radiated the just the right blend of cool sophistication and throwback-nerviness to appeal to most parties. Strong as her position already was, however, she understood that there were things she could do to further strengthen it. Among these things was a strategic marriage, and none would be more strategic in her case than a marriage to Natsuki.

The first reason for it would be that it was a nice reconsolidation of lineage, especially as Natsuki hailed from a dynasty admittedly better than her own. Alyssa knew that her cousin's ancestral pre-eminence would automatically be credited to her too were they married, and that was of even greater significance now that there were no other royal Ortygians to represent that line. The closest alternative would be Natsuki's cousin, Nina, but she was Natsuki's cousin twice-removed and that weakened her claim to the blood royal. The blueness of Natsuki's blood, Alyssa thought, made her cousin Nina's look like water. So Natsuki it had to be. A pity one could not get a child off of her but what mattered was the lustre of her lineage supporting Alyssa's claim. And of that, there was sufficient to overlook the matter of producing offspring. There was

always adoption of a royal nephew or niece, after all, to keep the blood dynastically pure.

The second reason for Alyssa's eagerness to marry her cousin was no less important. Indeed, it was far more tangible. Having Natsuki for a wife would give Alyssa access to one of the most closely-kept secrets of the Otomeians, courtesy of Natsuki's exterminated people: namely, the fabled lost gold of Ortygia. Which was, Alyssa knew, neither fabled nor lost. It was still very much in existence.

The story had it thus: not long after the Ortygians settled in their forest, they had pondered the security of their royal treasures, which included both the treasures they had taken from the vaults of the ancestors they had in common with the Otomeians as well as the treasures they had taken on their wanderings. The forest was a fine place to finally settle, all agreed. But was it so fine a place for hiding wealth? There was too much of the stuff to place in one hiding spot, and breaking it up rendered it vulnerable to whatever dolt-be it man or beast or otherwise-might chance upon one of the caches. Oh, so much mammon! But where to put it?

The one to solve the vexed question was one of Natsuki's ancestors. Instead of rooting deeper and deeper in their forest for the perfect hiding place, like his forbears, he turned the other way and started looking outwards... and saw the newly-built citadel capital of his people's mountain-dwelling cousins. It was a fortress on a peak, sheltered by towering walls built upon a naturally defensive geography. Easily one of the most secure locations in the world, that Ortygian ruler assessed admiringly. Thus it passed that the Ortygian wealth was transferred- *banked*, one might say-in the vaults of Otomeia.

The arrangement would have undoubtedly befuddled most other peoples, not least the Himeans who, had they known of it, would have wondered what madness would drive anyone to put his wealth in another's keeping so trustingly. But the Otomeians and Ortygians were of a culture that permitted the agreement. Indeed, no Otomeian-from the kings down to the commoners-would ever have entertained the idea of laying hands on that Ortygian treasure with anything but a shudder. Not because no Otomeians were greedy! For every people had its share of greed and more than enough

representatives of the trait.

No, rather, the wealth of the Ortygians was safe because the Otomeians believed that they *could not* touch it. Entrusted to their kings under the most terrible of oaths, its protection was a hallowed duty. Should it ever pass that they failed it, should they ever permit anyone to secrete the wealth of the Ortygians from the vaults dedicated to it, the consequences would be catastrophic. It would entail the most profound curse on them and their offspring-if they even had any offspring to be spared after the consequences of their failure, it was said. It was a nonnegotiable belief and was fed to every Otomeian who ever lived, right along with his mother's milk.

Thus not even the greediest of the Otomeian rulers past had done more than contemplate the bitterness of the Ortygian treasure in his vaults, never to be his for the using. The treasure belonged to the Ortygians as a people, but only the members of the Ortygian royal family had access to it. And, with the final chapter of Ortygia's history written in the Great Massacre by Mithrii, only one person now had access to it.

Shizuru Fujino, lover of this sole inheritor, had often guessed at her lover's legacy. Taking into account what she knew of the Ortygian people's wanderings, the many plunders of towns and temples they had encountered on their way to the wintry north, she came up with an estimate approaching her own immense fortune. Yet even her estimate would come short, were she given the opportunity to verify it: the fortune of the Ortygians, by the time it was moved into the Otomeian vaults, was so large and contained so many "lost" works of art that its worth might eclipse even the present contents of Otomeia's Treasury. Or the immediate contents of Hime's, for that matter. That sulky princess currently in a ratty and weather-worn tent in Takeda Masashi's camp actually had fortune enough to buy and sell Hime's Sosia and Argus Provinces. Several times over.

*To make her my wife*, thought Alyssa again, *would secure so much for me*. Natsuki would, of course, retain her exclusive rights to the Ortygian treasures if she wished to keep them; however, she would also have an active interest in supporting Alyssa's aims and ventures upon their marriage. And though Alyssa knew her distant cousin would not touch-indeed, had *never* touched-the contents of

those secret vaults for herself, Alyssa knew too that her distant cousin was the sort of young woman who would do it for whomever she loved or whomever she saw it her duty to love. That is, the one she eventually married.

*Though I've no intent of forcing her spending it for me, naturally,* Alyssa added wistfully to herself. *At least, not as far as the circumstances would allow it. Natsuki's wealth would simply be there to add very strong security. It's an idiot who doesn't take every opportunity to raise securities, and I'm no idiot.*

She did seem, however, to be unlucky. Now the plan was thwarted, with her prospective bride stuck somewhere in some military debacle *and* pining for a continuation of what had apparently been a famous liaison with some outsider. *Shizuru Fujino*. The name was interesting-Alyssa had read enough Himean texts to get a sense of it being unusual. Supposedly a very powerful woman in that country across the sea, as well as a gifted general. And, so it was said, very beautiful.

*With red eyes*, she thought with a shudder, adding that detail at the last. How could they claim anything with red eyes to be beautiful? Some of the old ones said that there were demons that visited the earth in the shape of animals, the only clue being in their red eyes. Perhaps the same could be said for humans? But no, her father said the woman was a demigod, related to the gods Ares and - and - Aphrodite, was it? Well then, perhaps it was the same for people descended from them.

*Damn, damn and double-damn*. Divinity-descended or not, the woman deserved Alyssa's curses. Who would have thought that it would be a foreigner to beat Alyssa to it? If the rumours were true, which they most likely were, then that foreigner had already *taken* Natsuki. An appalling thought! Alyssa would be willing to take her cousin even then but it remained that she did not like the idea of someone else having initiated Natsuki into the marital bed: that had figured in her plans because she knew that doing that would have strengthened their bond, and she preferred to have a queen whom she could claim to own completely. Their people liked that, and she herself would rather have it than the other way. Especially when the other way involved a foreigner doing the bedding.

In this she concocted an argument even she would eventually have to admit was not too pressing, save for the concern over the foreign element. Famously abstemious as Otomeian nobles were when it came to sex and sensuality, they would not actually balk at a royal consort who would not enter her marriage a virgin. Otomeian prescriptions on abstinence qualified more on age than relations; they did not actually expect marriages to be made between virgins because, they admitted, that very rarely happened and you had to allow for human nature. And to add to the notes against her own contention: Alyssa herself was no virgin either.

No, Alyssa's opposition to the specific idea of Natsuki having been bedded was from something else. Not the jealousy of unconscious love: she truly was not in love with her distant cousin. But in place of that love had sprung a different feeling. She had spent *thirteen years* waiting for Natsuki to come to the earliest proper age for marrying: thirteen years of securing her own standing, of travelling and fighting, of working to make her reputation all that it needed to be. In all that time, not once had she failed to check on Natsuki at least once a year, visiting the capital's palace and marvelling each time at how her cousin had grown-inch by inch in height, face turning from gauntly, hauntingly elfin to fine-boned, hauntingly pretty. And frowning too each time at how this beauty would encourage complications to bud.

She always pruned them before they got out of hand.

So it had been thirteen years of dealing with any nobles who also showed an interest in her cousin, either deflecting them with some manipulation or sending them to termination, the latter by angling them into positions in battle where they were likely to fall under attack. How many deaths had she arranged that way? How many had she put off from approaching the girl by either negotiation or threat? At least thirteen years' worth of opponents! Thirteen years was a long time to wait. Yet Alyssa had waited, and worked while waiting.

Now the wait had apparently been extended and the plan fractured, all due to some bored foreigner eager to experience the Otomeian flavour. *It would be different*, she reflected, *if Shizuru Fujino hadn't been Himean*. But she was, and that made all the difference. She

was also a powerful aristocrat, an important politician, and that added yet another dimension of differences. Damn the Himeans and their greedy eyes! Thus Alyssa's vexation over Shizuru Fujino's intervention: it was that of a woman *interrupted*, delayed, stolen from by someone she could not call out for it. She had spent thirteen years planning for this day and her plans were thorough enough to justify all thirteen years of waiting; she had even planned to detail what would have been the rupture of her cousin's hymen.

Despite all this, however, the cool part of Alyssa generally ruled her. It did that now. Setting aside the anger with the aid of a few choice curses, she settled down to ponder. One had to admit, she thought, that this was partly her fault: she had been away far too long this time, actually going a little over a year before returning to the capital and checking on Natsuki. One had to admit too that her father's intent was sound, especially if Natsuki's lover was as influential as rumoured. Otomeia's alliance with Hime did indeed bear watching.

She knew there was nothing else for it but to leave be for now. She was sure Shizuru Fujino would eventually let Natsuki go anyway. The woman would find someone from her own people, start one of those heated romances-such a foreign notion!-and release Natsuki. Then Alyssa could return to her plan, which would have to be revised after the blow Natsuki's affair with the Himean had dealt it. Her cousin's potential prestige as the royal consort had been ruined, but the claim to the Ortygian fortune remained, as did the claim to the Ortygian bloodline. Perhaps she could take Natsuki as a minor wife instead? Surely that could bear well even under the strain of Shizuru Fujino's taint. But would Natsuki herself agree to suffer that lowered estimation? In the end, it still boiled down to Natsuki agreeing to it. And the girl was so very proud, Alyssa thought, especially as she carried the burden of her dynasty and tribe on her lonely shoulders...

Well, time enough to ponder what to do with Natsuki. Alyssa had other prey to fix. What was important now was that she deal with the goddamned Mentulae.

"I'm splitting off Otanara's group," she told her officers. "That's the five thousand that will answer for reinforcements to Sosia. They will have to do until my father's people manage to summon and arm

fresh warriors. The ones that went to Argus last month should help with that. They're close by."

"And the rest of us?" the commander of one of her cavalry brigades asked.

"The rest come with me," she said. "The Himean who wrote us-her name is Suou Himemiya, remember that-asked that we send the bulk of whatever we can send to the bridge west of Argentum, the big one on the boundaries. Right where the River Atinu and Holmys run into each other."

"The one the Mentulae are likely using for their crossings," someone said in comprehension, driving the rest to nod and grunt in satisfaction. "Good plan!"

"Yes-which means not all these Himeans are incompetent, thank the gods!" said Alyssa. "We'll drop that and garrison the river line as soon as we can. Which means we're wasting time talking here. All is prepared?"

"Yes."

"Let's go and kill some Mentulae."

Her army rolled out of Otomeia with equipment shining, every man and woman fresh and ready for a good battle. To Sosia headed five thousand foot with Otanara, there to reinforce the Himean city and Takeda. To Argentum headed ten thousand foot and two thousand horse with Alyssa, to do what they could by cutting off Mentulaean access to the bridge on the river-borders. Alyssa's task was more important, which was why she was pleased to be the one doing it despite the urge in her to be the one going to Sosia. At least, she assured herself, a success on her part would contribute to her cousin's safety. She was also looking forward to cutting down some Mentulaeans, for Alyssa loathed them, viewed them with distrust as did every other Otomeian old enough to understand how the Mentulaean rulers had always slavered over the prospect of invading Otomeia. Alyssa could not say she thought very much better of the Himeans by comparison-especially with everything that she had just heard and found out that day-but she retained sufficient

objectivity to know her father was right: Hime was still a better neighbour than the Mentulae. So she would do her part and exert every effort to help Hime win now, because such a victory would also be one for her people and would mean one dangerous neighbour less for Otomeia.

"But all these blasted foreigners," she muttered to her second-in-command later, "have surely taken the art of bad timing to perfection."



# Chapter 54

*Very tardy, one knows. My apologies to all for the delay.*

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## **Vocabulaire:**

**1. Comitia centuriata** (L.) - A Iso **Centuriate Assembly** ; one of the assemblies of the Roman people, it marshalled them in their classes and was convened for several purposes, including the drafting and approval of legislation as well as the elections for **curule magistracies** (s.v.). It held its meetings outside the pomerium, on the Campus Martius.

**2. Crossroad college** - O rganisations dedicated to the upkeep and protection of the crossroads in Rome, which were holy places and thus had shrines. The crossroad colleges' headquarters generally had bars where the members of the college (often lower-class) met and drank with each other.

**3. The Head Count** - In Latin, "capite censi". Socially the lowest of all Romans, they did not even deserve a rung on the class ladder. The poorest class was technically the Fifth Class, but these were still a notch above the Head Count, who were classless, property-less, vote-less, yet also the most numerous in Ancient Rome.

**4. Lamia** – A mythological monster who might have been the equivalent of today's bogeyman, used by parents in Rome to frighten youngsters into better behaviour.

**5. Octet** – One of the many divisions/groups in the Roman army. As taken from the name, it was composed of eight soldiers.

**6. Tribune (military)** - O fficers within a Roman army who often generaled cavalry; also known as prefects. They did other duties besides that, of course, and often served as part of the general's or legatal staff.

**7. *Tribunii aerarii* (pl.), *tribunus aerarius* (s.) - Tribune/s of the Treasury.**

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***Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae***

*par ethnewinter*

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Otanara's relief force reached Sosia towards the end of August and worked their way into the Himean camp-an easier thing for them than it had been for Takeda's contingent of the Seventh because they approached from the east, on the side opposite the Mentulaean base. First to detect them were their fellows with Takeda, who identified the false wolf-howls some nights before the reinforcements actually showed from the forest fringes. They might have been prevented from joining the beleaguered Himeans had it not been for the timely action of the Sosia garrison, which threatened the Mentulaean camp while Takeda's men fended off attacks around their site. Thus enemy attentions were divided, preventing them from swarming Takeda and the newcomers. This small success was heralded with much joy by the defenders, particularly since the appearance of this buffer force, no matter how small, at least helped with the mismatch of numbers and also freed up more units for forage.

The auxiliary's leaders gave a report in council as to how matters stood in Otomeia. Cheering news, it was generally agreed, that the Otomeians were fully dedicated to their old alliance. The only damper was that there were not yet more auxiliary troops to be had, but at least those that could be sent had already been deployed to Argus-from where, no doubt, they would be marching soon to relieve Sosia-or sent to stem Mentulaean traffic by working the bridges on the river boundary. Added to which, the Otomeians were also in the process of marshalling more forces and promised more reinforcements presently. Finally things were looking up!

"Of course it's still Himean legions we'll need to do the job," Takeda's senior legate noted in the council. "But Sugiura-san has

already sent for more. The Otomeians will have to do for now."

Takeda sighed at the comment. He agreed with Ushida, of course, but thought it slightly impolitic to openly disparage their allies' military worth when their leaders were present. They did not seem to mind overmuch, but Natsuki was present, and he did not care to offend her.

"They'll do fine," he insisted, rapping his knuckles on the table for attention. "If there's any auxiliary force I trust these days, by god it's the Otomeians!"

Suou grinned at him from across the table, but he ignored her.

"Anyway, we now have to provide for more people," he said. "Sosia's legion supplies itself. Until they look to be starving we don't worry about them. Our numbers?"

"One legion, understrength, Himean," the tribune he pointed to recited. "If we count with it the militia units picked up by Ushida-san, that brings it to a full-strength legion."

"Absorb the militia in it. Better to have it full-strength than leave the militia dangling separate."

"Noncombatants at appropriate number," the tribune went on. "Cavalry-thirteen hundred and fifty horse, Otomeian, half archery units and the other half Lupine division. Their noncombatants are at an appropriate number, but a hundred troopers have reported loss of one horse and eight both horses. The eight have been provided with horses from those with both horses remaining."

"I was thinking," Suou spoke up, "that I would like to round out the cavalry numbers to fifteen hundred, if not seventeen hundred. The Mentulae have four thousand horse out there, judging from what I've seen and the size of their cavalry camp, so it would be better to increase our cavalry where we can."

Ushida turned to Takeda. "I like it."

"So how do you plan to do this?" Takeda asked Suou. "I'm guessing you're getting the added troopers from the Otomeians who just

arrived, converting them from foot units to horse. Will that work?"

Suou nodded. "Natsuki-san assures me it will."

Takeda let his eyes stray to the source of that assurance, who did not return the glance.

"Well..." he said uncertainly. "That's good. But I'm just not sure the Otomeian troopers would take kindly to sharing out more of their reserve horses, especially since the numbers we're looking at put them at a risk of losing the ones they're using right now. We could end in deficit."

"We shall have to ask those who are willing to share, of course," Suou replied. "But my plan actually rests too upon our fellow officers and minor tribunes and the like."

Eyebrows went up all around the table.

"We all know many of the officers here do not actually get around to using their horses in battle," she explained, aware of Natsuki's very slight smirk beside her: she had discussed this option with the Otomeian princess beforehand and obtained the girl's approval for her scheme.

"And this is significant because all our officers have horses. Even quite a lot of the centurions have horses granted to them for awards or valour, and are carrying them on the march. But how often does a centurion really get on his steed? Or a junior tribune, or a quaestor, or a clerk? The horses stay in the stables for parades or public appearances, not so much for actual use in warfare, and that seems odd when we fund them from the war chest-not from any such thing as a parade chest, you would note."

Apprehensive looks dawned as they realised where she was going.

"It should only be considered a step towards our collective survival if these people give up their horses for the added troopers' use," she concluded. "Much good it would do them, anyway, if they just kept their horses for parade and did not live to see another parade afterwards. If this could be managed efficiently, I believe we should

be able to raise the cavalry numbers without too much grief, and spend our resources more efficiently besides."

There was silence after she finished, with some people looking darkly away from her.

"The men won't be happy," Takeda said, voicing the general Himean opinion.

"But they'll be alive," Suou countered, unknowingly voicing the general Otomeian opinion.

They looked at each other.

"Well," the commander finally grunted, looking a little unhappy as well. "Since this is a war council, better know what the rest think. Does anyone have a complaint with it?"

As no one could genuinely fault the logic of the proposition, no one spoke up but everyone looked sulky. Takeda's shoulders sagged.

"I'll ask you to work on it, Suou, since you're in charge of the cavalry," Takeda said in surrender, twisting at the thought of how his officers would be carping to him in the days to come. Damn Suou for putting him in this position! *No, that's not right*, he argued to himself, too fair to put the blame on her for coming up with such a scheme: she was only speaking good sense, after all, even if it came in the guise of a radical proposition. Damn the Mentulae instead!

"Oh, I shit on the Mentulae!" he burst out, face a picture of annoyance. "You're right, Suou-at least the bastards'll live, even if they're unhappy about it. What's the price of a parade horse against a chance to come out of this fuck-up?"

He spat the last so positively that those who had looked sulky nodded.

"So we aim to have fifteen hundred to seventeen hundred horse," Ushida reminded. "The current number of Otomeian foot is five thousand, though that'll be going down after we redistribute horses and cavalry gear."

The tribune who had been reciting the logistics all meeting said it was so.

"And how are the supplies against that?" Ushida asked her.

"Since the Otomeians brought supplies with them, the whole camp is set for two more weeks at most," the tribune answered. "If food is taken on spare commons."

"We'll have to start forage now," Ushida told Takeda. "The Otomeians can be sent to do it."

The commander agreed.

"Can you put together a team for that?" he asked Suou. "I think they'd better go under heavy arms."

"Of course. I shall talk to you later, Otanara-san," she said to the man concerned, who - naturally! - towered over the Himeans beside whom he stood.

Otanara nodded.

"Well, that about puts us right," the commander announced, tapping a finger on the table for each figure he stated. "One Himean legion, one Otomeian legion foot, and about thirteen hundred Otomeian horse. Our horse, at present numbers, looks outnumbered by three-to-one. Our foot..."

He looked around enquiringly.

"I estimate it to be some forty thousand out there. So at four-to-one," Suou suggested.

Several people swore along with the commander.

"There it is," he said. "So no playing heroes yet. Our main goal is to hold out for reinforcements-which *will* come, we know that now. We'll hold out and work skirmishes if they try anything daring in their siege but unless it comes to a full-blow thing, no full battles. I'm not willing to risk it."

And if those who had been present at the Battle of Argentum remembered what his precursor had dared to risk and won, they kept quiet.

"Hrm," growled the senior legate, nodding to himself. "Argus should be sending us more soldiers soon-and Hime too, since it's probably got the news by now. All that's left is to hold out a little more, and everything will be fine. We'll all get through this good and well."

Which rather put Takeda in a bad mood after that meeting broke up.

It was all very well for Ushida to say that, thought the careworn commander of the Himean defence of in the Northlands. Ushida could say all would be fine did they live through this because Ushida did not have to worry about the censure of Senate cracking down on his head. Takeda, however, had strong concerns about how his present senatorial allies would evaluate his performance. How could he explain having let this happen? No matter that it could not be attributed to any slacking off on his part, he reflected: the fact was, events would be read as things he had *allowed* to take place.

A very small voice in his head whispered that the only way out would be to argue that this travesty should be blamed on his predecessor's dispositions. Certainly any political advisor would counsel it. But the better part of him argued strongly against that track, as did the rational part that reminded him of the woman he now recognised as Fujino's agent, Suou Himemiya. Any spin he might produce would be very easily spun around by her. So no, unfortunately, nothing for it but to brazen it out when the time came for accounting. If only he could come up with some counterweight, some virtue fished up from this muddle...

*A great victory would do it .*

Yes, that was a thought, was it not? The more Takeda mulled it over, the more he knew it would be the saving of him, perhaps even bringing more reward in its train. Only, how to manage it before Hime sent more legions? For Hime would send another to replace him, that much he knew, and he would be sent home in disgrace after that, as impotent, as flaccid as a boy of tragic inexperience beaten off by a better man. Painful!

"How long would it take, you think, for more of your people to arrive?" he asked one of the Otomeians before him, who were some of the leaders of the new arrivals. "And how many?"

The female he was facing directly squinted-an act he marked because Natsuki did it often. Perhaps it was their people's habit?

"Some weeks, a month at most," she answered. "Apologies, but I am less certain of the numbers. If the King summons the nearest army in Sura-"

"Sura?"

"Our sister citadel to the northeast," she explained. "We came from there when we reached Otomeia and received the summons to join you."

"And how large is the army there?"

She exchanged a look with one of her confederates.

"In itself, only ten thousand," she said. "But the neighbouring valleys and plains under its administration also have soldiers. So the existing total would be somewhere around thirty."

Takeda's dark face lit up, was transformed by a wide smile. Ushida had walked up by now and was listening.

"Oh, good!" Takeda told them. "Well, we'll be in good state as soon as those get here. That thirty thousand will do until we can get more. There are more in your other territories, right?"

The woman blinked.

"Commander," she said, seeming reluctant. "I do not think our King can send all of those thirty thousand. Sura is surrounded by certain bands and tribes who constantly assault and raid parts of it. The most the King would send is maybe half the total number."

The smile left Takeda.

" *The King* had better do better than that," Ushida growled beside



him, upper lip curling. "If he doesn't send them all, then he might end up pissing himself over your main citadel, which will be lost to the Mentulae!"

The general stopped him with a hand, displeased too but afraid they would lose their only allies in this war if this conversation kept up in the same vein.

"What my senior legate is saying is that we need all the men we can get right now," Takeda told the Otomeian nobles, whose faces were no longer as open as before, nor half as warm. "For the sake of Otomeia as well as Hime. It's both our interests threatened, I'd hope you to know. King Kruger seems to understand that-he sent you so quickly."

He cast his eyes wildly about and spotted Suou, to his relief. He called her over.

She walked up with Otanara and Natsuki in tow, then addressed the female Otomeian to whom Takeda had been speaking.

"Otanara-san tells me I should speak to you about choosing people for the added troopers," she told the rather crusty-looking woman-now what had Takeda or Ushida said to make her so distrustful? "Might I have a word after you finish your talk here?"

The Otomeian shot a glance flat as ice at Takeda, who sighed.

"We're done," he told Suou.

"Excellent!"

She began to explain what she wanted to the woman as the commander and senior legate headed back into the tent. Meanwhile, behind Suou, Otanara had sidled up to Natsuki and was requesting to speak with her.

"Go ahead, please," said Suou when informed, guessing this was to be a private dialogue. "I shall meet you in our quarters, Natsuki."

The two Otomeians walked away. Their pace was restrained as they moved through the camp because the place was choked with

activity from the newcomers settling in. Only when they were outside Natsuki's billet did Otanara open his mouth, as well as his bag, from which he retrieved a scroll cylinder.

"Alyssa entrusted me to give this to you," said Otanara, handing his companion the light tube. A very short letter was inside, Natsuki thought, fingers taking a tactile measure of the object.

"She regrets she could not give you her regards in person," the man said. "Your health, Natsuki?"

His eyes were on the staff she was using as a prop; they strayed to her leg, still conspicuously bandaged.

"Well," she said curtly. "My cousin?"

He tried to stifle his smile. "Well. And worried."

She had to stifle her smile too. *Of course* Alyssa would worry about her. The woman was almost an older sister where Natsuki was concerned. No doubt that related to why Otanara had asked to speak with her today, she mused, wondering what message Alyssa had deemed worthy of sending him to convey. Otanara was one of her cousin's most trusted subordinates, and whenever her cousin sent those on a personal errand, Natsuki knew there was something of great significance to be done. Curious that Alyssa had not been content to just put the message in the letter just handed to her.

She shifted a little more weight onto her staff and cocked her head.

"The King?" she enquired.

"The same."

"Hm."

A brief pause. Otanara grunted deep in his throat, uncomfortable with the next task he had to discharge. Natsuki knew his mannerisms, and thus bade him take a seat inside the tented structure she occupied with Suou.

His eyes flashed very quickly over the living arrangements first, and

her lips tightened as she understood the reason for his survey.

"His Majesty and the Princess Alyssa both asked that I enquire after you," he began.

"You have," she snapped, still irked.

His breath dragged. The prominent thyroid cartilage on his neck bobbed as she watched it with childish interest, looking but not intending to look like an animal about to lunge for his jugular.

"And they are both... distraught over your situation," Otanara told this innocent predator. "A bad situation, Natsuki, if you'll pardon me saying it. This isn't how they imagined you spending your stay with the foreigners. Your injury too added to their worries when they learned of it. The circumstances don't look very well."

She said nothing.

"If it were possible to recall you to the safety of the capital, it would've been done," he proceeded. "But it isn't right now, as you know. So I've been tasked to ensure your health as far as possible in this position we're occupying. I'm to tell you too not to enter any battles for now," he said, sounding sorry even as he spoke the chief point of his communication. "Of course, you're still the head of your division. Nothing can change that. But you're asked not to lead it into battle, for the time being. That is, until the situation proves better, and your own health has recovered. This is to keep you safe until such time as the circumstances improve, naturally, and not to demote you or remove your leadership over your men. They would undoubtedly rest easier too if they knew their leader was safe-just as His Highness and the Princess Alyssa would feel easier if they knew your health was being cared for."

Her eyes moved off to the side as she cut him off.

"My health is being seen to satisfactorily," she enunciated, sounding annoyed.

"I was only ordered, Princess," Otanara apologised. Her weird gaze returned at the plea in his voice and he found his guard rising

because of it. Otanara was like the rest of the Otomeians, used to the yellows and blues of their kind. So he had always found Natsuki disturbing because, though her skin was as white as theirs, she just seemed so *dark* .

"The origin of the order?" the dark one probed.

Now was that not the key question, Otanara grimaced. He should have known better than to pray she would not ask it: Natsuki was very far from dumb, and no amount of prayer or wordplay on his part could push her into assuming what he would have wanted her to assume. How much easier this would be had she been thicker! Alyssa would be displeased with him if he did not lie now, he knew, but she would still understand: whereas there would be hell to pay from other quarters if he did make up some fiction for the purpose. So he winced while answering, but did not lie.

"The Princess Alyssa."

"Not," she said, "His Majesty?"

"No," he admitted.

Her lips tugged upwards. Which he took to mean that the order was practically moot where she was concerned. Loyalty to his commander asserted itself as Otanara attempted to persuade Natsuki to heed the order-which, he said slyly, was actually a gentle plea, a concerned request from her royal cousin.

"It's only that she's so worried," he said to the girl before him, who listened to his arguments in that way she had made her own: unmoving yet crackling with caution, fantastic eyes translucent yet unreadable. "Even more when she found out from Shura that, despite your injury, you had to go to battle because of the low manpower. She said that His Majesty voiced worry too over you. You've the King's and your cousin's love, Natsuki. So also their concern."

She stirred.

"They have mine," she said with faint dismissal, flicking her hair with

one hand. "I know what you say. There is no need to say it."

"For the sake of my hide, I thought it better to," he countered, looking wistful. "I was entrusted to convey the message. But you know what that means with Alyssa."

She nodded. With Alyssa, carrying a message meant seeing it carried out too.

"So I hope you can understand my position as a mere messenger," he told her.

Her head moved very slightly; the nostrils on either side of the small nose flared.

"I said before," she snarled. "I know what you say. You think me thoughtless?"

He got to his feet.

"Please forgive my rudeness," he said, beginning a genuflection.

She asked him to return to his seat before he could complete the gesture, shaking her head. He acquiesced smoothly, though his brow remained pleated with tension as he eyed her.

"You too," she said to him once he was seated, "are worried, Otanara."

She had the small smile about her lips as she said it, and it helped Otanara relax. He held his peace, however, as she held up her hand to indicate she was thinking.

Finally she decided.

"Done," she told him.

His features lightened. "You agree?"

"Mm," she murmured. "Insofar as circumstances permit it."

Otanara knew that was the most he could hope to get and got up

again.

"Thank you very much, Princess," he said, bowing before walking out of the tent. "Your cousin would be relieved if she knew it. And if I can say so, I'm pleased that I will be fighting with you again."

She threw him a twisted smile, her eyes full of defiance.

"Fight *with* me?" she repeated. "Not so what you asked of me, Otanara."

She dismissed him before he could apologise again.

The letter from Alyssa, she discovered, was also much as she had expected: a promise to reunite with her soon, combined with an injunction to keep herself in good health and do as Otanara had requested. Short and precise, every word printed out in that clear, sharp hand she knew to be Alyssa's. *A little sharper than usual*, she assessed, guessing that it was because the older woman had been in a rush while writing it. That was one more reason to appreciate the note, in fact, since Alyssa had obviously taken what little time she had to spare to write it.

Natsuki nodded to herself and rolled up the paper to return to its canister.

*Thoughtless.*

She frowned and repeated the word in her mind: a rebuke. Why had she not thought of Alyssa, she wondered. It might be because it had been so long since last she had seen her cousin-and so many things had happened during that time that had stripped most other considerations from Natsuki's mind. Still, she should have thought of Alyssa. It was not like her to fail in such considerations and Alyssa was important enough to her to merit consideration. Again she berated herself, wondering if her cousin had heard the news of her affair yet. Yes, chances were tilted very heavily to the affirmative. The soldiers would have talked and Alyssa would have heard. In the absence of further information, it was safer to continue her thoughts under the premise Alyssa knew already. And what had she thought of it, that fiercely Otomeian, wildly patriotic woman? Ah, the chances

tilted heavily one way too, here. Natsuki could take an intelligent guess.

She got up from her seat with a huff and walked to her bed, irritated by the sound of the staff but not diverted by it. Her teeth rounded on one lip as she lowered herself to sit on the edge of her cot.

*Another judge.*

But what was another one of those, even so? Best resign herself to the fact: her people would talk about her liaison with Shizuru for a long time; neither of them had done much to keep it secret. Human nature that tongues would wag. Still, Alyssa was not just another human. She was a relative who happened to be a friend. And her disapproval, while not something that could sway Natsuki from a decision, was nonetheless another bruise on Natsuki's already overloaded back.

Not many things were going very well for Natsuki these days. She was part of what she considered a germinating military debacle, she had to put up with people's judgments over her unlikely affair with Shizuru, and she did not feel very well. The traitor in her belly was still refusing to cooperate completely, although she did fare better than before because of the prescribed regimen she had taken to eating. As for her leg, it was still sore-the surgeons swore they could find no rot in it, yet it refused to fully heal. Thus the reason Alyssa had not really needed to charge Otanara with ensuring she not enter battle: she was forbidden entry to it already by the Himean surgeons, with the connivance of her Himean friend. *If she stops moving about so much, it should heal perfectly, they said. If she stops forcing the blood by riding her horse, it should heal perfectly, they said. If she stops eating anything sweet for a while, it should heal perfectly-* and so on, and so forth, they said. Had she been inclined to disputing with them in their speciality, she might have told them that the only things she could begin to taste or keep down these days were all sweet, so that last injunction might actually make her worse by leaving her starved. As it was, someone kindly argued the point for her and they conceded that a bit of honey in her food would not do too much harm.

"I should say it can't do too much harm," Suou had told them,

drawling the way Natsuki learned she did whenever she was disgusted. "Although it certainly is a thought that death by starvation would dry out that thing faster than anything else that seems to have been presented. A *most* progressive style of medicine."

Suou was amusing whenever she turned sarcastic, Natsuki assessed.

Still, she found amusements were growing increasingly rare. All she seemed to hear of late was a litany of ill events, and people always going on about them. There was always *so much talk*, and very little of it pleasant or reassuring. Always a voice saying this was going wrong, someone saying this was not working fine. How could that not make her wish just a little to hear the one voice that made anything better, the one that used to tell her everything would be all right?

"You look a storm," said a voice, not the voice she needed.

Natsuki blinked, hastened to shutter her heart.

"Suou," she said, greeting her friend by name. The screw of her lips loosened as she thought on the woman's words. "I... look a storm?"

The Himean drew up a stool to face her.

"You generally do, Natsuki," she said, smiling an apology for having voiced the observation. "With varying degrees of thunder. What happened for you to be so bothered, though?" She indicated Natsuki's leg, hanging over the edge of the bed. "And wouldn't it be better to put that up?"

She threw an arm behind her and dragged a chair close. Natsuki put her leg on it with a sigh.

"That bad?" Suou asked, still giving her that disarmingly attractive smile. "Or is it something about which you would rather not talk? Gods forbid I intrude upon Otomeian politics, lest I have to suffer more of *that* !"

The younger woman was intrigued by the remark.



"It hasn't escaped me that quite a few of the newcomers are giving me long looks," Suou explained, seeming very tickled. "Rather as though I were suspected of some transgression or other-and though I'm certainly no paragon of virtue, neither am I guilty of anything yet so large that half of your Otomeian fellows seem to know of it. What in the world did I do, you think?"

And then she saw that Natsuki had the answer. No part of the girl moved, but it was there in the half-lidded eyes: a shot of shame, secret and sensitive.

"Nothing," Natsuki admitted heavily, after some seconds. "You did... nothing."

"I'm definitely relieved to hear that." The Himean paused. "But you know what gnat is flying in their minds, don't you?"

It took a while, but she eventually got a nod.

"May I know what it is?" she prodded. "Or is it something you would rather not tell?"

Natsuki drew a breath and raised a hand, waving it in that masterfully spare, faintly tired way Suou imagined she did whenever she was dismissing someone in her noble function. An aristocrat down to the marrow, the snooty imp! She and Shizuru were made for each other.

"Better I tell," Natsuki ruled.

Suou waited.

"You did nothing," the girl said once more. "But it is that they..."

She trailed off as though she would not continue, but disproved the impression the next instant.

"They *wonder*," she concluded.

The Himean's brow creased as she thought about that.

"They wonder?" she echoed. "About what?"

Natsuki dropped her eyes.

"That we - we stay together."

Suou's eyebrows shot up as she caught it.

"Malicious old villains!" she blew out, mixing the exclamation with a laugh. "Do they actually wonder about *that* ? Ye gods, Natsuki, but your own people must not know you very well!"

Natsuki was grim.

"They know," she started, face turning red as she tried to finish it.  
"By now they know oh-oh-of-hhh-"

Suou waited for her to clear the obstacle, face betraying nothing at all. Just another reason Natsuki liked the Himean: she actually waited without making it seem like she was waiting whenever Natsuki's tongue seized up.

She finally pushed through it: "Of Shizuru!"

Natsuki gasped at the effort that had taken, both ears flying scarlet flags.

"I think because of that," she went on slowly. "So... they wonder."

Suou shook her head.

"This shows they don't know Shizuru-san either," she mused. "Had they met her, they would know exactly where I and all others are compelled to draw the line."

She wriggled both her eyebrows at the girl.

"Don't take this the wrong way, I beg," she grinned. "I like you very much for what you are, dear Natsuki, but I also happen to very much like living."

Finally the pink lips trembled into a smile.

"You always..." Natsuki frowned and searched her mind for the

words. "Always you make it seem *she* is so lethal, Suou."

Suou accepted that with a nod.

"Because she is," she affirmed. "The only reason you have leeway to doubt that is your impunity. The rest of us, however, are not blessed with the same exemption. Needs must tread carefully. You should be aware of this, your impunity notwithstanding."

The girl lifted an eyebrow.

"I take the warning," she said archly, drawing a laugh.

Suou asked if she could see the bindings on both sides of Natsuki's leg and the girl acquiesced. For a while no more words were spoken as the Himean did her inspection.

"Shall it trouble you?" she asked while signalling that the girl could put her leg back.

Natsuki took her meaning perfectly.

"No," she said with decision. "They only wonder."

"The imagination paired with the whisper may breed troublesome things sometimes," Suou retorted. "Witness how many innocuous and perfectly earthbound things crop up as the new Lamia! Can nothing be done? I would rather you stay here with me, of course, since I'd not have anyone to complain to when the rest get on my nerves-" The two of them laughed. "-but I wouldn't have you uncomfortable either."

But the Otomeian smiled and denied the offer.

"All right," she said, her voice telling Suou she wished to have an end of the subject. The Himean thanked her and dutifully broached a new topic.

"The one who has gone to perform interceptions at the bridge," she started.

Natsuki said the name. "Princess Alyssa."

"Just so. Tell me about her."

But the cut-glass eyes squinted sharply, as if to say that was too general a question. Suou sighed inwardly and supposed Natsuki was right.

"What is she like?" she elaborated. "As far as our purposes would go, would you call her capable? This is just between us, so please bring out your excellent objectivity here, Natsuki. I need to know where we stand with that woman, especially as she is the one carrying out a task so vital to our survival. Is she competent enough to hold that place with the numbers Otanara-san quoted to us earlier?"

Natsuki's brows drew together.

"Competent?" she snorted mildly, seeming amused. "She is competent. Very."

She continued in Greek.

"My cousin is a skilled warrior... but there is more to that, if such is what you ask. She is a warrior with a mind. And a tongue."

"Ah. A leader?"

Natsuki answered positively.

"And," she added, "she is most ambitious."

Again the tiny narrowing of the eyes, relaxing to their normal width in a flash. *No doubt that mind processes at the same pace, if not faster!* Suou thought to herself, enjoying the wisely calculating expression on the young countenance. She did not know yet why Natsuki saw fit to mention the Princess Alyssa's ambition, but she trusted there was a reason to it, so she did not interrupt.

"Many will say she is dangerously ambitious," Natsuki was saying very quietly. "I say she has the - ah - the *right* to be so. Such people are often found dangerous."

"Does that trouble her?"

"No. She provides for it always. She is such a person."

Suou hummed, hearing the faint note of admiration in the girl's words and filing it away in her mind.

"It is so in my mind, but it is also so that I may be wrong," Natsuki disclaimed.

The icy eyes stared at her with great interest.

"A little like Shizuru-san, then?" Suou suggested.

Natsuki hissed a sharp breath.

"A little like," Natsuki granted, seeming disturbed by that comparison. "And also unlike."

Suou urged her to say more.

The Otomeian frowned. "Shizuru is - she is *not* such as one thinks a naive person, yes?"

"Hardly!"

"But one does not call her suspicious either."

"Aah, now I understand."

Suou uncrossed and recrossed her legs, drumming the fingers of one hand on the edge of her seat.

"One would call the Princess Alyssa suspicious, then?" she asked.

"Mmm." Natsuki's eyes slid away for an instant. "Especially of - um - that she considers *external*."

The patrician smiled.

"You mean of the foreign," she clarified, drawing the tiniest of wincing from the girl.

"That is one such thing, yes." Natsuki caught herself and amended: "There are many things one would call foreign. So, yes."

She scowled all of a sudden, apparently finding something requiring a qualifier in her own words.

"She is not a fool," she insisted, looking Suou in the eyes to show her certainty in the evaluation. "Not blind, her suspicion. You asked if she is like Shizuru and I spoke of her suspicion. But it is so that her wariness is obligatory. For her aims and in our world, as well as the greater world, which is also yours."

Suou said she understood that pertinent circumstances could develop and reinforce such attitudes.

"So it may be that she is more like - like Shizuru, considered so," Natsuki determined. "But she is not, in my mind, as... provisional on her knowledge."

The Himean smiled and asked precisely she meant by that.

"Precisely," Natsuki said, "that Princess Alyssa does not revise her foundations as often as Shizuru does."

Suou succumbed to a chuckle, intensely amused by the scholarship of that answer.

"I see," she said, once she was sure the chuckle could not mutate into a laugh. "And she has a great deal of clout amongst your people, it was implied?"

"More and more, yes."

"And how does the King feel about her?"

"He favours her."

"Dear, dear. That rather puts the point on it, does it not?"

Suou hummed and swayed a little on her stool, looking nothing but her usual self: a woman cool as the most perfect ice. The Otomeian knew Suou, however, and knew Suou would soon voice the question that was most significant.

"Shall we find her difficult, Natsuki?"

The girl did not hesitate: "Yes."

Suou smiled.

"Interesting," she murmured. She got to her feet languidly and walked towards her desk, the green eyes trailing curiously after her.

"I take your warning too, Natsuki," she said, reaching for some paper.

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Shizuru went to the *comitia centuriata* the morning after the Senate gave her its refusals. To her pleasure, the Centuries repaid her trust: from the first meeting to the last, the knights made it clear they were willing to grant Shizuru all that she asked. Comitia to comitia, through the requisite seventeen days between a law's introduction and its passage, the House could do little but watch with horror as the equestrian powers tweaked senatorial noses. At the end, it was the Senate who was the loser and Shizuru Fujino taking the prize.

The bill returning her northern command was exhaustive, having been officially drafted to exquisite precision by Chikane Himemiya and, unofficially, by herself. Two of the greatest legal minds ever seen in Hime made for watertight legislation, so much was acknowledged. The pair included Sergay Wang's recommendations—much to Sergay Wang's annoyance—along with the amendments suggested by Chikane in that same session. Shizuru would have her proconsular imperium, giving her the highest authority of all the officials present in the Himean North. She had a mandate for annexing the current Mentulaean Empire, and it would extend for five years from the date of ratification, to be reviewed after that deadline and extended if needed. Most importantly of all, the bill included a clause that forbade discussion of her governorship prior to the expiration of the five-year term. Thus Shizuru would have at least five years of perfectly secure command in the north, without fear of anyone trying to introduce a contrary law stripping it from her all over again.

Ten legions would be the official minimum, with the Ninth, Eleventh, and Fourteenth included in the count. That the Eighth and Seventh

were not counted, although they were already in the northlands, was because they were technically still under the generalship of Takeda Masashi, who would have the option of turning them over to Shizuru once she arrived. Shizuru intended to make that option nonnegotiable for him, of course, since she wanted both legions back. She and everyone else in Fuuka did not yet know what had happened to the Eighth.

The Treasury was directed to pay out the stipulated funds for ten legions for ten months immediately, which meant as soon as the concerned commander managed to hound the ever-reluctant clerks of the Treasury enough into digging into the state coffers for the portion. This commander proved the worst thus far, at least where the Treasury was concerned. She actually showed up in their offices in the basement of the Temple of Saturn the *same* afternoon that she got her mandate.

"Shizuru Fujino, formerly praetor urbanus elect, currently acting praetor and now proconsular governor-general of the North Territories," she announced, breezing into the room in her usual style. "Good day to everyone. May I know who is in charge?"

The surprised clerks gaped, stared at her with the eyes of those used to being in the gloom all their lives and suddenly visited by a star no dimmer than the sun. Shizuru scanned the room swiftly and noted the smells first of all: dust and old paper and that distinctive metallic tang that meant gold and silver. *Smaller than I expected*, she thought, inwardly sighing at the staleness of the odours. The Treasury clerks were cooped up, and Shizuru could see that the bar-grilled openings on the walls were hardly sufficient for light. Day it was, outside, but every table's lamp was already lit. And oh- *that* was so familiar-witness the regulation accountant's clutter!

"I am," said a grey-haired woman, getting up from her seat at a table nearby. "Sumire Hisaka at your service, Fujino-san."

Shizuru unfurled the fat scroll in her hand and explained briefly the terms of her command.

"You shall be receiving notification presently," she said. "As for my purpose here, it is to inform you that I shall be leaving presently as



well. Therefore, I shall expect the papers to be done by tomorrow at the latest. The sum should be in the usual scrip, save for ten percent in cash, also by tomorrow. The ten percent should be in golden and silver denarii or talent sows, all stamped by Treasury seal. I shall accept no foreign coin," she stipulated, knowing that, even if weight and metal value were technically equivalent, the utility value was actually lower on foreign moneys given that a random shift in the political sphere could make a foreign coin harder to move all of a sudden. "Take note that part of the bill legislating my command included a pay raise for the legions. The raise was fixed today in the ratified bill as exactly double the present one."

Sumire choked. " *Double ?*"

"Exactly double."

"Ecastor!"

Shizuru went on.

"Hence the total should be costed out with that in mind. As I said, the notification should be here any moment." The corners of her lips turned up faintly as she thought of how the wage hike provision had seen the senators practically apoplectic. Now that had been *nice* !

"Please expect a visit tomorrow morning from my senior legate, Shizuma Hanazono, accompanied by my praefectus fabrum, Takumi Tokiha. My thanks for your work and good day again to all of you."

She left the *tribunii aerarii* all a little short of breath after that.

The clerks of the Treasury were not the only ones gasping. Most of the Senate was in a daze after Shizuru's victory in the comitia, feeling an outrage so strong it held them paralysed. A couple of the more daring plebeians (though no tribunes of the plebs: all of those pleaded ill that day) had even run to the rostra and tried to call a meeting. These were ignored, which was just as well for their bodily health given the current strength of Urumi's gangs. Other archconservatives met for the eighteenth consecutive time in a council, but were all so depressed that they did little save hurl aspersions on their foes and wine down their gullets, compounding their depression with roaring hangovers. By far the most miserable,

however, was the one member of the Traditionalists who never drank enough to get drunk. As she tried to explain to her boon companion, who had taken this latest defeat terribly as well: Haruka Armitage had gone to the bottle.

"I know, Haruka-chan," Yukino told the half-insensible woman mumbling on the other couch. Only the two of them were in Haruka's dingy old atrium, so no one else could tattle about the champion of Stoic restraint getting dead-drunk. This was Haruka's best-kept secret, and one she shared only with Yukino: on all the worst occasions in Haruka's life, the famed teetotaler emulated her late, alcoholic father and drowned the sorrows in liquor. Yukino had been present to see it all four times before, so she knew exactly how to handle the woman in such a state. Though that did not make it any less painful for her to watch whenever Haruka took these headlong dives off the wagon.

"The worst of it," Yukino groaned, "is that we had the choice. That's what she was trying to prove, I think."

A senseless mutter from Haruka.

"I mean she was showing that she offered us the choice of giving her that command first before she took it to the Centuries-that we could've kept the senatorial power over commands instead of losing a little more of our power to the comitia," Yukino explained, even while knowing the other was not actually listening to her. "I think - I think she was saying we could have stopped that by just letting her have what she wanted, Haruka-chan. Do you think that's what it was? I have this awful feeling we made a mistake there. Tell me we didn't, Haruka-chan. Tell me we couldn't have given in to her, no matter what."

But Haruka had no comfort to give, floating away as she was in her private sea. In other Traditionalist homes, similar scenes of misery were present, from a drained Sergay obsessively reading the newly-passed bill for the fifth time in an attempt to find a loophole that did not exist, to a prostrate Nakao weeping tears of frustration into his exquisite bed-sheet of Egyptian linen. And many of the other senators, including those not allied to the conservatives as well as some who had been on Shizuru's side, shivered in indignation that a

fellow senator had actively conspired to take away yet another from the diminishing number of exclusively senatorial powers, therefore betraying all of their kind.

The triumphant Shizuru did not stay to gloat at any of this, however. The same day the Centuries granted her the command, she announced that she would depart two days after, because no time could be wasted. True to her word, she mustered the Fourteenth in the Campus Martius right on schedule.

"Make your own departure two weeks from now, Shizuma-earlier if possible," she said to her cousin, who would handle all offices and further recruitment in Fuuka on her behalf. "Head for Argus and set up base there. I know not when I shall call on you, but ensure you are there within two weeks of my passage. The next two legions you can equip, send them ahead under Kenji-han."

"To Argus too?"

"Yes."

Shizuma was quick. "You wish me to do that for every two legions I put together afterwards, I suppose, with me heading the last pair?"

"With the choice of subsequent commanding legates up to your discretion." She did a swift scan of the scrolls on Shizuma's desk and purred. "Given how recruitment is proceeding, I imagine you should have all seven legions far ahead of the deadline."

"This keeps up, I might have *the whole ten*," Shizuma smiled.

"If they come, take them."

Up shot a silvery eyebrow.

"Ten was just the minimum, was it not?" said the younger woman.

"You'll have a time squeezing the Senate for funds if you do get more, you know," Shizuma warned.

"So let us send King Obsidian the bill instead." She nodded and whipped to leave before her legate could say any more. "I need you

in two weeks, cousin! If not earlier."

And then she was gone, leaving Shizuma to turn a wry smile to her new assistant.

"Our general, the slave-driver," she sighed.

The young lady sitting at the other desk-also cluttered with work-leaned both elbows on a sheet of paper and laughed.

"I like her," the tribune avowed.

Shizuma rolled her eyes humorously.

"Youth is irrepressible!" she returned. "I suppose I should just be glad it doesn't daunt you to know what kind of work she expects."

The other woman gave her a shy smile.

"I was warned," she reminded Shizuma.

"True," Shizuma replied, deadpan. "You were."

This young woman Shizuma had taken as her assistant had been thoroughly informed by the senior legate as to what duties would be expected of her, as well as the quality of work required in the execution of those duties. Shizuma herself had made the appointment... and if it had to be admitted that she had not made her choice out of actual assessment in terms of competence, it was nonetheless a fact that the girl she chose proved surprisingly easy to work with: keen to learn because she cared about pleasing her superior, endowed with an unquenchable good humour that had Shizuma smiling most of the time. Of course, Shizuma had other reasons for smiling in her assistant's presence. After all, said assistant happened to be the name Shizuma's cousin had put on her tribunician list just to gratify Shizuma's urge for retribution.

"Still, I find it a little, well, a kind of surprise," the young woman was telling her.

Shizuma smirked at the redhead, beloved niece of the despised Noboru. *Little red fox, caught in the trap.* A second glance prompted

her to amend the thought: *little auburn fox, rather.*

"A kind of surprise that Shizuru's so efficient, Nagisa-chan?" she baited.

"No!" A hand came up to cover the tribune's mouth; Nagisa flushed brightly. "I'm so sorry-I wasn't thinking. That's really not what I meant at all!"

"I understand," Shizuma said, to stop the flutters. "My cousin is very debonair socially, but to see her suddenly be so crisp is usually a shock to those who have never campaigned with her. That includes myself, take note."

The younger woman looked relieved at this explanation.

"I've never seen anyone go so fast," she eventually confessed, sounding awed. "Like the other day, when she was talking about the arrangements she wanted for the groups of-no, sorry, I mean cohorts." There was embarrassed laughter. "Sorry. I hope I get used to these terms soon!"

Shizuma grinned.

"A little more time here and you shall," she told the young woman. "Go on, what were you saying?"

"Well," Nagisa said, resting an elbow on the table and propping up her chin on one hand. "Fujino-san just sort of... breezed through it all, didn't she? It was all so detailed, I know-I can't even remember half of everything she specified then. But she just rattled it out like it had always been there, in her head."

"Most of the time, it is that."

"Mm-hm." The tribune nodded fervently. "But most of it seems so new, I think, that it's still amazing." She seemed to remember something and hurriedly added: "The other tribunes tell me too that they're new... a lot of the things Fujino-san wants to be done, I mean."

The senior legate only hummed, knowing that her enthusiastic

young assistant would run on by herself if permitted.

"I think they do make sense," Nagisa admitted, her brow creasing in thought. "Most of them are really practical changes, and I see why Fujino-san would want them. Although, well..."

Shizuma put on her curious face.

"What is it?" she prodded. "If there is aught that troubles, you know you may and *should* ask me, Nagisa." Her voice softened, flowed into its most swaying register: "You should ask me anytime."

It worked.

"Well, I get most of the other things," said the younger woman. "But... but why does the commander want the, um, octets to be fixed like that?"

"You mean, ensuring that there is at least one member of each who can read, write, and do figures?"

"Yes. I mean, it's so much work added on and for wha-"

A sudden stop, as she had just realised to whom she was speaking. *Another dangerous woman*, her uncle and aunt had warned, and all the more dangerous because Shizuma Hanazono and her cousin liked each other. Nagisa slapped herself several times in her mind, distraught at her own recklessness. But it was so hard to remember all those injunctions of caution when she faced the senior legate, who proved far nicer and more likeable than she had thought to prepare for. And so unbelievably attractive! The senior legate's looks played havoc with the tongue, sometimes tying Nagisa's into knots, sometimes loosening it until it spilled all sorts of things it should not. As in the present situation.

"Oh, say it already, Nagisa!" the older woman abruptly chuckled, interrupting her thoughts. "It shall do you more good than keeping it in your head to fester."

Nagisa sighed and knew she was caught.

"Sorry..." she said, looking sheepish. "It's just a thought, Shizuma-

sama."

"Shizuma- *san* ."

Nagisa shrank.

"I'm probably wrong," she uttered.

"Say it and let us find out if you are."

Nagisa gave up.

"Won't it be too troublesome having to find out who can do that and then distributing them across the octets in every century?" she asked, looking very awkward and unsure.

The senior legate stretched her legs under the table so that they poked out through the front. Nagisa looked and noted how far beyond the edge they stretched out. What legs the senior legate had! But she reminded herself she had no call to be surprised, given that the commander too was of an amazing height. The cousins were impressive women.

"As it turns out, you are *not* wrong," the senior legate was telling her wryly. "That directive *shall be* a headache to implement. But I have to admit it also has Shizuru's usual good sense speaking in its favour. As you heard earlier, we expect to have a great more recruits signing up soon, which will include not just those who have already been in the legions, but also those who have come from other walks of life. Including many members of the Head Count. And though many of the old-style generals in Hime still disdain to use Head Count recruits-they could afford it back then, being that we haven't had a war requiring an army this size in ages-my cousin does not. Not just because refusing them would mean fewer soldiers, but because she has always been one of the strongest voices in the House when it comes to using the Head Count in the legions. And why not? Only a fool would fail to see that the army is one of the only ways the Head Count can be useful to Hime, which gives them free grain and games for nothing. This way, the exchange is more balanced. Besides, the Head Count soldiers might even make enough money from a good campaign to get out of their

Head Count status. And can anyone rightly argue against such an opportunity for the people, when supporting it can only be positive and patriotic?"

Nagisa flushed, having heard many a speech from her relatives to the opposite effect. Both her mother's and father's families were heavily conservative and looked on the Head Count as an utterly worthless-if inescapable-leech upon Hime's body.

"So, it is to be expected that a huge part of the legions we put together shall be Head Count recruits," Shizuma continued. "My cousin and I actually discussed this beforehand, and this was when she told me of her scheme for the selection of octets. There is at least one literate and numerate man in each octet because he shall be tasked with teaching all the other members of the group basic letters and numbers. In exchange, the other members of the octet carry his things for him and take over some of his chores. Seniority privileges, in other words, shall be the payment for his tuition of the others."

The tribune blinked in astonishment.

"I guess I'm going to sound stupid here, Shizuma-san," she said with only a bit of reluctance. "But what does literacy and numeracy matter to the soldiers? I'd have thought they only needed to listen to their officers and fight."

She stopped abruptly again and looked frantically apologetic.

"I'm sorry, but I thought I'd better ask now because I don't understand," she added. "I'm so sorry I'm so dull!"

There was a low, rather thrillingly throaty laugh from the senior legate's desk.

"It argues against that self-indictment that you had sufficient gumption to ask, actually," Shizuma told the younger woman. "The answer is quite practical. Our general dislikes the idea of having troops who cannot read a simple note for themselves because, in a pinch, that could spell the difference between victory and defeat by miscommunication. As for numeracy, she also believes that every



soldier should be able to calculate his booty share and wage sums himself, so that he can not only avoid being cheated, but also *know* that he is not being cheated. Part of the skill in keeping the legionaries happy is ensuring they have the ability to see for themselves that they are being treated well, Nagisa."

Nagisa's mouth was open by the time she finished.

"I didn't think of that!" the young woman gasped. "That's amazing!"

Shizuma chuckled into her hand.

"Many of the things Shizuru thinks of are," she agreed. "So even though I predict we shall end up going demented in the process of acting out her orders, I find her commands are yet for the best, no matter how difficult or downright mad they sound. My cousin doesn't ask us to move mountains without knowing what she's about."

"She's so... so *amazing*," the tribune repeated, still dwelling on the earlier discussion. "And I think - I think she's actually very kind."

"But still an autocrat when wearing the general's cape." *Which she actually wears all the time, little though people know it!*

At least her cousin was the best kind of autocrat, Shizuma mused, having identified Shizuru's style now. Unwilling to brook dissent, as all autocrats, but undeniably brilliant enough to justify that dictatorship. And she delegated you into a job while making you feel you were the only one capable of doing it, which was why she was making you-and no one else-do it in the first place. Applying the smooth pressure of trust instead of rough authority on your head. If Shizuru was not the best kind of autocrat, she was at least the most bearable one.

She was just so efficient, marvelled the cousin who had known her to be so, but had never seen that efficiency in full swing before. It had been a long time since Shizuma's last stint in the military, but she knew she had never been in a campaign where everything was done with such speed and decision. Shizuru's ruthless competence was clearly what made her such a prized general. No wonder the volunteers kept signing up in droves! Even those officials with ties to

the conservatives were trying to angle a position for some relative or other-under pretext of keeping an eye on Shizuru, the cynical senior legate thought, but really just so they could be in on the rewards when her cousin had done. On that score no one could doubt: with Shizuru Fujino in the command tent, there *would* be rewards. And no matter how opposed the conservatives were to Shizuru on principle, they would not let that get in the way of getting a piece of the pie.

*It serves my purposes fair enough*, she thought with a furtive glance at her assistant-who, she knew with enjoyment, often shot her furtive glances as well. She knew that Nagisa Aoi was one of those who had been permitted by their parents, despite political inclinations to the contrary, to serve in the campaign in search of career and financial advancement. Shizuru Fujino's second northern campaign was already becoming known as the most hotly-contested posting in years, and those not asked for by name were already doing the asking. With the commander already off to the north and finished with her list, all those remaining positions were now Shizuma's to hand out... which made the new senior legate feel like the cat about to plunge in a lake of cream.

Her assistant would come first of all, however. Revenge was higher on Shizuma's list than petty diversions.

"Have you the contracts from the artificers there?" she asked, making sure to keep her eyes on her own table.

"Artificers, artificers... let me see. Yes, I do." Nagisa was already up from her seat, brandishing the papers in question. So eager! "Would you like them?"

"Yes, please."

She waited for Nagisa to approach her before looking up, then stared straight into eyes the colour of aged leather. How glad she had been to see her cousin's assurances truthful, the first time she had seen Nagisa: this conservative bud was no visual embarrassment at all! The girl had a mess of lovely brown hair that turned a rusty red under the sun, a pair of eyes the same colour, and naturally fair skin just recently tanned-not quite bronze, but

getting there. *A beauty wrapped up in a fur pelt*, Shizuma called it, actually terrifically attracted because she had always liked beauties of rich colours, and reddish-brown was one of the richest colours in her estimation. Not for her the classical blondes of their world, particularly when she was so far into the blonde end of the spectrum herself.

She took the sheets from Nagisa and let her mouth spread into a smile, her perfect teeth showing-as the rest of her-impeccably white.

"Thank you, my dear."

Only when she looked away again did Nagisa seem to bestir herself and bow, fluttering back to her own table. Shizuma pretended not to notice, although she was already laughing inside: she had heard the girl's breath hitch audibly when they had looked each other in the eyes.

"Try to finish that stack today, Nagisa-chan," she said.

The tribune almost jumped. "Yes, I will."

Some hours went more or less this way, with the regular interruptions from other officers, when a clamour at the entrance alerted them that there was someone trying to brush past the soldier on guard.

"Oh, step aside, man!" came a familiar male voice, accompanied by an also-familiar female giggle. "They know me well enough, and so should you. I am the Princeps Senatus, for gods' sakes, not some unknown entity here to make trouble!"

Shizuma looked up. It was not the Princeps's head she saw first, however, but that of the female with him, whose giggle she had identified.

"Greetings, Shizuma-san," the President of the Plebeian Tribunate sang out. And seeing the other woman in the room, rushed into the room and towards her. "And Nagisa-san too! My, my!"

"Let them in!" Shizuma called to the guard, some country lad probably out of his depth. The Princeps seemed to be bearding him

good-naturedly, from what she could hear. She returned her attention to the newcomer. "I didn't know you knew Nagisa-chan, Urumi-san."

"We met a few times in some social gatherings, back then," Urumi shrugged, already comfortably ensconced in the chair before Nagisa's desk. "Ages and ages back!"

"Just like everyone else in our world, I suppose," Shizuma replied. "Everyone has met everyone else... oh, once upon a time. But few remember."

"I would," Urumi smiled.

"Urumi-san *is* a genius," Nagisa giggled.

Urumi winked at her just as the Princeps walked into the room.

"Dear me," he said to them, his handsome face assuming an expression of mock-sadness. "I do believe that chap you have outside really had no idea who I am, Shizuma-san. It does humble the pride a little."

The silver-haired woman puffed.

"The reason I chose him," she explained. "Excellent judge of character."

"How cruel of you." Reito's eyebrows, thick and darkly lush, lifted in query. "I expected one particular character to be here, however. Shizuru-san?"

"I fear you missed her. She departed with the Fourteenth some hours ago."

The two visitors exchanged bewildered looks.

"Departed?" Urumi echoed.

"Without any announcement?" Reito demanded.

"As I recall, she announced it to all at the conclusion of the comitia

two days ago," Shizuru's cousin reminded them.

"Ye gods!" Reito exclaimed, erupting into a laugh of sheer amazement. Inside, he was applauding. The woman really knew how to make good on her words, he thought, and had such a sly way of going about it too! No one had sent any notices at all that the legion in the Campus Martius had already departed, probably thinking their general was only moving them somewhere nearby or putting them through a few drills. No fuss, no public send-offs or hurrahs-the woman had just told them to pack up and march off. Oh, how this would have the senators standing stiff in shock again, once he put the word out!

"She actually did it," he murmured, looking over to his cousin. "How I love her!"

Shizuma tipped her head at them. "Was it urgent business that brought you two here? You might send a courier to ride after her if so."

But the Princeps waved a hand, his senatorial ring flashing a golden streak in the air.

"Ah, there is no need for the trouble, thank you. I merely wished to bid her goodbye before she left, as it seems we shall not see her for quite a while. What a pity I missed her! And what a pity that they shall not go by sea!"

Shizuma was puzzled. "Why?"

"It would have been such a neat reference." He looked wistful. "Shizuru Fujino going after a foreign Helen, the new face to launch a thousand ships."

His cousin laughed.

"And what else?" she said. "Shizuru-san and the Mentulaean king have a duel as the paragon of beauty perches atop the battlements, her golden hair aflame?"

Reito turned to her and frowned.

"What?" he said distractedly. "No, no-Helen must be dark-haired, Urumi."

" *Dark* ? Everyone imagines Helen as a blonde."

"Not I! Dark is better."

"Well! What is the girl, anyway?"

"How should I know?"

Shizuma stared at the two in amusement, now fully committed to setting down her quill. Regular comics they certainly were, but the Kanzaki Cousins were not too bad a diversion when it came down to it.

Not that she would ever tell them that, of course.

"It says a great deal about you two that you would choose your respective hair colours as the better," she told the pair. "Shizuru never told either of you?"

They repeated that they did not know; Nagisa admitted to ignorance as well. Urumi stopped Shizuma before she could tell them the answer, however, and suggested a wager first.

"A wager? What's the reward?" the Princess asked in good humour.

The mismatched eyes twinkled. "Satisfaction."

"Done!"

Urumi nodded to Shizuma. "Now play."

"Reito wins," Shizuma said, eliciting a whoop from the Princess..

"Well, Urumi?" Reito was saying to his young cousin, who did not look too daunted by her loss. "One for me. Shall we say satisfaction lies in you buying me an excellent cup of wine at the first tavern we pass on our way back?"

"Why not?" his cousin said equably, jumping to her feet. "I have to

stop by one of the crossroad colleges, anyway."

Reito winced.

"I seem to recall you telling me that the usual wine for such places tastes like vinegar," he remarked, handsome face quite sour.

Urumi smiled.

"It does," she shrugged. "But I *am* the one buying, am I not?"

She jumped up and swept both Shizuma and Nagisa with one of her theatrical bows.

"I've already told Shizuru-san," she said aloud. "But allow me to wish you well too for your war. May your enterprise and Hime's prosper!"

She leaned over Nagisa's table and pressed her lips to the tribune's cheek, then went over to do the same for an intrigued Shizuma, who had never received such a gesture from the woman before.

Urumi only brushed her cheek, however, and whispered something quickly in her ear.

"I've evidence the Mentulae paid for Marguerite's fraud."

They pulled apart and smiled sweetly at each other.

"The birds are chirping more loudly these days," Shizuma said with nonchalance, angling her head as if to listen to the animals outside. Reito and Nagisa frowned, and instantly emulated her.

"Are they?" the Princeps asked. "I daresay I didn't notice. And it's rather late for birds to be chirping, isn't it?"

"They are-I heard them," Urumi confirmed. "I find it a good omen."

"I suppose..." Reito shrugged, his beautiful eyes crinkling in a smile. "The more there are, the better, then."

"Provided no vultures join," said his cousin. She turned and made for the exit, throwing over her shoulder, "See you at Chikane's for

dinner later, Shizuma-san."

"Indeed," answered Shizuma, grinning at the sound of Reito hectoring his cousin as to why he had neither been informed nor invited to dinner by the senior consul. Shizuma lowered her head to the last paper she had to sign and muttered under her breath: "Looks like you missed an interesting dinner, cousin."

At the moment, her cousin and the Fourteenth were making good time on the *via Flaminia*, marching at an urgent pace to cover the many hundreds of miles to the North. Typical of the commander and consonant with circumstances, there was no official baggage train to slow them down: whatever carts existed were drawn by mules instead of oxen. The general herself started out mounted on Albinus, because she needed to do the rounds of each cohort in the Fourteenth before she could dismount. Only once she had spoken to all of them would she march alongside the men.

"Innit the way it should be, general?" one of the centurions called to her as she reached his group. "Finally got a good march to toughen them up! These babies'll be proper veterans before they know it!"

Shizuru rode up beside him.

"Why, Jinnai-han, they already look like they are!" she exclaimed. She kept her steed trotting beside them, moving back and forth as she addressed the soldiers. "Soon they'll be showing even the Eighth how to soldier! Going forty miles a day until the blisters on their feet grow blisters! That's what my Eighth did! And they tore three forts down in a month! That's what the Ninth did too! And they snatched one of the greatest citadels in the world, brimming with gold and booty, right from under the enemy's nose! You've heard of those things, boys and girls? You've heard of that war, I hope?"

They shouted back their answers near-enough to unison.

"*Everyone* has heard of that war!" she confirmed. "Because it was a war to remember-full of the bravest and best legions Hime and Fuuka ever birthed!"

She tossed her head, very fierce and very proud.



"Because of that war, everyone has heard of *my* Eighth! Because of that war, everyone has heard of *my* Ninth! Well, this is another war everyone shall hear about again! This is a war to be remembered! So show me your mettle-show me that you are worthy of being *my* Fourteenth! Get me to Argus in time and we'll give them another legion worth hearing about!"

They cheered madly again, saying that she would get her forty miles a day, even if it wore down their feet to leather. Shizuru flashed her most winning smile. Her mount nickered at the excitement and she put a hand on his neck, urging him to move her to the next cohort in the line.

"Good boy," she murmured to him as he followed her body's orders, as soft and smooth a horse as she had ever ridden. He had a wonderfully calm feel to him for all his power, she thought, and she liked that.

"Such a good boy, Albinus." Another stroke on his neck. "She trained you well, did she not?"

His nostrils frugged and he nickered again, enjoying the attention.

*Really very soft*, she thought, bringing him up shortly to a lope and back without any effort. Albinus looked made of ice, but his movement was all water: flowing and cool, ever with the potential to surge if needed. The undercurrent was not restrained, as it was with other horses of his size, but relaxed. She believed it had everything to do with the horse's master.

There was something different about Natsuki's steeds, she had noticed. She could tell it when she first rode Albinus and confirmed it after riding Niger too. Compared to other horses she had ridden—including other Otomeian war-chargers—the two stallions felt like steeds out of a dream, graceful despite their bulk and uncannily attentive to their riders. She had meditated on it for a while before finally asking Natsuki if the pair of stallions were siblings, or perhaps from the same breeding stock.

"No, not the same," Natsuki had answered. "Why? They are like?"

"Somewhat. Were you the one who trained both of them?"

"Yes." A frown. "Something is wrong?"

She had laughed at the girl's concern.

"Oh no," was her reply. "Rather, something is right."

To which Natsuki had responded with a dark look of suspicion, driving Shizuru to reflect on the irony that it was the horses' mistress who felt more like a raw animal: bizarre and nervous, a highly-strung filly constantly watching you from one eye, always ready to rear up in your face. All that stormy, sinewy power, straining under a layer of perilous ice.

*Even now I feel that I have only begun to plumb the lake beneath it,* she reflected, feeling heat spread through her chest at the thought that she was finally returning to the girl's side. High up on Albinus and addressing the next cohort, she took a moment to revel in her recent triumphs, and in the pleasure of her own puissance, her capacity now to do what she needed and had sworn.

*I have come so far,* she told herself, admiring the orderly sight of the ranks, their armour silver in the sun. *I have come so far and know there is yet further to go, and revel in that fact. I shall go further than anyone else ever has-I shall carve out Hime's name in new empires, conquer and plant my feet upon ground that no other Himean has ever trod upon. What are all those triumphs that went before but honours for old wars, for foes and fellows who won battles on the same pieces of land over and over? They have all ploughed the same country for too long. Even Chikane, most excellent Chikane, has been content to work the same old furrows. Not so my future. Where I go, no one ever has. What I do from now on shall eclipse all that has gone before. My foes tried to stop me and failed, and hate me the more for that. But I take nothing more than my birthright, the opportunities that I deserve, which they would not accord to me out of petty spite. Because they were afraid of being shown up for how little they are.*

She regretted nothing, she decided. Not the loathing she had incurred, nor even the wound she had dealt to all others of her kind.

She had done no more than what her being had demanded. Now she was going to her fate, and to the woman who bore her fate in a pair of haunted eyes. She could not be shaken, could no longer be stopped.

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When Shohei and Nao reached Argus, they saw a Mentulæan camp looming ominously nearby, but hardly batted an eyelash at it. For one thing, there was obviously no siege being attempted by the Mentulæans. Had such an attempt been launched, the new arrivals knew, it would have been largely futile anyway. Argus was a port province, which made it impossible to starve out or block from reinforcements unless a naval blockade of epic proportions was launched. It was also one of the largest cities in the North, the space enclosed by its walls on par with that of the famed walls of Otomeia, and chock-full of immigrants from the warlike nations of the south: Arabs and Syrians and peoples from Judæa. Although only one understrength legion was officially billeted as its guard, Argus actually had enough mercenary residents available to call up and form several buffer cohorts. And it happened to have a brilliant primipilus in charge of its guard and militia.

"The Mentulæans in that camp we saw are just a block," Shohei said to *his* primipilus as they walked through the Argus billets. They had slipped the Ninth and Eleventh into camp as soon as they arrived and found no opposition from the hovering Mentulæans, who merely settled for parading near their own base.

"Of course they're a block," Nao grunted, scuffing up some soil with her boot. "That's the way up to Sosia, and that's all they really care about, fuck them. Not that it'll do any good."

"Ushida-san must have left far ahead of them getting here," Shohei said, turning to the other centurion walking ahead of them: she was their escort to the chief primipilus of Argus's garrison. "I guess you haven't been able to send him messages?"

The woman nodded.

"Just recently, legate," she answered. "We could for a while, and he

sent messages back, is how we know what we know about Sosia. But then we got interference when those *cunni* showed up-pardon the language, legate, centurion."

"We're all soldiers, soldier-you can talk any way you like," Shohei said. "They'll get called worse than that by me soon enough. When did *they* show up?"

He was indicating the Otomeians mingling with the troops everywhere. Shohei noted that he recognised some faces, even.

"They're the ones we had at Argentum!" he said with pleasure.

"Yes, legate," their escort answered. "Good men. Got here quick, before the Mentulae even arrived."

Nao seemed to be searching for something.

"No archers?" she asked. "I know the black ones-I mean the Lupine unit-is out with Masashi but where're the archers? All I've seen are the skirmishers. The light cavalry, looks like."

Their companion answered positively.

"The archers went with Ushida-san," she explained. "We have sixteen hundred horse here, equal parts light cavalry and heavy ones. Cataphracti. But those're not out unless we need them."

The other two Himeans nodded.

"And there's the primipilus now."

The Argus primipilus was in conference with some soldiers-centurions, judged the newcomers by the helmets-and all of them were bent over a map set on a large oak table outside the military headquarters.

"Beating off the buggers, Sakaki?" Nao said to her fellow first-spear centurion. "Looks like we got here just in time to cover your arse for you."

The very tall female towering over her smiled.

"We're fine," Sakaki said.

"Cocky and cold. Didn't even come to meet us."

Sakaki smiled.

"I thought," she said, "you could handle yourself."

Nao and Shohei laughed.

"I handle myself fine, all right," the redhead grinned, chucking the woman lightly on one arm. She scanned the faces surrounding them. "What, no bureaucrats or anything here? Sugiura gives you a free rein, don't she?"

"The governor was here earlier," Sakaki told them. "She's gone with the quaestors to calm the civilians."

Shohei's forehead wrinkled. "Is there unrest yet? I don't seem to have noticed any."

Sakaki did not answer him, however, and waved to a man approaching from the road. Shohei recognised him as the Argus governor's new quaestor and performed an introduction for Nao, who saluted very briefly.

The man explained what the governor was dealing with internally.

"Sugiura-san is often pretty loose on the collars," he said. "Or so I gather from the accounts of my predecessor. Since this is a war situation, thought, it calls for some tightening, which she's instituted by putting heavy regulations on all residents not actually of pure Himean or Fuukan descent. The curfew affects everyone, though."

"It's natural, so I don't think they ought to whinge much," Shohei commented. "We can't risk information being fed to the enemy by spies, after all. The non-Himean residents should see that."

"So we hope, though it's a thought that about half of the residents are non-Himean and three-quarters of the half that's left are Fuukan, not Himean," the quaestor grinned. "We've a few long-time residents who are Mentulaean, too. Got clout and not very happy about the

monitors Sugiura-san put on them. Personally, I think they're being stupid to complain-it's not that Sugiura-san really does distrust them all that much. She's just put those guards on to reassure other quarters that might actually distrust them enough to act on it, you know."

Shohei grinned back. "That's so. I'm thinking if I should go see her. Or is she too busy with that?"

"She'll come back here soon, she said."

"Then I can wait here." He nodded to the rest. "Go on with your meeting, please. I'd like to hear what your plans are."

Sakaki took over again and explained that they were working on a plan to get the Otomeians out of the city and past the Mentulaeans outside. The problem, she said, was that they did want to have to fight a general engagement for this because it would take too much time. The priority was to get the Otomeians to Sosia in order to relieve the siege there while keeping the Mentulae currently outside pinned by the Argus force.

"True, they'd serve us better parading out there," Shohei agreed. "Better they keep trying to break us than rejoin their comrades at Sosia."

Nao grunted. "We'll have to go with the Otomeians to Sosia, though. Let me see that map."

The tribune slid the large sheepskin toward her.

"East," she immediately decided.

"But how? The city's within sight of them so they'll see us anyway."

"Night transport," Sakaki suggested. "Load into ships and work east of the coast, then drop them off at this point to march north."

Nao frowned at the squiggle of the coastline on the map.

"Will it work?" she asked. "I don't know the waters here. It might take too long or the coast could be too dangerous for fuck-all to get past,

in which case it'd be better to chance slipping by the *cunni* outside."

"It should be fine," the Argus quaestor offered. "A little hard going, but we've good pilots and transports. They know every nook and cranny of this coast, and they'll do what they've got to."

Shohei folded both arms over his cuirass, thinking. "Then we just need a diversion to keep them from being detected."

Sakaki said she could orchestrate several skirmishes concluding in a false march to the west.

"A feint with a lot of noise-horses and stomping to make them think we're trying to sneak that way," she told them. "We've got some good Syrian militia. Quick and fast. They'll do the job."

"I like it," Nao said. "And I've got something that'll make sure it works, s'matter of fact."

They all looked at her.

"What?" Shohei demanded, as curious as all the rest.

"Later," she said tersely, shaking her head with a frown.

Everyone looked bemused, with the exception of Sakaki, who guessed that what Nao had in mind was one of those pieces of subterfuge in which Nao specialised, and which should not be put at risk of espionage by being spoken in public.

"Once that works out, I'm betting you're putting up more shows to convince them to stay," Nao said to her friend. "You'll have to keep them busy to pin them here, Sakaki, or this won't work. We don't want those Mentulae outside following us to Sosia."

Sakaki nodded.

"I know," she said.

"Let's talk about when to do it, then," Shohei said. "And pray we don't get any more of these assholes coming any time soon."

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More *were* actually on the way: an armed cavalcade was about then attempting to cross the natural boundary of the Mentulaean Empire. The third wave of the Mentulaean invasion, it was composed primarily of supplies intended to revictual the prior two waves of armies, guarded by a squadron of cavalry and a larger infantry contingent, roughly three cohorts in number.

The plan had been to cross the river on the largest bridge, which the two armies before them had also used and left guarded. They cavalcade found the bridge collapsed, however, and its guard absent. Disturbing, especially when they had actually received missives from the commanders of the armies ahead of them that everything had gone to plan and it was their turn to move out. Thus, the sight of the missing bridge and guard was an unexpected one. And an ill omen, thought the uneasy soldiers, whose suspicions began to rise.

Nonetheless, it was necessary to rejoin and deliver their supplies to their comrades on the other side. So scouts were sent out to find a usable bridge for crossing, and an advance party sent through it to scour the area for potential threats. This took some time, as it seemed that the two nearest bridges had also been demolished. Where was the enemy doing this? And who was it?

Finally, some weeks into the exercise, the scouts produced the answers. The destroyers of the bridges, they said, were Otomeians set up in a camp by the bridge far to the north, currently the largest existing bridge on the river. Not a large camp, the scouts reported, and small enough to tuck away from sight from the riverside-though not from the vantage point of a far hilltop that the scouts had used as their lookout. Obviously the Otomeians in that camp were setting a trap. How lucky that the fools had not thought to consider that hilltop on the Mentulaean side! Their hair would turn grey before they sprung that trap now, laughed the Mentulae.

The Mentulaeans moved south very quickly, in the opposite direction. There, they knew from their other scouting party, was a small and very old bridge that had fallen into disuse after the larger bridges had been built. Be that as it may, it had not fallen into such disrepair as would prohibit a crossing, and the scouts reported it



clear of enemies on the other side. They could cross through that and give the slip to the Otomeian hounds waiting up the headwaters, then march off to rejoin their fellows at Sosia and Argus.

They made it to the southern bridge and crossed without any problems save for a few scares owing to the old structure's awful creaking. Nothing was lost, nonetheless, and all of them made it over safely, reorganising into marching line and starting towards their destination.

This side of the river, the Mentulaeans noted, was unlike the ones up north: far craggier, shot with abrupt and unexpected ridges in the landscape and jagged little outcrops. It was when they had passed the first of these cliff-cut hills that it happened. A horde of Otomeian cavalry exploded from behind another ridge and screamed the insanely ululating cry that had every Mentulaean shivering in his boots. Taken off-guard, the Mentulaean party crumbled. Those in the back attempted to reverse, which proved a futile exercise for two reasons: first, slow-trundling wagons loaded with food and supplies could hardly move swiftly enough for a retreat; second, another group of Otomeians had materialised to their rear.

The camp to the north and near the river's headwaters had been a decoy, manned only by noncombatants and a very tiny unit of cavalry tasked with ensuring that the camp looked populated-as far as any Mentulaean lookouts on that hill on the other side were concerned. Should the Mentulae have hazarded that bridge instead, they would have found no trap ready to spring on them, since the trap was actually set up for that bridge down to the south. Having obliged the Otomeians by walking right into it, the Mentulae were so shocked by the surprise that they hardly put up a fight. Thus the supplies intended for the Mentulaean armies fell into the hands of the Princess Alyssa's troops, who showed their commander the nice cache of gold and silver coin they found amidst the food and army materials.

"Gaudy," was all the princess said when she saw the coins, each one stamped with the elaborate insignia and profile of the Mentulaean Emperor, Obsidian. Her blue eyes flicked away and onto the corpses of the Mentulae strewn all over the riverbank. She pointed to the bridge with one blood-encrusted hand.

"Tear that down and haul these for the fire. I don't want this trash contaminating the river."

## Chapter 55

*My apologies for the tardiness. At the very least, you have two chapters' worth (in Microsoft Word, past 60 pages) here, to try and make up for the lack of an update last month. You see what class of excellent person I am: not only have I made you wait to know what happens next, I now inundate you with so many words that you shall be cross-eyed by the time you finish.*

*At this point it is perhaps necessary to explain one of the main reasons delays occur. No doubt some have noted that I am often citing illness as the cause. For clarity, it has generally been only one illness: I have a most intrusive ailment of the heart. Said ailment was in fine form the past few months, which naturally had my own form in opposite state. Please do not misunderstand this as an appeal to either pity or sympathy since I require neither. It is merely an explanation, as well as a request for the readers to understand any irregularities in updating, in the future.*

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### **Vocabulaire:**

**1. Ala (s.) , alae (pl.)** - A cavalry unit; the estimates on the number of horsemen per ala differ, but for this story, the number shall be set at five hundred. The Lupine division, for instance, has approximately 700 horsemen, and is thus just a little shy of being an ala and a half.

**2. Calends** - The first of the three fixed points of a Roman (Himean) month. The days of the month were not named or given numbers, save for these three points. The Calends is always the first day of each month (e.g. the Calends of January January 1). Along with the other two fixed points (the **Nones** and the **Ides** ), it was considered a sacred day. Note that dates were reckoned backwards from the three fixed points. For example, if you wished to say "December 25," you would say "six days before the Calends of January," and not "ten days after the Ides (the 15th) of December."

**3. Contubernalis** - The Ancient Roman equivalent of a military

cadet. These were nobles or members of the Famous Families, so they were often kept out of the battle and seconded to staff work for the general's office.

**4. Falx** - A polearm weapon, like the rhomphaia. The falx's blade is slightly more curved in shape than the rhomphaia's, which means it is designed specifically for slashing moves.

**5. Gerrae!** - Latin for "Rubbish!"

**6. Gladius** - The short sword used by Roman legionaries. It was very sharp and used primarily for thrusting moves.

**7. Nagayama** - The legate Shohei's surname; for surety, it is included in this list.

**8. Paludamentum** - The long, scarlet cloak worn by full generals in the Roman army

**9. Pontifex Maximus** - The head of the state religion.

**10. Rhomphaia** - Polearm similar to a **falx** (see note above) but with a slight curve in the blade.

**11. Tribune (military)** - Not an elected tribune of the soldiers; ranked below legates and above cadets, the military tribunes often performed staff duties for the general and were sometimes given command over soldiers as cavalry officers.

**12. Triumph** - The military parade of honours, achievements, and booty that an army often performed upon return to Rome (if the soldiers had hailed the commander with the accolade of "imperator" in battle, and the Senate sanctioned the petition for triumph). The triumph was of great import to Roman politicians, as many considered it the height of their careers. In the text below, the reference Shizuru makes to Prince Artaxi's extended confinement is owing to the fact that the prince was the enemy commander at the battle (at Argentum) for which she is supposed to have a triumph. As such, he would only be brought out of his incarceration-which, by the way, is actually quite a comfortable imprisonment, all things considered-for her triumphal parade.

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## ***Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae***

*par ethnewinter*

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It was well into the tenth month of the year by the time Shizuru marched the Fourteenth into Argus. She entered to the cheers of the locals, herself mightily pleased by the welcome as she admitted to herself-it was a nice change from what she had been experiencing at home with her peers. Those happy faces might well change once they got news from their friends in Hime, and she knew it. But it was her privilege to enjoy this unmarred joy at her advent for now, fleeting though it might be.

"How long have they been sitting out there?" she asked the local officials, referring to the Mentulae parked outside the city. "What have they been doing?"

"They're well past a month now, General," one man answered, his toga in disarray from having run to participate in her reception. He tried to rearrange it and ended in making it look even more floppy. "They don't do anything. All they do is parade."

"Battle - skirmishes?"

"No, the cowardly lot! Never mind giving battle, though they'll take skirmishes on."

"Ah," she said, smiling reflectively: it was a pinning manoeuvre, of course. "So you *have* tried to give battle, then?"

"Not actually, Fujino-san. The governor thought it wiser to pin them down here until reinforcements-"

"Shizuru Fujino, by all the gods!"

Shizuru had just enough time to lift her arms. The meteor slammed into her and flared, putting hands upon her shoulders and kisses aplenty on her cheeks.

"Ave, Midori-han," she said, returning the hug as firmly as it had been given. "I am returned."

"And we are saved. We got your missive. The day before the Calends, to be precise. Oh Jupiter, it's good to see your face!"

She held Shizuru's cheeks as though forgetting that the latter was no longer a child to be so treated. A pause to drink in that reassuringly impressive countenance, followed by an oath.

Midori gasped: "Why-Shizuru, you're *brown* !"

The younger woman nodded once freed.

"Marching along the coast at the end-height of summer," she explained nonchalantly, masking her own pride at her appearance. Her skin browned evenly and retained its natural translucence while taking colour, leaving her limned, as a result, in an amber flush. Against this pale bronze shade, her teeth when she smiled were even more splendid than before.

"*Ecaster* !" Midori tried to get over the amazement; her eyes kept roaming the young goddess before her, despite all efforts to the contrary. "What about you? You got our note?"

"We met the courier on the march," Shizuru said. "Do we know the whereabouts of Shohei-han at the moment? And what must a woman do to get some water in these parts?"

Midori yelled for someone to bring water. A citizen carrying an amphora was ordered over and made to fill a ready beaker for Shizuru, who drained the contents in one gulp.

"We've nothing from Shohei-san, I'm afraid," Midori told her. "There will likely be no messages coming soon since their march is-"

"Incognito," Shizuru finished, licking her lips. "Quite so; I was only making sure."

Her *paludamentum* swished as she turned and addressed one of her tribunes.

"Where is the legate?"

The tribune indicated the officer to Shizuru, who waved her over.

"Midori-han, this is my legate, Miyuki Rokujou," she told the Argus governor, bringing forward at the introduction another tanned, rather elegantly-built lady in legatal trappings. "Miyuki-han, the governor of this province, Midori Sugiura."

The two Himeans exchanged greetings.

"I knew your father, Rokujou-san," Midori told Shizuru's new legate. "You're Chie Harada's replacement?"

The officer smiled demurely. "No, Sugiura-san. That honour belongs to my friend, Shizuma Hanazono."

Olive eyes sparkled at Shizuru after this disclosure.

"Your cousin, your senior legate?" Midori said.

"My cousin, my senior legate," Shizuru said.

Her other legate coughed gently.

"Shizuru-san, the Ninth and Eleventh's old pitching ground is still clear," Miyuki informed the commander while darting a crushing look at a fidgety tribune. "I'm having the Fourteenth set up camp there, if you have no objections to it."

"None at all. But a marching camp only, mind," Shizuru replied.

"Have the noncombatants start the work, in fact, and tell the legionaries to water themselves and take a breather. Have them do so in their centuries. I see no need for them to disperse just yet."

Her companions blinked.

"You don't plan to get on the move again?" the governor demanded.

"You only just got here!"

"We shall see," Shizuru said cryptically. "By the way, Midori-han, would you happen to know how many Otomeians are here and who

is their commander?"

Midori told her.

"Very good," she said, turning again to her legate. "Miyuki-han, seek out that man, if you please, as we shall need him."

Shizuru took a moment to scrutinise her officer's expression, wondering how Miyuki Rokujou would function with foreign auxiliaries. She could detect no disdain on the woman's face for the task being assigned, but she had to be certain that this promising new legate was not the kind to antagonise their allies... or vice versa.

"I am giving you charge of the Otomeians," she decided. Miyuki's performance here would determine what sort of tasks Shizuru would allot to her in the future and how far Shizuru would go in helping to advance her career. "This means you shall be the primary liaison for their officers in my staff, from this moment onwards. You may delegate some of the junior tribunes to actual leadership in the battle, of course, but all of them shall report directly to you. Questions?"

"Only if you have any orders for them right now," Miyuki replied, pleased by the added duties.

"Only to have their troops prepared this instant."

"Armed and sorted for engagement?"

"Yes, and the same for the Fourteenth. The central drill field should serve to hold both our men and theirs."

The head of thick and waving hair was thrown back: Shizuru considered the sky.

"The sun is yet hidden, but it shall continue to get warmer," she said, the pupils of her eyes overtaken by crimson as she maintained her survey. "Midori-han, do you recall the games you had last year, the time we first passed through on our way to Otomeia?"

A confused expression from the Argus governor. "Yes, why?"



"I would borrow those large sheets of canvas you used to erect shades over the theatres, if you still have them."

"Oh! We put them into storage, don't worry," the governor said eagerly, beckoning one of her men to listen. "Hold on, my man can fetch them to the field, if you like. You want to use them to tent the area where your men will be resting, right?"

"My very thoughts," Shizuru smiled.

"I'll have some slaves do the work too so your people can continue setting up camp."

"Yes, thank you." Shizuru faced her legate again. "I trust you can handle everything else. Would you see to the depositions? I must talk to the governor for a moment."

"We have the command tent close by," Midori volunteered at this. "Let's talk there, Shizuru. Easier than going all the way to the mansion."

"Very well," Shizuru said. "One of the locals should be able to direct you to it, Miyuki-han. Come join us as soon as you have finished delegating the tasks, please, and bring the staff with you."

Miyuki looked at the tribunes that had been trailing behind the commander, her face pleasant enough but at odds with the brutal assessment in her eyes. The tribunes stiffened and a pale tension crackled from the least seasoned of them.

"All of you with me," came the succinct order.

Off Miyuki went to march the tribunes into whatever assignments she could find—the execution of which, the commander ruminated, Miyuki would examine so critically that a misclassified scroll would precipitate formal indictment. Miyuki was satisfyingly exacting in every duty, which meant that results produced under her aegis were more reliable than otherwise. What Shizuru liked best about her was that, aside from her natural capabilities, she had one of those wonderfully Himean minds that admitted of flexibility yet stuck to the absolute limits: the kind of attitude that best described the *true*

Himean way, which depended on working within the rules even while exploring the loopholes for benefits. Known to Shizuru's staff as Rokujou, the legate bearing this characteristic was already gaining a reputation for her dependably methodical nature, which meant that she was often cast as a foil to their equally dependable but wildly unpredictable general. The contrast was assisted by the respective women's appearances and attitudes: Miyuki Rokujou was dark of hair, calm of eye, and while unfailingly courteous-generally sombre; Shizuru Fujino was light of hair, red of eye, and generally cheerful.

Shizuru seemed ignorant of this contrast being drawn by her men; however, as with nearly all other occasions where she displayed a lack of knowledge, the ignorance was pretence. Truth be told, it tickled her to be offset so well. She had even given Miyuki a task in keeping with their supposed roles: to bake the new tribunes into the bricks the army needed. The need for this attention came from the fact that half of Shizuru's staff was new and a good number of them even came from conservative-inclined families. As such, Shizuru explained to her new legate, she wanted to weed out possible problems before they blew up in their faces.

"I chose this crop to take with me because I thought I saw both a promise of capability as well as a capacity for open-mindedness in them," she told Miyuki, not bothering to explain why she had even taken them for her campaign if she knew they belonged more naturally to the opposition: both of them knew the answer to that already. "But a promise of capability and a capacity for open-mindedness still fall within mere potential. They need proper tending to fully develop. Better that both be tended at the same time."

"Especially," Miyuki said shrewdly, "the capacity for open-mindedness."

"Especially that. All the same, I have no time for potential that remains a theory. If it turns out that any of them is more resistant or more disobedient, I shall send him or her off the moment it is discovered. The same for any of them who turns out to have less skill than I wagered."

"You would send them home at the very start of the campaign?" the

other asked, a touch surprised because she had not thought the ever-sympathetic Shizuru to have such steel.

"Why not? If they perform disgracefully, I see no reason not to send them packing in like manner. Besides, I am like any other gambler: I do not much enjoy it when my wagers fail." Shizuru's stern expression vanished and was replaced by something softer, more trusting. "I shall leave the culling to you, Miyuki-han, because I believe you best-suited for their assessment and training. Your name and senatorial record is such that even these budding little conservatives respect you and have at the same time the necessary portion of fear supplementing that respect... whereas I am more likely to raise their wariness from the very start once I begin to tighten my hold: there is no conservative home out there, after all, which utters my name with great liking. I suspect many of them might even have burnt an effigy after me."

Miyuki said nothing to that because there was nothing to say. When a person was as popular, as patrician, as absolutely *maddening* as Shizuru Hanazono Fujino, who was to say bonfires and curses were not in play?

"Keep an eye on them," Shizuru finished. "Who curries favour without performance deserving reward? More importantly, who can be critical of command and who can be disloyal to it? I find no difficulty at all in keeping the former, but I would dispose of the latter."

"An elimination."

"Quite so, although that would be phrasing it negatively. I shall have the final word on the... hmm... *selection*, of course, but not just yet. It behoves me to apply the fur mitten for now."

"While I," agreed Miyuki, "shall apply the hammer."

Which the woman did so efficiently, Shizuru thought, that there had yet to be any snags. Thus far, all operations had run almost as smoothly as with her old personnel, although she did admit that the true test would come later, in the thick of the campaign. Until that arrived, she would let Miyuki march her staff as hard and fast as

Miyuki liked. Which was *very hard, very fast* .

In the meantime, she needed a word with Midori. The governor of Argus was already ushering Shizuru into a large tent from which the older woman ejected some other people. Only one of those originally in the tent did Midori keep: an effete and rather pretty youth who minced around them in a way that tickled Shizuru terribly, defeating as it did some of the more practiced minces she had seen from the girls of Hime.

"We can trust him-Tessaros is one of my personal servants," Midori said. Upon seeing Shizuru's impassive face, she changed her mind. "Although I can send him off after if you'd rather we spoke alone."

"Yes, thank you," said Shizuru. "I think that would be best."

Midori addressed her slave, who lowered his gaze with a most engaging flutter of the lashes. *Well done, Tessaros!* thought an entertained Shizuru, wondering if her boy-loving steward would find this creature even more interesting than she did.

"Tessaros," the governor said. "Leave us after you've poured our wine."

Shizuru asked for water.

"For certainty's sake," she explained to her astonished host. "I must be sure that I have all my senses perfect for later. Shame on me if I walked onto the field a bacchanal."

"You'll pardon me if I take the liquor, as I'm in need of it from all the excitement-though I'll have it diluted, in honour of your caution," Midori said, asking the slave to water her own drink and holding up her hand with admirable haste when the young man poured the portion of wine. She let him pour the water as well, then sent Tessaros off. "So you are planning to fight them."

"Fighting them *is* what I came here to do," Shizuru said when their attendant had left. She lifted her cup to her lips but changed her mind at the last moment and spoke instead: "There is no denying it would be the wiser course to destroy them while I have them here. If

the Ninth and Eleventh are already en route to joining the Seventh, I believe I can spare a day or so to put paid to that lot outside first. It would mean one less reserve army with which to contend when we do go to break the Sosia siege." She lifted an eyebrow, looked indolently content. "Besides, it would be a nice way to blood my not-quite-veteran boys and girls further."

"But this very day, Shizuru?"

"The days are still long enough, summer not being over. There is enough time for one manoeuvre."

"But..." Midori flapped a hand and looked distraught. "Right after a hell of a rushed march from Hime and outnumbered again?"

"You *are* lending me some of your units for this one battle, yes?" Shizuru responded with eyes downcast, a light playing beneath the heavy fringe of her lashes as she destroyed yet another of the counterarguments. "There is the single legion of Otomeian foot Shohei-han left here too. That would help make up for the numbers."

"True, though you'd have nothing in reserve then," was the snorted retort. "Bugger these Mentulae! The bastards must fornicate something fierce to get numbers like this!"

Shizuru raised her chin and treated Midori to a smirk.

"I am," she said, "most firmly resigned to that fact, Midori-han. This entire war shall proceed with us being outnumbered as a general rule, I think. It does not trouble me because I have never relied too heavily on numbers to win. Himean quality shall win at the end of the day, not quantity. They could field twice that number there and I would trounce them with two of my old legions."

Oh, was there nothing that could dent that incredible confidence?

"I'll drink to that," the governor said, smiling helplessly at the inimitable creature sitting in her tent. Why was it that being with Shizuru Fujino made one feel so reduced, she wondered. It was not just the confidence: Midori had known hundreds of others with similar self-assurance, yet absent the same intimidation. Was it the

fire, then, that did it? Was it that the justification for that confidence was so real it lent near-tactile weight to the issue?

Taking a second to regain her bearings, she set her chalice on the near table and stared at the younger woman, her olive eyes probing.

"You've a proconsular imperium, your note said?"

Shizuru confirmed it. "For five years."

"A hell of a mandate." Midori cast her mind back to the contents of the younger woman's letter, which she had received not too long ago and which had introduced some of the formal details pertaining to Shizuru's second northern mission. "And a hell of a job too, to annex Obsidian's lands."

"I wanted it."

"Yes, of course."

She pursed her lips, wondered if she should ask how Shizuru had managed to twist the Senate's arm into giving in to her desires. No, best not to ask yet. There was just one little detail she wanted to clarify, though.

"I remember what Masashi-san told me about their delegation to Hime, as well as the delegation he went off to meet before all this mayhem. I hope, Shizuru, that given the repetitive bad faith the Mentulaeans have shown, the Senate agrees all talks are off the table now?"

"Quite so." Shizuru smiled darkly. "Not that I would be inclined to talking, even were our fellows of a gentler mind. I assure you, Midori-han, that my mandate is to either put the beast down or cripple it into uselessness. If five years are not enough, I shall seek five more. Even if the Senate gets cold feet again in the future, I and our allies at home shall do all we can to finish the annexation of *all* of the Mentulaeon Empire into the New Northern Territories."

Midori's breath whooshed out audibly. "That eases the mind! But I can't help but get worried when I think of that mawkish bunch calling the shots in Hime. Is your mandate watertight this time?"

"The five years bar discussion. It was stipulated in the bill of command. My scribes brought a copy for you."

"I'll get it later," Midori said, relieved. "I'm guessing it means you didn't have your triumph? That's the old Fourteenth you brought with you, yes?"

"Yes. I - er - *postponed* my triumph indefinitely."

"I'm sorry about that, Shizuru-chan."

"I am not." Shizuru suddenly grinned. "Poor, afflicted Prince Artaxi-whom we caught at Argentum, you recall-may suffer the indignity of being confined in a backwoods town a little longer. The cur was indignant over not being able to move outside of the walls of his villa, and was demanding to be held in Hime instead, with freedom to move where he wished about the city. As though he were not a prisoner of war!"

"An arrogant pup. He takes after the father."

"Who shall eventually share a fate similar." The striking eyes, so engaging and intelligent, seemed to blaze. "If I may change the subject, Midori-han, I have some questions pertaining to my mission that I would ask before the others arrive."

"Yes, we'd best get to it. Ask anything and I'll speak answers."

"I noticed cavalry among the Mentulaeans outside. Would you be able to tell me how many there are?"

"We're not sure exactly. They've not a lot of horse out there, though it's still more than you can find among my militia. Two *alae*, maybe?" A distracted frown as Midori noted the harshness of the younger woman's cheekbones, which had always been high but not this austere. A closer assessment reassured her it was not an effect of the darker skin: Shizuru *was* thinner. "Have you eaten, by the way? We've a lot of grub-is there anything you want in particular?"

She grabbed a bowl of eggs from the table and thrust it towards the blonde, who declined the offering. Midori threw it back on the table with a clatter.

"What is the most you can give me for horse, Midori-han?"

"Oh, Juno..." The governor slapped her thighs with her palms. "I'd say just an ala or about that number. No more than that and you'd best mind that most of them aren't even real cavalry workers: we'd just be pressing them into it. Decent, but not brilliant. So you'd not be expecting anything like the Otomeians that've gone to Sosia." She emitted a rueful groan in recollection, wondering now if she should have held those back a while longer so Shizuru could have used them. "Now those were cavalry!"

"An ala," Shizuru was murmuring to herself, her head tilted so that the fringe above her eyes angled to one side. The visible eye twinkled at Midori. "Spare, but more than enough."

"An ala, more than enough?" the other snorted, staring at her. "*Gerrae!*"

"Really."

"Reveal intent, then!"

"Only a good battle." Shizuru bent over to inspect the laces of her footwear, tugging lightly at each knot as she checked the fastenings. "How good are your scouts?"

"Excellent," Midori returned impatiently, dissatisfied with Shizuru's deflection. "They're all locals, all Himean."

"You would trust them?"

The governor almost bristled at the question, even if she understood why Shizuru had to ask it.

"Most of them have been working for me for nearly four years," she said. "And I've yet to find anything worth complaint. So, yes, I trust them deeply. Not a caitiff piece in the lot, if you're worried the Mentulae've informers among us. If they do, which I don't think to be true, it certainly isn't among my scouts, Shizuru."

The younger woman responded by asking for a summary of scouting reports on the Mentulae.



"I see," she said, when Midori had finished giving her answer.  
"According to your men, then, the Mentulae outside have no units hiding in reserve?"

"None, and I've had them scouring and peeking from every bugged lookout nearby. We ferry or sneak out the scouts on the coast, by the way-that's how we've been getting around. It's so they have to travel through the east, looping far and up towards the north."

Shizuru's face changed subtly at this intelligence, her mind already sending tendrils of hypothesis up and down the map of the North she kept in her head.

"Then you've sent some on to Sosia," she spoke, sensing and hoping Midori had more to tell on this vein. She might be on a formal mission to run the Mentulae out of Hime's provinces but she was also on a personal mission to find someone. Would Sosia see her lucky in the latter aim, this early?

"Of course we sent some there, Shizuru-chan," the other woman was saying. "At first it was hard going. They had scouts of their own looking over the decent passes and I wasn't keen on the idea of risking couriers with information falling into their hands, whether it was information from our fellows at Sosia or from us."

A nod, very small because Shizuru was trying to mask its swiftness.

"Understandable," she told Midori.

"Then we got that idea of skirting by boat far to the east of the coast and dropping them there, just like what Nagayama's doing with your Ninth and Eleventh right now. We sent some just ahead of those legions' departure, in fact, so as to scout ahead and inform Sosia help was coming... *and* to return with news from Sosia."

Midori inhaled and was mortified when it staggered, severely aware that Shizuru had noticed. Well, why should she not be nervous, the governor asked herself, given the things she had to tell? Being of a straightforward nature, she wished she could just speak the chief points without preamble, but she knew it was better to explain the

circumstances first: Shizuru would demand them later anyway.

"Took a while since it's a hard track, to be honest. There aren't even any paths there, so they had to make their own. But it's much safer than going the easier or even just moderately tough ways if you're after avoiding trouble with the enemy. The return groups were arranged to go by separate routes too: one for those coming back here, and another for those joining your former legate's-or is he your legate again, then, since you've regained your command?-another route for those joining Nagayama's group, as I was saying."

She added, somewhat inconsequentially: "It's good to be safe."

"And," Shizuru said, "did the precaution bear returns?"

"It did, as a matter of fact."

Shizuru said nothing this time and chose to wait instead. The governor decided to come out with it quickly, for she was eager to see how Shizuru would take this first bit of news she had to impart.

"The ones who came from Sosia confirmed Masashi and Himemiya Minor's group joined Ushida there with the rest of Seventh," she announced. "And yes, with them is the cavalry division led by your Otomeian."

"Alive, then?"

The words had left Shizuru even before Midori finished the word "Otomeian". Shizuru seemed to realise the obviousness of her haste and frowned.

"Alive?" she repeated, more gently this time. "Is Na-"

She seemed to catch herself once more. The rest of the name's syllables dangled and did not drop, and her jaw underwent a flicker of a contraction, which her companion noted in amazement as a flashing ridge upon the brown cheek.

"The girl?" Shizuru finally managed, somehow unable to say the name for now.

"Yes, she's alive," Midori answered sternly, for she did not want to show how moved she was by how the younger woman was acting. "My men saw her in Sosia."

Shizuru had to mentally scream at herself not to leap from the chair. Her own words trumpeted in her ears, the question they had been now a paroxysm of certainty. *Alive, then!* She had known the girl was alive, of course, but only because she could not choose to know anything else at the time. But to have it confirmed by others... Oh, the reprieve! How good to feel as though she could breathe again!

"When-?" she started, cutting off the query because she needed to give her throat some time before she could speak normally.

"Just recently," was Midori's reply. "My men came back some days ago."

*Some days ago.* Shizuru thought about that. Allowing for the extended travel over untracked land due to the looping, she knew that meant significant time had passed since Midori's men made the contact. Time in which so much could have happened-and Sosia was such a precarious location. Oh, for the fleet sandals of Mercury! She would have stolen them from him were he present and did she think gods to exist as the Greeks thought them. At the moment she could comfort herself only in the knowledge that this was a good beginning to the end of her search, that Shohei Nagayama and Nao Yuuki were already bringing two legions to Sosia to aid the Seventh, and that Suou Himemiya was yet present in the game. She had to place her faith in those things and those people, lest she go mad from concern.

*But I must get to Sosia immediately!*

She needed to compose herself. But more than that, she needed The Girl. Ye gods, how she needed The Girl!

"And?" she said, knowing that what had been said was not enough yet. "Was she well?"

"They said she was well when I pressed," Midori said reluctantly. "But my men aren't physicians and they didn't go under orders to

enquire after her, you have to remember. They didn't even know she was there with Masashi and Himemiya until they got there."

The governor paused and inhaled: carefully this time, because she did not wish to embarrass herself again.

"They said she looked well enough, Shizuru-chan, though you'd have to talk to them later for details. I'll have them waiting at the mansion for when you might want them."

"Thank you." Shizuru looked as if she wanted to interview them that very moment. "Thank you, Midori-han. For everything."

"You'd better know something else."

Her tone dulled the smile that had been coming to Shizuru's face.

"What is it?" the young woman enquired, wary. "Has it to do with her?"

"Yes. Do you know she wasn't dealing with your absence well?"

Shizuru frowned. "If you mean the illness, Suou-han wrote me a letter."

"Ahhh." Midori sighed. "That's fine, then. Just as long as you were aware of it already."

The older woman cleared her throat and was disgusted by the falseness of the sound. She was fidgety because she wanted to get on with the rest but was also too polite to break upon what was clearly a private thanksgiving in Shizuru's head.

"Well, now... there's a bit more to say, Shizuru-chan," she said, feeling awkward and intrusive. "It's to do with business and some other things you left when you were recalled to Hime. I hate to have to bring them up so abruptly *now*, but--"

"No, not at all."

And just like that, younger woman was her usual self again: eyes understanding but detached, manner cool but inviting confidence.

*As if, Midori thought wonderingly, that shudder had never happened.*

"We should indeed be getting on," Shizuru said. "What is the rest, Midori-han?"

"Right, let me see now." She frowned as she thought over the notes. "For a start, you should know that there's a little over two alae of Otomeian cavalry in Masashi-san's camp outside the Sosia walls. There's also a full legion of Otomeian infantry that just joined them, sent over from Otomeia."

The fine eyebrows went up; Shizuru's smile had returned.

"Otomeia has been properly informed?" she asked. "By whom?"

"I requested the auxiliary you used in your first run here but it was Himemiya Minor who sent messages requesting reinforcements to Sosia and warning them that war has broken out. The Otomeians who joined Masashi at Sosia are just the first and most available troops they could send while they're marshalling. Not a lot, but..." She shrugged.

"But at least they are on the way to getting more. Right, please go on."

"There's also apparently a group that's been sent from Otomeia citadel with the purpose of tearing down the bridges on the river."

"Suou!" Shizuru exclaimed, guessing that last bit had been part of her friend's message to the Otomeians. "Was that her doing too?"

At Midori's nod, she laughed: "How I love her!"

"Himemiya Major would be pleased-as would have been their father," Midori agreed. "A good thing she stayed, Shizuru, as she's probably been the only legate of real worth Masashi has had on his campaign. Oh, Ushida's definitely a worthwhile investment where fighting's concerned. He's no military dunce, that one! But I suspect a touch of avarice in him. Any conscientious commander would have to keep an eye on him most of the time and it may be a bit more work than you'd like. But that's neither here nor there. I'm telling you this so you know what we know of Sosia and also to answer

something you brought up earlier. On our way here, you said you wanted to know what had happened to your Eighth, which was stationed at Argentum."

"And my other former legate in charge of them, Aidou Yuji," Shizuru replied, although it was clear from her tone that she cared far less about Aidou Yuji's fate compared to that of the Eighth. "Quite. I expect our fellows at Sosia filled up this lacuna with information, then?"

Midori's face was dark: the answer before the answer.

"Argentum was besieged again," she said, grim because she was angry about what had happened and also because she did not want to show Shizuru her own sadness, knowing it could not compare to the sadness Shizuru would feel. She knew the significance the Eighth had held for the young general, and knew that this would hurt Shizuru as few things could.

"This time, Argentum fell," she continued. "And the legion that was stationed in it, the Eighth, is gone."

A pause to take that in.

"Gone?" Shizuru repeated, her calm unimpaired. "Do you mean slain or..."

"Slain."

"Were there bodies?"

"Yes, apparently."

" *All of the Eighth ?*"

Midori nodded and compounded the gesture with a wince.

"The Otomeian scouts of the Seventh claimed no survivors," she explained. "They're the ones from whom we have this intelligence, so Masashi and the officers of the Seventh told my couriers at Sosia."

"And Argentum?"

"Razed to the ground."

"Ah."

No part of Shizuru's face moved save for her eyes, which were shut away from Midori.

*Gone... Razed to the ground...*

How capricious fate could be, Shizuru was thinking. One moment she had been suffused with joy at the news of Natsuki, the next she had practically felt herself emptied, thrust into a vale of mourning. A part of her mourned the people of Argentum but a far greater part of her was devoted to the unconscionable loss of the Eighth. *Her* Eighth. While she had prepared herself for countless undesirable scenarios as to that beloved legion's fate, she could never have prepared herself for this. That there would be many deaths among her old legions she had expected and understood. But to have an entire legion dead, down the last man? It taxed even credulity. Oh, she believed it: had there been any who fled-which she doubted-they would have turned up or been heard about by now. Had there been any who were captured by the Mentulae-and that was possible-they would have been tortured to death. So yes, her Eighth was indeed dead.

*A tragedy on too many levels*, she described to herself, heart weeping at the loss of five thousand soldiers she had known by name. And their centurions! Hime was poorer by sixty centurions, a staggering sixty gone of those officers who were the true backbones of the army. She remembered each of the Eighth's to detail. There was Aoshima, that hoary primipilus, who had both mouth and skill to rival Nao. Tiny Kuroki, who was thrice as vicious as her dwarf-like body looked. Kuwabara, who was always spending his money on dice and bones, always in trouble with the provost marshals... Oh, who gave a fig now about Senator Aidou Yuji? Those sixty centurions alone had been worth a thousand of him, so precious were they to the woman who was locking her grief behind her eyelids.

The Eighth had been her favourite legion along with the Ninth because of sheer length of acquaintance as well as quality of performance. Both the Ninth and the Eighth had been with her on her first campaign as a full general, themselves on their first war then. Blooded under her direct leadership and turned veteran in her hands, the Eighth had been with her during some of her most renowned battles. It had been one of the legions she had used at Argentum. Extinct now, both the Eighth and that city.

*What a setback* . The first point of contention, Argentum Citadel, was already lost. And her beloved Eighth was dead to the last man. Fickle Fortuna! She had favoured Shizuru enough to grant her wish to return here, favoured her enough too to guide her closer to Natsuki. Why this fate for the Eighth, then? Was it that the goddess had not favoured the men and women of the Eighth, to permit such a fate to happen? Or was it the doing of the man who had stationed the Eighth so perilously alone in Argentum - that blasted, murdering incompetent who had practically commissioned those soldiers into a dying duty? How could anyone do that to such excellent men and women? How could he live with himself knowing what he had done to them?

How could *she* have lent them to him, in the first place?

Part of this should fall upon her, she acknowledged. Takeda Masashi had genuinely disbelieved the possibility of the Mentulae attacking, and was at fault only for his ineptitude. It was she, the one who had known and could have done better, who richly deserved the blame for having been unable to provide for this. For she could have, she convinced herself: she could have, with only a little more foresight and effort! Oh, how she wished she could bring back the Eighth for just a day and apologise to them for her failure. And oh, how she wished that accursed knot in her throat would leave, would spend itself lavishly in the muggy air.

*But not yet*, she berated herself, slaying the urge to weep where it was stuck between mouth and chest. She could not possibly weep when there was no berth in her life yet for it. This was not the occasion to mourn: the Eighth deserved her tears and would get them, but this war also deserved her attention. For now she had to be hard, she reminded herself, and Dis and the Mentulae take the



sorrow!

She opened her eyes.

"This is most likely reliable information-Otomeians would have no reason to lie about that," she said simply, her tone even. "The probability too is that there truly are no survivors. A new Eighth shall have to be made, and very quickly."

Midori listened to that smoothly spreading voice, wondering at how much more preserved Shizuru was with this than she had been with the news of her girl. She did not know the workings of Shizuru's armour, which deemed relief and joy permissible to show. True grief to Shizuru, on the other hand, was necessarily private. Only its sublimations would she show to others, a pale and pink showing compared to the bloodier wound within.

"I shall send a message to Shizuma presently to that end," the young woman continued. "I am a legion down, it appears; I had hoped to have the Eighth with me again. What a pity." Her brow crumpled for an instant, but very weakly. "And Aidou Yuuji, Midori-han? What of the man?"

The governor swallowed, wanting to cry for the young woman who would not allow it of herself. "Of Aidou Yuuji, they had no news. We presume he's fallen as well."

"I see. You said it was the Otomeian scouts attached to the Seventh to report this. The Eighth was given no obsequies, then, and left at the site?"

"I'd think so... Those few scouts couldn't have done much."

"True," the general returned. "If indeed a full legion has perished-ye gods, the number!-it would take a full legion too to see to all the rites necessary for them. The bodies would have been left there, as I understand the Mentulaeans to be unconcerned with clearing out their battlefields. I shall write a letter to the Pontifex Maximus interceding for their shades' passage, in case something happens to the remains before I get to Argentum. A contract shall have to be drawn up, the necessary coin for Charon paid in lump. That should

see the Eighth safely across the river."

She stopped and indulged in another, shorter silence. She had to clear her mind, which was fogged with the shades of the Eighth. They seemed to return to her as translucencies, yet ones choked with detail from the intimacy her association with them had once held. How many such people had she known, anyway, and lost in some battle or other? Beyond the Eighth, beyond her Northern Campaigns, beyond even her campaigns as a general? Hundreds upon thousands, perhaps. Some she had known as their general, some she had known when she had been a mere *contubernalis*. And so many of those people's deaths had been unnecessary-casualties that she believed could have been prevented easily had some bungler or other been endowed with either more foresight or less authority relative to hers.

*I am old, she thought with bitterness, to have seen so many deaths. I know not how many there have been, but certainly enough to last a lifetime. Yet my enemies in the House apostrophise me as 'too young' when I stand among them. Their condescension of me is laughable when I think of it. How many of those couch generals of our Senate have also seen the bereavement I have? How many of them have known their soldiers as I knew mine, and lost them?*

Midori's voice reached out and slipped through her musings: "I'm sorry, Shizuru. Gods damn it, I was cursing Masashi when I found out. It's a bloody shame and..." A harsh rasp of breath. "Fuck Jupiter, but I'm really am sorry about it all."

Shizuru shook her head, ignoring the uncharacteristic blasphemy Midori had just uttered.

"No," said the young woman. "It was not your doing, after all."

She smiled at Midori even as something in her eyes reared its head for a dangerous moment.

"Another shall pay tenfold for this horror," Shizuru vowed. "I swear it."

Midori nodded, feeling the words more ominous because they were

said so quietly and with that strange light in Shizuru's eyes.

"Please proceed with what you were saying. The sooner I know everything, the sooner I may take action," Shizuru went on. "Sosia is holding out, then, with the Seventh encamped outside?"

"That's right," replied Midori, very glad to be given a different subject. "The Seventh's complete, thank the gods! A little whittled down due to recent battles, it seems, but faring well. The garrison in Sosia's walls is—oh, you know it already, yes? And your other old legate's there as well."

"Toshi-han, yes. I recall." Shizuru's brows drew down slightly. "The Ninth and Eleventh had not arrived at Sosia yet when your men entered Masashi's camp?"

"Correct. My couriers couldn't get into Sosia's walls, unfortunately. The enemy was a little tighter on the security there."

"And your men just returned recently, you said?"

"Right about the time I got your note telling me to prepare."

"Have you sent word to Hime of this information, Midori-han?"

"Not yet, as I wanted to know what you would prefer to do first."

Shizuru's smile appeared.

"I thank you for that consideration," she said with great sincerity. "Let us discuss that later, please. For now, let us move on to the details of Argus's situation itself. I began, before our detour, by asking if there were enemy reserves nearby and you said there were none."

"Yes. The lay of the land isn't cooperative for concealment, if you've noticed: no ravines, no big-enough groves, no hills for a good mile or so. And even after that mile, my scouts say there's nothing still." The governor snorted hot derision. "Typical of the Mentulae, isn't it? All numbers, all brute display."

"It does stand to reason if their primary intent is to threaten off reinforcements to Sosia by merely looming out there."

"A ridiculous bluff! They've managed to pin us for a while, though, and I'll admit that." A small smile as she thought about it. "Even if there isn't that much to pin."

"Indeed. I shall pull out that pin today."

Midori leaned forward, not bothering to hide her excitement at the promise.

"How?" she demanded. "How do you plan to do it?"

"With your help."

Midori nodded and tried to enquire again, but Shizuru beat her to it.

"You are putting all your resources at my disposal, Midori-han?"

"You're the one with proconsular imperium. Of course I am."

"And the Otomeian legion here is uniform in composition? All work with the rhomphaia?"

"All of them, yes."

"And your militia is ready for marshalling, your officers said?"

"Yes!"

Shizuru looked satisfied.

"Then it is settled," she said. "I would borrow your troops for the battle later, Midori-han. How kind of the Mentulae not to burden the plan with reserves! Still, I shall provide for the outside possibility too, to be certain. This shall be interesting."

The other woman had been sitting on her exasperation, and these words finally caused it to escape.

"*Interesting*?" Midori said. "I've been trying to tell you that I'm right here and I'm interested! You've yet to shed light on your plan, Shizuru, for all you've been waving the damned lantern in my face."

Shizuru lifted an eyebrow with lordly sloth, as if Midori were some

interloper she had forgotten to be present. For a second the governor of Argus felt like an intruder in her own command tent.

"I beg your pardon for my atrocious behaviour," the younger woman told her placidly. "I promise I shall explain shortly, Midori-han, although I would prefer to say it in conference with the officers of your garrison present. We should be sending for them now."

The older woman suddenly got to her feet and dashed out of the tent. Shizuru heard her calling someone outside. There were words, more patters of feet.

The governor reappeared through the flap, her red hair dishevelled.

"It's done," she told Shizuru, who was amused by the swiftness with which Midori had taken action. Easier to believe, seeing the woman so, that the governor was as young as she liked to claim!

"Thank you," Shizuru said. "Now all that is left is to wait for them."

Her gaze strayed to the table upon which Midori had perched her goblet, taking in the various foodstuffs upon it.

"You are not suffering much as far as food goes," she observed. "Those skulkers out there have not depressed rations yet?"

"I piss on their skulking!" Midori cried, her chest puffing with pride. "The advantage to having a port province like this, Shizuru-chan, is that it's near impossible to depress its rations unless you attack two fronts at once, which they haven't. Besides, I make it a point to keep our silos-you've seen them-packed full to the ceiling."

"You managed to get the harvest in."

"All of it! I remember-before all this broke out-that we even sent the first crops to Sosia when it started coming. I think Sosia should be set for food too, despite their share of Mentulaeans. Those *cunni* outside might've stopped most of the land traffic but all Argus's seagoing commerce is still up and running. Given that most of the trades here are dependent on the waters, in fact, there's been less abatement of business than might be the case for other places."

"A fortunate state of affairs," the younger woman said appreciatively. "Argus shall have to be my supply base for the first part of the campaign, then, since I did instruct my cousin to put in at your province once ready."

"I'll inform my people."

"My gratitude. As an initial repayment of the favour, I promise to keep the Mentulae more or less out of your hair." A swift wink. "And I promise to explain shortly, so pray do not try to drag it out of me over-early!"

Midori's nod to this was slow.

"Say now, Shizuru-chan, are you really sure you can't put it off for a day so your men can rest?" she enquired all of a sudden, her earlier worry resurfacing. "I'm just wondering if a day's delay would cause your mission such harm... and a night's rest wouldn't, in my opinion. The men might prefer it too."

Shizuru breathed out a chuckle.

"Did I not have so much regard for you I would make wager over that," she smirked. "And promptly strip you of your purse. My men have spent several months of nothing but drills and construction work in Fuuka-and while that has served to keep them fit, it has also served to whet their appetite for a return to what they truly do best: fighting. I assure you the Fourteenth is so worked up for a taste of blood that they would beg me to give battle now if I so much as hesitated."

*More to the point, you've made sure they reached that state,* Midori replied in her mind. She was not deceived by the coolness of the younger woman in front of her, guessing that there were even more troubles on Shizuru besides the ones she knew. Why, one only had to imagine what she had done to snatch this latest command off the Senate! No doubt something that also bought her enmity, and even more enemies. Well, whatever it had been, that tranquil confidence was all the more impressive for it. How *could* one look like that when weighted down by such burdens, by the knowledge of an entire legion's death, by twenty pounds of armour? Midori still remembered

her time in the habiliments and knew how uncomfortable that scarf padded around the neck of the cuirass could be in summer. Add the thick shirt underneath and you came up with a kind of persecution. In spite of all this, however, Shizuru continued to look nothing but languid. The governor, who knew another would just have languished, applauded such masterly control. She always had.

Which was why that earlier slip regarding that foreign girl had her so intrigued.

"Well, if you can end that charade they've got going out there, we'd be much obliged," she sighed, turning thoughts to the matter before them. "Our garrison, most of all."

Shizuru quizzed her with an eyebrow. "I was given to understand you have not actually had many casualties from your skirmishes with them."

"True, we haven't. But it's been hard having to orchestrate enough skirmishes and pretend-patrols to make it look like we've three Himean legions still in here... when we really only have one. The parades are easy enough-but ye gods, orchestrating several of these productions at the same time has been a headache!"

"Midori-han, you are woman after my own heart," Shizuru said, smiling a little. "Thank the gods you were able to go to that much trouble. I was about to ask after it just now."

"Keep the query: I've answered."

"I move to another. They believe it, you think?"

"Every indication of doing so. Take my word for it when I say I've been thorough. I've taken the precaution, too, of having the men throw talk at each other reinforcing the tale, when in sorties." Midori threw a devious glance at her former pupil. "Did you think I'd fail to do that?"

Shizuru let her face communicate the apology first.

"I was uncertain as to the breadth of the deception," she replied. "My apologies for that."

"It's no matter." Midori grinned. "Just let it remind you that I'm not a dried-up old sandal yet, young lady. There are some marches left yet in this military boot."

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So the Mentulaeans at Argus were treated later to the sight of a Himean army massing in front of their camp, blatantly readying for a general engagement. The Himean front had the form one would expect of an outnumbered army led by an inexperienced general: very stretched to match the Mentulaeen line as best as it could, with a thinned centre owing to the necessity of protecting the flanks. The heavier wings sprawled ahead of that thin middle, with a small complement of cavalry on each side-which complements were barely an *ala* strong and rather a disorganised bunch, at that. The Mentulaeen general looked and had to look again.

"They're trying," she hooted to her subalterns, who shared in the laughter. "Too bad they don't have more to fill out that paper centre."

"Surprised they'd give battle now," someone remarked.

"It's not surprising at all," the commander said to that. "They just got more soldiers in, so they probably think they have enough to fight us this time. You heard them cheering in there earlier, right? Someone in that new group's stiffened their balls."

"It's long overdue, General."

"True, it is." She eyed the Himean line again and paused as the thought niggled. "Now what could've pushed them to it this time?"

One of her advisors spoke up. "It must be that they think they have the numbers now. Maybe they're eager to make a break for it."

Another officer snorted aloud.

"Desperation, I'd call it," he said.

"To break this standstill?" said the commander, her brown eyes still fixed on that desperate front. "The truth is they should've done this long ago. How many more soldiers did they get in there for them to



feel daring enough for battle?"

She frowned, confused why there seemed to be less than she had expected. There was another group that had entered this city too, about a month ago. Could it really just be that they had been waiting for more soldiers?

"They're still far outnumbered," she followed. "And they know it, by the judging. Look at that formation."

"It's Sosia," her second-in-command volunteered. All eyes turned to him. "We know they already know about Sosia, given the number of times they've tried to sneak some of their troops past us and on the route to that city. My bet is that they've realised we're just a pinning force and want to see if they can break us now, so they can finally open the route to succouring Sosia."

"That's what I just said to the general: that they're going to try and make a break for it."

The commander quieted for a moment and let her subordinates argue it out. She herself only continued scanning that worried-looking assortment being pitted against her troops. What a rude presentation!

She put both hands on her hips and drew herself up.

"By Esus! What are you all still doing here?" she demanded of her officers. "You jackals think this is the time for gabbling with each other?"

They shut their mouths and stood at the ready, a ripple of expectancy passing through them all.

"Then we give battle?" one said, so eager was he to get a piece of the fighting. Though he spoke out of turn, no one marked it. Every face in the group communicated nothing but an electric hope that the answer to the query would be positive, so long had they gone now without battle in this thus-far-dull war. In there was also an unspoken but equally electric menace: that if the commander failed to take the initiative now and happened to miss out on what seemed

a plush opportunity, there was no telling what the costs might turn out to be later, once the higher-ups decided on an accounting. The Mentulaeen king's favour was as labile as the sky itself, one moment raining gifts, the next hurling bolts and thunder.

*There's that delay too*, thought the Mentulaeen commander, herself more concerned about the tardiness of the next supply caravan and of the army supposed to be joining them. Argus was actually supposed to suffer a siege soon after Sosia did, and another of the royal armies, very large and packed with veterans, had been arranged to come hard on their heels to that end. Even if the Mentulaeen notion of 'coming hard on the heel' was laughable by Himean standards, the delay for said army's coming was already long enough to trouble even Mentulaeen sensibilities. The only thing the general could think of to explain it was that something had happened to block off the passes, most probably at the river. Which meant an enemy force had managed to elude the first wave, which was theirs.

*Worrisome*, thought the general, chipping at the haft of her sword with a yellow nail. What were the chances of receiving no aid for this venture? Even if the army destined for Argus never arrived, there was still the one at Sosia, was there not? She weighed the conditions again and decided that this sudden surge of Himean nerve might be a godsend. If she could clear out this paltry foe from Argus, the city would be deprived of its prime military strength even before the arrival of another, larger army to siege it. Accolades would be high for the achievement if she played it right in court, and she could see her station being raised by the king. She would also know better what to do about the delays if she could completely eliminate this force she was currently pinning under the princes' orders.

In the end, however, none of these arguments had as much effect on her decision as the sound of the Himean buglers calling orders. The Himeans meant business, it seemed, and there was nothing to do but enter the transaction. Just her luck they were unwise enough to press devoid advantage.

"It would be uncouth not to oblige *that*," she told her men, pointing to the still overcompensating Himean line. "Get on, then. We might

finally get to finish this shit duty today."

The keen Mentulaeans massed and waded into the field barely a turn of the glass later. Just as the Mentulae wanted, the forward-straggling wings of the Himeans were first to engage them, striking the ends of the Mentulaean line. The Mentulae saw the opportunity and seized it: they took a charge into the middle, intending to punch out that fragile Himean centre.

There they met a nasty surprise. Shizuru Fujino had tucked her best soldiers into the wings and some of them suddenly ran inwards to thicken the Himean curve, abruptly reinforcing what had been a flimsy middle. Those who remained at the wings simply turned to fight the Mentulae from the flanks, being already in a prime position for envelopment.

The Mentulaean cavalry managed to get their bearings in that first confusion and tried to break the manoeuvre by harassing from outside. However, they found themselves repelled by line after line of rhomphaia put there as a guard. Meanwhile, the Himeans' straggling cavalry had abandoned their act of incompetence and reformed into proper units, starting to raid the Mentulaean rear. Caught off-guard by the unexpected reorganisations, the Mentulae panicked and lost the battle.

"Brilliantly won," Shizuru's legate told her afterwards, as the two of them rode to have a look at the enemy camp. The legate turned and realised she had to pull her chin far up to meet her commander's eyes because Shizuru was still astride her monster of a stallion. She pulled her horse back.

Though Miyuki was not a horse person, her first sight of the commander's Otomeian steed had taken away her breath. The animal was gargantuan! It suited Shizuru, yes, and definitely had a certain style to its appearance, but was also notorious for provoking some of the less-horse-loving officers and scribes to back off when they saw it. *As well men would run from the creature*, Miyuki thought: earlier, she had seen Shizuru use it to introduce some brains to the sand.

The commander had not been reckless enough to literally lead the

charge today-as legend had it she did on occasion-but she had still been on the field, and had still been part of the fighting. Mounted on her white beast and easily visible with her scarlet cape, the woman had been everywhere at once, rallying and ordering and doing a hundred other things to keep the battle in their favour. When Miyuki considered what one usually knew of generalship and its normal practice, Shizuru Fujino was as mind-boggling as she was extraordinary. She seemed to always know where to go next and what to do, and never turned a hair in the doing of it. What a woman!

"I thank you," the woman was saying, in response to Miyuki's praise of her triumph. "But I would not number it among my better fights, to tell the truth. Most of what led us to victory had to do with the enemy's faults."

"Which would be?"

"They were bored to death, thirsty for an end to this fruitless business of pinning down the Argus military. Boredom is fine if it has soldiers eager for blood, but it does not wed well the other traits they possessed."

Shizuru paused to free a water-skin from her saddle, offering a drink to her legate before taking one herself.

"Complacency, for instance. They had that too, since they knew they outnumbered us. Lack of imagination, as they did not find suspicious the front we showed to them..."

There was a group of legionaries herding some weeping Mentulæan slaves out of the camp, and the tiny parade stopped when one of the captives suddenly fell to his knees. He retched copiously on the path and Shizuru gave a tiny sigh as she watched him.

"And haste," she added after the unfortunate collection was out of sight. "Only a dead-bored, overly hasty idiot would charge straight into a line with the makings of a horseshoe, Miyuki-han. Certainly you would not see me do so."

"Even if you were leading cavalry?"

A puff of air blew from the handsome nose.

"Perhaps," Shizuru allowed. "And perhaps not. It is easy to say it takes the horse to trample the shoe..."

Miyuki finished it. "But it takes the noose to capture the horse?"

"Precisely. I would be wary even with cavalry. A little too obvious, you know. That the Mentulae bit what I dangled in front of them attests to the carelessness in their command. Eight times out of ten, that which presents as desperate presents a deception."

"It makes sense. Good generalship seems to go with a general wariness of the foe. Yet we did force them into the engagement, since we made it clear we would attack their camp whether they met us on the field or not. What would you have done in such a situation, were you in their shoes?"

"I would come out for battle, naturally. But I would not have charged the line as they did ours. And, of course, I would have deployed quite differently."

"I see."

Shizuru hummed, the sound starting deep in her neck as she flexed it from one side to the other. She felt the rub where the fine chain of her necklace- *Natsuki's necklace* -rested beneath her scarf. A reassuring weight, as always, and now more than ever.

"Is that the sum of your questions?" she said aloud.

Next to her, Miyuki frowned.

"What?" said the legate.

"You have not asked why I held no troops in reserve for pursuance of the Mentulae who would flee the battle." Shizuru let slip a tiny grin at her companion's astonishment. "You seemed to wonder when I rejected that proposal during our council."

The dark-haired woman managed an ashamed smile.

"I'm sorry it was so obvious," she owned.

"Not at all. I wondered that you left it at that, absent protest or enquiry for my judgment," was the reply. "Yet I think-and forgive me if my observation is short of the mark here-there is yet some doubt remaining. I thought, therefore, that I should explain it to you now."

She paused to exchange friendly words with a passing soldier.

"As I was saying," she continued, "I thought there was no need to keep news of us from Sosia. I preferred, you see, that the Mentulae besieging that city actually hear news of reinforcements coming from Argus, or the south. This would be such that any possible defensive measures they take would be concentrated towards our direction. If any of those who fled battle today head there to warn of us, they would be there fairly soon, if I am right and the road is open to them. They would get there sooner, say, than any improbable but still possible informant coming in from the eastern paths-

Miyuki's head jerked; her lips uttered a muffled sound.

"Thus giving a distraction in favour of the group that ought to be closing upon Sosia now, the legions under the command of Nagayama-san," she said for her general. "I see it, Shizuru-san. You want to throw sand in their eyes."

"Quite so. Or, if by chance word has indeed reached them of Shohei-han's march, at least force them into splitting their defensive resources by virtue of multiple considerations. Let them sweat a little."

"I'm glad you had enough forbearance with me to explain."

"And I am glad that you had enough forbearance with me to trust the order even before that." She fixed Miyuki with a serious eye despite the words. "In future, however, I would prefer you ask me earlier. Should it come to pass that I ever make the error of concocting questionable plans, I would have those I trust to be the ones widening my perspective. We must not forget that every person needs checks upon him. I also prefer my officers to understand as many details as possible when it comes to strategies and tactics. If I

forget to explain sometimes, I would consider it a help to be reminded so."

She added with a smile: "Although there may be times when I shall consciously withhold details, Miyuki-han. When such cases arise, I ask only that you retain your trust in me, as I am your commander. Other than those occasions, make free with your tongue. It actually reassures me when my officers do not simply act like mindless puppets whose strings I pull."

Miyuki accepted the mild reprimand. They then busied themselves for a while with their inspection of the enemy camp, which they found irregularly-planned and unbearably cluttered. It was such a difference, they told each other, from their own always-neat, precisely-surveyed bases. In passing what seemed to have been one of the untidier areas, the legate slowed her horse to point out something to the commander.

"You were right in calling them dead-bored," Miyuki said, indicating yet another of the many dice and gambling tables they had found thus far. Some empty cups were stacked haphazardly on one of the stools, and Shizuru could see, on the ground, some tiny bones and refuse she guessed to have been from old meals. Her belly registered complaint and she remembered she had yet to eat anything since breaking her fast in the morning.

"Even our troops do not play this often when given vacations," the legate was saying. Shizuru hid a smile, knowing Miyuki was contemptuous because she considered gambling a degenerate pastime. "Nor do our men erect such areas solely dedicated to the activity."

The commander laughed. "Oh, you would be surprised."

Miyuki eyed her thoughtfully.

"Would you have planned our battle differently had you not thought our foes dead-bored?" she demanded.

"I might have planned differently according to any given change in the situation," Shizuru replied honestly enough. "Up to and including

my mood."

A line built on Miyuki's brow. She could not say she liked that answer, as it went far against her own obsessively systematic nature. However, she also knew enough about her commander to understand that latitude had to be given where genius of Shizuru's type was concerned. So she took her time evaluating that reply, aware that her young commander was aware of what was going on in her mind, and aware too that said young commander had probably given that reply partly to provoke her.

"Spoken," she finally said, "like Shizuma's kin."

Shizuru chuckled.

"Miyuki Rokujou has never approved much of caprice, as I recall," was her response.

The corners of Miyuki's lips turned up of their own volition.

"I knew Shizuma told you about my lectures to her," the legate sighed with a flick of her jaw-length mane. "I'm guessing I've been portrayed the stick in the mud often where that tongue is concerned."

The younger woman shook her head in response and removed one hand from the reins to lift her own hair from her nape. The sticky-soiled feeling of her flesh was an irritation to Shizuru, especially with the souring concoction of old sweat being thickened by dust and blood. The climate of the North was milder than what she had just left at home, but it was still summer by the seasons and she had just gone through a forced march followed by a battle, with no intervening bath. The padded shirt she wore under her armour was moist; already she could feel a fresh drop of sweat between her breasts rolling to the slick board of her belly. Her only consolation was that she had washed both face and hands after the fight, but that still did little for the rest of her.

She left the reins for a second to unsheathe her *gladius*, the scrape of the weapon drawing her legate's glance. Passing a tent with a cord swaying from one pole, Shizuru grabbed the rope and cut off a



section that she could use to tie up her mane. The bead of chalcedony on her necklace pressed against her skin as she stretched, and she thought again-as always-of her girl and what her girl might think of her if they met while she was in this state. Hair clumping with dirt, torso smelling of the cuirass's cavern. Would Natsuki wince at the thought of touching someone so soiled? Shizuru could already imagine that perfect little nose wrinkling, its hauteur marred on account of the smells. She knew that her girl was also a soldier, but that girl had never soldiered in climes that could really be called warm. Natsuki would not know the particular tang of a battlefield ripened by true heat, the tart bouquet made up of sun and sweat as it died.

*So close now, so close to her!*

"My cousin only ever spoke of you with affection, as far as I remember," she told her legate, who noted that the commander looked oddly anxious for an instant, as though there were something she absolutely needed to do and would do that very moment. The expression fled like a dream, however, and Shizuru was quickly smiling again. "That one note on whim stuck more than the rest, so I wondered if you would also subject me to the same well-meaning homily on the dangers of being so capricious."

"No, as you're my superior officer."

"I am hardly as strict as that."

"True. In that case, if you wouldn't be opposed to a note, I would think you should call it 'instinct' and not 'caprice' in your situation," Miyuki told Shizuru above the sound of their clomping horses. "For my peace of mind, at least."

Shizuru swallowed a chuckle. They had reached a small clearing bounded by a row of tall structures, and here they encountered another group of legionaries, this time led by a junior tribune.

"Oomichi-san," Miyuki called to the tribune. She eyed the items the men were carrying out of the tents before them. "Wheat? Are we to understand that you've found their rations?"

Oomichi approached his superiors at a trot.

"Yes Rokujou-san, General," he said, standing stiffly before them.  
"There's not a lot of it, though."

"Ara?" Shizuru brought Albinus beside Miyuki's smaller steed. She pulled back a little when she realised her height required the tribune to tilt his head back at an angle that could be none too comfortable.  
"How much, then?"

"Well, we're not sure this is where they kept it all," Oomichi conceded, a fresh streak furrowed in the dirt of his brow. "But if we're right and this is it, they'd have eaten themselves out in five more days or so, if they didn't go to find more."

Shizuru exchanged a glance with her legate.

"Five days?" Miyuki echoed. "Why would they have only that much? No wonder the Argus officers said they had been getting quite a number of skirmishes in on the forage troops."

"Quite," replied Shizuru. "That could mean that they were expecting another group of their people to arrive bearing a consignment of supplies-or, given how close that time-frame is, had been expecting such a group for a while now and without success. It would have to be a third party, since it would make no sense for the second-I mean the Mentulaean army at Sosia-to be the one revictualling our Mentulae here."

"Delayed, then?"

"Or blockaded. If it is the latter, then our Otomeian allies must already be up in the passes."

"General!"

The shout had all three officers looking to one direction: two legionaries approached, bearing a kicking and squealing woman between them. The soldiers saluted their superiors as best they could with the Fury they were holding, and thrust the woman forward even as she continued to shrill.

"We found her hiding behind some of the stock," said the elder of the two men bringing her. "She don't look like a slave to me, General."

Shizuru slid off her stallion and approached the trio.

"Well, well, what have we here?" she said softly, towering over the cowering Mentulaean. "An officer of some kind, are you? Or some official, perhaps?"

The woman regarded her with blue eyes overtaken by fear.

"I'm not an official!" she declared in that odd form of Himean the Mentulae used. "You have it wrong! I'm just a slave!"

Shizuru exchanged a look with Miyuki and grinned. If the woman's well-kept appearance were not enough to show the lie, the gold on her fingers certainly sufficed.

"Such rich dress for a slave," the general said, motioning to the finery. "And here I thought your people were exceeding cruel to their human property."

The terrified eyes darted about in wild panic.

"What, no alibis, even?" Shizuru smiled, having recognised the look on the woman's face as that many liars showed before producing a tale. "I *am* disappointed."

"I stole them!" the woman burst out. "I stole them!"

"Still disappointed. How unconvincing."

"Please, I'm just a slave! I don't know anything!"

"That may well be." Shizuru nodded to the legionaries. "We shall test the assertion later. Take her away for questioning."

The Mentulaean exploded into a frenzy of resistance, thrashing and shouting so hard the men were hard-put to restrain her. Shizuru, who had been on the verge of mounting her steed again, turned back and faced the captive.

"Please stop that," she said, voice full of command.

But the woman continued with her furore. The watching Miyuki reflected that she had probably not even heard Shizuru.

"Very well."

Shizuru's arm pulled back and struck the Mentulæan a blow that silenced her instantly. The woman's eyes rolled up as though seeking something in the back of her head - and then she was gone.

"That should make it easier to carry her," she told the awed legionaries, who gazed at their commander with worship in their faces. The commander was cool as ever, slipping onto Albinus again and glancing at her stunned legate.

"I tapped her but lightly, Miyuki-han," she told the woman with a tiny smile. "In case you fear me indulging in undue brutality. Had she gone on any longer, she would have embarrassed herself further as well as enhanced the quality of her nuisance to Kamijou-han and Nishino-han. And given me a migraine."

The legionaries holding the limp Mentulæan beamed further at her referral to their names. As for Miyuki, she nodded very slowly.

"Er... yes," she said, watching as the delighted legionaries bore away the captive like a sack of wheat. "Some people have no sense of dignity."

"Quite."

Shizuru eyed the remaining man on the ground. The commander studied the trickle of blood from the tribune's ear, a small displeasure communicated by her brow when she apprehended that the earlobe had been lopped off.

"How came you by that injury, soldier?" she asked Oomichi, who dabbed at the wound reflexively.

"A falx, General," he answered. "Nipped me while we were moving the Otomeians into the outer lines. The bastard was faster than his fellows."

"I pray the scoundrel was similarly speedy in finding his end."

"I helped him to it myself," the tribune said with a broad grin, very proud of his accomplishment. "He was stupid enough to wade right into us so I just dipped under his falx and caught him clean."

"I wish I could have seen it, Oomichi-han," the general said with her warmest smile. It floored the man, the still-watching legate thought, and she rather understood why. Even browned by the sun and tarnished with a patina of battlefield grime, Shizuru looked divine. What blasted strong charm these mercurial Hanazono had!

*A pity, thought the legate, that it seems to come married to mischief.*

"If you have a decent cloth on you, Oomichi-han, keep it pressed to the cut and stanch the flow. I would prefer you have your injury tended to as soon as possible."

"Yes, General!"

"Keep up the good work."

She dismissed him and set off with a fulsome explosion of hooves, Miyuki following.

"They needed this victory," the legate said from nowhere. "After news of the Eighth."

The general glanced her way.

"I am pleased spirits have lifted somewhat," Shizuru eventually replied. "Although I do think a touch of bereavement shall still be called to order in private moments. In public, I would like the Eighth to be celebrated in each victory. They were a great legion, and did not deserve so bitter an end."

"It's a tragedy," Miyuki said.

"To be rectified presently," Shizuru answered.

Her eyes swivelled around and found the next path to take: she turned Albinus's white head that way, her own to Miyuki again.

"I require a bath," she said, evincing no discomfort at the admission. "Between the battle and the heat, I reek close to a latrine. Tell the men to go to their barracks after these inspections and then get some rest. I have asked Midori-han to have the Argus legion clean up. This means I shall suffer no whining from our men in the morning."

"What happens in the morning?"

"We march for Sosia."

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In the camp of the Himean relief army at Sosia, Suou Himemiya was contemplating her current general.

He had changed, she thought, especially in countenance. Naturally angular, his face had grown even more so owing to the worsening emaciation they all now shared. This reduction was also showing in his formerly regular features a tendency to be pinched, the set of his thin mouth both nervous and negative. Although he had troubled enough to have his mane freshly cropped-an attention, Suou guessed, that was due to the stiffness of his hair-his facial hair had not been equally maintained. That handsome jaw was now obscured, the area overrun with dark stubble. When she enquired after it, he explained that he had told his servants to trim it as best as they could for now, being that he was saving the little oil left for purposes other than his daily shave.

Suou listened to the explanation with a disapproving ear. Her opposition arose from a worry that the men would misinterpret the commander's appearance, and in none-too-useful a manner. In a world where men contrived to be clean-shaven unless prevented by some unfortunate condition hindering the razor-as, say, a rabid case of acne-the growth of facial hair was often taken to be evidence of a fast, or of mourning. Not a very inspiring thought for the soldiers, in Suou's opinion, and not very considerate of their general.

She supposed it was wiser to advise him of that before she pressed to more troubling things.

"Don't say it, let me guess," Takeda pre-empted before her words could leave. "You don't like the plan."

Suou's lazy smile manifested. *Might as well move on to my true purpose*, she decided, *and leave him to his preferences in fashion*.

"You read minds now, Takeda-kun?" she said.

The commander rubbed a hand over his eyes.

"I've been suffering from your contrariness this whole time," he told her, the words lent more poignancy by his miserable appearance. "Doesn't take a mind-reader to guess what you came here for."

"Does it take one to guess the reason behind the disagreement on this occasion?"

Their eyes met, and a cold and resigned expression could be read in his.

"Maybe," he said. "But I don't need one because you came here to tell me, right?"

"Another good guess! You should look into a secondary career option if this streak of good guesses goes on." She grinned in spite of his obvious vexation with her flippancy. "Before you worry that I'm putting down the plan you've formulated out of a congenital tendency to pessimism, let me say this first: I do agree that we need to attenuate Mentulaeen power for Sosia to have a chance, especially given how strongly they have been in attacking recently. Our skirmishes in aid of preventing their assaults have not been as effectual as we'd like since-and this is only one of the possible reasons, I must say-we're still so grossly outnumbered. Even counting the Sosia legion, our current foot stands at a disadvantage of roughly three-to-one. As for our cavalry, it's down by about two-to-one, likely more. In light of this, no one can genuinely blame any of us for having had so much difficulty."

Takeda grunted, suspecting that she actually blamed *him* despite those words.

"I agree too that we might have better effect on the Mentulaeen

forces were we stronger," she went on. "Even only one more legion at our disposal would make a difference. To which end I understand that eyes would gravitate first to the nearest available resource, the legion that serves as garrison of Sosia citadel. Being able to command that legion or liaise with it directly instead of trying to time our attacks together as we've been doing would be a definite improvement. Furthermore, I understand the temptation to transfer base inside Sosia's walls, since we know to it be well-stocked. We, on the other hand, are running very low on resources. All of this I see."

Takeda nodded at the summary, his expression circumspect.

"That having been admitted, I see some parts in tomorrow's plan that beg me to take pause," Suou followed. "First of all, I don't think attempting to move the men inside the walls is wise. Even, say, if it does work out that we get the men in, it's still a sketchy situation."

He shifted a shoulder uncomfortably and frowned.

"And right now isn't?" he asked her. "You said it yourself, Suou! The grain's almost out, and the scraps your foraging troops are bringing in aren't near enough. We're on half-rations already, damn it, and the men can't keep fighting on that." Seeing the beginnings of a reply forming on her mouth, he cut her off: "Don't tell me you think we should stick it out and let the men starve? It's not like we can all just escape in search of resources and abandon Sosia to its fate either, because honour would go against that."

Suou resisted the urge to roll her eyes and kept the smile glued to her mouth. Those who knew her better would have noticed the anger she was masking, for Suou's smile stayed near-static when she was displeased: it neither grew nor lessened, but fixed itself like an icicle dangling threateningly overhead.

"And honour would agree with us adding to Sosia's dependents?" she replied, rankled by his insinuation that the forage units-which were under her supervision-were not performing their job properly. "We would just be adding to those feeding off of Sosia's siege supplies, which should be reserved for their people. Some relief army we'd be if we entered their walls with the purpose of their



defence and ended eating them out!"

A glint in his eye; he threw her the challenge: "Fujino did it when you went to succour Argentum."

"What goes for a Fujino does not go for a Masashi too."

That had him on his feet faster than a prick to the rear. Then again, Suou thought, it *might* have been a prick to the rear.

"What the hell does that mean?" he spat, jaw thrust forward. Suou looked up at him from where she was seated and somehow managed to convey with her look that his display had her unimpressed.

"Sit down, please, Takeda-kun," she said in what he found to be an irritatingly reasonable tone. "You know what it means, even if you don't like it. Shizuru Fujino is just not a good point of comparison for this issue. I campaigned with her, so please trust me when I say her reputation isn't exaggerated. Hate her you can-some have made a career of doing so-but have enough sense to admit that she's beyond us where military strategies and tactics are concerned."

A bark of laughter was his reply, harsh and derisive.

"I admit nothing," he growled, showing her his teeth. "So you can spare me the honour of lumping me with you in that confession, Suou!"

She looked, in his eyes, *infuriatingly* patient.

"Then never mind the admission," she persevered. "If you can't stomach it, cast it off for now. But consider the circumstances, I beg of you! Argentum and Sosia are two different animals. We can't apply what happened in Argentum to our situation. For one thing, the forces available are different. Part of what made Argentum possible was the presence of a very large cavalry party. Which brings me to my next point-"

He snorted, "I don't think I even want to hear it."

"-regarding the way you intend to use the Otomeians," she

continued anyway, undeterred. And, seeing that he was on the verge of ordering her out of the tent, she quelled him with a scowl.

"Don't turn me away, I ask you, because this needs to be heard!" she snapped. "If I'm the only one willing to put it to your ears, I'll not miss the opportunity. Choose now if you want me to tell you here, in the privacy of your tent, or outside, within the men's hearing as well as the auxiliaries'. Do you really want them knowing what I have to say like that? You don't have to like my criticism to use it to your advantage. But I ask you to extend me the courtesy to listen, at least, before you pronounce it useless."

A silence followed her request. Takeda studied her for a moment before suddenly dropping back into his chair, his slumped posture communicating a huge fatigue. Seizing the chance, Suou launched into her piece before he could get a second wind.

"I have some concerns about the plan's details regarding the auxiliaries," she informed him as he studied the top of his desk in an insidious scrutiny. "See, I'll grant you that using the cavalry to protect infantry is normal, as is using auxiliary infantry the same way. Foreign auxiliaries are always subordinated in import, and I've no issue with that at all."

One jaundiced eye peeked at her: he was waiting for the bad parts.

"Using them with blatant disregard for their value, however—that I have a problem with," she told him, ignoring his scoff of disagreement for her phrasing. "Because that is how the plan looks to them, Takeda-kun. It's not very palatable, this scheme to have their cavalry draw away attacks while having their infantry lined up as a buffer between ours and the foe. There's an obvious split between our forces and theirs and they look like bait and know it."

He held out both hands and cast her an exasperated stare.

"But you just said it yourself!" he cried. "This is normal as far as our procedures go, Suou. Auxiliaries are always used as a buffer to protect our troops."

"Yes, I said I knew that," she soothed. "But this is a special case,

Takeda-kun. Given the sheer strength of our foe and our own thinness of people, any buffer here isn't just being put at statistical risk: it's being *statistically condemned*. If you go through with the plan tomorrow, you know as well as I do that a hitch in the stratagem will lead to the Otomeian foot being nigh-annihilated. Their horse stand with marginally better chances, but I predict heavy losses there as well. Too much could go wrong, and we have too little by way of actual bumper forces to absorb losses. And don't tell me the losses you plan to absorb are the ones the Otomeians shall be getting, because making it into Sosia with that large a drop in numbers would hardly be a success, by any terms. At the risk of overstep, I must remind you the Seventh is the only legion you yet have, and the Otomeians make the rest. Without immediate reinforcement, to lose even just a third of these would see us all dead!"

Takeda sucked on his teeth, indicating he already knew that.

"Thus my request for you to reconsider this," Suou concluded. "If something goes awry, it shall be damned hard to recoup from it. And I tell you now, with every ounce of instinct I may claim to have, that something shall go awry."

"I thought you said it wasn't sheer pessimism," he said to that, crossing both arms over his chest and looking defensive. "You're planning on hitches, Suou, is your problem."

The silvery eyebrows lifted as she listened to him.

"I understand you're worried," he continued. "So am I. But you can't go around this way, predicting doom all the time. It speaks to the men, you know."

She cast him a disbelieving smile.

"Do you mean to indicate," she said, "that I am now the cause of our misfortunes?"

He grimaced.

"No, no, damn it," he said hurriedly. "Look, that's not what I meant to

say. I'm not blaming you for anything." A wild head-shake as he tried to think of what to say next. "I'm not saying that at all, Suou."

Her pale eyes flashed.

"And I, for my part," she drawled, "am not saying I'm an enemy. I am here to advise a reconsideration, as any good legate would do if she thought her general tempting mutiny."

That had his heart plummeting to his gut, his face overtaken by shock.

"Mutiny?" he gasped, as though not quite understanding what the word meant. "Suou-kun, you should be careful with that word!"

"You think me not? I use it with utmost care, I assure you."

He rocked back like a man taking a blow.

He whispered: "Are you saying the Seventh is disaffected?"

Suou conferred him a calming smile.

"I would not say that so lightly," Suou said. "But even they understand their chances with the plan tomorrow and they're not very happy, see. They too are at risk if we do what you want tomorrow, Takeda-kun. It's not just the Otomeians in danger with such a split-army strategy: breaking up our already-small contingent into even smaller contingents is suicide, precisely because it makes them so much easier to swallow for that monster from the Underworld we have waiting outside. Even if the enemy takes the Otomeian bait you want to use for diversion, they shall still have enough mass to form a second head for the rest of us. Do you see now why I insisted on coming to you with this?"

"Do you mean that... you came here to warn me?" A sudden scowl. "Did you hear something? Or did they *depute* you?"

"I came to advise you. Let us put it that way."

Takeda's mouth twisted as he felt another jet of fear through his spine. Mutiny! Most hated of all words to a general, most

abominable of all movements. He could not afford to have a mutiny, on top of everything else, on his hands. His career was already on the way to the pyre, but there was yet something he could do to save it, and he hoped that. A mutiny, however, would kill his hopes more conclusively than even than these Mentulaean *cunni* could. Nothing could save him if the Seventh chose to act on their unhappiness, as Suou had described it.

Were they really so unhappy with his plan, he wondered. For a second he toyed with the idea of Suou saying all of this only to frighten him away from his intentions, but then he realised not even she would drop so fearsome a word without anything to back it. He was aware the soldiers regarded Suou very highly too, and that she was on friendly terms with the centurions. Therefore, if she warned him of something like this in the wind, he had little choice but to take the pause she was begging of him. He also had to reconsider his strategies now, since she was citing them as possible motivations for revolt. The introduction of mutiny to their conversation had put him at disadvantage, with no choice but to yield.

Which they both knew, he thought irately.

"The auxiliary's even more discontent than our legionaries," she said, knowing she had already won the battle-or part of it, anyway. "Understandably so. How do you think it looks to them?"

He shot her a glower, thinking that she was gloating.

"So that's it, eh?" he demanded. "If they're the real discontents in this story, that's not really my concern as long as they follow orders. If they just do as commanded the whole time, all would go well."

"Strong words, but vain." Suou puffed out a sigh. "Takeda-kun, listen to yourself. No plan-no plan!-ever goes perfectly right! And this one won't see all of them going well, even if they follow it to the letter."

"You can't be asking me to figure out a battle strategy without casualties."

"Well, a minimum of them would be appreciated!"

"Would you rather I put *our* legionaries in the front instead?"

Suou hissed, nearly at the end of her very long tether. Even if she had cornered him into reconsidering his stratagem, she had to make him see why and how it needed to be reformulated, and her first point of order was explaining to him the importance of keeping their auxiliary working *with* their legionaries instead of acting as a separate bait or buffer for it.

"Let me put it this way," she said. "Since what seems to be blocking your sight here is the fact that they're just auxiliaries or foreigners, I ask you now to remember that Natsuki-san is one of them. No, no - do not protest that she has nothing to do with it! Both of us are old enough to be frank here and say we understand what I mean by using her as an example. Now, what would you do with her were you to go ahead with your original plan? She would be placed in the heavy-risk areas owing to what and who she is, and can you tell me with a straight face that you'd countenance that?"

He blushed at the barb and retorted: "She's injured! Naturally, she'll not be among the fighters tomorrow."

"So you planned to put her with the noncombatants?"

"Yes, with the rest of the injured."

"A brilliant consolation," she said wearily. "To spare one Otomeian among the hundreds."

A hand slammed on the desk.

"I don't understand what the hell you want!" he said, not up from his seat but perched on its very edge. "Do you want her safe, or don't you? If it'll make you so happy, I'll order her to the front line myself!"

Suddenly her face was level with his, her light eyes a mere foot away.

"You try that and see if the woman you hate so much doesn't hunt you down," she told him, articulating every word with portentous lack of expression. "As I've been telling you all this time, one look at that field says that anyone on the front lines tomorrow will *die*. And I vow

to you now, by all the gods, I myself shall bring you to a reckoning if you so much as utter that order."

Then she was back in her seat again, the slight stirring of her hair the only testament to that rapid lunge.

"I hope that settles that," she said to him. "Cast it from your mind, Takeda, or see me break it out myself. I'll not break any laws where the army is concerned, but say that again and I shall."

Takeda sat stunned in his chair.

"Suou," he stammered. "Gods' sakes, Suou... See here, I wouldn't do that to her!"

"No?" she asked coldly.

"I didn't mean that, by Jupiter. I didn't!"

"Then don't say it again."

He wheezed out a groan, squeezed both eyes shut as if in pain, and held out the palms of hands.

"Look," he said. "What do you want me to do? I can't let this go on for much longer-our men are going to either starve to death at this rate or fall in battle from weakness. We have to move! I know you're insistent that we wait it out here, in this camp, but we don't know when the promised reinforcements from Otomeia or from Argus will arrive. It could be tomorrow, next week, or the next fucking year. We don't know when!"

A deep breath from him.

"I'm worried even if our men don't die from hunger, we're still sitting ducks out here," he told her, speaking slowly in an effort to make her understand. "We can't hold this place much longer, especially with weakening men. There's too many mouths too feed and not enough to go around, especially now that we have the Otomeians with us too. I'm not about to rely on the Sosia legion either, especially after that fiasco last time."

He was talking about a particularly gruelling engagement against the walls where the Mentulae had brought to bear every single piece of artillery on Sosia citadel, along with every soldier they could spare. Part of the walls had been severely damaged, and the foe had taken heart from that, making attack after attack with unusual vigour. It had taken all of Takeda's forces as well as every able fighting man and woman in Sosia to drive them away. Though the end of that day saw Sosia still in Himean hands, there were grievous losses.

"I don't know how much they lost then, but I'd bet no less than three cohorts," Takeda said disgustedly, not bothering to state their own losses, both from the Seventh and the auxiliary. "Those *cunni* saw us retire with fewer men than we brought, and they know we suffered more than they did in that fight. They're not crazy about coming up here yet, thank the gods, but one day they will. And if the Mentulae get the idea of falling on this camp, the whole pack of them... Well, fuck it all, but we're finished. You know we're finished."

Suou sighed, because she did know it. The choice she was rooting for-to wait out the arrival of reinforcements and keep eking out survival through the little the foraging troops were finding-was a big gamble too, resting upon the promptness of the Ninth and Eleventh, upon the inability of the Mentulae to decide to take out their little camp in one full attack, wary as the heathens were of the Himean fortifications. Nearly as many conditionals as Takeda's plan, she admitted, even while hiding her discomfort from the man whose scheme she was trying to overturn.

She wondered what Shizuru would do in such a situation. *Would that I had her mind now*, she thought sadly, feeling just the slightest twinge of self-disappointment. Ambition could not cause her to envy Shizuru's talent, but the welfare of people under her care did. She had to do all in her power to preserve what was left of the Seventh, as well as the Otomeians with them. And though she was doing all she could, she was yet acutely conscious of the same weariness in Takeda infecting her, tainting her with its malaise. Why did she feel as though she was only making a horrid situation just a little better, but not getting any closer to solving it? And what could she do to solve it, anyway, short of conjuring a miracle?

*I am empty*, she admitted. *What a pity for all concerned that I*



*haven't the spirit of Ulysses that possesses Shizuru-san: that one's cup runneth over with guile.* In some inarticulate place nestled deeper than logic, Suou *knew* Shizuru would be able to figure out something in this situation, would somehow prevail. Because she was the darling of the gods, Fortuna's favourite. And why was she the darling of the gods and Fortuna, anyway? Probably because the gods and Fortune loved people who were, even absent divine aid, so inhumanly excellent in all they did.

"I think there's only one thing for it if you're not willing to wait it out here," she finally replied. "We have to fight our way to Sosia in square formation, on defence the whole way. The first third or even half of the way can be marched, but we would be kidding ourselves to think the Mentulae wouldn't engage us once they are able to muster. They have no intention of letting us enter the citadel, so much we've seen from past manoeuvres. So the best way to Sosia shall be the tough one, probably a tortoise creep-fighting most of the time."

He seemed to think about it.

"It's not a bad idea, as far as protection goes," he said after some moments. He stared grimly at her. "What do you think of trying it at night? It might allow us to get further on before they give a fight."

"I advise against it, unless you feel confident enough to fight in the dark."

"No, you're right-I don't," he admitted. "The men might actually do worse then. I shit on this place! I wish we could do another distraction like the last time."

"Given that we shall be traversing a plain this time, I would hardly expect any misdirection on our parts to matter much."

There passed a silence long enough to indicate he was considering her suggestions. Suou waited, preparing additional arguments in case he had yet to be convinced by her words.

Finally he stirred.

"All right," he settled brusquely. "I'll go with your suggestions. But no more talk of staying here. We have to get inside Sosia tomorrow and that's it, Suou. Do I make myself clear?"

Suou shrugged.

"You make yourself clear," she said. "I'm not perfectly happy, but you make yourself clear. You'll announce the changes now?"

He got to his feet. "I'll send for the others."

"And I'll help you."

The assembly of the officers was fast and they were soon apprised of the modifications. It was dark by the time they finished spreading the word to the rankers and auxiliaries, however, and Suou retired to a late dinner with her tent-mate.

"A pity he would not concede more," she told Natsuki at their table, over a sorry meal of bread and dried meat. The bread was stale and weevilly, and the meat headed for shoe leather. Concerned for her charge, Suou had replaced Natsuki's portion with some boiled fowl the foragers had hunted. The birds were small and lean but still softer than what she herself was eating. Although Natsuki's stomach was in better state than before and the surgeons had pronounced her able to eat tougher solids again, Suou had still quailed at the thought of reintroducing the girl to them with such poor fare. This, even though the army doctors said that it would do no harm now.

*"It might do no harm, yet do no good either," she had responded to this. "As I see it, the girl doesn't need to eat such rude-tasting food to regain weight. If a bit of hunting's worth shall suit her better and add to the encouragement to finish her meal, then I see no reason not to take the trouble."*

She watched Natsuki test the cooked birds now, satisfied when the girl seemed quite happy with them.

"Thus goes the pathetic tale of my attempt to preserve all our lives," she said, continuing with what she had been saying before. "Ye gods, why am I now feeling the concessions so paltry? I felt better

about them before, but now even my belly seems to be telling me I've not done nearly enough to make a difference. Strange: I do not feel this often." She grimaced at her plate. "Why do we even have to risk slipping into Sosia citadel, anyway? I confess I still see it presenting little better chances for us than what we'd have if we took the risk of staying put instead."

Her companion was staring down a hunk of bread and picking out baked weevils from it.

"I do not... like it," the girl grumbled, teeth on her bottom lip from concentration.

"Neither do I, but we've no choice."

"Still, I do not like it. Stupid. It - it is-" Natsuki searched her lexicon for the appropriate word before finally coming up with one she had just employed: "It is very much of the stupid."

Suou gnawed on the inside of one cheek.

"I know," she muttered. "The best part of it is that our commander thinks himself subject to some jape by the gods and his enemies, but he's the real editor and we the casualties in the farce. Did he only have sense enough to rise beyond this dream of persecution, he would see that he has never needed to play victim."

She rocked her stool and fell into a dark reverie, woken from it only when Natsuki uttered one of her Otomeian exclamations.

"Never seen so many," the girl told Suou, showing off yet another insect's carcass between her fingers. "They do not properly..." A shake of her head as she searched for the word she wanted again. "*Anikmao*?"

"Ah, you mean 'sift'," Suou responded. "Yes, they're not sifting it as much as they could. Then again, considering the quality of what remains of our flour at this point, they would probably halve it by sifting it that strictly, mind you. Perhaps you should eat that weevil after all-gods know the bread already tastes like dust anyway. Why not supplement it with whatever else there is?"

She ripped a piece of bread from her own roll and stared at it resentfully.

"Because the foraging troops are bringing in scraps, eh?" she spoke on, recalling one of Takeda's remarks to her. "Well, why should it be otherwise? We're but peddlers in this case, praying to the gods for scraps of good fortune. I wish he would try to remember who beggared us into this, all the same."

She threw the bread into her mouth and chewed as though she bore a grudge against the food. Natsuki watched her silently, ears tracking the sound of Suou's teeth grinding.

Suddenly the Himean looked up. Their eyes met.

"Your silent calm mocks me, Natsuki," Suou said.

Natsuki frowned.

"I learn," the girl said in her usual truncated style, leaving Suou to wonder what exactly she had learned. "But you are troubled."

Suou laughed. "I am that indeed!"

"More than ever."

"This seems as good a time as any to test my boundaries for worry, yes," the legate said with more dark humour, popping another morsel of bread between her teeth.

"You *changed* some things."

Suou hummed deep in her throat and pushed the sawdust in her mouth to one cheek.

"Precious little," she said, careful not to open her lips too much. She swallowed. "Scanty."

"But still some things. It is not good yet, but it *is* better."

"Little better."

"Suou!"

Suou looked up again and found Natsuki's gaze searing into hers. The girl's eyes were darker in the dimness of the tent and Suou's expression softened as she saw again the odd familiarity of her sister's strength somehow refracted in this foreign and frail being.

"Little is also a difference, Suou," the young woman told her. "And difference, it matters. Suddenly you are harsh to yourself."

"Am I?" Suou sighed. "Perhaps I'm trying to keep myself on my toes, is all."

"You tread on your toes, rather," the girl replied, dead-earnest.

"Unlike you and unwarranted. This is something great patricians do sometimes, maybe? There are times like now... times you are like Shizuru."

The Himean froze mid-chew.

"You are troubled by how little you see the changes," Natsuki told her. "But you said earlier: all you could change was changed. What more does one do besides that? I am grateful for this much you call little. My men will remember this well. As will yours, I think. But mine, even more."

Suou was a little stunned by this unexpected solace.

"We are grateful for all you do for us," Natsuki repeated, returning immediately after to her food as though nothing of consequence had passed between them.

"My pleasure, Natsuki," Suou said after a quick gulp of the food in her mouth. "It was my pleasure to convince him to make such alterations. I only apologise that I couldn't convince him to do more, really."

Natsuki shook her head to show the apology was unnecessary.

"Although, to be honest, I'm not entirely certain either that my recommendation would have been so much better than his."

Natsuki said that she thought it was.

"Well, I thank you for that, although I must admit it doesn't exactly lift the spirits considering I failed to bring him around to the proposal." Suou finally grinned, and it relieved Natsuki to see it. "Still, there's little for it now but to hope the gods favour us tomorrow. And to take the small successes where we find them, as you say."

They both partook of some food before continuing their conversation, their faces wan.

Suou tried to explain what was the matter with their commander.

"He wasn't so unhinged before," she told Natsuki. "I think it's the strain that's responsible for this deterioration. The anxiety has been pushing him down lower than I've ever seen before. Perhaps he'd not even be this labile a leader if not for everything that's been going against his case ever since this started."

"This is the lowest you know of him?" Natsuki asked, tearing off a shred of meat from a bird wing. "He was different before?"

"Rather. I did like him well enough before all of this happened, you know, on more or less friendly terms. He didn't strike me then as staggeringly incapable. Maybe it's just that he is one of those who can't stand this degree of pressure."

Natsuki mulled this over while tearing the meat in her hands into smaller shreds. Suou eventually had to stop her when she apprehended that Natsuki was doing it unthinkingly, a kind of fiddle while musing. By the time Suou intervened, the scrap of meat had been frayed into several pathetic wisps, stringy as the unravelled ends of twine. Natsuki pouted at her own doing.

"I wonder," the girl began, switching to their other language. "You think he approaches his nadir because of so many problems or you think he does so because of so many responsibilities?"

Suou's brow creased as she attempted to think of the answer.

"Fair enough," she said, answering Natsuki's Greek with Himean. "Maybe I am just trying to justify my past association with the man."

In the end, I don't know which it is."

"Either way, my esteem of him does not grow." Natsuki's face, so thin yet still thick with character, peered closely at Suou's classically fair face. "Worth is, to me, measured in... ah, consistency . "

Suou saw the justice in the concept.

"I worry too about the morrow," Natsuki added. "But I know too there is no choice but his. I - no, *we* - will follow the order. But we will do all we can to improve it where there is - is latitude, no?"

"Well said," Suou replied, giving an approving dip of the chin.

"You're right, of course. There's nothing more for it than to see what can be done once we get there." An explosive exhale, strong and filled with the concerns that had been so heavy on her spirit. "No use moping about it here. Pardon my rudeness over our dinner, Natsuki. I've no idea what came over me."

Natsuki nodded and returned to her fare. Suou called her attention to something.

"This is the last of the honey." The Himean pushed towards her a saucer of the syrup, which was yet untouched. "I suggest you eat it with your bread to make it more bearable, Natsuki."

Natsuki nodded and gingerly touched the tip of one finger to the honey's surface. She sucked on the digit afterwards and the sweetness fluttered her lashes.

"You too?" she offered, sliding the saucer closer to the other woman-who was smiling at the thought that, had she been a certain someone, Natsuki would have likely offered the finger instead.

"No, it's all right." Suou tore off a crust of the stale bread and dipped it in her goblet. "I have a bit of wine left. It macerates well, for all that it's swill."

The green eyes were on hers, shining and alert. "Mass-"

Suou's confusion was transient.

"Oh, macerate," she said to the Otomeian. "To soften something by soaking it in a fluid. A verb."

Natsuki nodded rapidly several times, silently mouthing the word. She shot up and towards Suou's desk, grabbing writing implements. The Himean, for her part, had been well-habituated to Natsuki's eccentricities by now. She waited without looking.

"There," she said, after having written the word on the used parchment Natsuki had brought. "That is how you spell it."

Natsuki purred over the letters Suou had written, still mouthing the word. Eventually she repeated it to her own satisfaction, and she thanked her companion for the lesson.

"You're welcome," Suou answered, still a little distracted by thoughts of the next day. She surfaced from her considerations long enough, however, to ask the girl to eat already.

"Those look like the kind to toughen as they cool," she said, pointing to chick-sized fowls in Natsuki's bowl. "Let us not waste the cooks' trouble, please, for I had them boil those to softness for you especially. Your belly may not take as well to them if you ingest them when they have turned stiff."

Natsuki finally drew away from her parchment.

"I will... macerate first," she murmured, more to herself than to Suou. "The bread."

"You go to it, Natsuki. You go to it."

Suou got a dirty look for that, but paid it no notice. Once they had finished with their repast and were just finishing their cups-both of which they had refilled with water, the wine stores having been near-depleted-Suou got up and headed to her desk for the regular ritual.

Natsuki reached over to her cot for a dagger she had been polishing.

"Suou," she said, as the older woman sat to her correspondence. "Those letters you write are again for..."



Suou concluded the name. "Shizuru-san, yes."

Natsuki hummed and slipped her dagger from its damascened sheath: it was the one Shizuru had given her and she treasured it with a vehemence requiring its maintenance each evening. She picked up the cloth she used to clean it and took it to the blade, her green eyes fixed on the wicked blue edge.

"What is it?" Suou followed. "Why do you ask that?"

Natsuki took her time to reply.

"Always, you write them," she observed after a while.

"Not every night. But yes, I suppose it seems I'm always at it."

"Always," Natsuki went on, "you do not send them."

"True, I don't do that."

"Even when... when the messenger from Argus was sent back."

"True, even then."

A silence passed as Natsuki finally parted her gaze from her blade, directed it to the back of Suou's flaxen head.

"But why?" she asked. "Why write, if you will not send?"

Suou stopped what she was doing. Her chair scraped and she turned to face the girl.

"Is this about my cautioning you not to send any letters to Shizuru-san either, when Midori-san's messengers slipped in?" she asked, her pale eyes twinkling. "You didn't question me then, so I thought you understood."

Natsuki's frown deepened. Her reasons for agreeing with that injunction at the time were not equal to Suou's and she had suspected it. She had refrained from sending a letter to Shizuru only because she had never had any intention of doing so in the first place. Why burden Shizuru with inconsequential words now, after

all, when Shizuru would undoubtedly have dozens of other problems to deal with upon returning here? Besides that, Natsuki was quite resigned to her reality: given everything that was happening, she doubted her chances of coming out of all of this as one of the living. If she lived, the words she wished to write would be another matter, and probably expressed somehow, some way. But if the worst happened, as was a distinct possibility, she had to consider the welfare of those left behind. And Natsuki had had enough experience in the subject to know that the most destructive words were always those last spoken by the dead.

"Speak your reason, Suou," she said simply. "Then we see if I understand."

"I forbade your sending any letters to her in particular," Suou explained. "Because I was afraid of what might happen were our couriers unfortunate enough to be waylaid by Mentulæan scouts-or bandits, even, who might be in their pay."

Natsuki cocked her head at the apparent disparity she had found, looking like a pup trying to identify a foreign scent.

"But you took the risk," she pointed out. "For the formal letters to the governor of Argus."

"Yes, I did," Suou told her. "But that was a calculated risk. The information there about our strength means little to the Mentulæ, even if they do intercept it. Any information to be gleaned from-well, pardon me if I am indelicate here-from *Shizuru Fujino's lover*, however, is too sensitive for that gamble."

The other made no secret of either her confusion or her embarrassment.

"I dare not risk the Mentulæ suspecting what you are to Shizuru-san," Suou said. "Not just for Shizuru-san's sake or yours, but for everyone else's too. If the foe knew who you are to her, they would be likely to actually go with our worst fears and attack our little camp in full cry, just to bear you off as a prize. Even were Shizuru-san not returning to battle with them and inspire the wretches to such symbolic attacks, the fact remains that she once practically spat on

the dust where their Emperor stood, then rubbed his face in the resulting mud. Do you think he'd not remember her forever for that? I daresay he might have even informed all his underlings and officers at court to bring him Shizuru-san, did any of them luck out and encounter the woman. The same for anyone who is proven to have so deep a relation to her. They would make you a trophy, dear-of the kind that you subject to indignities, then mount as a disembodied skull on a pike. I shall not be accomplice to that."

She turned back to her writing and spoke on in that easy way she had, which she had noticed to also set Natsuki at better ease.

"What I write so regularly are accounts," she disclosed. "Full, detailed accounts of all that has happened and is happening to us. My servants actually know about these because I told them what to do, should anything happen to me that prevents these records from reaching Shizuru-san once she returns. She should know all of this, Natsuki: the incompetence that led us to these straits, the bravery of heroes like you, the full tale with nothing spared. All people must be held accountable for their actions, just as much as their words." She paused for the briefest of moments. "These words I set down shall substitute for my voice, should anything happen to bring me to the silence of the pyre."

Natsuki began to protest immediately.

"Oh, for Juno' sake-I'm not *planning on dying*," Suou said, throwing the girl a lazy grin over one shoulder. "But I am planning for all possibilities. If my sister ever taught me anything, it would be to have insurance against even the worst outcome. So set mind at ease. Just think of this as surety."

She had turned back to her writing, so she did not see the look on Natsuki's face.

Suou had disturbed Natsuki deeply in her little surety, for her expression of it rather dropped the girl's low hopes even lower. It was true Natsuki had been calm for most of the fiascos during this awful war, but that was only Natsuki being Natsuki, even at her most worried: that stolidity of character in the girl was due to her fluency when it came to the desperate. Being so used to seeing the worst-

and, in a way, often expecting the worst-Natsuki spared little time for either panic or plaintiveness because she accepted the worst automatically and got on by focusing on making the best of it.

That Suou had troubled her was due to the implication of Suou's disclosure, which was that Natsuki had failed to evaluate the desperation of their case. The girl had actually been planning to be in the battle-without Suou's knowledge, of course-so that she could help in it. Natsuki needed no conceit to appraise her own military talents, and knew she had to be in the fray to make a difference with her leadership. When Takeda Masashi had first announced the original version of his plan, she had seen immediately what was going to happen to her fellows-and she could not let that happen to them without attempting counter to it, that was for certain. Thus what she had been turning about her mind all day was how to save her men from certain death while discharging their piteous duty as bait, how to work within that bungling battle strategy so that she could yet salvage as many of hers as the gods permitted.

In this framework within Natsuki's mind, one assumption was that the Himeans would be generally safe. She would not need to go to such exertions as she expected to have to do for her men just to save them. Their safety was the entire point of the strategy, after all, and it was left to Otomeians like her to consider death on the morrow. But to hear Suou, a Himean, a legate and patrician of the first order, considering the same? Well, what that told Natsuki was that, even with the improvements in the strategy, Suou thought no one safe, either generally or otherwise. And if a Himean of such status could think that-here Natsuki felt a violent shiver-what should she and all the other Otomeians think? That absolutely no hope remained?

She began to speak to herself under her breath, which she only did when in a transport of deliberation.

Suou could hear it from her desk. Slow slip of a soft sound somewhere - sibilant hiss intervening - then more rolling, throaty notes. The woman sat through it for a while and pretended not to notice, keeping her quill busy and her hand gliding. Once she had had enough of the background noise, though, she pushed her chair from the table and cast her friend a frown.

Natsuki felt herself interrupted and lifted a raven-black eyebrow.

"You should not mutter to yourself so," the Himean said, obviously disparaging.

Natsuki glared the way she did whenever she thought Suou was putting more restrictions on her.

"Why?" the girl demanded, on edge from her thoughts. "I am not permitted? Why should I not mutter to myself?"

"Because there are some among the men who find it disturbingly sexy, I hear," the Himean replied levelly. "And I do not want you providing additional temptation to my peers. You keep trying to make my job harder than it has to be."

That slammed the Otomeian's mouth shut, she was gratified to see.

"Shizuru-san would agree with me on this, I think," she smiled at the mortified-looking Natsuki. "One more thing to explain to her if I have to maim someone to keep them away from you."

Natsuki's brow furrowed. Suou nodded to her leg and in doing so prompted a cry from the girl.

"Not your fault!" the Otomeian gasped, shocked. "You know this, Suou. It was nuh-nuh- *not* your fault!"

Suou laughed gently.

"True," the Himean answered. "But it was my responsibility. There lies a difference between the two, Natsuki."

Natsuki's face loosened further.

"No more argument on that, I ask of you," Suou went on. "Trust me to know where my duties lie as well as where my performance is, relative to those lines."

It took some deep deliberation, but Natsuki ultimately acquiesced. The other woman could see she was still unnerved, however, so she decided to put her writing on hold temporarily and chat with the girl

for a while.

"Wait, I remembered just now," she said with immense nonchalance. "Takeda said something to you earlier, when we were leaving the command tent. That was your language, wasn't it? You did not tell me what he said."

The diversion had effect: Natsuki made a face. "He said *good night*, I think."

"You think?"

"He mutilated the words," the girl sneered in her purest Attic. "Difficult to identify corpses so distorted."

Suou doubled over in her chair.

"I apologise on his behalf, then," she giggled. "And on behalf of all other Himeans who might unknowingly slaughter your tongue with their accents, in coming days. No doubt others have already tried similar greetings on you, from among the men?"

The green eyes responded to the query with a searching gaze.

"Oh, I do know about it," Suou chuckled. "And I do respect your ability to hold them at bay-provided you know to come to me if someone oversteps the advance. How have you been holding up against your admirers and well-wishers, then? You must grant some of them are just genuinely moved by your injury and illness, you know, so they don't all deserve one of your famously chill turns."

"I know," Natsuki told her unenthusiastically. "You think me unkind?"

"Not at all!"

"Then *I know*."

"Fair enough," Suou said with a smile. "Since we are already talking about this, has anyone been so bold as to actually make an indelicate proposition to you?" Upon seeing the wariness in the girl's face, she quickly added a disclaimer: "I need not know the name, although I would like to know the rank. And I promise not to do

anything untoward to the person should I discover who it is, unless he or she does anything untoward in the future, of course."

Natsuki admitted it. "One."

"Rank?"

"Officer."

"What kind?"

"Officer," Natsuki repeated.

Suou smirked at the girl's care.

"You'd think me a villain," she said. "An officer, then. And how did you respond to the proposition?"

"I said *no*," Natsuki told her, squinting. "Very simple."

"It worked?"

"Mm-hm." The younger woman exhaled. "I think the person does - does not even remember."

"How could that be?"

A shrug. "Drunk."

"Dear me."

Suou contemplated the collected young woman with rising esteem. She had heard nothing of this or of any of the officers putting such a fool proposition to Natsuki, which only indicated how close the girl's nature was. How many were the things she held secret! Even she had moments where she needed to complain to another, yet Natsuki held off from even that unless pressured into it. Did all those burdens not try to burst out sometimes, she wondered, smiling at the girl. And then she remembered the claw marks Natsuki had been leaving on herself before, and cast off that question.

"You do have a most wonderful patience," Suou told her now. "I

don't think many are aware of that virtue of yours and how well you exercise it. I can only imagine the trouble all these hangers-on give you, Natsuki."

Natsuki stared. This, she thought, from the woman whom half her own troopers agreed to be a veritable gift of god-and that without counting her skills in battle or strategy yet.

" *Only* imagine?" the girl said with heavy accusation. "Suou."

Suou's eyebrows quizzed her tone.

"Suou, some of-" She stopped so abruptly it sounded like a choke. It took more wiggling from Suou's eyebrows to get her to go on. "They give... Also, they give you that. Trouble."

"Do they?" Suou said, trying to clarify that she had taken the girl's meaning properly. "Just to be sure, Natsuki, would you mind giving me at least one example?"

"Umm..."

"You said 'they', so you might be able to provide a name."

"Oh! Um..." The green eyes slid upwards and to one side as Natsuki tried to recall at least one. "Naoko Funasaka?"

"Funasaka-san, hm? Now I see."

Naoko Funasaka was one of the tribunes on Takeda's staff, and a rather sparkly and pretty specimen too. She was also one of those who had set her eyes on the second daughter of the Himemiya the moment she arrived from Hime, and was always fluttering those selfsame eyes at the unaffected legate.

"Yes, I suppose I must deal with similar troubles sometimes," Suou admitted, making a point of ignoring the loud snort Natsuki released at the word "sometimes". She smiled at the freedom with which the girl had made the sound, pleased that they had come to such a point in their friendship. "It doesn't trouble me much. I'm lucky in that most of the male ones happen to be subordinate to my rank, and so hesitate to make too bold an approach, while the female ones, even



if some *are* close to my position, are generally mild enough."

Natsuki's head was angled to one side. Suou knew that meant the girl had more questions, so she prodded the girl into asking some.

"None of them..." Natsuki started, before stopping herself and shaking her head. "None catch your eye?"

Suou was surprised by the query, though she did not show it.

"No, unfortunately," she said. "Or is it fortunate, rather? Either way, it does not much matter to me."

"Um. Wuh-why?"

"Perhaps because, to be honest, I am just not interested in romance at this time," Suou smiled. "Or could it be going back to it, perhaps, that it is just because I am not interested in any of those who have proposed?"

The green eyes were very wide, and it dawned on Suou that Natsuki was genuinely interested in what she was saying.

*Interesting*, she thought, wondering at the girl's curiosity. And then she realised that part of Natsuki's expression had to do with enjoyment: the brat was actually enjoying their topic!

*Ten denarii says because she has never had this talk with a friend before*, Suou wagered, a little tickled by the girl's virginity in such areas. *What a time to finally have it, though!*

"Why?" asked Natsuki, striving to look serious. "Why... not interested?"

"Heavens, but you must have nerves of steel to indulge in such talk at this time."

"This campaign is good practice for such nerves."

Suou grinned.

"If it would be anything." She sighed and shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, far be it from me to admit defeat so quickly in composure. In answer to your query, Natsuki, I think they're just not my type."

"Type?"

"Type of lover, I meant, or the type I would prefer."

"Ohh." Now she looked even more interested. "And what is... um..."

"Ask away, do, Natsuki! I promise I shall not think ill of you, whatever the query may be."

"Um." A lick of the lips. "Wuh-what..."

She held off and seemed to summon courage. At length, she came out with it: "What is your 'type', Suou?"

"I'm not certain. Someone like you, perhaps?"

Natsuki's glare was withering.

"You are an ass," she said.

Suou doubled over again in her chair.

"Oh, come," she said when she was able to talk again, still hugely amused by Natsuki's response. She had actually taught the line to the girl as a jest, instructing her to say it to anyone making advances. " *You* began this odd conversation, Natsuki, and I'm not entirely sure you've done it in earnest. I only beat you to it because I rather suspect a joke for me waiting here, looming in the wings."

She received the princess's haughtiest glare. "Takeda Masashi is not alone in the dream of persecution."

"Oh, a sting! You've a barbed lash on that tongue, do you not?" Suou chuckled merrily at her. "See now-I've botched a whole column on this page, and it's your fault for keeping me wriggling in my seat. If I keep this, I shall write that down. *Culpability should go to Shizuru's brat for having me so diverted.*"

"Not a brat," Natsuki declared, nose in the air. "And if you do not

write well now, you blame your pedagogue, Suou. And your... your..."

"My?"

"Your shaky hands!"

Suou blew a lock of hair from her face playfully.

"I had a very good pedagogue, thank you, and my hands are quite proven," she told the girl. "Oh, look at this mess. This is too smeared - best redo it."

She balled up the parchment on which she had been writing.

"Just to answer that question you've yet to ask but have in your eyes, Natsuki," she said while crumpling the paper, "I have actually had my share of affairs."

Natsuki was stunned by the disclosure.

"Yes, you've heard little of it, have you not?" Suou smirked, aware that Natsuki heard a great deal more around the camp than she let on. "I'm not famed for my affairs, see, and am fairly confident in saying I've yet to make any grand gestures or follies for romanticism. In which sense I have decent confidence too in admitting I'm not a great lover."

She winked at the girl's slack jaw.

"Yes, I admit that," she said. "I'm not much in love with being one either. I'm too practical for it, is what I think to be the hindrance. That might be the answer as well to why I'm not interested in anyone right now. It's not convenient for me, so I've no inclination to entertaining a liaison at this point in time. One cannot be a great lover with such a sensibility, right?"

Natsuki's mouth made a silent O and Suou smiled.

"Boring, wouldn't you say?" she asked the girl, who denied it.

"Not boring," Natsuki insisted. She threw her head back and stared

at the tent's ceiling, the softness of her exposed neck bored into by a pair of pale eyes. "But *like you* ."

She brought her chin down again and threw Suou one of her beautiful, astonishing grins.

"Always so level-headed," she told the Himean.

"You think so?" Suou asked, flipping the crumpled-up parchment into the air and catching it gracefully. "I wonder. There are yet times when I wonder what it would be like to be more-let me see now, what is the word?-oh, more impractically romantic." She shammed puppy-faced excitement. "It seems like great fun, see!"

Natsuki shared her laughter.

"It is great fun?" the Otomeian echoed.

"It seems to be." Suou flipped the parchment ball again. "One day, I promise, I shall make the attempt. I have no dearth of models after which to pattern my actions, at least."

Natsuki smirked. "You will say Shizuru, I think."

"Come, you should admit she's a front runner where this is concerned. Or I could try to be like my sister, who did flout one of the foundational rules of our world for her wife. Oh, to be a mad, unreasonable lover! I might actually enjoy it."

"Try to be like Takeda Masashi and enjoy?" Natsuki suggested wickedly.

"No, that's very much of the stupid." The Himean checked herself and groaned. "Damn it, I'm beginning to talk *like you* ."

The other was all approval: "More articulate now, yes."

Suou threw the ball of parchment at the girl's face.

" *Tace* and let me write!" she said, smiling.

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The dawn saw them in less jokey mood, for the muster to arms was early and their easy banter the night before had just been a mask for the worries persisting. For all that there had been some improvement to the general's scheme, neither woman genuinely felt good about the day: Suou still had that ringing alarm in her instinct, and her lingering fears of some disaster; Natsuki still had the unrest Suou had given her the night before, as well as fears of her own scheme's discovery.

The captain of the Lupine troopers had arranged for some of her attendants to squirrel her out of the noncombatant cluster and they did so as soon as the march towards Sosia citadel was underway, helping her reach the Otomeian infantry with none of the Himean officers noticing. Only when she was among her infantry fellows did Natsuki release her breath: she knew where Suou was, and knew the woman unlikely to spy her from there. Natsuki had taken some precautions in camouflage as well. She understood by now that should Suou catch sight of her, the woman would stick at nothing to return her to safety-even if safety meant tying Natsuki in a bundle and having her carted off in ignominy.

"Please forgive me, but I would be tempted to agree with her then, Princess," the man marching beside the girl said: it was Otanara, the head of the Otomeian infantry legion. He was crustier than even he had expected to be today, and all because of Natsuki's sneaking into the infantry. "Please return to the noncombatants. I regret to remind you of this, but you made me a promise to keep from the fighting."

"To be held insofar as circumstances permit."

He frowned at the reminder of that provision in their agreement and leaned closer, their heads almost touching as they whispered conspiratorially.

"Please, Natsuki, let the circumstances permit it today," he said. "You know as well as I do that today of all days is dangerous."

"Mm-hm," she said. "And I come here to reduce it, the danger."

"Again, please forgive me, but my concern is reducing the danger to

you!"

She snapped him a scornful look.

"Your concern, Otanara," she retorted, "is the danger to the men. I am but one person, yet you set eyes on me alone. Review your priorities-" Her eyes gleamed. "Or relinquish your office."

His voice was beseeching. "If something happens to you, Natsuki, Alyssa would have me relinquish *more* . Please."

"Enough." Her eyes were forward now, her posture straight despite the slight limp still in her step. "You will be silent."

Otanara's head snapped upwards and his eyes rolled to the heavens, the frustration showing in the bulging cords of his neck. What was one to do with such a strong-willed creature, he wondered. The problem was that, despite his orders coming from Alyssa, Natsuki had sufficient authority to disdain any attempt by him to return her to safety. Oh, but Alyssa would still skin him for this did he live through it! *And should give Natsuki a good spanking*, he added with some hope.

"A small request, then," he whispered, trying just one more time. "Please, I beg of you, at least stay out of the worst of the fighting. I've set my two best men to guard your flanks but I fear that's not enough! Please keep away from the very front, or else I will be diverted from my duties from worry. My fears today are sharp enough without fear for you severing me from moorings, Princess."

Suddenly she whipped her head to him, an unexpected smile in her large gaze.

"A good figure of speech," she said, genuinely enthusiastic. "It is pertinent to, ah, to naval matters, no? You get that where, Otanara?"

He sighed long-sufferingly.

The march proceeded devoid of incident at the start, as indeed the officers had warned the men to expect. Later, glances in the Mentulaeen camp's direction showed the foe already debouching and after them, and the sight of the accruing horde helped spur the

Seventh and its allies into a faster pace. For a few minutes there was nothing but the sound of two armies rushing over the field, both heading towards the citadel. Another few minutes and then it was a *race* .

Midway through the second quarter of the track, the Himeans were still marching in furious double-step. The sentries atop the Sosia walls started calling out to them.

Exactly halfway through the track, the Himeans pushed all their noncombatants and artillery further into the front end of their formation, intending that these should be nearer the gates by the time the enemy hit.

Starting into the third quarter of the track, the Mentulae were close enough to sting the Himeans' eyes with their dust cloud. Wisely, the Himean commander ordered the officers to slow the men's pace to normal, afraid the legionaries might be out of breath once the armies met.

Well into that same third quarter, the battle began.

"Here they come!" Takeda yelled, calling his buglers to play 'form square'. The legionaries and auxiliary foot made up the sides, while the artillery and noncombatants were at the centre. The cavalry retained its own unit since it would have charge of fending off the enemy horse, and was assigned en masse to one flank. Once the formations had been achieved, the square did not yet come to standstill but continued to march, having been instructed to wait until the officers gave the signal to prepare. These were holding it off for the last moment to further reduce the distance between the troops and their destination.

"Brace yourselves, you *cunni* !" the senior legate roared to his cohort when the standstill could be put off no longer. He could see some of the men's faces already showing apprehension at what they were facing, and he addressed them over and over in those few seconds before the foe struck, trying to raise their spirits as much as words could. "They only look large, you bastards, because their arses are so wide! Give the cocksuckers as good as you get and don't let me see anyone breaking rank!"

The onrush coming at them was truly fearsome. So numerous were the enemy that the ground trembled under the legionaries, who had swords out and shields at the ready. Yet first blood went to the Himean side due to the auxiliary cavalry, who awaited the clash on their bows. Their aim was unfocused, for they loosed shafts as fast as they could nock them, but each arrow found a mark anyway in that dense crowd of men. The Himeans threw their spears too as soon as the first Mentulae came within range, and achieved similar effects.

And then there was contact.

One side of the Seventh's square nearly caved in at the impact. The soldiers dug themselves in quickly, however, and regained the form even while more Mentulae streamed to the sides, trying to attack them from three fronts. The cavalry came to the rescue, executing passes that thinned the flanks' attackers for brief moments-during which the Himeans could recoup and gather themselves for the next battery. All the while, the general kept on the lookout for the first significant break in the enemy's force, intending to use that for a resumption of the march.

"Now!" he cried upon finding what he sought. "Step until I say to hold again, and stick to formation!"

The action was quite beautifully organised, thought Suou, who was in the fight as commander of her old cohort. The Seventh and the auxiliaries neither broke the square nor fell out of step, and it was in this manner that they worked their way closer to the walls in which they sought refuge. They made their march-now a crawl-while fighting back the bursts of Mentulae still falling upon them, and actually covered a respectable distance with respectable losses for a while. The Mentulae had made the mistake of dashing towards them in that first attack and this aided the Himeans greatly, for it broke up what could have been an unceasing and solid wall into scattered pockets of assault.

The Otomeian cavalry was also doing well, if not even better: the conspicuously garbed members of the Lupine Division made up the tip of the arrow for each raid the horse ran, and these were so effective they cracked open every Mentulaean line into which they



cannoned. Part of this was due to the Mentulae's inability to get over their fear of these specific warriors, about whom they had heard many a chilling tale. It only compounded the infamy of the black uniforms that the Mentulae had seen the Lupine Division go head-to-head with their cavalry on several occasions in this siege, and had seen their cavalry limp back the losers every single time. The Mentulae were wary of the sickle-wielders on the giant horses, and it was another thing that worked to the Himean advantage.

*Things are going well*, Suou thought with amazement, hardly able to credit her own observation. About an hour or so into the battle, they had cleared the third quarter of the way without suffering outrageous casualties yet. Against her pragmatic nature, Suou let herself hope for the briefest instant that this mad idea would work. She could even hear the hubbub from behind that told her the Sosia garrison was coming to help them.

But then there was another tremble of the earth, skittering from her heels all the way to her knees.

"Incoming," she heard someone call. "Their horse is out!"

The Mentulae had thought to hold the remains of their horse as reserve, apparently, but now changed their minds and threw them into the conflict. After them was a thicker mass of Mentulaean foot than the first wave had brought, and every Himean on the field felt his skin crawl in a fever of apprehension.

"Hold!" the general was screaming from his position, his directive translated by the buglers. "Hold now!"

The Seventh ceased the crawl. Officers and centurions yelled to their men to take heart, to ready themselves for this second major assault. Meanwhile, the cavalry-led by one of the military tribunes-detached from their side to stave off the enemy cavalry's attack. Both horse contingents veered to one side, and engaged in their own heated battle. This took away some of the pressure from the infantry square, which waited again for the enemy's human bombardment. These had to suffer those few moments of agony as the foe surged upon them in a pack so large and undisciplined that countless Mentulae were trod underfoot by their comrades still

coming on. Oh the steel required to stand fast while facing that wave! It seemed to surge straight from the bowels of hell.

There was chaos when the second Mentulaean mass collided with the square. The sheer shock of soldiers piling upon soldiers actually killed most of those in the front lines on both sides, and led to a break on one side of the formation that cut off the Otomeian foot-positioned there to protect the flank farthest from the cavalry-like a splinter. The Seventh fought against the bedlam to close the gap, hard-put to do so because the Mentulae drew to it like ants to a sweet tart and because the inertia of the Mentulaean charge was still pushing them backwards, actually closer to the gates of Sosia.

The Sosia garrison, which had intended to reinforce them, now had to remain close to the walls. It protected the gates from any Mentulae who attempted to enter, and was forced to remain there even as the Seventh took the brunt of the enemy's strength.

The mayhem was occurring beside the citadel now, and both the Seventh and its foes, as well as the Otomeian cavalry, were unbearably close to their destination. The Otomeian foot, however, was being pushed further away, and had to fend for itself even while trying to rejoin its Himean comrades. Takeda watched this from high atop his steed, watching with consternation as the auxiliary foot failed again and again to return to the square. They all been so close, he thought painfully, until that break occurred. He swore an oath as he saw why the break had happened: it was due to something he had not thought to consider more thoroughly, which was the difference between the Himean and Otomeian weapons in a pitched battle like this.

Because he had wanted to provide for the possibility that he might need to separate the Himean and Otomeian foot after all, he had formed the square of two distinct parts and not mixed the legionaries with the auxiliary soldiers. Part of the square's shell was thus horned with Himean short swords, which worked brilliantly in crowded situations. The other part of the shell, being Otomeian, bristled with rhomphaia. While this was a limited weapon in close battle, it was still far better than the Mentulaean falx, which required space for the swing because it was limited to slash-work. The rhomphaia's straighter blade permitted a thrust, and this was precisely why the

Otomeians lined all their rhomphaia-users-about half of the total-at the front of the side facing the Mentulaean advance.

So when the second wave of Mentulae had struck, it met with two very different shells. The first one, the Himean, took the blow upon the flat of their shields, and were thus pushed back while absorbing the shock. The second shell, the Otomeian, welcomed the rush with a solid hedge of forward-thrust rhomphaia-the first few rows of which their wielders had even thought to brace against the ground at an angle. This relieved the auxiliary foot from taking the full strength of the jolt because the Mentulae simply stacked up on the waiting skewers. The break began when the Himean section was pushed off and towards Sosia, leaving the standing Otomeian fragment. The distance between the two sections only continued to be aggravated thereafter, and through minute after agonising minute, Takeda saw nothing but the odds mounting against favour of reunification. The Himeans could make a break for the destination already, but the separated Otomeians were too far. And the Mentulae seemed to notice, for most of them diverted into the gap between the two allies, thickening the human wall that made the partition.

The Himean leader watched this with a heavy heart, and was suddenly seized by dread that he would be able to salvage nothing from here did he delay any longer over the next command. All his experiences in the army had taught him that it was the commander who delayed too much that usually lost, and that triumph went to those as swift as they were ruthless. To his eyes the Mentulaeans spilling around the Seventh were a dread sea, seething with awful portent and ready to drown the only men that remained of his forces. Abruptly an image of the Eighth filled his vision, and he wondered if this was how that legendary legion had fallen, eaten up in its attempt to stand against an outrageously larger enemy.

The battle raged on as he underwent this torturous deliberation. Still no headway was made by the Otomeians trying to rejoin the Seventh. They were also being pushed and had now drifted very far-almost halfway back the path they had marched, in fact. Takeda eyed them with growing dismay and let his gaze go to the proximity of the Sosia gates, so near that he could have ridden to them in a matter of minutes.

"Fuck!" he exploded, spitting with disgust onto the ground. "Fuck!"

One of his tribunes rode up and closer. "General?"

Again Takeda's eyes drifted to the gates and the Sosia garrison guarding the way. He drifted next to the faraway Otomeians, still fighting alone.

He turned to the tribune and made the only decision he could think to make, gaze coming to rest on his precious Seventh.

*For every gain there's a sacrifice*, he told himself, biting the inside of his cheek so hard he tore out a flap.

The fresh orders blew from the buglers' horns.

Suou, whose cohort was among those at the front, looked up at the unexpected complication of the call. She had expected to hear something like an order to hold, but not the series that were being announced by the horns.

"What's that?" she demanded of one of her centurions, both of them pausing their screams at the legionaries. The bugles blew again and they interpreted the sounds into the tactics being described.

*All Himean foot, make for Sosia. Otomeian foot, draw off enemy left and hold. Horse, cover Himeans.*

Though she summoned all the composure for which her family was known, Suou still blanched.

"Rot your shrivelled-up head, Takeda!" she cried, ignoring the fact that her legionaries could hear her. She fell back and away from the fighting. "Goddamn the man!"

She swivelled to the salty old primipilus beside her, knowing the man would understand her alarm.

"What idiot gives the men permit to retreat during a battle?" she said to the veteran, who equalled her demand with a revolted look.

"Damn fool thing, legate," he growled, already feeling the shudder

from behind the ranks: the order was being carried out by the legionaries from behind. "They'll be on us like vultures after a massacre!"

Suou barked an order to her cohort to stand ground, and the centurions echoed it without question. These were men who knew why she had just contravened the general's rule, and actually approved of her contravention.

"Where's my mule?" Suou demanded, looking for the animal she had taken to replace her usual battle charger: all officers except the commander had traded their horses for mules to supplement the cavalry. "Get me a mule, lads, or an accursed horse! I need a mount and I need it now!"

They served her while battling on, and Suou was soon able to survey the field from the elevation of a horse's back. She noted everything within her sight and wrestled with her mind to give her a remedy for the harm developing even now.

She saw that the Seventh was still engulfed and in the thick of battle, but some of its cohorts had started for Sosia upon Takeda's command. They were peeling off from the square, running towards the temptation of the gates and the safety of the garrison of Sosia, which was extending itself as best as it could to help. But the fleeing soldiers of the Seventh were exposing their backs and also thinning the ranks in devastating measure. Suou could already see the Mentulaeans gaining ground as the Himean front gradually lost mass from behind. Did the front ranks turn now, nearly all of the Seventh would be in cut down like a gaggle of defenceless children.

At least her cohort had taken her order without question and was fighting on. Ushida's cohort was beside hers and not giving way either. This told Suou the senior legate had given mutinous injunction against Takeda's orders too. She could see Ushida on a cream-coloured nag he had taken from someone, and saw her alarm reflected clearly on his handsome face. She considered going after him so he could make Takeda change the order, but then she saw him suddenly go after the Otomeian troopers, who were flagging because the tribune leading them had fallen. Suou realised he was going to try and redirect the cavalry to better effect.

She dug her heel into her steed's ribs, and ran the animal straight after the retreating legionaries of the Seventh.

"Return and fall to formation! Fall to the formation, goddamn you!" she screamed with all her might, cutting off a terrified soldier. She could see Takeda's cohort at the head of the withdrawal, and his *paludamentum* already making safe distance from the fray. "Return to the ranks! Ignore the bugled order!"

Most of them could not hear her, although a nearby tribune did ride up at her cry. He drew alongside, his horse blowing steam and himself gasping at her rebellious words.

"Himemiya-san!" he yelled. "Stop! The general gave the comman-"

" *Tace, inepte* !" she yelled back. "The general has killed us with his stupidity, is what he has done!"

He reeled back from her fury and tried again. "But it's clear! We can rush into Sosia now!"

"And be cut down before we cross the gateway, you fool! They'll be after us with nothing to hold them save for the Otomeians, and they'll not even be enough to draw the dogs off our scent!"

She punctuated that with more screams for the Seventh to hold ground. A glance backwards showed her some of the Seventh had heard her cry and were staying with her cohort and Ushida's. But they had been weakened by those who had chosen to heed the general's command, and the poor holdouts were getting the worst of the fight.

And still being shoved further away was the auxiliary.

Suou jerked her mount so quickly to the tribune's that the animals' sides crashed into each other.

"Listen, Ichinose," she said, pulling the other officer close. "Go to the general now. Tell him to belay that order and call to the buglers to reform the square before this gets any worse."

"But we're being swamped!"

"We're being killed now, Tribune, so take your pick as to which sees our chances better."

"But I can't say that to the gener-"

She struck him so hard with the back of her hand that his nose ran blood.

" *Listen to me*, you spineless cur," she said, taking care to enunciate the words into his ear, which she had pulled again to her mouth. "If you can't bring yourself to speak my words to the general, I might as well gut you myself now. I'll even run every member of your miserable family to the ground if you don't follow my order, and you'd best believe I can do it! Do you understand, you worthless piece of shit?"

He stared into her pale eyes and felt a chill that had nothing to do with his fear for the battle.

"Tell him now!" she said, pushing him away. She slapped his steed on the flank and set him off.

She ran her horse back and forth to the rear of the remaining lines, trying to head off as many retreating soldiers as she could.

"I beg of you, listen!" she yelled, lungs and throat on fire. "This is Suou Himemiya, Seventh! Listen to someone you know well! I certainly thought I knew you! I thought the Seventh was the bravest legion I'd ever seen! Today you're proving me wrong!"

Some had already recognised her voice, and arrested their departure from the line.

"The Seventh I see now are cowards!" Suou was shouting, still running her horse up and down to maximise her effect. "You flee from the Mentulae and present them with bare arses! Shame on the Seventh for having been so quick to follow the order to run, even when they know better! Or does the Seventh know better? Does it even deserve to be called a legion of Hime, when it acts like a lot of bum-boys asking for the Mentulaean ram?"

A good number on the verge of retreat were suddenly back, growling

at the insults of their beloved legate. How could Suou Himemiya say such things to them, when they were only following the bugled directives? She knew they had only been heeding orders, that they had no choice!

Yet many of them were choosing to flout Takeda's orders now, and returning to their stations to fight again.

"Prove this wrong, Seventh!" Suou called to them, her voice more urgent than it had ever been at any other time in her life. "Show me I was right in what I always thought, and that you've the most piss and vinegar of any legion I've ever known! Stand by me, by the gods, and reform-or we are all lost!"

They had as much piss and vinegar as she thought, for they saw the reason in her words and took the instruction. More than half of the Seventh reformed and fought back against the Mentulae, gaining precious time for their confederates who had fled for the walls and were thus vulnerable. Looking over the fray as she galloped to her men, Suou saw to her horror that the Seventh had not stiffened in time: the Otomeian foot was already separated from them by more than the original square's length, and was drawing avalanche after avalanche of Mentulae, which it had to fend off alone. She held her breath as an enormous wave descended upon their allies. It burst upon the blonde heads of the Otomeians like seawater on a reef, bubbling after the blow. Suou had not released her breath than another such wave came upon their allies: to her amazement, it met similar end. Suou could hardly believe what was happening. The Otomeians were *holding*.

"Ecastor!" she cried, following it with a whoop when yet another wave succeeded only in pushing the Otomeians away but not in destroying their wall. "Well done, by Jupiter!"

She ran her horse closer to the front lines, eager for a better view.

The Mentulae spared some hesitation right before the punch, she found after some time of surveying the distant conflict. It was during that infinitesimal recess that they lost power and lent advantage to their targets. Suou supposed the very sight of the Otomeians was also working on the enemy: over half of the Otomeian foot came to



two metres tall, the rest approaching it. So large were these mountain-dwellers that they towered over nearly all the soldiers coming at them, looming horrific on the Mentulaean horizon. A blow from one such giant, too, was usually lethal because of the sheer size of the arm dealing it out. In any battle that merely traded hits, Otomeians were easily the winners.

*But they're not like the Mentulae, and they've more sophistication than just trading blows,* thought the vastly impressed legate, who had already had the measure of these allies yet still kept being astounded by their worth. It was not just their stature that made them so valuable: it was also their discipline. A disciplined soldier of average size might be able to bring down an unschooled giant if he used his wits: a disciplined soldier of average size would hardly have a chance against that giant if the giant gained the traits of both thought and discipline. And the Otomeians had both those virtues to add to their excellence.

*We should be arraigned for spending their lives like this,* Suou told herself even as she rallied the Seventh in defence. *Many a Himean general has complained of feckless and inconsistent auxiliary, and here we are with a Himean general who actually has the exceptions to the rule, yet would squander them in profligate expenditure-and all for nothing. Damn the waste! It's a wonder they do not hate us for our meanness to them, our underestimation of their lives. Even I do not know how to face Natsuki after this.*

That was her only consolation now: that Natsuki had probably been shepherded into Sosia already with the rest of the noncombatants, and was safe. Suou had still not discovered the girl on the field, for Natsuki's camouflage consisted of trading her black uniform for the white infantry one and the addition of a helm for her hair. Even though the helmet had been torn off in the scuffle, she was still invisible to Suou because of the confusion at the Otomeian infantry's front, which was just a ruck of men and melee. She had been a little closer to the central rows earlier, but had come nearer the fore upon hearing the order from the buglers, and joined the other Otomeian officers egging on the fatigued men and fearing the worst.

The Otomeian officers showed their mettle now, all of them hoarse from screaming non-stop to stabilise the ranks. They had tried to

stand ground as long as possible earlier, but had eventually found themselves so swamped that the mere rush of Mentulae pushed them adrift. The officers-Natsuki included-were half-mad already from the stress of trying to regain the earlier position, but the Mentulae were refusing to give and the Himeans were not coming to help. The gap between them and Sosia continued to widen.

Finally, when it was clear that they had been all but abandoned, the Otomeians realised the gamble they had to take. Most of the Mentulaean weight was now concentrating beside Sosia, not least because of the sight of the Seventh turning tail. Even though a veritable horde was assailing the Otomeians too, they actually had fewer Mentulae scattered over their part of the field, and most of those present were on the side nearest Sosia and the Seventh as well. This meant that the Otomeians had little chance of breaking through and rejoining the Seventh, but it also meant that one avenue was open and uncontested: the one to the old camp.

The Otomeian leaders gave the order to inch towards it, and the soldiers soon picked it up, forming a tortoise-like configuration similar to the one they had just been parted from. They worked their way through the mass of Mentulae with agonising sloth at first, but were soon making even better progress than the Seventh, which was becoming more heavily assailed as the open gates tempted the Mentulae in their direction.

The Otomeian foot's survival depended on reaching the fortified ground around the old camp in time. The Otomeians still remembered the paths through the fortifications, but the Mentulae would be in danger if they tried to follow said paths, and had also had bad experiences in attempting it before. Many of the Mentulae would draw off once they got close to those mined and trap-filled spaces, and the Otomeians were banking on that. And it was only a short distance!

That short distance might have been several leagues' worth. Excellent though they were, nearly all odds were stacked against the Otomeians in their progress, and there were soon good numbers being felled by the Mentulae, their hulking bodies littered in the wake of the Otomeian shell. Some respite was afforded by the cavalry when it regrouped, for it was still raiding the Mentulae and now

concentrated on those occupying the space between the Seventh and the auxiliary foot, to prevent more weight being added to either of the larger masses. But the Otomeian infantry plight remained, for the most part, a desperate one.

Fighting alongside her countrymen, Natsuki could see that. She took her turn near the front and battled against it herself. Her arms were raw with slashes, her accursed leg was killing her, and she could barely move from one side to the other without taking a falx to the ribs. Yet she thanked the gods for the last, for she knew the Mentulae had made a mistake in moving the battle to such close quarters: the falx was an unwieldy weapon at best, and near impossible to direct when the user's movement was hampered. Taking heart from this minor lead, she started calling out to the men to break the polearms' stems wherever possible. She herself lopped off two in one sword swing and flung one detached blade into the middle of Mentulae, hoping it would hit someone. It did.

An hour and a half into this gruelling retreat, even the formidable arms of the Otomeians felt like dead weight to their owners. Only the exhortations of the officers still kept the infantry fighting, enhanced by the constant reminder that they were getting closer to their possible sanctuary. It was while giving one such reminder that Otanara, their supreme commander, saw something that made his heart still.

One madman from the Mentulaean front, in an astounding act of defiance, actually leapt towards the Otomeian polearms on Natsuki's section and died on their points. But he managed to land his metal-knobbed club on Natsuki's brow during the landing, and her head snapped back with such force that Otanara feared her neck broken. A halo of blood whipped a curve in her wake, and howls went up among the warriors she had been commanding.

"Shiina! Kame!" Otanara roared, worsening the babel around him. "The princess is hit! The princess! She is down!"

The two men he had called were the ones engaged to shadow Natsuki during the battle. They had been separated from her during the tumult, but they were yet closer to her than Otanara, and now redoubled their efforts to push through the crowd to reach the fallen

officer-who was at that moment being shielded from the enemy by a clump of outraged Otomeians.

Shiina and Kame finally made it to their destination and yelled to the others to provide cover, the two of them focused on dragging Natsuki away from the fight. As Shiina handed her to him in order to hack the arm off an approaching foe, Kame spared some time to look at the girl in his arms.

There was a great deal of blood. Red tears in her uniform revealed more injuries, but the one on her brow threw all the rest into insignificance. Kame thanked the gods it had not been a blade that soldier had held, for the force had split her flesh right over the skull and the broken wound gaped ragged, pink with shards of something shiny and white. The red kept blooming from the gap, even though it had painted half her face already. He paused when offered a safe huddle by some of his fellows, all of them sweating ice and vastly afraid.

"My god!" gasped Shiina, who had been abaft him all this time. "Did it open the brain?"

Kame tore off part of his uniform and wrapped it as best as he could around her blood-soaked head. He brought his ear to her mouth, whispering every prayer he had ever learned and making up new ones then and there.

A piteous rattle passed from the lips under him.

"Alive!" he breathed explosively. "Thank heaven!"

He trumpeted it to his commander, whom he trusted to hear the cry amidst the tumult.

"She's alive! The princess is alive!"

Otanara heard. He surveyed their position and saw that they were almost at the outermost set of ditches of the old camp.

He barrelled his way towards one of the men, the one famed for his stentorian voice.

"Call this out now!" he said, giving the man the message and sending him to the rear so he could call it without interruption. No sooner had he taken the man's place than he heard the cry, clear and articulated. At first it was probably futile, but another of the Otomeian warriors took it up, and then another. Soon, they were crying it out in chorus, an odd sound in any battle.

The words they were yelling were Otomeian, and neither the Himeans nor the Mentulae understood what was being said, even when they heard. Takeda's senior legate, who was still leading the cavalry, realised it must be something of import when he saw how the Lupine Division was acting: they had actually stopped mid-charge, and were now holding up all the horse since Ushida had been using them as the spearheads.

Ushida grabbed one of the black-uniformed troopers and pulled her to him.

"What the fuck are they saying, you barbarian?" he yelled at the woman, whose face showed panic like all the rest of her mates. "Speak Himean and tell me what that's saying!"

She slapped his hand off her collar and released a macabre shriek that had him backing away.

"The princess is down!" the blonde harpy screeched, before suddenly riding off with the rest of the Lupine warriors. She screamed again as Ushida tried to call her and her compatriots back. "*She is down! Kill the Mentulae!*"

Still among the Seventh, which was now reinforced by the Sosia garrison, Suou heard her own breath wheeze out as she saw the seeming defection: the black arrow shot from the cavalry, parting from it and flying straight into the Mentulae dividing them and the now-distant Otomeian infantry. There were yells as the Mentulae saw them coming and made ready, followed by a disturbing instant where the air was filled with a single and sustained scream issuing from the black warriors in weird unison.

They hurtled into the Mentulae like a pack of suicides from hell. Some of them fell, either horse or rider caught by a falx, but so

insane had been their charge that the lines parted in the face of their madness and succeeded in opening the way for the rest of the cavalry, which automatically followed. Ushida and his tribunes rode with them, trying to turn them back. But the madness of the Lupine Division seemed to have infected the rest of the troopers, and all of them now rushed to the aid of the Otomeians near the old camp, leaving the Seventh and the Sosia legion to fend for themselves.

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It was two hours later that the battle finally ended, with all sides drawing off to lick heavy wounds. The Otomeians, both infantry and cavalry, found themselves halved in total and in the camp from which they had set out that very morning and intended to leave. The Mentulaeans, thwarted yet again from their goal, suffered even more casualties among their soldiers. As for the Himeans in the citadel of Sosia, their retirement was a welter of tragedy and pain, for they were now cut off from their auxiliary as well as abridged by an unconscionable number-and that including some of their best, who had held formation even as the less sturdy fled to the safety of the walls. Yet the worst loss of the day, considered the appalled Takeda Masashi, was in the identity of one of the fallen. Among the dead they gathered from the field that afternoon was Legate Suou Himemiya.

The senior consul's sister had fallen towards the very end of the fight, during the last despairing rush by the Mentulae. Busy encouraging the declining legionaries, she had not seen the soldier aiming for her horse, which flung her away before it collapsed from the thrust it took to the chest. Dazed from the fall, its unseated rider had been set upon by another foe, whom she still managed to cut with her sword by sheer luck. Her luck ran out with the second assailant, however, and she fell mere metres from her own cohort, a gaping hole spewing warmth on her belly and back.

Suou Himemiya did not have the privilege of a swift death. She actually lived almost to the cessation of the battle, some last vestige of fortune keeping her from being trampled over by the combatants. Though she tried to rise several times, the most she ever managed was a lift of the head that always pushed more blood up her throat and through her mouth as spittle. At the time the Otomeians finally

accessed the old camp and a half-dead Natsuki was being carried into the fortifications Ushida had built a month past, Suou had been living her last seconds in silence, the noise of the battle a murmur in her ears.

*Either it ends now or death comes with deafness*, she had thought then, helpless to control the upward spin of her gaze. She was amazed to find that even at such a moment she could marvel at the clarity of the sky, which was palest-blue and nearly white, a perfect mirror of her dying eyes.

A bird streaked across the mirror and disappeared, and Suou thought someone or something fell beside her.

*But I'm not sure of that*, she thought with astonishment. *Why, I cannot even feel the wound any longer!* She focused herself and realised that the pain had also gone and that the rest of her senses were probably about to follow. Her mind had begun to flicker, and it took strength simply to think coherent thoughts to herself. Despite all of that, Suou was still a Himemiya, and no Himemiya had ever existed whose will was not considerable. She exerted hers then to shape her thoughts into such as she thought appropriate to evoke in a dying meditation: thoughts of those she held dear, for instance, or thoughts about the strangeness of her calm. And, of course, thoughts of the sister she loved best of everyone in the world. She would not see that sister again but she was being afforded time enough to imagine that beloved face, and that was as good a way as any to spend the last of her powers.

Thus did she stare upwards and wait out her own expiration as coolly as she had done everything else in her life, glad at least that the violence of her slaying would not transmit to her passage. Her hearing had weakened enough to turn the roar of battle to a hum, and she was grateful for it. She resolved to keep her eyes open and on the mirror above her. Only there, on this bloody earth, could she find her final peace reflected. So there only would she look, wanting to preserve that steadiness that had been the mark of her character.

But Suou learned something that jarred her steadiness in those last moments. The most powerful human will, she would find, could yet be jolted by a single unexpected idea. Before her crystalline eyes

glazed forever, the last thing that passed them was not contentment. This was because Suou's last thought was not according to her own will or expectation, which had been that she would pass while thinking of her beloved sibling and friends. Her last thought instead was of a pair of green eyes sparkling with trust and making Suou's last emotion one of a sudden, all-too-galling regret.



## Chapter 56

*Thank you again to the readers and reviewers. The first eight pages of this (out of about fifty in total) are heavily political, which means that many readers shall be likely to pass over them. Ah well.*

*And to clarify something from the last chapter, to her death, Suou was unaware Natsuki was on the field.*

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### **Illustration:**

*Something to apologise for the tardiness and something for Natsuki: ethnewinter. deviantart art/Natsuki-Riding-230643924*

*Please remove the spaces after the full stops.*

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### **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Calends** - The first of the three fixed points of a Roman (Himean) month. The days of the month were not named or given numbers, save for these three points. The Calends is always the first day of each month (e.g. the Calends of January January 1). Along with the other two fixed points (the **Nones** and the **Ides** ), it was considered a sacred day. Note that dates were reckoned backwards from the three fixed points. For example, if you wished to say "December 25," you would say "six days before the Calends of January," and not "ten days after the Ides (the 15th) of December."

2. **Censor** - The most senior of the Roman magistracies, although not one that owned imperium. Two censors were elected to serve in tandem for five years, some of their duties being the regulation of senatorial membership, the execution of a general census, the application of means tests, and the giving of state contracts for public works and buildings. Note that only **consulars** (see note below) could stand as censors.

3. **Consular** - One who has served as a consul at least once in the past.

4. **Corona obsidionalis** - Also the **corona graminea**, the highest military award possible for Romans. So rarely was it given that it ensured a man nigh-eternal glory and, like the crown second to it, the corona **civi ca**, also bestowed membership in the Senate.

5. **Curia** - Senate house, the full name being Curia Hostilis; like most of the locations of Hime given below, it may be found on a standard map of Ancient Rome.

6. **Curule** - Relating to magistracies that had imperium.

7. ( **Crop from the** ) **dragon's teeth** - Not an obscure reference, but just to be sure: it signifies the task Æetes set Jason in the Quest of the Golden Fleece. The dragon's teeth, when sown, were supposed to sprout instant, fully-armoured warriors who would advance upon the planter-in the original tale's case, Jason.

8. **Equestrian** - See note for **Knights** .

9. **Forum** - More properly, the Forum Romanum. It was an area in the city dedicated to Roman political activities. It may be found on a standard map of Ancient Rome.

10 . **Hercules and the lion** - To be precise, the Nemean lion. Hercules had to slay this beast as part of his 12 Labours.

11. **Ides** - The last of the three fixed points of the Roman month. It was set on either the fifteenth or the thirteenth, depending on the month. See the note for **Calends** for more on the Roman calendar.

12. **Knights** - Members of the Ordo Equester, called "the knights" as opposed to "the senators". Those of knight or **equestrian** rank were usually as well-born as those of senatorial rank, but the difference was that they chose not a political career but a commercial one. Recall that there are restrictions on senatorial businesses, which is the reason the knights are generally the richer of the two ranks. One may consider them the equivalents of the modern "business sector" of the community, with the senators being the "government or

political sector", for a simplified but convenient categorisation.

13. **Leges** - Latin for "laws", the singular being "lex", so "leges Himemiya" means the Himemiyan Laws.

14. **Lustrum** - The term of the **censors**, which lasted for five years.

15. **Medicus** (s), **medici** (pl) - Latin for "doctor" or "physician"

16. **Ossa** - A mountain; see note for **Pelion**, below.

17. **NOTE: On the lex Himemiya stipulating a five year wait between a person's successive consular terms** - There was in fact a lex Genucia stipulating double this period, or ten years. I halved the number because, quite frankly, this tale would take too long and would see most of the characters old and balding before they gained a second consulship were I to keep the original duration.

18. **Pelion** - Like Ossa, a mountain. The expression "to pile Pelion on Ossa" comes from the myth of the Giants Otus and Ephialtes, sons of Poseidon who defied the Olympian gods several times-at some point, by capturing and chaining Ares-and even threatened to pile Mount Pelion atop Mount Ossa, and use the result to attain the heights of heaven. In literary usage, to say that one would see something done even if one had to pile Pelion on Ossa meant that one would see something done at any cost, even that of defying the divine. Incidentally, for a neat little point: Otus and Ephialtes were eventually brought down by none other than the goddess Artemis.

19. **Pluto's vaults** - Pluto (also Dis or Hades) was god over the Underworld and the earth beneath the surface, which meant he had a monopoly of the minerals and precious metals to be mined from the ground. As such, he was considered the richest of all the gods.

20. **Publicani** - What the Ancient Romans called individuals/ organisations hired by the Roman State apparatus (specifically, the Treasury) to farm taxes on its behalf. Tax farming activities were more elaborately discussed in an earlier chapter of the story-the 13th, to be precise-and can be found in the third part of that particular chapter, "parts" being delineated by the long horizontal

*bars denoting page breaks on this website.*

21. **Praefectus (praefectus fabrum)** - Officer in charge of procuring supplies for the army.

22. **Prorogue** – A term one may actually find in a lexicon, though the definition used here is rarely given in the dictionaries. In this text, it is generally used as a verb meaning 'to extend (someone's) term of office in a gubernatorial or commanding position'.

23. **Rosea rura** - Perhaps the best grazing ground in Italy at the time. It was famous for producing the most excellent mules.

24. **Tribe** - Not an ethnic or familial category, the Tribus was a political category used for voting in tribal assemblies. Every Roman citizen belonged to one.

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## ***Inter Nos II: Inde Ire et Lacrimae***

*par ethnewinter*

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Mindful of her cousin's command, Shizuma Hanazono left for the north two weeks after Shizuru's departure, down to the day. She left a Hime besieged by a barrage of law-making activity originating from the senior consul who, everyone now realised, had been downplaying her own legislative plans when she had used them as the excuse for refusing the Northern campaign. Soon after Shizuru departed with the Fourteenth, Chikane Himemiya had embarked on an overwhelming agenda that was aided most efficaciously by her tribunician cousin. As these two also had the ear and general-though *not unquestioning* -support of the Princeps Senatus of the Senate, the laws Chikane put forward fell upon Senate and People in a merciless and irresistible rain.

The first laws tabled made good on the senior consul's vow to organise the electoral processes of the government.

"The first step is to fix a permanent date for the polls," she told the

House in a meeting. "In the past, we have let the consuls of the year decide when to hold elections during their term, as indeed my colleague and I have done this year. But this is a haphazard practice at best and places the elections at the tender mercies of various considerations, political connivance and tragedies included."

"Hence, what I propose to legislate is an actual system. We shall begin by fixing a permanent date for all elections hereafter. I ask that elections be held from now on in the month of July. The day before the Ides of that month shall see the curule elections held in the Centuriate Assembly. Ten days before the Calends of August, the elections for the lower positions shall follow, with the exception of the positions elected by the Plebeian Assembly. Those last shall be polled two days before the Calends of August. This means that all candidates shall be sure to know their fates far ahead of the year's end, which I think most of us shall appreciate."

There was a murmur of approval. It was a masterly stroke, some reflected, to propose to set the elections in July. This made sure they took place during the same time of year as the games, when most of the rural Himeans would be in the city.

Voting of the most important magistracies was done by either Class or Tribe. All Himeans were distributed across thirty-five tribes, and of those thirty-five, thirty-one were rural. To belong to a rural tribe was a distinction: most of the members of the First and Second Classes were in rural tribes, and actually lived outside the city. Majority of the permanent residents of Hime were in fact freedmen and non-Himeans who had somehow gained the citizenship, and the senators and knights of the city were in gross minority against the numbers of these. To hold the elections at a time when the rural First and Second Class were in Hime ensured that *true* Himeans still controlled the outcome of the elections, and that the classic feeling for exclusivity was satisfied.

Chikane elaborated: "As this means we shall know the next year's officials about five months before they take office, it behoves us to further distinguish them. I propose to give new prominence to the officials-elect by giving them higher status in our meetings. For formal discussions, incumbent consuls shall still be asked to speak first of all in the House, but consuls-elect shall be accorded the right

to speak immediately after them from now on. Incumbent praetors shall follow, and praetors-elect shall be accorded the right to come immediately after. The usual order shall apply to all speakers after that."

That saw less approving murmurs and the Leader of the Senate on his feet, his handsome face none too happy.

"If I may, Himemiya-san," he began, when Chikane paused to allow him a word. "You are proposing to rearrange the traditional order of speakers in the House. I agree that it would be but sensible to have consuls-elect and praetors-elect enjoy this 'new prominence' in our meetings, but do you mean by the 'usual order' applying after that that the consulars and ex-censors-and even I, the Princeps Senatus!-may only speak after the last praetor-elect has spoken or been given the chance to do so?"

All eyes swung back and forth between the two, understanding why the Princeps had cut in: he was being demoted in this speaking order, after all, and no one had expected him to take it meekly.

"That would be correct," the senior consul said coolly. "Not to put too fine a point on it, but the consulars and ex-censors-and even you, the Princeps Senatus!-are not in positions of *imperium* or of currency. I should think it makes more sense to put the opinions of those who are in or about to be in such positions ahead of those who no longer are."

Reito Kanzaki Princeps Senatus responded with a bitter smile. *Damn you, Chikane*, he thought, recalling their conversation of the night before. She had spoken of the electoral revisions she wanted, but had not spoken of this. The woman gave you no warning!

"But this puts the opening statements at the mercy of men who might have less experience than those who have it in abundance," he retorted. "The reason we ask our fellows to speak in the House is to tender opinions that are wise and well-directed, am I right? It only follows, in *my* opinion, that those with more wisdom and direction on such matters should speak before, not after."

"Hardly!" Chikane shot back. "The reason we ask our fellows to

Speak in the House is indeed to tender such opinions. But we only ask for those opinions in order for us to formulate policies, and that is the true purpose of all our meetings, not mere opinion-giving. In the end, the policies that come into practice after our sessions are at the discretion of those who occupy the offices tasked to execute them."

She sighed and looked supremely weary.

"Let us be honest, Senators," she said in a dry voice. "Most of the time, our opinions count for rubbish where a lot of the executive decisions are concerned. Many a consul or praetor has easily found reason, whether justly or unjustly, to spurn the recommendations of their 'wise and well-directed' fellows. I am not saying that the opinions of those out of or not about to occupy office shall no longer be heard. I am merely saying that it is wiser to have the current executives of our government be the first to tender what they think should be said or done *because I want those with more experience and wisdom to have a better chance of being listened to*. With what I am proposing, those with the experience shall know what suggestions to make when their turn to speak comes, or what critiques to proffer, and better gauge the way to phrase them in order to make a difference."

She met Reito's warm eyes with her chill ones, her face indicating she could not be bent or broken from this.

"I am proposing it as the order for formally-directed discussions," she continued. "My intent here is to establish a method, Princeps, that may serve as a template for the House when it actually has sufficient composure to follow. You shall take note, I hope, that the template's execution is chiefly dependent on the supervision of both the consuls *and* the Leader of the House. The Leader of the House is still expected to interject an opinion or his words if necessary to keep the Senate functioning properly, his tongue still the directing organ when disorder threatens. Indeed, this even means the Princeps has an elevated position, for he is now to be charged with ensuring an actual *written* form be followed. Or have you objections to this very important task?"

The Princeps sat down, at once placated and miffed.

"None for now, if that would be the interpretation," he admitted with caution. "Thank you for clarifying that. Please go on, as I'm sure we are all eager to hear the rest of your proposed changes."

"Six to eight praetors shall be elected each year, as usual," she acquiesced. "From now on, however, I request that a precise number of twenty-one quaestors shall be elected yearly, all of whom-as always-shall be automatically admitted to the Senate upon election if they are not already part of it. The same promotion shall still apply to elected tribunes of the plebs and those falling under special circumstances provided for in existing laws, such as the senatorial membership awarded to those with the *corona obsidionalis* or *civica*. Thus for the avenues of entry into our ranks, which should see us sufficiently plump each term. Regarding the consuls, I am tabling a law that makes it impossible for anyone to be elected consul unless he or she has already served as praetor in the past. I know this has already been the established tradition, but I feel it is time it was put down as law."

There were no objections, but someone did pose a question.

"I notice you say nothing about the censors' powers to admit new members into the Senate," said Mai Tokiha. "Does this mean you intend to make no changes to that other avenue for entry into Senate, Himemiya-san?"

"Indeed, Tokiha-san."

"Please bear with me, but just to be clear, will you not be adding to the requirements for admission?"

"I shall not. My view is that the present requirements are sufficient."

Mai thanked her and Chikane proceeded.

"Regarding the consuls again, we already have a law stating that no one may be elected consul two years in a row. I wish to add to that by stipulating the actual period that must elapse before a man who has been consul may seek the office again."

"In future," she said, "five years must pass from the end of a man's



term as consul before he applies again as a candidate for the consul's chair. This is a fair period and should ensure that most of the House gets a chance at the position. I am also introducing a stipulation that no one may seek the consulship *immediately after* having occupied the praetorship."

She was treated to curious faces, as she had done just that to get to where she was.

"Henceforth, all former praetors must let two years elapse after their praetorian terms before they seek the consulship," she told them. "This shall allow sufficient staggering to distribute the positions of praetor and consul across our ranks, and also makes for better officials, I think, since a person can gain a great deal of helpful experience in those two years."

She continued: "For all offices, candidates must present themselves in public and in person to the officer designated to oversee the relevant election. 'In public' means at the scrutineer's booth, witnesses present. 'In person' means no one may file candidature by proxy, save for the case of *in absentia* candidates."

"Any candidate proposing to stand *in absentia* must apply to be given a legal mandate for it, specific to him or her and not applicable to any others, even if they are candidates for the same position. No more blanket dispensations shall be possible from now on, and applications for the single-person dispensations shall be reviewed with the strictest discernment under supervision of the relevant electoral officer and the advice of the Senate. I intend to make impossible laws like that passed by Takeda Masashi-san last year, which allowed *in absentia* filing for all and sundry in the previous elections. Such unspecific bills have been allowed thus far only to the benefit of shady politicians trying to hide their intention to outrun charges or creditors by seeking further office after their terms. That law also led to the predicament we faced in Shizuru Fujino's election, and I shall have no more predicaments similar."

"Thank all the gods for that!" whispered Sergay Wang to his neighbour, who looked far less enthusiastic. "So far, I can't complain with anything she's said."

"Just you wait!" snapped his neighbour, Jin Akagi.

So they waited. The next laws, which came right after the electoral ones, had to do with the procedures and regulations covering governors and Hime's provinces.

"We currently hold ten provinces and are even now on the way to establishing control over another, setting us at eleven," she informed the House. "By name, our provinces are Hispania Citerior, Hispania Ulterior, Cilicia, Sicilia, Sardinia with Corsica, Macedonia with Greece, Africa Province with Cyrenaica, Asia Province, Sosia, Argus, and the ongoing addition of the former Mentulaeen Empire, to be called the province of Septentria. Each of these has a governor's seat, which provides us with at least ten possible provinces for outgoing praetors and consuls who might wish to take a gubernatorial shift after their term, provided no current governors are prorogued. I say ten instead of eleven because the wartime governorship of Septentria shall be occupied for at least five years by the same person, as we all know."

She ignored the mutters at this reminder and barrelled on with what she had to say.

"If you recall the stipulations I made in my laws on the elections and electoral procedures, I asked for twenty-one quaestors to be elected each year. This is because each governor needs at least one quaestor, to be assigned at random from the lot. Why at random? To make it just a little bit harder for potential governors and quaestors to collude with each other beforehand in how to strip a province bare, as so many of them have in the past. Why twenty-one each year? Twenty-one allows, at most, ten remaining quaestors to be assigned to Hime and Fuuka, which is a manageable number."

"I do not seek to change much about the manner in which provinces are assigned," she told the perfectly attentive House. "However, I do wish to make some changes to the manner in which governors receive their stipend. You will note, fellow senators, that we have been subject to various requests throughout the years from our provincial governors requesting an increase in funds for diverse reasons. Sometimes these are granted, sometimes they are not. Either way, they only add to the bureaucratic backlog. Therefore,

this is what I propose: when the reasons provided for the request have to do with grave emergencies such as sudden war or disaster, only then shall we review the application. All other cases from now on shall be *turned down* ."

She raised a hand to silence the outburst of voices.

"This is because I propose that the gubernatorial stipends be given to the governors in full at the very start of their terms," she explained. "Under advisement of the Treasury, the Senate shall henceforth pay out the *complete* stipend of all governors when they leave to go to their provinces. This sum is legally theirs upon transfer and they shall use it to pay staffing expenses and whatever might need funding in the exercise of their duties. They shall be required to present a detailed accounting of how they used that sum at the end of their terms, but they shall *not* be required to return to the state any amount of that sum that might remain unspent afterwards."

"Oh, I like it!" said one of the current praetors. He was heavily in debt and looking forward to taking a province after the year, in order to recoup his fortunes and make enough to free him from his creditors. The problem was that his debts had grown so large that he was in serious danger of being brought to the courts by the usurers even before he left to govern a province. What was occurring to him at the moment was that, if the senior consul's proposal were approved, he might get his hands on the gubernatorial stipend before he left and ask his creditors to attach it by lien instead of bringing him to court.

"I like it too," said his handsome neighbour, who happened to have a (distant) familial link to the senior consul. "But I wouldn't count on the stipend for fending off your creditors, old boy."

A frown. "Why not, Suguru-san?"

"If you've been paying attention, you'd remember why the senior consul is doing this," sighed Suguru Kashiwagi, his beautiful eyes settling on an epicene, very smooth face in the row of backbenchers opposite them: Kashiwagi liked pretty young men, and was famous for his exploits among the males of Hime-to say nothing of his

exploits among the males of Athens.

"If word on the street is right," Kashiwagi continued, "I'd say your debts will just about clean out a gubernatorial stipend. And don't underestimate our moneylenders: they would likely attach the stipend by lien before you even think of collecting it, which means they shall take it all whether you offer it to them or not. That means your creditors will see you going to govern your province with barely a *sestertius* clinking in your purse, because no more money shall be forthcoming from the Treasury after that lump sum. How long do you think you would last then, governor of a province for one year without a coin to your name?"

"Shit!" his fellow hissed. "What am I to do with the moneylenders, then? I have to govern a province to even begin to make enough to pay them! Pluto's cock-it's why most of us go to a damn province in the first place!"

Kashiwagi sighed and did not bother explaining the sting behind the senior consul's seemingly governor-friendly plan: if moneylenders could indeed seize a prospective governor's full stipend through attaching it by lien before his departure, the prospective governor would have to give up his claim to a province, it being that he would likely have no money left for governing it. The other senator was right in saying moneymaking was the regular reason for wanting a gubernatorial post: it was the easiest solution for a debt-riddled senator to take a governorship, then suck his province dry in order to make enough money for his needs. The result was that most of the provinces were raped to destitution by one money-hungry Himean governor after another. The senior consul's proposal, however, was purported to alleviate precisely this by crippling the avaricious officials before they even set off.

"Can't you apply to a friend to put up part of the sum you owe?" he proposed. "It would hold them off."

"No, I'm already up to my ears in debt. Unless you would-"

"Sorry, but I can't."

"Then what can I do?"

Kashiwagi broke out his best grin, but not for the benefit of the man beside him: the lovely backbencher had noticed his stare and was smiling an invitation.

"Who knows?" he said carelessly, no longer interested in the conversation. "Maybe you'll just have to give them the slip and run off to your province. Run off in the night with the money or something. Once you're in your province, you'll be exempt from prosecution for the duration of your term."

The senior consul was still speaking.

"There have been some qualms in recent years about the lack of gubernatorial positions available to outgoing consuls and praetors, because some provinces have governors who have been prorogued over and over again. Proroguing a governor, however, should happen only in special circumstances. I propose to tighten up our regulations on gubernatorial occupancies to make chances fairer and open to all of us. Not every outgoing praetor or consul wants to take a province after his or her term, but every outgoing praetor or consul deserves the chance to do so."

"From now on, all provincial governors shall be obliged to vacate their positions after one year or whatever term is stipulated in their mandates so as to open gubernatorial posts to the outgoing consuls and praetors. However, if there are fewer outgoing consuls and praetors intending to take provinces than there are open gubernatorial posts, the Senate shall review the circumstances of each incumbent governor and prorogue those with the best performance. Governors who are prorogued shall receive another year's stipend, of course, to be sent to them by the Treasury."

"Governors committed to wars shall automatically come under review by the House towards the end of their terms. Should they prove to have been capable in their situations, they shall be prorogued. Otherwise, they must step down at the end of that year and turn over their province and war to the next governor sent by the House."

It was a heavy programme, by no means finished. Chikane's next shafts targeted the *publicani* and Treasury, and sent a reflexive

shudder through all members of the tax-farming community .

"Throughout the years, many a travelling senator has been approached by people from our provinces applying for aid against the depredations of the *publicani*, " she said to the House, in strong attendance because it was curious to hear what she had next on her impressive itinerary. "So regular is this occurrence that we have learned to brush off the issue whenever encountering it, even when presented with more aggressive applications. Indeed, we have had at least four formal delegations this year alone on that subject, from provincial landowners and businesspeople requesting that we do something about the exorbitant tax rates in our territories. Last year we had two of the same. The year before that saw another four. Each term has seen us do little on the issue save brush it off, time and again."

"As we should," interjected Senator Satoshi Higurashi, his skin prickling with warning at her tone: the Higurashi were heavily committed to knight lobbies, as indeed were many other influential people in the House. Any trouble stirred up by the senior consul for the *publicani* would see the knights squealing to their patrons, since they were the ones who profited most from collecting payments for tax arrears in the provinces abroad.

"As you just said, Himemiya-san, it's a regular occurrence," he went on with feigned boredom. "I do not see what you can propose to do about it. The provinces will always cry foul when it comes to paying the Republic their due, so much can I assure you."

"If it were so simple as that, Higurashi-san, I would not even have drawn attention to it," she replied. "But the fact is that there is a reason behind the protests, and it is our responsibility to address that. I have been reviewing the contracts for the *publicani* in the last ten years and have come to the conclusion that these applications have validity. The taxes in many of our provinces are far too high."

There was a stronger stirring now among the ranks.

"I used some of the reports sent in by our more conscientious governors and their quaestors for my calculations," she went on. "If the results I have found are any indication, we are *officially* taxing a

good number of our provinces by as much as a hundred to two hundred percent over the appropriate rates! We are nurturing more bad blood than is our share among our provinces, and using that same bad blood to water a crop sown of the dragon's teeth! Far be it from me to act a doomsayer, but I very much fear this shall bring worse than formal delegations in the future, should we leave the ravages unchecked."

"If you're not acting a doomsayer, aren't you being a dramatist, Himemiya-san?" a voice called. It was from one of the consulars, Kanako Ootori. "To call these things as ravages is a little more tragedy than they deserve. The provinces depend on us for their protection and administration, which means we are fully at liberty to set the rates as we wish!"

"To the tune of what-amounts you would expect from Pluto's vaults?" said Chikane. "Administration does not equal abuse, Ootori-san. What I am telling you now is that the rates we currently have are not merely abusive but abhorrent! We are indeed tasked with the protection and care of the territories, but this does not mean making of their assets an economic abattoir. It means seeing them prosper so that their well-being may redound positively upon the Republic. And what we have been doing has seen to the opposite: we are well on our way to impoverishing our territories, which means they shall be hard-pressed to fend for themselves on the day some catastrophe strikes. Oh, we may praise the richness of our provinces for hours, but this is a wealth in which we are not investing properly! When was the last time you went to one of the provinces and saw the state of the fields, the dilapidation of the towns? When was the last time any of you did that, as a matter of fact? Those who have shall know of what I speak, I think."

The urban praetor was requesting the floor, and it was given to her.

"I was actually abroad two years ago, as quaestor of Asia Province," said this worthy, a fine-looking and fairly young woman not far from Shizuru Fujino's age. "I had occasion to visit Sicilia before that, and Macedonia after. I think I may claim to have some current observations on those provinces as well. I know of what you speak, Himemiya-san, for there was never a day the governor of Asia was not assailed by complaints on that subject. And you're right in saying

we cannot simply toss aside such complaints, because they do come from decent, well-respected citizens, not mere canaille out to escape their duties to the state. But even when we discussed this issue, my fellow provincial officials and I, we failed to see what could be done as - to put it bluntly - the ravages you have mentioned are *legal* ! The censors gave the *publicani* the contracts to collect, after all, which means they have governmental permission for their rates. It's true that we have Shizuru Fujino-san's case last year, where she managed to *persuade* both the tax farmers and governor of Sosia to lower rates-" She had to pause to allow the grumbles to die down. "But that was only for rates in the case of usury. Tax collections are a different matter."

"You bring me nearer my point, Ginga-san," said Chikane, nodding. "We may do something about it, as a matter of fact. I am not about to demand that the censors recall the contracts, so you may rest easy there. I am, however, demanding several changes in the manner we let the tax farming contracts in the future."

"Such as?"

"Such as the Treasury changing its estimates for what we may expect from the provinces."

Objecting voices arose all around, and one soared to the forefront: "The estimates we currently have are the ones we use by tradition! Any attempt to change them will see me protest!"

"Oh, you may protest all you like!" the senior consul snapped, looking her most supercilious. "But the arithmetic stands on better foundation than your objections. What the numbers show is that neither the *publicani* nor the Treasury has been doing their homework with diligence. The estimates the Treasury currently employs might be traditional, but they are not reflective of the facts. Indeed, to point out one particularly salient fact, please recall that the present estimates were actually ones set literally three decades ago! I dare some sterling economist and model of probity here to stand up and tell me that the economy has not changed significantly since then!"

As expected, there were no takers. The senior consul eyed her



grumbling colleagues with tangible disdain, her face speaking the insults her famously well-mannered mouth would not.

"What I am asking is for us to face the facts, not the dream," she said. "The facts are that the Treasury has been asking for far too much from the provinces. The *publicani* are aggravating the trouble by placing impossibly high bids in an effort to drive out their competition among the other tax farmers seeking contracts. This is not just detrimental to the provinces, Members of this House: it is detrimental to both *publicani* and Treasury too! Consider, for instance, how much trouble the *publicani* are always claiming when it comes to their collections. Consider how many accounts are yet standing, with the Treasury feeling the pinch from the tardiness of those payments. I only wish to make it easier for all of us to live together and profit in that harmony, so those who think I am doing this to either make trouble or gain provincial clients may think again! Have I proposed that we abolish the provincial taxes for you to react with such exaggeration? And I am the one accused of being a dramatist in this medley?"

She all but sniffed in her disgust, brow darkening so much that everyone suddenly found valid reason for looking very attentive.

"What I propose," she proceeded, "is that we give both the *publicani* and Treasury the support necessary to make their jobs easier. Let us send to each province a commission that shall assess how much a province's taxes should properly be. As these investigators shall be working in the provinces themselves, able to access data necessary to the generation of their estimates, they should be capable of telling us how much we can reasonably expect from each territory. Their findings shall be transmitted to the Treasury, so that it may know how much it should demand in the new contracts."

The House had settled down, seeing that her solution was not as unreasonable as they had feared. Indeed, it showed sterling good sense. And even among the conservatives, those who were not too thickly entrenched in knightly and *publicani* matters were nodding in approval.

To give them their due, a fair number of the conservatives were genuine Himeans of the old and sensible kind. They had sufficient

pride in their lineages to keep from "low" businesses like tax-gathering and had a measure of the classical Himean practicality too. One of them spoke out for the rest suddenly, and silence ensued as they listened to her.

"It's an idea, Senior Consul," said Haruka Armitage in her unmusical voice, her purple eyes actually quite calm. "How often will these commissions be sent?"

Chikane smiled at her best friend's most obdurate foe, glad for the question.

"Once every five years, at the beginning of each censorial pair's *lustrum*," she answered. "As the current censors exit office next year, the commissions may be sent this year, and the data they gather may reach us in time for the next set of contracts for *publicani* in our provinces."

"Who will overwrite the organisation of these commissions?"

"Ideally, either the consuls or the censors shall *oversee* their administration," Chikane replied, placing emphasis on her correction of what was most likely another of Haruka's malapropisms. "I would like it noted that I put myself forward for that task. It seems only fitting that the person proposing the commissions be the one to supervise them."

Haruka harrumphed, though not in dissent, and nodded with seeming good opinion. The other conservatives and moderates took note, to Chikane's relief. Catching the interest of someone as influential as Haruka meant the meeker sheep were more likely to open their ears. Even though there was further debate on the issue, the discussion proceeded reasonably after that - enough to assure everyone, by the end of the last session, that Chikane would get what she wanted.

"Jupiter!" Sergay told his supposed rival and actual friend, the Princeps Senatus. "She's setting procedures for nearly every part of our government that matters. Just when I was thinking her insane to have passed up the opportunity to get in the history books with the command she passed on to Fujino, she comes out with this - this

*mad flurry* of legislation."

"I didn't hear you protesting too much," the Princeps sighed, still suffering some lingering sting from his downgrade.

Sergay flapped a hand at him.

"How can I, when everything she's done has actually made sense? But damn me if the procedures set by the *leges Himemiya* won't be the ones we'll be following, generations into the future. She's found her way into the history books without even having to go off to win some grand war like her friend. Himemiya's a wonder!"

Some of the senior consul's acts did not actually promulgate laws, even if they still related to them. The day before Shizuma Hanazono left to join her cousin in the north, Chikane Himemiya announced to the House that she was contributing a building to the Forum.

"It is not unusual among us to make such public works as contributions to the Republic," she told the senators, who were not surprised at her announcement: she was right in that it was to be expected from most officials, especially those with the means for it, that a public work would be donated to the state in exchange for the glory of it bearing their family's name.

"As such, I would like to announce that I am making my own contribution," Chikane declared. "I shall be building a Tabularium, a grand records hall to house all our tablets of law, our annals, and the like. We need a better repository for those than the musty old basements of various temples, which are not maintained as well as they could be, and are thus suffering from paper-deteriorating pests of all kinds. The lack of organisation with our records has also made it harder for us to access some account or other when we need it. I consider it high time we made a building dedicated solely to their housing."

That was actually something of a surprise. It was more normal for an official to contribute a basilica or temple, something grand and for use in public events and political meetings. A basilica or temple was something over which people could ooh and ahh, and marvel at the glory of the family in whose name it had been established. But

something as sober, as staid as a tabularium? Well, that was a patrician Himemiya for you! Bizarre people, all of them!

"While we are on the subject of records, permit me to inform you that I have also added a public records officer outside," Chikane added afterwards. "He is the man at the desk you might have noticed on your way in, flanked by assistants on either side. This is a little adjustment that I hope shall be continued by later consuls and officials. It has not been lost on me that many of the laws we promulgate amongst ourselves, even if they are eventually aired to the People or the Centuries, are not actually easily accessible to the public when they do want details. The public records officer I have set outside shall try to address that, being armed with copies of the laws I have been proposing and ample knowledge on their minutiae. Any questions from the curious may be addressed to him."

Such Himean level-headedness resonated with the People and the Centuries, and they ratified every last one of her laws into being: even, miraculously enough, the ones that purported to cut both *publicani* and Treasury revenues.

"It was all typical of Chikane's roundabout style," Shizuma Hanazono told the governor of Argus, who met her when she arrived with the rest-but not the last-of Shizuru's Northern army. "One could never call her doings jejune. She focused in particular on regulations for overseas governors such as yourself because she was trying to point out, in her own delicate way, that the territories needed to be given more attention. All those seemingly insignificant foreign events are not given notice by anyone save the Princeps, who has to deal with foreign delegations and whatnot all alone. No one really pays attention to these things until a war breaks out, and then it comes as a surprise! Just like the Mentulaean situation. And the one I see germinating near our Asia Province, I suppose. I shall wager anyone fifty talents that thing shall turn out a rot!"

"Why, what's going on near Asia Province?" asked the governor of Argus, curiosity piqued.

"An interesting changeover of rulers in Cappadocia." Shizuma grinned wickedly. "The old king has apparently died of illness-another name for *poison* among the royalty!-and has been replaced

by an alleged sprig off the original dynasty, a boy of nine or so years, we hear. Said lad, incidentally, happens to have been placed on the throne by his so-called protector, who is..."

"Don't say it, let me guess: the King of Pontus?"

"The King of Pontus."

"The old game!" Midori was scowling. "The boy's a puppet!"

"So we suspect, although all Senate did was to shrug and say it was not really our business," the silver-haired woman said, rolling her eyes. "They did ask the governor of Asia Province to make an inquiry on it, but that was all. It *is* our business, Midori-san! And it *is* a worry, especially as we are allied to the Pontic rulers' old enemy, the ruling line of Bithynia."

"I agree. Cappadocia's important."

"Especially as the imbrications of that land would open Cilicia to Pontus by default," Shizuma said. "And how far away is our very own Asia Province from that? Unfortunately, the Senate does not seem overly concerned. So Chikane's provision on more regular turnovers for gubernatorial seats wasn't solely for fair distribution, as she claimed: it was also to force more senators to give attention to affairs across the seas."

"Yes, I see," Midori replied pensively. "It's high time. We governors are usually left to our own devices, and though I'd like to think I haven't done too badly by my province, I have to admit it doesn't always turn out well, either for Hime or her bailiwicks."

The other nodded. "Given that your province is adjacent the one Shizuru's carving out- *Septentria*, I should try and remember to call it that from now on-I very much suspect you shall be among those prorogued. The war situation might work in your favour, to that end."

"If I apply to my friends back home to lobby for me to be prorogued."

Shizuma lifted a steely eyebrow. "Shall you not?"

"I might," Midori sighed. "Oh, I need time to think on it. I've been here ages!"

"It shows." The younger woman plucked a grape from the bowl between them and popped it into her mouth. "And the people seem to love you."

"Oh, they do. I love them back, just so you know. It's just-well, I can hardly believe I'm saying it-but I do miss Hime sometimes! Years since I've been there!"

Shizuma smiled in understanding.

"It's a horrid place," she hummed. "As well as the best city in the world. I think we all miss it when we're abroad."

Midori agreed.

"I might apply to stay on as an adviser to the next governor instead, unless they ask me to retain the seat," she confessed to the younger woman. "That way, I shall be able to journey to Hime when the urge takes me, yet maintain my residence here. One does get used to living in Argus. Hime holds my heart, Shizuma-chan, but my feet have taken root here. I have no problems with living out the rest of my years in this province."

A crack of laughter.

"Oh, you sound like a gammer!" Shizuma said.

"True, I do, don't I?" Midori laughed back. "Strike that! Never let it be said I let myself age so quickly with a reckless word."

"It never shall be said," the younger woman agreed. "Well, so much for events in Hime. I am well rid of them!" A flick of her hair, which fluttered soft as a silver wing. "If you'll excuse me, I've matters to see to yet. My cousin's an understanding sort of woman, but not where her own plans are concerned. People would not believe it, but Shizuru's hard with her goals."

Midori laughed at the truth of that. "Then do not let me keep you from your work, by the gods!"

Shizuma did not let Midori keep her. Up she shot from the governor's nicely padded seat and off to her quarters where the rest of her staff was working, back to the hard chair at her desk. Her favourite military tribune was beside her in a moment, and handing over a scroll cylinder.

"I've finished arrangements with the governor," she said, breaking open the cylinder. "Any word yet from Takumi-san, Nagisa-chan?"

"The *praefectus* came in earlier to say he'd negotiated matters with the local businessmen already, Shizuma-san," the tribune answered. "All the contracts have been drawn up properly, and he says to tell you he negotiated very good prices for the supplies."

"And the warehouses?"

"We've managed to hire two more."

"That should be enough to hold the next shipment of grain. We're fortunate this year saw no drought," she sighed. "My cousin should be pleased that we've managed to requisition part of the harvest calculated as excess. Although we'll need more presently. It takes a lot of grain to run an army."

Nagisa grinned.

"Along with a hundred and one other things, Shizuma-san," she said.

"How true!" Shizuma took a peek at the letter in her hands and winced. "Another request for audience from one of my cousin's clients. Wonderful."

She rolled up the scroll and threw it carelessly into a bucket full of similar letters.

"Gods spare me from her favour-currying sycophants," she sneered, resting her chin on one hand and ignoring her red-headed tribune's apology. "I might be her senior legate and her cousin but I'm not her blasted secretary. She should have left one of her own staff members here to cater to these."

Another tribune in the room spoke.

"Please excuse me, Hanazono-san, but aren't you going to meet with any of them?" said this other young woman on Shizuma's staff, a dark-haired and rather smart character Shizuma only noticed because she was apparently great friends with Nagisa. "We've had at least ten such requests and you haven't honoured any with a hearing."

Shizuma lifted an eyebrow at the young woman's professional tone, aware that said young woman was not a great partisan of her. Which did not sting Shizuma in the least, given that she was no great partisan of the young woman either.

"Thank you for that useful reminder, Tamao-san," she said with smooth scorn. "It's very hard to count them, really, so thank you for doing it for me."

Tamao Suzumi flushed and avoided her friend Nagisa's eyes, keeping her own locked with the senior legate's.

"I only ask, Hanazono-san, because they might be offering assistance to our campaign," she said with difficulty. She really was not fond of the senior legate, especially given the way the woman was always looking at Nagisa—who was the sort of clueless young woman who needed protection from the wolves. And such a wolf this one was! Tall and lean and silver-furred, always just a little hungry in her eyes.

"The local plutocrats can prove invaluable if we nurture them and listen to their needs," she told the wolf, who was looking even hungrier than usual. "They're in a great position to serve ours in this mission. I think General Fujino would agree, especially as she spoke of the need to cultivate long-term resources in her staff meeting before she left Hime."

Shizuma's eyes twinkled, shifted colour in that way they did when her mood was unstable.

"True, *General Fujino* did speak of it," she said, pronouncing her cousin's title with remarkable sarcasm.



Suddenly a change came over her, however, and she smiled quite happily.

"Oh... Do you know what, Tamao-san?" she exclaimed. "You have just given me the most brilliant notion!"

Tamao visibly drew back and eyed the senior legate's smile the way one would eye a wolf's jaws.

"Yes, Hanazono-san?" she said.

"I think what you said is right," Shizuma grinned, very aware of Nagisa watching their exchange, along with everyone else in the room. "You - are - right! So right, in fact, that I intend to give you full credit for it."

She pointed to the bucket where she had thrown the missive that had started this.

"From now on," she said, "you shall be the one talking to these local resources for me and seeing how our needs, both theirs and ours, might be resolved to everyone's benefit. In fact, I want you to take that bucket and arrange meetings with every last one of those people in there right now. This shall be the focus of your efforts for the moment, so I am taking you off your regular staff duties temporarily just for it. Dedicate yourself to this special job, Tamao-san! It was your genius that got it."

She motioned to some of the other officers listening to them and gave further instructions.

"You'll need assistance," she told Tamao. "So Hideo and Neru shall be going with you. Hideo-san, go and fix a place for Tamao-san to hold her meetings. Neru-san, you go with them and take notes, so Tamao-san has her hands free. Bring all your things. I am assigning all three of you to this so that it may be done most efficiently. I shall be sending over some scribes to help as well."

The trio stared at her, a little taken aback. The legate snapped her fingers at them impatiently.

"Well, why are you looking at me like a bunch of idiots?" she

demanded. "Go on and be about it quick. This is important work too, you know."

The three tribunes got to work, trying to gather their things in a hurry. Shizuma watched in pure pleasure as they packed, her smiling eyes following Tamao with particular attention. Said tribune paused on her way out of the room with the other two and shot Shizuma another borderline-rebellious look.

"Just to be clear, in what capacity should I meet them, Hanazono-san?" she said, still wary. "As a tribune of the general's army, or as a member of *your* staff?"

Shizuma lifted both eyebrows. "You are both, Tamao-san. I would have thought that clear to you from the beginning."

The young woman bowed sparingly to the legate and looked to the remaining tribune in the room, her eyes softening when they alighted on her friend.

"I'll see you later, Nagisa," she said, making ready to leave.

The senior legate stopped her.

"Hold, Tamao-san."

Tamao paused. "Yes, Hanazono-san?"

Shizuma's eyes were appraising as they looked at each other.

"I believe you shall do *exceedingly* well in this new task," she said. "You're a very capable young woman and you have a lot of good qualities for a tribune. There is no doubt in my mind you shall remember all my instructions, especially since you seem to have a good memory."

Tamao's brows went up at the praise and Shizuma continued the rest of what she had to say.

"But never question me in that way again. I let you off this time, but you shall find me most mercurial when it comes to mercy." The senior legate smiled and proved she was a genius of striking the

perfect median between looking dismissive and looking nasty. "No doubt you shall remember that instruction along with the rest, hm, given that good memory?"

The tribune's mouth was tight, but she still saluted and responded to it.

"No doubt I will, Legate," she said before stalking off, flesh crawling from the warning.

Shizuma listened to the patter of Tamao's feet moving away.

"Your friend doesn't like me, Nagisa-chan," she remarked to one of her two remaining companions, amused when the girl answered with a flinch.

"No, she does, Shizuma-san, really," said the young woman, worried for her friend's sake. "She's just a little – a little, um–"

"A little nothing," Shizuma said dismissively, waving at the nervous girl. "Do not get yourself into a pother over it. I care not if she hates me, even, should her dislike of me come to hate. The only thing that matters to me is that she performs well and proves she has a good brain to go with that - hmm - *obvious dedication* of hers, let us say. She has yet to disappoint there."

She stretched in her seat and added: "I can very well put up with her not liking me as long as she suits my purposes. I'm still the one giving her orders, at the end of the day."

The awkward-looking tribune shook her head miserably.

"She really doesn't dislike you, Shizuma-san," she tried. "Tamao isn't the type to dislike people. Oh, and the other day, she even said she admired you for your thoroughness with the army!"

"While calling me a *cunnus*, I wager."

That set off another flinch.

"No, no!" Nagisa said. "She wouldn't say that, Shizuma-san! She never said–"

"Calm yourself, girl," Shizuma laughed. "I know she'd not say it. Tamao-san hardly strikes me as the type to use such words. I'd think she has other, more refined ones in their stead." Her mouth quirked, turned up on one side. "And to tell you the truth, Nagisa-chan, I've been called far, *far* worse names - and even deserved some of them. So I would hardly bat an eyelash had she indeed called me a *cunnus*."

She grinned at the queasy-looking tribune and added: "Although it's quite nice of her to admit my thoroughness with the army."

Which praise could not make her bat an eyelash either, all things considered. Shizuma was far more aware of herself than most others would credit, which meant she suffered no crippling weakness for flattery. She knew she had been thorough in her duties thus far and expected neither thanks nor compliments for that, so she felt no gratitude at all to Tamao Suzumi and all others who might acknowledge her performance. Such compliments were simply from persons who had not expected her to do well, and their grudging admissions were not the measure of her self-esteem, but rather of theirs.

*Perhaps most of them have forgotten I served in the army before this*, she thought, knowing that it was that prior experience that had helped her in her current post. Shizuma's memory was nearly as good as her cousin's, so she had a good remembrance of her own experiences and the analytical skill for knowing which among those deserved repetition and which of them begged rethinking. This meant going into details as much as general orders, and Shizuma *had* been detailed. Or to put it in Tamao Suzumi's words: she was so surprisingly thorough it was impressive.

Even while still in Hime, she had made the centurions personally inspect the soundness of all the soldiers' kits and gear, and inspected each legion's common property herself. She culled the old pack animals whenever she found them and was clever enough to draw up contracts with mule breeders from the *rosea rura*, demanding only the youngest mules for the legions. She tested the axles of each cart and wagon, and actually had them driven through rough patches just to be sure of their calibre. She drilled each legion from the time it was formed to the time it was marched, ordering the

centurions to keep at it once she could no longer oversee them. Throughout it all, she made sure to keep with her cousin's direction that each ready pair of legions be sent on to the north. And when the two weeks' grace her cousin had given was done, she left one of Shizuru's old legates, Taro, to continue taking recruits and volunteers for two more weeks in her stead. Only then did she move out for the north herself, heading another pair of legions for Shizuru's army.

What few people knew about Shizuma was that she was the sort of person who could carry out a task to its end. The only problem was in getting her to start at all. Since her cousin had practically corralled her into this post, however, that hindrance had already been leapt. As a result, the silver-haired woman exposed herself for the dedicated worker she could actually be. Canny and intelligent, she held up well against the stresses of official status in an army. A more straightforward person compared to her cousin, she also brooked opposition about as well as she brooked foolery: with as much intolerance as a wolf disturbed from its winter sleep.

This she demonstrated several times before her cousin's enemies, who questioned her to no end before she finally quit Hime with the Seventeenth and Eighteenth legions. Questions about what was her cousin thinking, doing this, doing that; questions about their plans and the things they had dared to do; questions that were not questions but implications, reversed remarks, *accusations* of all kinds...

She remembered one such accusatory query from her cousin's "most beloved senator"-a richly sarcastic designation, even coming from Shizuma.

"I passed by the Campus Martius the other day and saw your troops. What are those men in the lion's skins?" Haruka Armitage had harrumphed some days to her before Shizuma left for the North, the two of them having run into each other in the Forum. "Barbaric sight! Another radical novelty from your cousin?"

"Doubtless you shall call it that in the next session," Shizuma had replied, sure to spread as much vinegar as possible in the response. "We call them the *aquiliferi* after the eagles, the standard-bearers of

the army. All are chosen with an eye to personal bravery, the very flower of the legions. My cousin has chosen to distinguish the position of standard-bearer so as to better honour the Republic, represented in the standards these excellent specimens carry. Is it not fitting that the men given so elevated a task must be elevated as well, in the eyes of all who follow their steps in battle and march alike?"

"Oh, yes, of course!" Haruka had replied, hard-put to contradict that. "But I don't see what purpose the lion skins have for the... er... aquiliferi."

"It keeps them warm, obviously," Shizuma sneered.

She understood very well that Haruka's real opposition to the new standard-bearers had been in the associations Shizuru had placed in their costume. While the eagle had long been associated with the Republic of Hime, the lion was a little-just a little-less so, and was also a rather blatant link to the Fujino, as their seal had always borne a lion with a full mane. Well, Shizuru had explained that it was a reference to Hercules, to whom all soldiers gave honour during battle in the old cry, "Hercules Invictus!" That was what she said and that was what would continue to be said, even if everyone knew otherwise.

"You just can't resist, can you?" Shizuma had told her cousin after the first explanation of the idea for the aquilifer. "Eagles and lions, Shizuru? You tempt the wolves."

"A good thing," Shizuru had replied. "Are they not also beasts associated with our nation?"

"As your choices are with the Himemiya families and the Fujino. Should I be glad you did not have the gall to include the snake as well?"

"The snake! I wonder..." The blonde had frowned in thought and looked wistful. "Perhaps I should have, cousin. It would have looked so good, now that I reflect on it. The ferocity of the lion with the nobility of the eagle, and upon that the diplomacy of the caduceus. Yes, yes, it would have been so much better! I should have added

it."

Shizuma had sighed and thrown up both hands in surrender.

"Oh, to Dis with you!" she had exclaimed, more exasperated than angry. "Even he'd be hard-put to reason with a woman who would plant a menagerie on a legion's standards!"

Which meant Shizuru had gotten the better of her, of course, but she had found it difficult to care just then. There had been so much to do and think on, and while Shizuru did not tax her with too many orders, it had only meant that Shizuma had had to divine for herself what to do next to prepare her cousin's army. When Shizuru had left, she had wondered for a while what she should do once she reached the North, aside from drilling the new recruits mercilessly at the Argus camp. Was that to be all, she wondered. Should she send out some of the troops for forays while waiting? Should she have some of them do a reconnaissance by the boundaries? She had some ideas about what she would like to do, herself, but she was not the commander of the mission and the commander of the mission had told her to stay in Argus until she came a-calling.

As it turned out, she need not have worried over the issue. She had found Shizuru's instructions waiting for her at Argus.

Upon arrival, the senior legate was expected to stock four of the legions in Argus with provisions and send them to the boundaries of the Mentulæan Empire to hold the passes. So off went four legions to do just that, with Shizuma appointing her cousin's old legate, the ginger-haired Kenji, to be the officer in charge of the expedition. Shizuma picked the Fifth, the Sixth, the Fifteenth, and the Sixteenth legions for the task, with the two partly-veteran legions of the Sixth and Fifth chosen specifically to stiffen up the latter two, which were raw.

The rest of the legions, including the pair Shizuma was left holding, were instructed to wait for further directives from Sosia and continue training on an intensive programme. *My cousin is no fool, all right*, Shizuma had thought then. Shizuru had obviously expected most of her troops to be tyros, as turned out to be the case: the senior legate's two remaining legions and the rest of the legions coming in

would likely be composed of none but raw recruits. It troubled Shizuma a little, but she knew there was nothing to do but to work them and hope they did well despite their greenness. The rest of the veteran legions of Hime were already assigned elsewhere, and Shizuma's cousin had not thought to twist a few arms to get her hands on them. Or more probably had not cared, the cocky wretch! Typical that she would walk into a grand venture like this without giving a fig for the advantages others would try to get.

"All's well, Shizuma-san?" said a male voice. She looked up at the man who had interrupted her thoughts.

"All's well," she said to her fellow legate, Keigo Kurauchi. This young man was actually brother to Kazuya of the Traditionalists, and though no Traditionalist himself, still of the conservative faction, for all practical purposes. As to why he was a legate of Shizuru Fujino, that was because his elder brother had not scorned to approach the enemy of the Traditionalists and ask for a post for his younger, less-established sibling. As to why Shizuru Fujino had accepted-well, *leave it to her damned politicking!*

Still and all, Shizuma had to admit that she did not in fact dislike Keigo Kurauchi. He was quite a likeable young man, to both her relief and her chagrin.

"Drills are finished?" she asked.

"Just now, yes," the other responded, his brow shiny with sweat. He took the seat in front of her desk and pushed out his legs. "I just ran into Takumi-san. He looked happy, I'll say."

"That young man shall turn out a plutocrat, I'll wager," Shizuma said with a smile. "He struck up some nice deals with the locals for our provisions, apparently, so he shall be happy going to bed tonight."

"That's a relief he did that, though. The men will eat us out, at the rate they're going."

An inquisitive look. "Are they so voracious, these youngsters?"

Keigo laughed and showed that he had a far more mobile face than



his brother, even the corners of his eyes crinkling in good humour.

"The centurions are working the poor bastards so hard they're eating like people who've starved a month," he said with a low whistle.

"You do have some tough officers in there, Shizuma-san."

"They belong to my cousin-they would be tough," Shizuma said. "I wish we could have worked the Fifteenth and Sixteenth a little more before sending them off to the borders, but they shall have to find their exercises on the field, I suppose."

A change came over the animated face, the little creased fans at the edges of his eyes disappearing.

"Yes, about that," said Keigo. "I've just been giving it a lot of thought, Shizuma-san, and I have an idea. Not about the Fifteenth or the Sixteenth, but about the legions we have here."

Shizuma nodded.

"I think at least one of us should bring them to Sosia," he said, only to be stopped by a shake of her head.

"No," she said firmly. "No troops to Sosia yet."

"But Shizuma-san, is that really wise?" he asked, revisiting one of his first concerns upon their arrival. He had mentioned it once before, but been turned down so swiftly that he had kept the misgivings hidden-until now. "Even if we don't *both* go, we could just send one legion to be sure. We know there's a lot of the Mentulae up there, and we don't know how many have been lost to us from what remains of the Seventh, not to mention if the Ninth and Eleventh have reached it. Fujino-san might be grateful if we erred on the safe side here instead of assuming all's gone well."

Again Shizuma declined.

"No," she repeated. "The orders were to keep the Seventeenth and Eighteenth in Argus until she sent word that she needed them."

"But what if she *did* send word and it's just yet to get here?"

Shizuma laughed. "Oh, no! If Shizuru did feel she would need them, she would have sent word halfway through her march there. So no troops to Sosia, at least not until she demands it. She'd not thank me for contravening her orders out of a misplaced desire to 'rescue' her against that piddling lot of savages she's to contend with in that province."

He stared. "Piddling? There's a horde of them, I hear!"

"All the better." She smiled at him with almost illusive innocence: a weird and white woman of enigmatic attitude. "Just remember what your relatives and friends say about my cousin, Keigo-san, because it's true: Shizuru's a *plague* to her enemies. By the time any unsolicited 'help' from us would arrive, death shall have infected every Mentulaean still in Sosia."

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Shizuma was right in choosing not to send further troops to support Sosia's relief, for the end of the siege there was the same day her cousin came within sight of the citadel. Shizuru and the Fourteenth arrived in the midst of a battle between the Mentulae and the Eleventh and Ninth of Shohei, and she struck with characteristic opportunism: she ran the Fourteenth the rest of the way and took the Mentulae to the rear of one flank, rolling them up from the right. Between her troops and those of Shohei-which were being supported by the remains of the Seventh and the Sosia legion, along with the remaining Otomeians-they finally eliminated the Sosian besiegers and freed the beleaguered city.

Amidst the ecstatic yells of the soldiers and the citizens watching from the walls, Shizuru called out for some of her officers to ride with her. She found her old legate exactly where he should be in the battle, and the two of them met astride their bloodied horses, which had stepped on more than a few people during and after the fight.

"Shohei-han!" she said to his salute. "Well done."

Shohei grinned the embrace he would never have thought of giving her. He loved his commander as only a true soldier could of a truly good commander, so her sudden appearance during the battle

earlier had driven him as crazed with joy as it had the legionaries-who were coming in towards the two of them, yelling to their old general. Soon Shizuru and her officers were at the centre of a mob of legionaries calling her name, and she smiled at them while speaking with Shohei above the hubbub.

"It's good to see you, Fujino-san!" yelled her old officer, still unable to wipe the broad grin off his face. "Senate knuckled under?"

"As ever!" she yelled back. "Hold a moment!"

She turned to wave to the men, who cheered another deafening chorus before settling down under her call for silence.

"As promised, boys and girls," she shouted to them. "I have returned! Oh, how good it is to say I am once again your commander-for I am that once again, by decree of the People and Senate!"

A voice answered: "What d'you mean? Y'always were, General!"

"S'right!" someone agreed. "We don't care what the fucken Senate and People say! You're our General always!"

"Nobody else calls us their boys and girls, do they?"

Others affirmed the cries, and there was a racket of celebration. Shizuru laughed and waved them to silence for the second time.

"True, how could I forget that? Thanks to all of you for remind me," she said. "I shall speak to you later. For now we still have pressing business. Some of your comrades are still combing the field, and we must help. You know what to do: tend to the wounded, see to the dead, clean up the field. Look to your officers for instructions, and trust me when I say I am prouder of you than words can express! You have done Hime proud today, and you have proven you are *my* boys and girls!"

They roared to her again and began to disperse in orderly clumps, their officers shepherding them in the cleanup of the battle.

"I wonder if they ever realise their general's younger than most of

them," laughed Shohei to Nao, who had not left with the rest of the soldiers. The Ninth's primipilus was smiling almost as broadly as he was, having been infected by atmosphere. As her grin exposed her longish canines, however, it meant she looked less ecstatic than the rest of them and more caught between happiness and hunger.

"The Fourteenth and Eleventh are still babies by comparison but your Ninth's grizzled," Shohei continued to her. "Many of them are a good bit older than Fujino-san, for all that she calls them her boys and girls."

"Don't forget about us in that comment," she replied, just as Shizuru turned again and finally saw her. Nao smacked her cuirass loudly and whipped out her hand in crisp salute. "General!"

"Yuuki-han." Shizuru reached down and shook her centurion's hand in a firm grasp. "My god, am I glad to see you!"

"Likewise." Their hands released. "Harada's stayed in the city, Fujino-san?"

"Yes. The new senior legate is my cousin. She should be in Argus by now."

"Yes, General."

Shizuru's eyes had been touching on every other face in the small circle, and now swung back to Nao's in confusion.

"And where is Suou-han?" she demanded. "I would have expected to run into her now."

Nao shook her head.

"Haven't seen her yet-though I saw a few of the old Seventh's soldiers during the fight." And, reading perfectly what Shizuru meant by asking about Suou, she added: "Haven't seen the girl either, but it was a mess in there. Still hard to see clear right now, this dust up and all."

She jerked a thumb to the field.

"You can see there're some of the Lupine troopers, though. They did good, as always."

Shizuru nodded, still trying to find a glimpse or clue of Natsuki even if she did not actually expect to find the girl among the troopers still going over the field. She remembered that the Argus scouts who had been here had reported seeing her girl with a bandaged leg, which told her that there was a high possibility that Natsuki had not been in the battle-Suou would have guessed Shizuru's wishes and would most likely have kept her out of it. So it was Suou Shizuru had to find.

For a moment she toyed with the idea of heading over to the smaller camp, the one that had been set up by Ushida. But a part of her reasoned that Suou would have been with the Sosia officers during the battle, and probably brought Natsuki with her. Shizuru could not imagine a leg wound being powerful enough to tamp down her strong-willed girl's character, and it stood to the girl's nature that she would have demanded to at least be part of the Himean command overseeing the action. Yes, it was Suou she had to find first.

"They might be with the Sosia officers-they're over there, I think," Shohei was suggesting, pointing to a spot near the citadel's walls where a cluster of officials seemed to be calling out orders for relieving the wounded soldiers.

A light brow was lifted at him.

"You think? Do you mean you have yet to speak with them?" Shizuru asked, surprised. She whipped to address Nao before he could answer her, however, and indicated a few other officers in the group. She told them to oversee things and wait for her other legate to come and take over for them. The rest of the officers she ordered to follow her and Shohei as they rode towards the citadel.

"The reason we've not spoken to them yet is that we only just got here," Shohei explained in a yell as they galloped. His commander's eyes were all over the field, noting the presence of Otomeians where she could find them.

*Reassuring.*

"We thought we'd get here soon enough when we took that eastern route, but we didn't count on it being little more than goat track. Damn thing was practically a midget's footpath!"

"Was it so bad, then?" said the amazed Shizuru, who knew her legate better than to accuse him of sloth.

"The land was a nightmare, General," Shohei revealed. "No wonder no one bothered making paths through it. The plain and wood sections weren't so bad. It's the heights that were the worst part."

"I knew there was a rugged range barring transport from the maps," Shizuru said, recalling the many charts and representations she had of the north and thinking of Shohei's news. That finished her hopes of building an alternative passage to the east! "Yet there was little data on just how rocky."

"Jupiter, I'll say it was rocky!" the legate cried, still obviously exasperated by the memory. "Full of the most awful cliffs! Some of the paths we had to pass were but barely a tall man's length wide, and ended in a sheer rock wall down and up. They're not all that high for ranges, but damn me if they weren't tough. If I'd known they'd be so bad, I'd have fought my way through those Mentulae at Argus instead!" He peered eagerly at her. "By the way, those are-?"

"Gone," Shizuru said. "I handled them when I set out."

"Oh, excellent! I'd have taken them on with the Ninth and Eleventh, but we thought we'd make better time just giving them the slip. Turns out it might've been the same had we fought them first. I'm very sorry about that, Fujino-san."

"You were not to know the pass would be so hard."

"I should've done my homework first. Might've spared us some mules too if I had known it—we lost some in the crossing."

"You left the artillery," Shizuru noted. She had seen them in Argus when she had put in with the Fourteenth and had ordered them brought with the Fourteenth's artillery pieces when those were sent in later.

"Best decision I made in that mess," he said. "They'd not have survived that path to the east."

"Hmm," she said absent-mindedly: her thoughts were already turning to another thing, far more important to her than even considerations of the army. She took one hand off the reins, a perilous act for anyone but a skilled rider like her, and waved to the group before them. They waved back.

"They are coming to meet us," she said. "Quicker!"

They spurred on and were soon before the Sosia officers, who dismounted with them some distance from the citadel. Sosia's citizens were spilling out of the gates and gaping at the field, some of them already jumping and dancing in celebration of the battle.

"Ikita-han," Shizuru said, greeting the provincial governor first of all and nodding congenially to the others-including her foe, Takeda Masashi, who she thought had aged since last they had met. Had his face always been so pinched and narrow?

"A good day for your province, I should say," she told Ikita.

"A very good day," agreed the governor, who was beaming at the double-pleasure of today's victory and of seeing her again. He stared at her skin too, for he had actually not realised it was she earlier until her mount had come close enough for him to address her with a yell. He held her extended hand in a firm grip, not minding the blood she got on his palm. "You've saved us, by god."

"No, Shohei-han did that," she said, inclining her head towards the legate she had named. He was standing beside her and grinning at his old comrade and fellow Fujino legate, Toshi. "He arrived to save you before I came to help finish."

"The General's was properly the killing stroke," Shohei said modestly.

"Not at all. I was only in there for a few minutes."

"Those few minutes were what saw the Mentulae go down, General."

Ikita ended the passing of praise, his spirits too lifted for him to stay out of it as he would have normally.

"Either way, we're damned grateful to both of you!" burst out from him. "We've had those *cunni* up our arses here for what feels like a lifetime, and it's your coming that's ended it. I assume you've been given a second commission?" he asked, eyeing Shizuru with giddy expectation. He might not have said it outright, but it was clear to everyone that he preferred this other commander to the one standing beside him, who seemed cloaked in a black despair.

"Yes, although I would prefer to discuss the details later."

She turned her head to his side and met her foe's tired eyes, her own expressing nothing but cool detachment.

"Masashi," she said.

"Fujino," he answered.

She went straight to the point.

"I am to relieve you of your mission by order of the Senate and People of Hime, and am retrieving the legions I left after my first campaign here. I am aware the Eighth is gone, so I shall be taking the Seventh along with all auxiliary legions gathered under your command. My officers have copies of the mandate, but I fear you shall have to wait until later to see them."

He ignored the others' glances and nodded bitterly at her businesslike manner. What a way to be stripped of both mandate and men! But what could one do about it in his position?

"Right," he said, striving to sound as detached as she was. "What about my officers?"

"Any who care to remain under my command may apply to my staff tomorrow." She smiled suddenly and without malice, albeit with little warmth. "For today, however, I would like our personnel to remain functioning under each of our commands, but in cooperation with each other. It should make things work faster in the transition."



"Fine."

She frowned all of a sudden. "Where *is* Suou Himemiya? I came here looking for her."

That brought all eyes again to Takeda, who set his teeth against the cringe. Too late - she had noticed it! Already her eyes were staring at him more sharply, some of the fire he had expected from her building up enough to show him the innocence of her curiosity. She did not know anything.

That was no surprise, he reflected. No one knew it yet outside of those who had been through the whole of this awful siege. Only natural Fujino bore no inkling, then, what with the suddenness of her return. Little though he liked it, he was conscious of a near-crushing apprehension as her eyes continued to search him, scratching for the answer. He was very conscious of how abnormally tall she was and darted an eye downwards: no, that was not it, her boots were of the same height as his. She really was so long, he thought, and then remembered that he had thought this before. Well, he supposed it took you by surprise each time.

Something bit his stomach as he sized her up in a quick look, painfully aware that standing next to her was none too flattering for him. How to tell this darling of the gods that her friend had perished under his command? Takeda had realised by now that he had no gift with words and nothing in him that might soften the blow he was about to give. Not that he wanted to soften the blow for her! Rather, the mercy was sought for himself, as this would be the thrust to end him. Suou Himemiya had killed his career by getting herself killed, and he felt again the resentment he had in the first few days after her body's discovery. A part of his mind whined at the injustice of it while another part, stiffer than the rest, kicked at him and ordered him to do it, to get the suicide over with, to kill the career of Takeda Masashi, who could have been one of Hime's brightest stars, who had almost been its brightest star if not for characters like the one standing before him...

The stiffer part won out and he spoke it in the plainest way: "She's dead."

To his surprise-and a bit of gratification-the golden face before him went lighter by a full shade.

"Dead?" The word was slow to come and sceptical. "How could..."

She shut her mouth and frowned, and there was no effort to hide the disbelief when she spoke again.

" *Suou Himemiya ?*"

As she made no attempt to hide, neither did he: Takeda did not dissemble or bind up the truth in soft words. He told her and spared no one, not Suou nor himself, in the account he tendered, which had the faces of Shizuru's officers-who had not known of Suou Himemiya's fate either before this moment-contorting with shock.

"She led those countermanding orders, but her actions gave others the time they needed," he ended after somehow pushing out the ghastly tale, aware every eye was riveted to him but somehow unable to care overmuch for all the others present. Only his old nemesis seemed to exist in the same space, the same time of his storytelling, and the rest might as well have been ghosts. And though he knew the story himself and had even lived it, he still found himself wondering at the end if his face was as pale as hers had become.

"Still, she should have been among those first in the walls. I'd counted on it." He harrumphed and looked as though he had been fed something rotten, then spoke through the knot in his throat. "But Suou still was - she was a good officer. It's no lie to say it was a tragedy."

Shizuru's face had still not changed from the puzzled, disbelieving countenance it had turned into upon being informed of her friend's death, and he wondered if she had actually taken in anything he had said. She nodded slowly as though urging him to go on, even though he was finished.

"I see," she said, once finally accepting that he had no more to say. She repeated his last words not in the manner of one agreeing, but in mindless rote. "It was a tragedy."

Then she frowned in the way one did when still uncertain of what was happening.

"The body," she said. "What has been done with her body?"

"We were unsure what ritual practice the Himemiya employed for their dead." It was the governor of Sosia who spoke, his face proclaiming he was genuinely saddened. And why should he not be, came the scream in Shizuru's ears: *Why should he not be?*

She blinked again, very casually, and shook off the sound only she was hearing. Ikita was still explaining what had been done with the corpse and she needed to listen to him. She was fairly sure what he was saying mattered, even if it sounded worthless to her ears. Who cared about the body and what they had done with it? The body was not the person, and they were telling her the person had been killed.

"But in light of the heat, we had to decide swiftly before the body went rancid. We burned her with all proper obsequies, Fujino-san, and placed her ashes in the best urn we could find. I hope this doesn't prove to have been an error."

"Where is the urn?"

"I have it in the gubernatorial mansion. It is safe."

"I shall come for it later."

"Of course." Governor Ikita's face suddenly gained more creases as he shook his head in patent dismay. "It's a damned shame *she* had to be among the dead," he said bluntly, ignoring Takeda's presence. "It really was, Fujino-san."

To his befuddlement, Shizuru took that with nothing but a smooth word of agreement and an equally smooth nod, seemingly more interested in surveying the field than mourning her friend. But Ikita already knew that appearances were deceiving with this one. And in fact, the real Shizuru was not in front of Ikita, not the cool-looking woman who seemed to be mulling over the news rationally, as though it were just another problem to be solved in her list of things to do for the day. The real Shizuru was elsewhere and fixed on an

idea that refused to leave.

That Suou Himemiya could not be deceased .

It was not that Shizuru did not understand what Takeda or Ikita had said, or thought anyone at present a liar. Simply, Suou's death was still an implausible to the frame of her universe: a thing not yet *true* although it *was* . It was such that one could not even say she struggled with it. She simply stared at and through it as it stood before her, a strange and uncertain anomaly in her world. She would wonder later that no moisture had come to her eyes upon being informed of this anomaly, but the truth was that it affected her more than even she understood. It was shock that left her eyes dry, shock that she was feeling.

She knew it was most likely no lie that Suou had died in the manner Takeda had described. You could not jest about a Himemiya dying in such a way because the Himemiya just did not pass thus. People whose forebears had founded Hime itself - who also boasted of genuine divinities among their ancestors -whose pedigrees rivalled even Shizuru's own - why, people such as that never died in a battle with the rank-and-file soldiers! They could commit suicide in desperation of a battle completely lost; they could and would be pulled out first of all officers to be saved, in deference to their name; they might even flee the arena and save their own skins, for gods' sakes! But they did not die as Takeda claimed Suou had died, practically trampled by the front lines of the enemy mob. Was that what had caused the killing blow, perhaps? Had someone or something crushed that magnificent form before the life expired, insulting the physical marvel first before the even more precious will leached from it?

No. A sheer implausibility.

Shizuru hissed a deep breath through her nose, fighting a jarring urge to step back from the people around her. The only reason she did not surrender to that urge was that she feared another part of the world would give way with that one step. It was such a fragile world - she understood it now, she with all that monstrous confidence. Even without that, how could she have known such elemental things could so easily crumble? Was anything truly elemental, for that matter?

*Everything comes down to relativity, she reasoned, trying to talk herself through the confusion. What is elemental to me? Suou was part of my life almost from the beginning: she knew me as few others could ever claim, and that knowledge was a part of my own reflection. So much was she to me that I cannot think of the younger me without considering the younger her. Yet they say she is dead and I remain as I ever was. As much as I loved her-and love her still-she is not elemental to me, then, if she is truly dead and I exist. What is elemental to Shizuru Fujino? Is it fire, water, air or earth? The philosophers say it would be these, yet I feel not the pull of them in my veins. Is it something as simple as the blood that leaks from my cuts? Or am I, at the final reduction, simply bound to my own self-esteem, my dignitas? Suou is dead, and I shall never laugh with her again. What is elemental?*

Her head jerked and it came to her, the thing her shock had obscured for an instant.

*Elemental.*

Her foot took the step she had feared before and propelled her forward instead of back. Another idea now burned so brightly in her mind that her next actions and words were produced without deliberation, driving out even the bewilderment inside as it struck out all other paths with searchlight intensity.

"Natsuki," she said aloud. "Natsuki. Where is she?"

She addressed this to Takeda, it seemed, for her eyes were on his the moment she asked the query. He met her gaze with some consternation, a muscle leaping in his neck as she took another step towards him.

"Natsuki," she insisted, even as he opened his mouth. "Natsuki."

The staccato repetition threw him off and he stammered his response.

"That's - she's - I don't know. We don't know, not yet." Seeing she was about to take him to task, he explained before she could start with the eerie iterations of the name again: "She was with the

Otomeians who were separated. I'd arranged for her to be among the first to be brought in Sosia, but she'd sneaked into the auxiliary lines. We only found out later fro-

To his lasting chagrin, she turned her back to him at this point and practically leapt straight onto her stallion, taking off with her little band of subordinates trying to follow. All she threw to the officials of Sosia and the interrupted Takeda in that departure was the carelessly spoken word, "Later!"

Shohei's horse was blowing hard as it struggled to keep up, and he shouted to her as she raided the field anew with her eyes.

"Fujino-san!" he hollered. "I don't think she's been on the field today! I've not seen her the whole time - she might be with the ones they left in their camp!"

She surprised him and the rest of the officers by reining Albinus in suddenly. She then began calling the names of over half of the officers as their steeds kicked up the dust, stamping at the excitement.

"Those I named, go with Shohei-han to see to the army," she said, speaking at a rapid clip that emphasised her accent's cresting rhythms. "Those I did not, come with me. Shohei-han, get together with Legate Miyuki Rokujou. Set up camp, arrangements for the *medici* first. Handle the rest."

"I'll have the men ask around for her too, Fujino-sa-"

She cut him short with uncharacteristic discourtesy.

"Later!" she said for the second time, and peeled away with the tribunes she had selected. It did not take long to find a black-uniformed trooper and she led her posse to him.

"Soldier, where is your commanding officer?" she demanded, once face-to-face with the surprised man. "The Captain, where is she?"

Failing to evoke anything but confusion from him, she tried even more urgently.

"Natsuki!" she snapped, patience wearing thin. "I seek the Princess Natsuki. Where is she?"

The man's face lit up at the name and he suddenly thrust his face closer to her in a bizarre response. She was caught off guard and did not quiz him for a moment, which he exploited to squint at her. This was followed by him pulling back and giving a strange yell.

"General Shizuru Fujino!" he cried, letting his horse prance a little. "Red-Eyes!"

And then she understood that he had not recognised her earlier, either due to her brown skin or his bad eyes or both. She repeated her query.

"Natsuki!" he said, nodding fiercely and driving his horse into another jittery dance. "Come for Natsuki!"

Two other black-suited troopers had drawn close to them, all staring with expectancy at the Himean commander. Others were coming now, and Shizuru thought she would have to repeat her request for them to give way as they crowded about her and her officers. But then several of them suddenly started dancing their horses and jabbering away to her, pointing to the small fort in the distance.

It was the fort Seigo Ushida had put up, where the Otomeians had been staying ever since their separation from the Seventh.

"Come with us for Natsuki!" said one of them, clearly far more articulate than the first trooper Shizuru had encountered. The man sounded anxious, and stared at her as though not understanding why she was not sending Albinus into gallop yet. "Come now, General Fujino! You will help the Princess! Hurry, hurry with me!"

There was no telling her twice. She took off to the fort, her tribunes and the Otomeians in hot pursuit. Soon her tribunes were behind, the Otomeian horses pulling ahead with Shizuru's own Albinus. As they rode, the Northerners called out the news to their fellows who had yet to hear: the Red-Eyes was back! They were in the hands of a true general again.

They reached the camp, Shizuru pulling on Albinus so shortly he actually came almost to rearing. She jumped off him when she saw the troopers dismount, some gabbling at her in broken Himean, others in their native tongue. One of them, someone she recognised as one of the sub-commanders of their division, came to the fore and urged her to follow them. Then she was striding side by side with the man, heading uncaringly wherever the stranger would lead for so long as he was promising Natsuki.

She was actively searching the whole time with her eyes, so she looked about while walking and thus got to see the state of the camp. Sensitised to the world again by the knowledge that Natsuki had been staying here, she was appalled by what she saw. What structures existed were makeshift enclosures of scraped-up materials, and she remembered seeing funeral pyres in abundance outside the walls. The wounded had obviously been left to care for the more gravely wounded, and she shuddered to see how ill-treated many of the people coming out at their clamour appeared. These were not Otomeians gaping at her and her guides: these were emaciated scarecrows, stringy and straw-haired characters with blue eyes popping from darkened sockets. They were the stick-figures of children's drawings come to life, creatures in a nightmare of crude simplicity!

*This is a sorry place*, she thought to herself, mouth tense with the anger of considering that Natsuki had been forced to live in such conditions as well. *That my girl should have had to stay here is an accursed misery. These very people now are a misery, and the greatest misery is the fool who let this happen.*

She quickened her step another beat and was dissatisfied with it: finally, she threw all appearances to the wind and switched to a run, the troopers whooping and following her example.

"Quickly," she said to the man leading them. "Quickly!"

They were all running now, their noise bringing out even more people from the tents. Finally the leading trooper pointed to a particular enclosure as their destination, and Shizuru showed them what her legs-legs that had spent literal years of marching and hiking in the legions-were made of: she went into full sprint and



earned herself some exclamations from the impressed warriors, who strove to match the pace. She still reached the tent first of all, and actually caused a man coming out of it to drop the swaddle of filthy linen he had been carrying. She set him aside with one hand and went into the tent without announcing her presence, expecting to find Natsuki in front of her. What met her was near-darkness instead, and it surprised her enough to pause where she was. She would have gone on and explored the gloom had the troopers been with her but they had apparently chosen to stay outside, perhaps out of reverence for this meeting. Such a dark place for a meeting, though! Was this obscurity truly where Natsuki was? Oh, but she did not like this!

A slit of brilliance parted the blackness, and she realised this was only one section of the tent when a woman stepped from the light.

"Where is the Princess Natsuki?" Shizuru demanded of the woman, leaving the Otomeian blinking in surprise at the sudden interrogation. Before the Otomeian could answer, however, Shizuru had already rushed past her and into the lit-but still dim-inner section of the tent.

Here Shizuru had to stop again as her eyes adjusted to the change in lighting. Eventually she saw there was a cot and that in the cot was a dark mess of hair that she would have recognised even were she half-blind and the world half-dark.

"Is that-" She caught her breath so hard she nearly coughed.  
"Natsuki! Natsuki, I am here!"

She sprang towards the bed, intent on waking her girl from what looked to be sleep.

"General," the Otomeian behind her was saying in a miserable accent. Shizuru noted hazily that the woman's voice sounded like she was crying. "General, *please* help!"

*Help? Again that word*, the Himean echoed in her mind, even while calling again to the girl. She bent over the cot, not even sparing a close glance at the body on it because she knew without a doubt it was Natsuki. She simply scooped up the unconscious form, trying to

do it as tenderly as she could but aware she was probably doing it too fast. Her hands felt flesh that yet had its warmth, and she murmured a quick oath of relief at that. But a closer hold let her see that it was not just warmth but a great heat, and she peered again at the face as she brought the body up. And then she was afraid.

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"Jupiter, what a day!"

The chief of the army surgeons for the Fourteenth padded into the tent set up for them and shook his hands at his fellows who were already there, taking a break from the nonstop work that they had been doing ever since they arrived in Sosia province. One of them handed him a jug of water that he tilted to his lips thirstily.

"Those Greeks in Hime have it easy," he said afterwards, wiping his mouth. "They get called in to visit their patients' homes and make simple prescriptions for complaints of fever and simple catarrh. We are forced to keep up with a mob of soldiers who suffer from every possible injury at any possible time, from broken bones to savaged flesh. What a difference!"

"Well, I'd rather stay in the army than cater to the hypochondriac notions of the rich," said one of the other surgeons. "You learn things here that the quacks in the city never do."

"Of course, of course, it makes for a comprehensive practice and experience," replied the head surgeon, who had been longer in the service but was new to the sort of marching they had just undergone in recent days. "But this haste! What a brutal way to treat *medici* !"

Two of the others exchanged glances and grinned.

"Best get used to it," one of them said. This was his second Fujino campaign and he knew she had a habit of dragging everyone in the army-herself included-from one place to another without much regard for the strain it took on the legs. "She works like this all the time. At least we got to ride some days."

"But not all," said the head surgeon, who had flopped into a seat.

"Oh, I am tired! And it is so noisy! What is that noise now?"

There was a commotion from outside the tent, and it seemed to be made up of hooves and feet and all sorts of other things. They heard someone calling the general, then a voice calling for the *medicus*, and were just about to go out and investigate when the source of the disturbance came barging in.

"Medicus!" said the intruder, flooring all of them. "Your aid, quickly!"

The surgeons gaped at the sight of their general as she stumbled into the tent, her once-polished armour grubby and her arms bearing a clutch of rags. She put the rags on the table in their operating area, and that was when they saw that there was a body bundled up there. Again they had to stare at it. What in the world was happening?

The general strode over and lifted the chief surgeon from his seat.

"Help her," she rasped, actually panting from a compound of fear and anger. Her eyes darted from him to the body on the table and then to him again as she burst out: "Did you not hear me? *Help her, I said!*"

The demand galvanised the man, who had never expected to see the composed Shizuru Fujino come to him in such a lather over one patient-and to be the one to bring that patient directly to him, for that matter. Who was this sorry-looking thing on his table that she would be treated so importantly? Interesting, interesting!

"Boiled water, in a pot!" he yelled to his fellows, who were already divesting the new patient of her clothes. The other surgeons would be his assistants today. "Clear the rest of these things off, quickly!"

There was a wince as he caught the scent of putrefaction from the unconscious woman-no, not a woman. Tall but also small, he thought, re-evaluating the patient. A girl, then? Yes, an adolescent. Or perhaps not: it was hard to tell, since she was so mean of flesh. Bones all over and hardly anything within! This was a living corpse the general had brought to him.

"Watch that blade," he cautioned as one of them continued to cut down the patient's shift. "Someone start taking off these bandages already!"

"I have it!"

"Mind her skin!"

The general stepped back and watched them work, feeling awkward and uncertain in this medical mayhem. Some officers had followed her dash all the way to the tent, and now entered to stand behind her with astonished faces. Shohei was present, as was the primipilus of the Ninth and some scribes with the Fourteenth. Some of them walked past the partition to see what the general had just brought in at the tearing hurry they had all seen, when she had ignored everything and everyone who had been calling.

"My god!" croaked Shohei, who finally recognised two senseless green eyes on the creature in the arms of the surgeons. "Is that *Natsuki-san*?"

Nao gave one look around his shoulder, then backed away and pulled Shohei and all the rest with her, shaking her head at their protests. She herded them out of sight of the table and cursed them into peace.

"Cut these rags!" the surgeon ordered, a little calmer now that one mystery had been cleared. He remembered that strange name from the gossip, the name the legate had just given. *Of course, of course - it would be the barbarian mistress.* He only just managed to stop nodding to himself at the realisation and continued his examination of the patient, occasionally punctuating her insensible moans with his own grunts and noting her symptoms and injuries as they were discovered.

*Incisions on the arms, incisions on the sides – a mess, just a mess - some of those stitches need redoing - grave and abnormal discoloration, a bad sign - and what do we have here? Ah, of course, of course, this would have been the source of the odour...*

They had removed all the bandages and the shift by the time the

patient started to come to properly. She began muttering, her body doing a chorea of no particular rhythm. Keen on the girl's attention, the general tried calling the girl's name as she had done the whole way to the tent. Again it provoked no sensible response and a new note of desperation entered Shizuru's voice as she addressed the chief surgeon.

"Why does she not answer?" Shizuru demanded when the surgeon turned away from the table to face the box carrying his tools. She winced when she saw another odd jerk from Natsuki's limbs, which another of the surgeons had to hold down. "Why does she *shiver* so?"

"Delirium-it is the fever," the *medicus* replied, concerned with ensuring all his tools were at hand. A loud thump drew their eyes to the patient, who was producing more jerks against the assistants' restraints. She was still strong for a near-corpse, thought the *medicus*, about to give the order to bind her.

Suddenly her head came up and two wild eyes stared at him: he froze, fascinated by the lambent irises he had not seen properly until then. Two broken lips quivered and pulled back until he could see her teeth.

The living corpse screamed.

"Natsuki!" Shizuru gasped, amazed that the girl had seemed not to even see her when their eyes had met for an instant. She shuddered at the sound of the girl's scream in decrescendo, a lingering roll like the growl of a beast. "What is the matter with her, Medicus? Can she not recognise anything?"

"She is not sensible," said the chief surgeon. "I doubt anything we say is understood."

He frowned at the sound of another scream, hoarse and more air than voice to the ears.

"I must strap her to the table to better tend to the injuries."

The general watched helplessly as the man gave the order to tie

down the patient, anger twisting her as she saw them lashing down the girl. Natsuki fought the surgeons with the stubbornness Shizuru knew her to have and once tied, resorted to thrashing her head against the table like a savage. They forced it down and secured it with more cloth, inspecting the stitches on her brow before that. Thus fully immobilised, the patient emitted another breathless scream, and then another, and another still.

Listening to what was clearly the sound of a creature out of its mind with terror, Shizuru grit her teeth hard. She still had the sense not to approach, however, as she was afraid of what she might do to the *medici* for what they were doing, even despite her knowledge that they were trying to help the girl. It was easy to understand that, she thought, but her heart was being commanded by those screams and she was afraid of what it might compel her hands to do if she did not keep her distance.

"Can you not give her something for calm?" she asked nervously, eyes riveted to the long, twig-like neck straining against the bondage. By the gods, she could break that twig with one hand! "Medicus, how grave is it?"

"This one - this one is very bad," the chief surgeon muttered, selecting various implements from his box. "I will try to induce her to swallow something to put her to sleep, but it is very bad. Where is my reed, my reed... Tch!"

He did not see the look she flicked to him, which shimmered between hope and despair. "But you can take care of this."

"To some degree," he said. "She is very bad, General. It is not wise to get our hopes high."

"Because you are the person best-equipped to help her, I shall pretend you did not just say that," Shizuru shot back. " *You* should be the one concerned with hopes right now, since you had best hope your skills do not fail you this time."

She and the man locked eyes, the latter experiencing a skitter of fright at her stare.

"I have every faith in my skills, General," the surgeon still replied bravely. "But she is a very bad case and I cannot guarantee survival. It is well to prepare, because she will probably die."

It was a good thing he was not holding any part of the patient's body at that moment, for Shizuru covered the distance between them with inhuman speed, reached for him some feet away, and then tugged and lifted him into the air. The physician would not have believed the slender woman's power had someone only told him of it, and was so shocked that he kicked and struck one of her greaves with a clang. An angry shake stopped that and he went still, forced to meet her glare as she brought his head level to hers. Her face was very close and he could finally see the smoothness of her olive skin, and the purity of feature that made up her beauty. It was strange from up close, the incurably clinical part of him reflected, because it seemed almost to have too much purity. It was as though he were staring into the face of a statue by the old masters from Greece, and not at a living being.

But this statue had the eyes of a demon, and it was sending his heart into his ribs.

As the spot where they stood was not shielded from the receiving area of the tent by the partitions, everyone save the patient saw her assault the man. The other surgeons stopped what they were doing, frightened half out of their wits.

"Say that again and I guarantee *your* non-survival," Shizuru said softly to the man she held aloft, her voice dropping to her boots as she struggled not to kill him. "Hear me, Medicus, and the rest of you quacks in this tent: you shall guarantee her life, even if you must throw Pelion atop Ossa to do so! I shall see this girl alive or I shall end you superfluous worms myself!"

The threat woke one of the gobsmacked spectators. Miyuki Rokujou had just joined the other officers in the tent and now reached out to her commander, still panting from the run that had brought her over.

"Shizuru-san-" she tried to say.

Shizuru silenced her with a glance. Miyuki suddenly found reason to

think better of what she had to say and ended in deciding not to say it.

"Fo - forgive me," the chief surgeon whined, wondering if she was going to kill him. Her stare narrowed at his apology, and his heart bruised itself against his ribs again. And with almost evil timing, the patient breathed out another terrified scream.

The surgeon begged for his life upon feeling her hands tighten.

"Please, General, forgive me. My tongue was careless! It was an error and I am very sorry for it!"

She glared at the apology but still released her grip. The *medicus* crumpled to the floor, his face pasty.

"Predict no tragedies for this patient's life," the woman before him said between her teeth. "Or see me match them for yours. Clear?"

The man nodded with convulsive speed. He recoiled when she reached a hand out to him, but could not fight the force as she pulled him to his feet.

"Get to it," she snapped irritably. "You are not dead yet, Medicus, so move!"

He all but ran for the table. As for her, she stalked to the other side of the partition, glaring scornfully at the officers clustered together. Suddenly these wished they had bethought themselves of better things to do earlier, instead of choosing to stay and watch the delicious drama they had seen unfolding.

"What are you all doing here?" she asked, still so furious that she actually lifted her upper lip in addressing them. "Are there not things to be done with the army?"

That got rid of most of them, but not the ones she considered most loyal and highest up in rank, ironically enough. They got a haughty eyebrow for their courage, each of them flinching for each cry the patient gave behind the partition. Shizuru herself pretended to be oblivious to the sounds, but they knew she was listening very keenly: her eyes got a little narrower after each cry, as though she



were the one in pain instead of the girl voicing the noises.

"What?" she said, driving them to shift on their feet. Someone had to answer her, of course, but they well knew that said someone might end up getting flogged at this rate-or perhaps strangled by the general's hands, given the way they were still clenching. Oh, this was a fine pickle they had gotten into! If only they had left her alone after her dash through the unfinished camp, instead of following her here and poking their noses into her private business. Well, someone's nose would be getting lopped today. This decidedly different, practically alien Shizuru Fujino looked to be guaranteeing it.

"What?" she repeated, prompting sweat to break out on all foreheads.

Easily the bravest of the lot as well as the one with the most affinity for rebellion, the chief centurion of the Ninth stepped forward and took it on her shoulders. The rest stared at the redheaded officer, each one half-afraid and half-applauding.

"Excuse me, Fujino-san," Nao told the dour-looking commander, careful to keep her voice as respectful as possible. "D'you want me to send for Erstin? She can help watch her, you know, and she's a good girl. Be good to get someone you trust in here while you work."

*I'm dead, Nao found herself thinking in the silence following her offer. Fuck if it's not what I get, all cocky-like and coming up to her right now, and that bloody medicus isn't helping, what he's doing to that girl to make her bawl, and fuck my stupid mouth-*

Her inner rant was cut short when she heard Shizuru's breath hissing out.

"Indeed," the general was saying, for she understood what the centurion was trying to say and knew the rightness of it. "Erstin."

Nao let her shoulders sag just a little, knowing no one could see it in her armour.

"Thank you," Shizuru said, slightly calmer too because the cries in

the tent had subsided. "Yes, she shall do."

"You can send some of your servants, 'course," Nao added in an effort to keep her in this reasonable mood. "But Ers will see the job right better if she's with them. She'll have them sending you word on her too."

Shizuru nodded without a word. She might have calmed enough to respond to Nao's offer but she was far from composed, especially as she was concerned about the change in the patient's noises. No sooner had she turned with the intention of seeing what had happened than the chief surgeon trotted out and joined their party.

He froze upon seeing all of them glaring at him. Why-was everything to be blamed upon *him* today?

"Medicus?" Shizuru said, inviting him to begin whatever he had been on the verge of saying.

"Fujino-san," he said unenthusiastically. "There is a difficulty."

She walked around him and tried to get a better look at the patient.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"The rest of her wounds I am certain I can address," the man answered. "But the one on the leg is very bad. We have just taken off the wrappings, and they too have gone dark." He pointed to the farther end of the body, which Shizuru could not see properly due to the table's orientation. "There is much discharge from it, and it is not wholesome."

Shizuru froze in horror, halting her steps that very second.

" *Gangraena* ?" she asked in a hoarse voice, knowing that condition as one of the most fearsome ailments that could ever afflict a soldier. " *That serious* ?"

He grimaced and nodded.

"Very serious, General," he said. "The effluvium is putrid and so is the surrounding flesh. It is beyond simple repair."

She sucked in her breath and looked staggered. Her officers were staring, but she could not care about them just then. For all she was concerned, they might have been massacred by a pack of Mentulae and she would not have noticed.

"Can it not be treated at all?" she asked, sounding more like someone begging than someone asking a scientific query. "Can nothing be done for it?"

"No, unfortunately." He shifted and looked even more unenthusiastic. "There is only one thing left, I mean."

"What? What is it?" Shizuru asked, looking as though she would claw him whatever he said next. The surgeon swallowed and said it anyway:

"We must extirpate the limb."

This time everyone in the tent sucked in a breath. Shizuru stared at the chief surgeon with shock written all over her face.

"You are asking me..." she uttered incredulously. "To amputate her leg?"

He swallowed.

"I am asking if you would permit it, General," he said.

"A good question." The look in her eyes was lethal. "Why should I?"

Again the reflex contracted his throat.

"The limb cannot be saved," he explained. "But it is likely that she can be, if we sever the rotten part now. The rot will migrate to all the other parts if we let it stay, and then nothing can be done to help the patient. It is the only way to help her."

The rest of the people in the tent listened with mingled dread and fascination, their eyes on their commander as she eyed the man as though sizing him up for the cremation urn. Her glare was practically boiling off the sweat as fast as the physician's face produced it, and suddenly even those not on the receiving end of her anger felt the

need to flee. Another kind of fear rooted them where they were, however, and they were forced to stay and watch this potential tragedy as it played.

"So you are asking me for permission that you may do the only thing there is to do," Shizuru finally spoke, doling out the words with ominous care. "Is this not so?"

The poor surgeon bent over as far as he could, his face gone the colour of slate.

"General," he uttered miserably.

"You *did* say it was the only thing to do, correct?"

Another miserable utterance: "Yes, General."

"Then," she growled, "why are you even requesting consent if you say it is the only thing to be done, damn you!"

He came out with the truth, his voice croaking in dejection.

"Because if I did it without asking, General, I was afraid you would kill me."

Those fierce eyes stayed on him, a world of fire binding an expanding spot of darkness in each one. The poor man cringed, visited by a presentiment that the fear he had just spoken would become real. Why had he ever agreed to this post? Who was it that had told him she was a wonderful general?

The wonderful general gave him one last glare and looked away, her face hidden from all of them. When she turned back, her whole countenance was bizarrely devoid of expression.

"I see."

She inclined her head and said, in the most reasonable tone he had heard from her all day, "Sever the limb."

He gasped and bowed to the waist. "General!"

Then he was rushing back to the table where his patient was already strapped down and waiting, leaving Shizuru with her officers. Who looked to their commander with hearts pounding, wondering what fresh fury this would visit on them.

But she was cool in her address, her voice bearing nothing but the crushing authority they had only ever heard her bring out in the most dire army situations.

"We shall leave the Medicus and his assistants to their work," she said. "And betake ourselves to ours. All outside now."

Nao was the first to exit, going off to fetch her body-servant for the promised task. The rest filed out slowly, all with sombre and downcast expressions. Only Shizuru's old scribe dared to meet her eyes as they were leaving, and the face he turned to her was on the brink of tears.

Shizuru warned him off before he could say a word.

"Hold your tongue," she whispered, her throat hurting so badly it was a wonder she managed to say the rest. "Aisuka-han, say anything and I shall send you home this very moment."

The older man nodded and lifted his arm so he could wipe his eyes. He hid his face from her and went out with the others. Then only Shizuru was left.

"Medicus," she said, just loudly enough so the man would hear.

He stepped out from behind the partition.

"Yes, General?" he said fretfully.

"Remember what I said."

"Oh, yes, General."

"I shall send people over."

She left him and went to the group waiting outside. Her old legate came close and addressed her first, speaking in a hushed tone she

could barely hear above the racket of soldiers starting on nearby parts of the camp.

"Rokujou-san and I can do the work, Fujino-san," he said. "If you want to stay here for a while, you can. We'll handle it."

She actually opened her eyes wide at him.

"Impossible," she stated. "I am the commander, and I should be the one to tend to certain things. Even I must prove I am not superfluous."

She lifted her voice and addressed the rest.

"Return to your duties, which I expect all of you to know by now," she said. "If you do not, quit my sight immediately and find out what your duties should be. Shohei-han, take your officers with you to handle the clean-up and set up camp for the army. Send a note to Masashi's group to handle the Seventh for now and work on supporting the other legions in their work."

She looked up and seemed to squint into the field before them, which was a little less dusty now that it had been muddied by all the dragged bodies.

"Do not forget to account for the Otomeians still quartered in the hill base. Most of them are wounded, so they should be transferred as soon as possible to the medical quarters. Expand those to suit the current requirement. Inquire about the Seventh's injured as well: they might need assistance."

"Right away, Fujino-san."

"You know the rest. Send me an update on your progress in about an hour's time."

He agreed and made to leave, but she stopped him with a word. Something else had caught her notice, and she seemed displeased by it.

"Water donkeys are not enough," she said, eyeing the asses being led about to water the thirsty soldiers. "From now on, I want water

skins added to the standard issue for our legionaries. You shall notice the Fourteenth is provided with them already. In contrast, the Ninth and Eleventh are clearly parched, and I do not want that happening in future battles or for this day, which shall have them working under the summer heat to the evening. Delegate one of your officers to take care of this. Buy out all the water skins in Sosia if you have to and have them making more immediately."

"Right," said the man. "Ah-do we get the same provisions for the auxiliary?"

She said not a word but met his eyes with hers. He took the hint.

"Right, General," he said again, and went off to do her bidding.

The rest of the officers Shizuru brought with her to their command tent, which had already been put up courtesy of the Fourteenth. Shizuru's servants, too, had been very efficient, and had already arranged the necessities for a war council, complete with all the stools and desks the commander required for her ever-present scribes.

The somewhat dazed officers were marched into the room and made to take their seats by the still strangely calm general, who got down to work as soon as her rear met a chair. Her first order of business was to ask for an accounting of their current forces and for specific officers to be called over from Takeda Masashi's billets inside the city, as well as for the captured Mentulaean commander-yet another prince of Obsidian's enormous brood-to be brought to her for an interview. So competently did she run the council that those officers who had seen her passions earlier were tempted to doubt their memories, all of them wondering how anyone could return so coolly to business after such an experience. Why, she did not even seem to spare time for mourning the dead legate they had all known to be her friend! Or for the casualties among the Seventh, come to it.

Only a few of these observers realised that, had the commander indeed let her grief rein, it might well have brought out all of theirs. As she acted so professionally, however, they could find no space for indulging in their own miseries. Which Shizuru understood

perfectly, herself being no stranger to the demoralising potential of military losses.

"So this brings the Seventh down to half-strength," she said to Takeda Masashi's senior legate, who came to detail to her the casualties in Takeda's last legion. Shizuru's officers watched with interest as she lifted an eyebrow at the handsome man, who looked not a whit discomposd by the accusation in her tone.

"At least six members of illustrious families gone, a Himemiya included," she drawled to him, sounding as critical as she looked. "Half of the Seventh gone. Half or more of the original auxiliary gone. *All* of the Eighth gone. Impressive figures... for the Mentulae."

Seigo Ushida took that with the exactly the right amount of gravity.

"There were some unwise orders going on," he said flat-out, provoking some looks from the other Masashi officers in the tent. They all knew he was friends with Takeda, of course, so it was something of a defection for him to admit this to the other general. But then again, everyone knew Takeda was going down and no one wanted to go down with him.

"That's all I can say, Fujino-san, and it's no excuse, I'll agree," said Ushida. "Bad decisions made with our command, and good people paid the price for it."

"You were part of the command, Ushida-han," she reminded him.

"But not *the* command," he stated strongly. "I agreed with Suou Himemiya on most things, and if things had gone our way, I doubt those losses would have happened. But we weren't the real command, Fujino-san, so we couldn't have our way. That's about the sum of it."

*And that is suggestive accounting if ever I have heard it!* thought an interested Miyuki, who was watching this interview on her feet, her hip rested against a table edge. She understood what Ushida was getting at, naturally, but was uncertain of what Shizuru's answer would be. Would she take on the man, despite his established friendship with Takeda Masashi? Granted, he seemed to know his



military from the way he had explained everything, but there were other things about him, some tendencies Miyuki did not feel to be too palatable to someone of Shizuru's ilk...

"It was a shame, then, that you were not heeded," Shizuru eventually said. "Perhaps if you were in other, differently structured armies?"

Ushida looked at her, his eyes shining.

"Yes, that's what I think," he said. "I'd love to work with someone who knows bad decisions from good ones."

"I think we all would."

"Not as much as I do. I'd give anything for it."

Shizuru kept her gaze level, not giving him an inch of hope yet.

"Really," she said with a bored tone. "How much do you want it?"

"Enough to drop what I have right now and go after it if I had the chance."

She made up her mind and nodded to him.

"I am certain you shall find it accommodating if you do go that far," she hinted, ending their veiled conversation. "I have kept you long enough, Ushida-han. Please return to your duties, and thank you again for lending us your time."

He walked away very relieved and already making plans to have a private interview with her the next day. There could be no mistake: she had just approved of his informal request to become her legate. Ah, let the ill-thinkers whisper what they would of him after this! He had a career to protect and a whole pack of siblings to provide for, and he could not do all of that without a good campaign and good pickings. Takeda's attempt had failed and had gained him far less than he had expected, so it was off with Takeda's attempt and on with Fujino's. It was all well and good to stay chummy with his old friend, of course, but the ship had to go first-and he was not about to let Takeda's sinking one drag his along with it.

Only a few minutes had passed from Ushida's exit when the guards announced the arrival of someone Shizuru had been awaiting: the captured general of the Sosia Siege's Mentulaean army, Prince Hanu of Obsidian's Royal Family.

"Good day, Prince," Shizuru said, indicating that a chair should be drawn up for their aristocratic visitor. It was done in an instant, one of the tribunes vacating his chair for the guest. "Please sit."

The invitation got her a sniff to the face.

"Very well, if we must exercise the petty strategy of positioning," Shizuru said tolerantly, getting up from her seat and walking over until they were face to face. He stared at her height first when showed she was taller than him, then stared at her eyes when the initial shock from the first trait had gone away.

Shizuru dropped her chin a little. "Far be it from me to satisfy your need to make me look churlish by standing while I enjoy a comfy chair. Would you like a cup of wine, by the way?"

The dark-eyed, light-haired prince scowled, flexed the corded muscles of his arms, and spat a refusal.

"And have you poison me in public?" he growled. "No, thank you, Himean!"

Several people chuckled behind Shizuru, who smiled a little as well.

"Er - no, we are not in the habit of poisoning our guests," she said to him. "I could sip from your cup to assure you of its safety, but I doubt you would like that. Are you sure you would not like something? Water? Some food?"

No response.

"I see."

She narrowed her eyes at him as if evaluating his appearance, running her gaze from his feet to the top of his head. Every part of him radiated offence at her prying look.

"The soldiers who caught you said you were to the back at first, but came closer and closer through the fight," she said. "You could have run away when it turned against you. Yet you did not."

His upper lip pulled back as he snarled and looked goaded.

"And how do you understand that, then?" he hissed. "Does it fit your image of us? Or are you wondering why I was not cowed enough to flee?"

She looked patient again. "I shall thank you not to pose questions to me. Speak directly, Prince."

"You would prefer to think we Mentulaeans are cowardly!"

"I wonder," she replied, unfazed. "For myself, I have never really espoused such a view of the enemy. At any rate, it is not about what one *prefers* to think and more about what one actually thinks. For instance, some of my men actually think you did not flee because you did not realise there was a possibility of it."

"Hah!" He scoffed out the laugh, his tone derisive as he retorted. "Am I blind? Your men think wrong."

She surprised him by agreeing.

"I believe you *chose* not to flee, Prince. I shall grant you have your share of bravery," she said to him. "You did not flee even when you could have and knew it, even when your men were being cut down. No, you simply were not willing to run. I see it in you even now. Your very look, your demeanour-" She eyed his broad-shouldered, very martial frame. "It tells me you have courage."

He sneered despite the compliment. She gave him reason to do so the next second.

"Skill, however, you have not," she continued dispassionately. "From what I hear, you had somewhere around six legions' worth of foot and a legion's worth of horse with you, along with a fair number of artillery from the outset. Yet you could not take the citadel even after three months of attempt. A performance one must term laughable. Brave? I suppose. Persistent? Definitely. But *smart*?"

She shook her head with obvious pity for his apparent shortcomings.

"I wonder your King allowed you command at all," she sighed. "But then, that is the difficulty with monarchies and I realise it. Nepotism is the law. Or perhaps it is the nature of politics everywhere, given that it rears its head in our case too. Furthermore, it must be noted that most nations are still unable to separate their notions of the great warrior and the great general. You must be a great warrior, and I see it: they thought you would also make a great general by default. Still, Prince, I must say I have rarely seen as pathetic a job at siege as you have done here. Were you a Himean commander, you would be arraigned by now in a special court. Count yourself fortunate you are merely one of the Mentulae."

He snarled and looked so close to biting her that the guards took a step forward.

"You will pay for your insults, Himean," he promised. "My siblings and the King My Father will see to it! It shall be so before you have had your fill of celebration after killing me!"

But the face Shizuru turned to him was a surprised one.

"Kill you?" she echoed. "Do I look a butcher, man, that you would think that? I have absolutely no intention of killing you."

His expression said he could not believe her.

"It is not our way," Shizuru insisted. "Even your father shall not face an execution of the kind you seem to expect. No, you and all your fellow commanders shall live to walk in my triumph after this war. You shall be placed in confinement at a villa in a nice Fuukan town while awaiting that event, which shall likely take place only after a good many years, given the length of my term. Your brother, the Prince Artaxi, is already enjoying such a confinement, you know."

He stared at her with even more dislike despite the assurance that he would live.

"Then you would disgrace us instead of giving us death?" he said sourly. "You put us in a low dungeon, treat us like pigs in the sty?"

You Himeans have a greater sense of cruelty than I expected."

"Oh, how much you love the erotesis! And how little you know of us!" Shizuru said to that, sounding almost kind as she explained something to the foreigner. "Himeans have no dungeons, Prince! Save for a tiny and unguarded cell in Hime that we call the Lautumiae. No one is ever really put there to be imprisoned. Even were someone to be put there, it would be largely useless, at any rate, since the cell is gateless."

She peered into his amazed eyes and revealed the future of his imprisonment.

"As I said, you shall be going to a *villa*," she told him. "I did not speak in irony. Your brother the Prince Artaxi is certainly not in a dungeon. However, the two of you shall never meet during your confinement. The locations of your villas are assigned by secret, and neither of you is allowed to leave the walls of your temporary home. All your needs shall be provided for-if you need women or food brought to you it shall be done-but you shall be guarded at all times and you shall not be permitted to exchange letters with anyone. You shall endure, in effect, a comfortable sort of anonymity. As to how long that shall last... Who knows? Perhaps your name might be forgotten by the time we release you. A relief, I imagine, considering your performance here."

The scowl returned to his face and shunted the bewilderment from it. The Prince inhaled and stood straight, intent to show up this foreign menace for what she was relative to his royal person.

"Enjoy your brief victory, Shizuru Fujino," he said with immense dignity. "It won't last, so gloat all you can before my siblings and the King gut you and what's left of your armies. Those of you who do live will be blind, deaf, and dumb cripples before this is over."

She smiled. But she followed the smile by stepping in and throwing her fist so viciously at his face that the warrior prince howled and fell to his knees. Both his face and Shizuru's knuckles were bloodied from the shot, but his was by far the worse state: the masculine, forward-thrusting set of his mandible was a grotesque parody of before, his chin reset and skewed in a preposterous way. She had

dislocated his jaw.

Shizuru asked for water from one of the dazed tribunes, who punctuated the shock in the tent by jumping up and scurrying to pour water for her. She held out her hand under the trickle and washed her cut, pleased that only a small one had broken. She could feel no internal injuries either: little though most people would expect it, she had given enough punches throughout her life to thicken her knuckles as well as teach her the best way to deliver a blow without breaking the bones of the fist. She asked for clean linen next from the tribune and used it to stanch the cut on her hand, turning her back on the man moaning on the floor.

"Please escort him to the quarters prepared," she said, returning to her seat. "And have one of the free surgeons put *that* back first. I doubt our prince would enjoy having that reminder of me each time he stares into the mirror for the rest of his sorry life."

The other spectators woke from their torpor, the prince's legionary guards suddenly jerking to his aid and pulling him away. Shizuru watched with a bored air as they helped him out of the tent, her eyes coming to Miyuki Rokujou's once the party was gone.

"Because I felt like it," she said matter-of-factly, as if Miyuki had asked the question.

Miyuki cleared her throat, the accusation that this was becoming a habit dying on her tongue.

"Concerning the legions we have on hand," said the commander, as though nothing of moment had just happened. "I want some of the cohorts redistributed to fill out the five lost by the Seventh."

The others did not respond quickly enough, a little slower in the recovery.

"Five cohorts for the Seventh," Miyuki reiterated for the benefit of the still shocked scribes. "Is that right, Shizuru-san?"

"Not exactly. The redistribution shall come to only three additional cohorts for the Seventh, so it shall have to stay understrength for

now."

"Along with the other legions from which you plan to take those cohorts, I presume?"

"Quite so." Shizuru was patting the cut on her hand with a handkerchief. "One cohort from the Ninth, Eleventh, Fourteenth each."

"Why aren't we using the Seventh to plump out the other legions?" one of the tribunes said. He was still getting over the shock of seeing the commander take a pop at the foreign prince, so he forgot to school his tongue and spoke freely. "At least we'd have stronger legions then, even if there are fewer."

All eyes darted to him.

" *Your manners, Tribune !*" Miyuki snapped before anyone else could. "You are in the presence of your senior officers! How dare you interrupt your general when she's addressing her legates?"

The tribune flushed at the objurgation, his posture stiffening.

"As to why the general has chosen to redistribute the legions that way," she continued, "it's obviously because any fool can see that four understrength legions are better than three overstrength ones, if only because they are more manoeuvrable. Something you managed to miss, along with your lessons in army hierarchy. The next time you get the bright idea of opening your mouth and showing off to your superiors in council, try to display something other than your folly."

Shizuru sighed aloud, regaining the focus of the tent.

"Do all of you think I might return to my depositions without interruption?" she said with a decidedly humourless smile.

Everyone nodded, including the blushing tribune who had interrupted her.

"Good," she said. "For my next concern, I would like to hear from Arashi-han again."

That young woman, another of the officers sent over from Takeda's camp and someone with whom Suou had worked often in the months prior to her death, stepped forward and waited.

"Arashi-han, you have been liaising with the Otomeians for the Seventh," Shizuru began. "You said earlier that there were some of them tearing down the bridges on the boundary. Were they also guarding the banks of the rivers, then, or was it a single-task deployment?"

"The Otomeians said the directions assigned to that contingent were specifically to bring down the bridges *and* do all they could to prevent Mentulaeen incursions, Fujino-san," said the young woman. "They assured us those Otomeians at the rivers would have stayed there until further directions or extenuating circumstances required a retreat."

"Certainly it would indicate they are yet there, as we have no news from the scouts we sent weeks ago of any further intrusions by the Mentulae," Shizuru noted, looking at Miyuki. "Have you details of their strength, Arashi-han?"

"As I recall, two legions foot and four alae horse," was the answer.

"That's a good number," Miyuki said, having expected fewer.

"But hardly enough to cover that whole stretch," Shizuru cautioned. "The length is too large, and the Mentulae shall eventually find a clear pass. Now I am doubly thankful I left instructions at Argus to send another four legions to cover the boundaries. They should encounter the Otomeians and agree on how to split up the areas for their duties."

She turned to Arashi again and frowned.

"Do we know who is commanding that boundary army, by the way?" she asked. "And whence does it come? As I calculate it, there are more Otomeians in total than there were before, last I was here."

Arashi agreed.

"The surplus comes from a fresh army that apparently just returned



from their other provinces," she explained, rather enjoying having everyone's attention. There were some stellar names in the tent, even excluding the general and the legate, and to be treated so importantly by such illustrious people was rather an experience. "The bulk of that army is the one that went to tear down the crossings, and its original commander is still handling it. They called her the Princess Alyssa."

Again the thoughtful frown came to Shizuru's face. "Alyssa? Information."

"She's one of the Otomeian king's daughters. Very highly respected by the Otomeians and said to be a great commander."

"Which would make her a great warrior as well, as I understand the Otomeian way of thinking to be," Shizuru responded with some curiosity. "Very well. That gives me higher hopes of initiating the next phase of the plan for the border infiltration soon. For now we should focus on what is taking place on this side of the rivers and make sure we have no more interlopers running about our piece of this country. Have the scouts all been sent?"

"Already on their duties," someone answered.

"I am not yet fully satisfied with the run of communications here. Our intelligence network is starting to take shape and more agents from Yamada-han should be coming in from Argus this week, but I want a separate communications division aside from that. Aside from the scouts, I also want at least two couriers always on the roads of Sosia to Argus and Sosia to Otomeia. That means at least two daily for each route, whether battle is taking place or not."

"Even on days when there is no real news?" Miyuki said with a frown.

"There is always real news. Otherwise, we may write to each other about the weather or what we had for breakfast. Have we enough horses and couriers for this?"

Miyuki had been inquiring into the status of the scouts and stables earlier and told her it was doable.

"A little rearrangement can work it out," she told the general. "But we need to think about getting more horses soon. From what our Otomeians and Masashi-san's officers have told me, Masashi-san's Otomeians are ridiculously low in horseflesh after all their battling. So much so that Masashi-san's officers had to trade their horses for mules and nags to keep up the cavalry. Right, Arashi-san?"

"We converted some infantry soldiers to cavalry ones," Arashi clarified. "It was Himemiya-san's idea."

Miyuki paused her response, but Shizuru did not.

"I see," the commander said. "Have someone do an accounting of all the Otomeian cavalry's present stock-retrieving the Himean horses, of course, since we shall be hearing from some querulous people soon if we do not return them-and send a request to their citadel for the horse deficit. Put that request with similar letters and accounts penned by their own leaders, and have one of their scouts or couriers accompany the ones we send for that missive."

"Should we wait to include that in the package we're sending them today?"

"No. I see no need to delay the mail announcing my reinstatement and the victory at Sosia. Ye gods, how pitiful is it we shall even have to deem this a victory, by the way? A legion and a half lost and thousands of our allies slain."

She looked disgusted and had to shake her head to stop herself from going further. She knew she could not let herself go far enough to start thinking along these lines or she would be tempted to shirk her duties-and that was something one simply did not do when one was the commander of such an enterprise.

"We can send the missive about horseflesh in a separate package," she told them.

She angled her head and seemed to consider something.

"Inform me before that mail goes out, however. I think we should tell them to bring up even more horses from their horse-raising

provinces than what we need to fill our cavalry deficit. I shall place an order to them to sell us horses for seating all our officers, including even the junior tribunes. Officers need to have height and always be visible. Most of the minor officers are not given steeds and I think I shall change that."

"Even if the Otomeians do have enough reserve horses for this, the circumstances will make those additional ones ridiculously expensive," Miyuki warned her-rather uselessly too, as Shizuru's scribes and longer-standing officers knew. As these had expected, the commander brushed off Miyuki's warning with a wicked reply.

"What is that to me?" Shizuru said. "The Senate is paying for it."

Having caused Miyuki's jaw to snap shut, she then looked up at the sound of a soldier entering the tent and throwing her a salute.

"Here with an update, soldier?" said Shizuru, recognising the man as a highly decorated member of the Ninth. She leaned back in her seat and looked expectantly at him. "Well done with the battle earlier."

"Thank you, General!"

"Deliver what you have, please."

He clapped both feet together loudly and started reciting what the legate had told him.

"General! The Eleventh, and Ninth are setting up camp. The legate estimates time of completion to be two hours from present. The Sosia legion is with the Ninth and the Fourteenth is on cleanup duty. The medical quarters have been expanded as per instructions and are finished. The legate has started moving the Otomeians from the hill camp."

"Have we any numbers from the Otomeians on their casualties?"

"Not yet, General, very sorry. The legate has sent someone to gather the information from their leaders now."

"Very well, then. Proceed."

"Sosia's stocks are low. Maximum period of use is a week until further supplies are brought in. The legate requests permission to use one legion for forage as soon as possible."

"Granted, but not today. Proceed."

"The legions can extend a week if the Seventh is included in the Ninth's and Eleventh's share..."

And so on and so forth. Shizuru worked without even pausing for a drink, let alone a bite, and strove to finish everything she would have expected herself to finish after a normal battle, even sparing some time to send for the centurions of the devastated Seventh and praising them for their spirit as well as patting them on the back when several burst into tears. She dictated messages to Otomeia, Hime, and Argus to her scribes at her usual breakneck speed and had the officers announce a muster to be held the next day, during which she would address her reconstituted army. She also took some time away from her desk to ride into Sosia with some officers and collect the remains of her old friend, which was perhaps the worst thing of all that she had to do as the commander. Besides that, there were about a hundred and one other tasks she dealt with. Through it all, she did not once stop by the tent where she knew Natsuki to be, for all that it was merely a few minutes away from the tent to which she kept returning. Even when one of her slaves arrived at the command quarters and announced that he had an update on the progress of the Otomeian princess's surgery, she refused to hear it, much to the astonishment of those listening.

"I do not want updates on her," she told the slave flatly. "Stay with her and only come here again if she does not make it. Otherwise, do not interrupt my council."

Which words had several of her officers gawping and poor old Aisuka dabbing at his eyes again. Some of the newer officers found a renewed respect for her then, but out of misinterpretation; some others found a little more fear, again misinterpreting her words and thinking her a colder bitch than talk had it. Not that any of these understood. Even the sympathetic Aisuka could not grasp Shizuru's feelings during that whole stretch of deliberate disregard, and the woman herself did not let on all that much now that she was no

longer seeing the patient before her.

Many of the observers *did* notice that she was washing her hands a great deal, though, but they thought it could also be due to her famous mania about being clean.

Whatever she was feeling, the commander performed her duties admirably. She slogged on without seeming to tire of the endless details and logistics and kept all of them steady in their own facilities with her ruthless capability. Even under her direction, though, it was still another hour or so before Shizuru managed to settle everything that demanded her unique attention, and the camp was nigh-finished by the time she finally managed to leave her seat.

"I think you can handle the rest, Miyuki-han," she said quietly, going around her table and flicking quick, dismissive glances to the rest of them. "I am leaving now."

What members of her staff were still present got to their feet. They knew where she was going to go now, of course, and knew better than to try and keep her from there.

"I can take care of it from here, Shizuru-san," said the legate. "Thank you for the assistance today."

Shizuru was already walking. "Do not work too long."

"Understood, General."

"Leave accounts of everything you decide on my desk so that I may go over it afterwards."

"Yes, General."

And the general left them.

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She reached the surgeons' tent in two minutes. Then she spent another five just standing in front of it.

Shizuru wiped her hands on her tunic while staring at the entrance

to the structure, wishing she could strip her palms and dry them over a fire to get rid of their annoying dampness. They had been running a cold sweat ever since she left Natsuki in the surgeons' care, and she had been careful not to touch any paper or anyone's bare flesh from then-with the exception of the Prince, whom she had struck on impulse. It was the word "cripples", of course, that had done it. That had been her undoing, although she still wished she had held a little more control: it had not been her intention to go so far as to force his jaw from its set. Well, it was already done, and it had been done on instinct. Besides, she reasoned, he deserved to be struck for his incompetence, for all that he was their enemy. How many inept leaders there had been in this war! It was enough to make anyone despair of the future of war-making. Where had the geniuses of battle gone, all the great strategists and tacticians of the histories? Perhaps the gods of war had decided to forsake men. But then, it was less up to the gods than it was to fortune, which decided whom to bless with the skill and whom to leave wanting.

Which really did not have anything to do with her purpose at the moment, she reminded herself, berating herself for rambling.

The sweat was back on her palms. She ran her hands over her soaked shirt again, wondering why it never seemed to go away. How could hands sweat so much? She had never experienced such a strange symptom, and now felt her trepidation increasing, the credulous Himean part of her fearful that it was a portent of fresh evil. Some people had already noticed her vigil outside the tent and were staring, and she knew she had to move soon or risk accusations of insanity. She had to go in the tent.

But she was afraid to go in the tent.

*She is not dead*, she reassured herself, coming straight to her worst fear. *None of my slaves came after the first one, so she is not dead. I can go in and see it for myself and there is no worry. I am sure she cannot be dead. The greatest proof of this is that the world still exists. Yes, that is so: I am yet here, and so she must be. There cannot be anything but truth to this.*

The defining logic of her world: *I am yet here, so she must be.*

She summoned all her courage and finally walked in, making her strides long and powerful to conceal the tremble in her knees. The first thing to greet her was a clutch of her slaves huddled on some stools, along with two characters she had expected: Nao's body-slave, Erstin, and Nina, Natsuki's cousin.

The latter was staring at her with an anger Shizuru had no difficulty interpreting.

*She knows I did this, she thought, not even daring to return the Otomeian's glare. There can be no question that I did this. I did it when I left my girl here, and then did not return as quickly as promised. Then I told my slave to bring news only if she passed away and did not check on her once during the whole time I was working. And I told the medicus to cut off her leg.*

She caught her breath dazedly at the list and wondered, *Why did I do this?*

The chief surgeon walked out from behind the partition and saw her.

"General," he said cautiously. "We finished the surgery earlier. I intended to send for you, but your servants said not to interrupt you during your duties."

Out of the corner of her vision, she could feel Nina's eyes stabbing her all over again.

"How was it?" she asked, expending every iota of strength to keep her body in check. She was frightened of what the surgeon might say, and the very fact of her fright was driving her close to panic. She had never felt fright like this, not even during the times when she had faced death. Or perhaps she had never faced death before this. Which was it?

"Is she-how *is* she, then?"

"Still dangerous, *Domina*," he said, speaking with utmost deference. How to tell such a woman that the patient she had deemed important enough to carry in herself might still perish? "We have severed the limb and sealed the wound with success. However, the

fever grips her, and is now the most pressing concern. It is a very grave fever, and very dangerous even now."

The long-lashed, tired-looking eyes blinked druggedly at the news.

"The fever," she repeated.

"Yes, General."

"You mean," she said, "the fever from the poison you were supposed to have excised with her leg?"

He confirmed it. "The poison is in her blood. The wound went too long with the rot for us to be able to terminate the complication with a simple amputation."

A gleam came to her eyes that reminded him of the patient's crazed glares earlier and he visibly diminished, already trying to hunch his body to protect it from any more manhandling.

"Too long?" the commander echoed very softly, in those caressing notes that always seemed to precede her maximum displeasure. "Too long for you, eh?"

He took a step back.

"If that is so, Medicus," she went on, not walking but starting to lean towards him. "Why was I even asked to sanction a 'simple amputation'?"

The others were beginning to shift from the change in atmosphere, and Shizuru could feel Nina's eyes lifting from her and turning on the surgeon instead, charging into him with fresh accusations and hate. The *medicus* was oblivious to all but Shizuru, however, and she expanded visibly before him as she took a step closer, towering so far above him she cast a literal shadow over his eyes.

"We have done all we can, General, I swear to you," he said pleadingly. "At this point, however, all that is left is for us is to palliate, not to cure. With fortune, the fever shall burn out soon and the poison exit her bloodstream. She shall recover as soon as that happens, and in the meantime, the best we can do is see to her care



and give her much rest and peace."

He was a smart man, the *medicus*. The appeal to the patient's need for peace brought the general out of her mood and back to the world of reason, although she did retain some measure of darkness as she told him to wait for her behind the partition and to check again on the patient. He retired obediently-wondering if this was to be a good thing or not-and waited as she addressed her slaves.

"Go out for a moment," she said to them. "Wait outside or nearby. Anywhere within sight and sound of this tent so that I may just come out and call you over should I have need of you."

They bowed deep and went to do as she had told them. Erstin made as if to go too, but Shizuru asked her to hold a moment before she left.

"Thank you for your help, Erstin-chan," Shizuru told the girl gently. "You may return to Yuuki-han. Please tell her it was much appreciated."

The girl nodded, keeping her head low.

"Take this too, please." The general pulled out a tiny purse she had been carrying for the past few months, fingering the soft cloth before handing it over. It had something oval-shaped in it, like a very large coin, thought Erstin. "Give it to one of my servants outside, please, and tell them to put it among my things."

The girl gave Shizuru the sort of watery smile that was filled with compassion, then scurried away before the general was displeased by it. The centurion had actually warned her not to show such emotions to the general, and she had to obey the order even if she was not too sure of its reason. Her Otomeian companion was refusing to follow her lead as she tried to exit, though, and she had to tug harder on the other girl's arm. It had little effect.

Nina did not wish to leave, and Shizuru understood why.

"Please," Shizuru told the girl, letting her face drop a little: just for a moment and just enough so the girl could understand that she knew

her guilt. "You have things to do as well, I am sure. I shall stay with her."

Still the girl looked uncertain, her eyes red and angry as she scowled at the Himean. Shizuru tried again.

"I promise to you," she said, lowering her voice. "She shall not be alone from now on."

*Too late*, Nina's face seemed to say.

Still, the Otomeian finally turned on her heel and walked out after the others, her back still rigid with anger for the woman she had just faced. And said woman felt it even to the moment Nina disappeared through the exit, the very image of her departure chastising Shizuru in a silent but no less violent way.

"General?"

It was the chief surgeon. Shizuru took a second to compose herself, then went to join him and stand beside the patient's bed. They had converted this part of the tent to be a proper sickbay of sorts, she noticed, and taken away some of the other paraphernalia that had been here earlier. She turned to the surgeon, whose first reaction was to jerk backwards.

"You have removed many things," she observed, ignoring his obvious fear of her.

"Ah, yes... We thought it wiser not to move her around after the operation, General," he explained. "So, instead of transferring her to a different tent with the other patients, we thought to transfer our headquarters to another tent instead and dedicate this tent to her. We thought you would prefer to have it so as well."

She nodded slowly, taking in the changes. Not once did she let her gaze touch the square area occupied by the bed, however, and he noticed it from the immediate evasion her eyes did whenever coming to that spot. Oh, he was still frightened by her, but this was so *interesting* ! She would not even look at the patient, and that was a strange thing to him.

"Yes," she was saying. "Yes, I find it better. This is for her alone, then?"

"Yes, General."

"I see." She paused. "I shall make a few more changes later."

"Yes, General."

She crossed her arms over her chest and let her eyelids droop. Heavy-lidded and mysterious, they finally made the slow trek from the stand on the corner to the edge of the cot, over the soft cream sheets, and towards the girl.

The first thing she saw prompted a crease on her forehead.

"Must you keep her lashed down?" she asked. "She is already asleep."

"If she wakes, she may go into another fit, especially as she is still drugged and likely to be unreasonable. It would be unwise to let her move much, especially when she has had some new stitches."

He could hear the air hissing as she sucked it through her nose, a hard breath that seemed to chill her whole body. This was the statue he had seen earlier, stiff and stony save for her eyes and words, like a frozen peak whose vents betrayed hot internal pressures. Yes, that was the best simile for being around her right now, he decided. You felt as though you were looking up at a snowy volcano from its foot, wondering if and when it would spew fire on your head.

"Explain what you did," she said to him. Her eyes flickered down the bed for the shortest beat and shot back up so fast even her head showed the movement. She could not bear to look at the leg then, he noted, or at the empty space that should have been the leg. "Except for the amputation. You say... You say it went well?"

"Very well, General. There was nothing out of what we expected there."

"Good. Go on."

He licked his lips and obliged.

"We had to redo the stitching for some wounds," he said. "Some of them were torn, and a few of her wounds reopened during her struggles. The laceration on her head was actually quite well-sewn, to my relief, and the rest of the injuries except for the - uh - the leg wound were relatively less grave, which made it easier. There were many gashes upon her, however."

He pointed to a few of the stitches visible on her body, which they had covered with only a short shirt for the torso and a loincloth for her pelvic area. Most of it was bare, Shizuru supposed, so that they could access her wounds as soon as possible for post-surgical care.

"Most of the gashes were not too deep, thankfully," he went on. "None were penetrative to the point of threatening the organs. Most of them were most likely cuts from a falx. But because of the number, the surgery took a little longer than expected."

She breathed very quietly next to him, staring at the sunken face she still knew despite the ravages marked on it. And what ravages! Shizuru's teeth clenched tight, the pulling muscles on her jaw worrying the surgeon eyeing her.

"Her head," she said. "It looked bad earlier."

"A blunt trauma," he replied. "It was not a clean cut at all, so even though the stitching was quite good, we still had to do a little work there too. Something large and dull struck her, such as a club, and caused the laceration."

"Shall she sustain added injury from that?"

"Of the physical kind, I doubt it, as we have already fixed the wound," he said. "However, it is my experience that patients with head injuries have often manifested symptoms such as problems with thought or memory later on." Seeing her face contort reflexively, he hastened to reassure her. "But this is not always the case. We may tell more of this later, when she comes to her senses. For now, General, it is the infection that should concern us. Her leg was left too long without proper medicine for fighting off the rot, and the

poison from that may have spread to the rest of her body already. We must hope it may be stopped by the herbs we have prepared."

She nodded almost meekly at his words, taking a step closer to the bed and still focused on the girl's face. It seemed to him that she wanted to touch it but dared not, and he was tempted to tell her it was safe to do so. He could not understand why she, who had not just carried in this girl but also threatened his life over hers, would suddenly hesitate to touch her when she was insentient and could not even complain.

"How could it have gone this long with no-one noticing?" she asked.

"I believe it was a delayed infection," he said. "Not one that broke soon after taking the injury, but developed afterwards, by conjunction of ill care and post-wound corruption. And a lack of the proper medications."

"She must be washed often, then?"

"Certainly, and with great care."

"Have you assigned someone to this?"

"One of my assistants is assigned to check on her every hour, General." He glanced at the water-clock on a table. "There should be an hour before the next one."

"Can that person show me the way to clean her?"

He was surprised. "Why, yes, of course."

"Good."

She looked up as though searching for something in his eyes. It was a most uncomfortable search, he thought, at least where he was concerned.

"Can she..." She paused and exhaled heavily, her eyes going away, then coming back to him. "Can she suffer being touched, then? Even if not just for cleaning?"

He released his breath as well.

"Yes, certainly. But her injuries should be avoided." A finger came out to point at the swaddled areas. "These places, for instance. And the remaining part of the leg must not be touched, of course."

He found her giving him a glare that had the air catching in his windpipe. Her face said, *Do you think me a cretin that you must tell me that?*

"Has she any other grave injuries?" she said, not hiding her irritation with him. "Aside from these bandaged areas? Are there any broken bones?"

"None, General," he said timidly. "We have done our best."

She said nothing for a while, to the point that he felt compelled to raise his eyes from where they had been nailed to the floor. The commander was finally looking at the lower part of the patient's body, seemingly riveted now to the frank asymmetry to be found at that location. The surgeon could see the ridges coming up again on the side of her jaw, the faint shudder of her eyelashes as she stared down the sight as one would an enemy.

"How was it you managed the surgery without her waking?" she asked in a peculiar tone he could not place. "You *did* drug her for it?"

"We introduced a blend of mandragora and opium into her gullet by means of a reed," he explained. "A technique I picked up from Egypt. I had to be sure she would not wake, so I gave her a lot, General. It is unlikely she shall wake today. Even should she wake, she shall still be in delirium, as she was when you brought her."

Her brows contracted.

"So bad still?" she whispered.

"I fear so. She is still very ill, as I said."

Her eyes came to him again and she asked, seemingly without expression: "But she *shall* be better?"

Ye gods, the woman was dangerous! He mastered the urge to lick his lips and said, voice a husk of anxiety,

"Given proper care and medication, and with the grace of fortune, she has a chance to be better."

"Leave the bargaining with Fortune to me," she replied, pushing him gently to one side and returning to her chilly, fatally volcanic persona. "Well done for now, Medicus, but nothing is certain yet, as you have made a point of reminding me this whole time. Mind, if I find out from some other physician that there should have been a way to save her leg, not even Dis shall take what is left once I finish with you."

He said nothing, too terrified of what she might do if he responded. She turned a provoked eye to him anyway.

"What are you still doing here?" she whispered.

He scurried away as fast as he could to gather his things and leave the tent, deciding he had tempted fate far too long. His last image of the general was of her kneeling beside the bed and slipping her head under one of the patient's clawlike hands.

# Chapter 57

*Thank you to the readers and reviewers. And as ever, apologies for the tardiness.*

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## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Calda** - Wine flavoured with spices

2. **Medici, medicus** - Respectively, "doctors", "doctor".

3. **Note on crucifixion and breaking legs** - The legs of crucified persons were frequently broken to hasten their expiration. Leaving the legs intact often mean a long, drawn-out death.

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## **Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae**

*par ethnewinter*

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There were a great many decisions to be made and only one woman to make them.

Shizuru's liberation of Sosia had her falling into captivity, shackled to her job and duties for hours on end. Her staff was equally fraught with work, the scribes never without something to write and the officers never without an order to follow. This was not precisely unexpected: it was a Fujino campaign and Shizuru was notorious for working herself and her men in marathons like this. But there was still something new here, and it was best indicated by a seemingly innocuous fact. This fact was that no one complained. Indeed, no one complained aloud whether in her sight or out of it.

It spoke tellingly of the menace exuded by the leader of the



campaign.

Everyone knew the origins of the menace, of course. The amputation of her mistress's leg, her manhandling of the Chief Surgeon, her blow to the enemy prince's jaw during his interview—all of these would be classed as prime gossip in any setting and they were certainly treated that way by the Fujino army. So quickly was word of these circulated that no one in the legions was ignorant of them by the end of the same day all three things occurred. And though the general everyone saw after that was hardly the vicious, unrestrained woman some versions of the story made her out to be, she was also not the cheerful, light-hearted woman most of the soldiers had come to know and expect.

The changes were subtle at first, as she seemed to make an effort to put on a façade of normalcy when discharging her duties. It took a while before people realised that the generous mouth had become stingier with its grins and that what few it did dole out were concise and non-lingering. A little after that it was recognised that she had become prone to eyeing people in council, always selecting those who were thinking of questioning her words and throwing them such basilisk stares that they all ended up swallowing objections.

There were many other small changes, and the older officers came up with a description for it. *A kind of hardness*, they said, that they thought to be toughening her skin. To some extent the words were true, but to a larger extent they were also reductive. One had to acknowledge that the people making the descriptions were non-intellectuals, and what was taking place in Shizuru's golden hide was too complex to be articulated in the words available to them. As the limits of language often defined the limits of perception, this also meant that most could not see any further than the thickening of the general's skin. It was a pity, for there was so much more going on beneath it. For instance, the hardness ossifying Shizuru's shell, even if it did destroy the surface softness, did not eradicate the basic elasticity. This was important to note because it differentiated her from an embittered human being who had hardened in response to loss and pain. It made her hardness so much more than the vent of mortal bitterness and resentment.

Shizuru was not bitter, after all: she was merely evolving.

Again it was not strictly new: those who knew her would say she had been evolving all her life. This particular stage was only remarkable because the lessons provoking it were so strikingly delivered. She had been given quite a few lessons lately, to her mind, and she found them all of great importance. For instance, the first lesson was that leaving important things in the hands of mediocre people was always foolish, no matter how well-meaning or confident the mediocrity. Witness Masashi.

*Conclusion: mediocrity must never be given high opportunity.*

The second lesson was that when excellent people attempted to accommodate lesser people out of courtesy, the only result of the disproportion was injustice and the usual victims were those who were excellent enough not to deserve it. Witness Natsuki.

*Conclusion: if one knows oneself to be most excellent at something yet yields control of it to another, one can never be held blameless for either that other's blunders or the blunders' victims.*

The third lesson was something she had known all along, but had failed to note for the canon of life that it was: that various things, from luck to law, contrived to give mediocrities and other lesser people seats far above what logic would dictate, and that it was the reluctance to question these gross irrationalities that led to the tragedies of the mortal condition. Witness the Eighth. Witness Suou Himemiya.

*Conclusion: one must not step aside for lesser beings, no matter what or who the regulatory authority demanding it.*

She had seen the results of denying herself that which she deserved simply out of deference to the rules of her people and supposed peers. In this she had facilitated the slaughter of some of the most excellent persons she had ever known, to say nothing of permitting the crippling of the most excellent person she knew to exist. All because the Senate had told her to do it. All because Masashi had wanted to have a go at her seat and they had wanted to humour him to spite her.

All because the mediocrities fancied themselves her equal simply

since they were her peers.

The abuse had been too much, the prices too high. Shizuru Fujino could only be prodded so far. Thus her evolution was in the choice to be far more of herself, to shed one more layer of the oppressive skin her parents and those who loved her had persisted in maintaining because they feared for what she might do sans its restraint. The most visible result was an even stronger autocracy than before and a visible prejudice against incompetence: her most common address was suddenly that of command; her most scathing word *inepte*. Her hardness was that of a woman who had seen lesser minds at work and was finally fed up, intent now on suffocating the subpar even if it meant she had to do it brutally. It was also the paradoxical hardness of a woman for whom practically everything, no matter how "fundamental" she labelled it, was a pliable concept.

All of this was not to say that the more common interpretation of her "hardness" was entirely off. If anyone doubted the term the old campaigners propagated to explain her change, he received a salutary lesson when the thousand captive Mentulaeans were clapped in chains and marched out of Sosia. Shizuru sent these to Argentum, ordering that they gather and burn the despoiled bodies of the Eighth mouldering there. The captives were accompanied by the Fourteenth, which was told to supervise and stand guard at a hygienic distance.

Following the unconventional order, one of the tribunes assigned to oversee the expedition had asked, "Begging your pardon, General, but what if there are arms remaining there and some of the captives try to take them up against us?"

He asked this not out of concern that the captives could do any damage, of course, but because all captives from a battle were the exclusive spoils of the general. She would make a fortune by selling them in the slave market later, as indeed was a normal practice for Himean commanders. To harm any of the captives would be to tamper with the general's private property, so the tribune had asked out of valid concern.

The general's response had been considered astonishing,

considering her reputation.

"Kill them, but always try to capture them alive. Flog first, then crucify. And do not break their legs when you have put them up, unless the cleanup has finished and there are still some living on the crosses. For so long as you have to stay in the area, however, none of those crucified should be taken down or slain out of pity. No leniency for Mentulaeans in Argentum, where the Eighth found no leniency either."

Although it was suspected by several that it was less about equalising the injustice to the defunct Eighth and more about the general simply feeling short of mercy at the time. And truth be told, most others felt the same. It was not just that the danger of further Mentulaean incursions forbade any abeyance in the restorative operation. It was also that said operation had to run on less-than-optimum fuel.

The citadel's immense underground vaults were finally depleted, and the army had to share food with the citizens. Shizuru had not brought a proper baggage train with the Fourteenth as she had arranged for it to proceed at its own pace, which was much, much slower than the legionaries'. She had made the soldiers carry only enough to sustain them, due to the exigency of speed at the time. More or less the same could be said of Shohei Nagayama's group, the Ninth and Eleventh. And horribly enough, the Mentulae turned out to have been running dangerously low on supplies as well, which might have explained the desperation with which they had tried to bring down the stubborn citadel on that last day. So what little there was to be shared out had to be shared out at siege rations still, which rather put a damper on the celebration of the actual siege's end.

Forage was the only recourse until the baggage arrived. But both the Mentulae and the Himeans led by Masashi had scoured every loot-worthy shed, granary, or plot of ground nearby, which meant the land was practically emptied of produce. Sosia was, in the first place, not a farming province. Most of the searches returned with rather mean greens and the few edible mushrooms not yet touched by previous foragers. Of plums there were plenty, but though delicious, these came with a cost: eating too many of them had

people running to the latrines with many a groan and some explosive cursing.

The onset of boar hunting season alleviated the problem slightly. The animals could be heard rooting all around the woods now, sometimes even venturing out and into the edges of Sosia's clearing. Shizuru regularly sent hunting parties after them after these were detected. It was soon noticed that the Otomeians outperformed everyone else in the hunt, as was expected of a people used to living in forests and mountains, and Shizuru quickly leveraged them for training the rest of the parties. There were also some deer but it was a little early for them, according to the locals, and they were also far more skittish than the boars. So wild boars were the prey of choice. Soon enough there were heaps of them being brought in and hundreds of slaves set to work. There were days upon days of boar being skinned and salted and spiced and smoked. It helped.

But it was *meat*.

Himeans knew people could not live on just meat, even if their game-loving, mountain-dwelling allies seemed quite willing and able to do it. The grain stores were dwindling fast and bread was being rationed heavily. The true relief only came when the scouts reported the baggage train finally trundling in, tolling as it did deliverance from their un-Himean diet.

This was the baggage train formally attached to the Fourteenth, an impressive convoy of provisions Shizuru had calculated for both the legions and Sosia. With it were the Fourteenth's, the Ninth's, and the Eleventh's artillery; replacement gear and fresh army issue for the legionaries who might need it; a herd of livestock and poultry to provide a fresh source of meat and eggs; and the possessions of the Fourteenth that had been impossible to carry on a double-step march, including some of the superior officers' personal effects and slaves. When Shizuru had assured her legions that supplies enough would be coming in, she had not quite explained how many supplies she had arranged: the sight of the enormous procession and its goodies had everyone breathing prayers in thanks for their commander's wisdom.

Being so loaded with goods, the procession when it arrived took

hours to pull in completely, a veritable drove of ox wagons and donkey carts with people milling about and in between. The noise brought out all of Sosia as well as the legions, who came to watch the plodding people and lowing beasts. Eventually they were doing more than watching, as several helpful members of the public started giving the soldiers a hand with the unloading. It started a trend, and soon more people were being brought into the line to help carry the share of grain allotted to relief of the Sosia citizenry.

The general was among those who remained watching the activity, letting her officers handle the supervision and direction of the work. She kept herself apart from the crowd but made sure to stay close to the forefront because she was waiting for someone. As she was still surrounded by her new, quietly glum air, people read her pose easily and left her alone, although nearly everyone threw a passing greeting. She was properly the woman whose arrival had ended the siege, after all, as well as the woman who had arranged for these relief supplies. If anything could still add to her immense popularity with the locals, it would be those feats.

After responding to yet another bashful salutation-from some very pretty local women, whom Shizuru hardly noticed-the general turned to the slave who had accompanied her for this meeting. The slave's name was Aella, and she often managed the commander's household on campaign or during marches, when Shizuru's steward was not present.

"This is worrying, Aella," she said grimly, although her eyes twinkled. "He is not yet here. What if they mistakenly left him at Argus?"

Aella could serve a dour twist of humour herself and did so.

"I doubt it would have been a mistake if they did, Domina," she said dolefully.

"You are cruel, Aella. One would think he was not your friend."

She glanced at the sky and tried to enjoy the faint breeze ruffling her hair, when all she really felt was a powerful urge to press on her eyelids. How tired she had been feeling lately!

"The weather has been cooling rapidly - yet it was a tardy autumn. They must have had a fine march."

"Surely better than ours, Domina."

"Mm," Shizuru hummed, running a white palm over her bronzed hand. "Summer's mark has yet to leave my skin."

"And mine, Domina," said the congenitally dark Aella with perfect seriousness.

They were approached by a group of slaves coming from the huge crowd before them. Shizuru blinked once against the weight pushing against her eyes, and then nodded at the familiar face of her steward. Was it queer that she should feel comforted to see him?

"Took your time, Hermias?" she said.

"My deepest apologies, Domina," he responded with one of his elegant bows. "I am sorry that our sloth has inconvenienced."

She shook her head and motioned to the woman standing a little behind her.

"To the camp. Aella shall breeze you through everything," she said, with a touch of quiet humour: *aella* was Greek for 'whirlwind'. "Install yourself as usual: the lodgings have already been arranged."

"Domina," he said gently, wondering how long she would make him wait for it. For all that Hermias would never gossip about his mistress to anyone-one of his most unique traits, which Shizuru knew-he was still as nosy as the next human being. He was dying to know where she was, the foreign girl who called to him as a child would, the one who even when absent had had his poor mistress on the end of a string. Hermias had no fears this powerful child was dead: he rather doubted even the gods would dare to foil his mistress's plans that way. But to not have her present and beside his mistress was something he found strange and warranting explanation.

She also looked very tired, and it worried him. He had to talk to Aella about it.

"I am pleased to inform you that we were able to procure the things you wanted, Domina," he informed her as they went, knowing for whom these "things" were; it was as good a hook as any. "The apples in particular are very fine and fresh."

Her head came up and she produced a smile. Now why would she have cause to look *hopeful* at that, Hermias wondered.

"Ah! Did you get exactly the ones I wished?" she asked, walking a little more slowly to keep her eyes on his. He took the advantage to study her more closely as they talked. Yes, she was very tired: she had not been sleeping again.

*Cucumbers*, he thought, busily making notes in his head. *It is a good thing I thought to bring her cucumbers; it shall relieve the pain I know is in her eyes. She has been working too much again. I do not know what is going on yet, but I must see to it that she gets some of those fresh cucumbers in the evening-she will not spare time to put them on now, because she will insist on working until it is dark. She is impossible that way but it cannot be helped.*

"We made sure to buy only the sweetest varieties, Domina" he said. "We tested them all prior to purchase, of course, and weeded out the bitter or sour ones. Most of the small ones, we found, were undesirable."

"I see. And what of the goats? Were you able to find good milking ones? How did they take the march?"

*She is asking too many questions too fast-she is anxious besides being tired. Aella has not been looking after her properly: she has even forgotten to have her hair trimmed. We shall see about that soon. But first, the cucumbers: I should have someone soak them as soon as possible in water, as they will feel cooler then...*

"They endured it well, Domina," he assured her. "We kept them away from the other livestock brought from Argus, as the goats we chose are prize animals." He smiled in reminiscence of something amusing. "The local cheese-makers were very reluctant to sell."

"Ah. And you changed their minds?"



"We were very eager to buy."

She smiled distantly and he saw that she was too distracted to appreciate the jest.

"Good, that is very good," she murmured, seeming to talk as much to herself as to him. "We could not find any here: nearly all the beasts had been butchered for their meat inside the city. Fresh milk may be just the thing. Do you not think so, Aella?"

Aella nodded dutifully. "Yes, Domina."

"Hermias, is it possible to milk them now? Yes? Then have someone collect a beaker's worth immediately and bring it over to my office afterwards. And get me a basket of those apples, too, yes- the very best ones. I want none with bruises, Hermias. I want them perfect."

He was a little amused that she would have to remind him of her standards after so long, but kept both amusement and curiosity inside and trusted all would be explained later. And when later would arrive, once Aella told him where their lady's mistress was and what had happened to her, he thanked the gods Shizuru had not spoken a word of it to him after all: he would not have been able to help weeping and it would have been discourteous to his mistress, who would not show anyone her own grief that way. For him to vent his own to her face would have then been the height of insensitivity.

While Hermias went off with Aella, Shizuru ended up walking with the governor of Sosia, who had asked to join her on her way back to camp. He was all smiles and laughter, and was so pleased by the food train she had masterminded that he nearly wrung her arm off with his handshake.

"Wonderful! Absolutely wonderful!" Ikita was gushing, not quite over the relief yet of knowing his poor civilians would be able to eat properly. Oh, to be spared the wretchedness of malnourishment and the monotony of meat! Once people got over the fear of being killed by blades and arrows, they had time again to start thinking and grousing over other things, such as how mean their daily fare still was although the siege was over. What did it matter that the end of

siege did not mean an instant return to the bounty of before? That was a sensible reply and people were simply not sensible!

"Such foresight, Fujino-san-it's really quite astounding!" he continued garrulously. "How could you have known this much food would be required? For all you knew when you marched from Argus, the Mentulae could've won and we were all already dead!"

"True," Shizuru replied. "But for all I knew, you could all have been alive too."

"What would you have done had it been otherwise?"

She threw him an odd look, expressionless but nerve-tingling. He realised his error.

"Oh, of course that would've been - well - just awful, including for me, obviously," he rushed with a weak attempt at a chuckle, wondering how to extricate himself from the mess his tongue had created.

She saved him by bringing up another topic, nodding nonchalantly all the while to the greetings being thrown at her. Her red eyes were on the people passing them, watching the scuttle of soldiers and servants bearing the supplies unloaded from the oxcarts, ticking off each item of food she could recognise as it was borne past with grunts of effort: bags of wheat, sacks of barley, barrels of salt pork and bacon, wheels of hard cheeses, jugs of what was probably *garum*...

*She hates that, she thought with a sense of odd fascination. I wonder what would happen if she got a whiff of it direct from those- she might faint if ever she got near enough one of those jugs. I would have to cover her nose with my cape and carry her off in a bundle.*

An internal chuckle, as private as it was wistful.

*It is a pity she could not be here to watch this. The cheeses would please her most: I know their shape appeals to her imagination. These are of a size and she would think, as she confessed to me*

*once, of wagons made of slabs of cheese and even more cheese for the wheels. I think she wanted to get a wheel big enough to roll down the road...*

"They tell me the farms nearby were not destroyed, even if houses were ransacked," she said to Ikita. "I hear the fields are still workable. Your small landholders shall be pleased about that, at the very least."

"Oh, they are-when we finally get them to see it's not as bad as it could have been," he sighed.

"You might remind them of what we did to Carthage after the war."

"Salting the fields, you mean? That *would* scare them into the bright side, I'd say!"

She said nothing to that and he filled up the silence by continuing.

"We're encouraging them to start working on their farms and gardens again as soon as possible. It's true we've very few farms, but every bit helps in war, doesn't it? The fewer people depend on the grain carts coming in from other areas, the better-which is why we've actually opened and leased fresh plots of land, courtesy of some of the bigger landowners we've talked to, for more people to try their hand at growing their own produce. We need to move more people out of the city as soon as we can."

"You started rebuilding very quickly."

"Starting with that," he laughed, jerking a thumb to the citadel-which was undergoing extensive repairs, its front having been battered almost to collapse. "I'd not be fool enough to think I can just leave everything alone and it will somehow turn out fine. I was thinking about what to do even when I was still stuck in the walls. You might say I had a lot of time," he said dryly.

"Time enough. It is a near-miracle the city did not come under enteric fever," she told him.

He frowned, knowing the seriousness of that problem and having been worried about it the whole duration of the siege.

"We can thank the lay of the land," he explained. "The city's water sources flow from behind, or from underground streams that run the wealds towards the west. The Sosia springs are unusual in that we can tap them through wells from inside the citadel without aqueducts or special devi-oh, why I am I explaining this to you?" he said, realising all of a sudden that what he was saying was probably old information to a woman who was here on her second campaign. She might think him either forgetful or foolish. "You've been here before me."

She smiled anyway. "The underground water lines run from the west, you said."

"Right. As all encampments-and their latrine pits-were situated in the other direction, you might say we were particularly lucky."

"And you opened fresh latrine pits outside and beyond the city," she said, stating the observation she had made long before. "No doubt our Mentulaean friends harassed you whenever you came out of the walls to... empty your chamber pots."

"Naturally," he said, giving her the wryest smile in his repertoire as he saw the ridiculous image in her mind. "And I'll admit we even lost people in the doing of it. But in my humble opinion, death from a battle is far preferable to death from a plague. The air was already toxic with the scent of blood and burnt bodies each day; failure to dispose of our waste properly would've made it downright lethal. I made as much clear to the citizens when I gave the order-and none of them disagreed, I'll have you know."

"Nor shall I disagree now," she said, lifting an eyebrow. "A woman mad enough to have the floor of her tent bedspace boarded up would hardly disagree with measures for avoiding deleterious filth."

He gasped, caught himself. So she knew about that wicked little rumour circulating in Senate about her, did she?

"Of course," he chuckled to her amused expression, quite tickled himself. He found nothing wrong in a woman who liked cleanliness, although he did think the rumour so exaggerated it was ludicrous. So Fujino liked to smell sweet and fresh-there was hardly any need

to make fun of her to that extent, was there? Boarding up a tent floor indeed!

"We'd make a fine pair of obsessives if only you really did that," he told her jokingly. "By the gods... They do let their imaginations run wild when it comes to you, don't they? I mean, really - why in the world would anyone board up a tent floor?"

They were inside the camp. She turned to him and smiled: a softer and more lasting smile than before.

"To protect against sand-dwelling fleas and lice," she said. "I cannot abide them."

He laughed. And then he looked confused.

"Thank you for accompanying me, Ikita-han, but I must leave you now," she said, ignoring his puzzlement. She had told him no more than the truth about the rumour, after all: it was up to him whether or not he wished to believe it. "Please make yourself at home in the camp and do not hesitate to ask any of my officers for assistance should you need anything."

She went first to her offices to check that her staff was functioning as she expected. There she found a newly-come courier, his arrival unnoticed due to the hubbub of the baggage train.

"He comes from Seigo Ushida-san," said Miyuki Rokujou, who had come in to give Shizuru the inventory for the recently-arrived cavalcade. This was being checked against the actual supplies at the moment, of course, but unless there were stark departures from the quoted amounts, there would be no need to inform the commander for validation.

"Thank you. And I do not think you need yet be so formal," Shizuru said, taking the inventory from Miyuki: it was a very large, very fat scroll. She turned to the courier still standing to attention. "Is your message to be given orally or just handed over, soldier?"

"To be handed over, General. Here it is, General," he said, extending to her the scroll from Ushida.

"Thank you. You may go."

He saluted and went out.

"Have you made a copy of this for storage?" Shizuru asked her legate, waving the inventory scroll. Miyuki followed her when she started walking.

"Yes, I gave it to Aisuka-san. And I need not be so formal about what?" Miyuki asked as Shizuru passed the other desks and made her way to the end of the tent, where her own desk was situated. The space was very large, so even the officers and scribes working at the other tables had to lean to one side to hear what the general and her legate were saying.

"In your address of Ushida-han, I suppose," Shizuru finally replied, motioning that the other woman should take a seat as she had. "One would think you did not trust him."

The cool-looking Miyuki said nothing.

"He has a good head for war, you must admit," Shizuru said seriously, although she was actually teasing. She thought in the ensuing silence that Miyuki Rokujou had a most excellent facility for looking ironic. Was that why her cousin was so fond of the woman, among other things?

"Sticky fingers," Miyuki stated, so quietly even Shizuru had to strain for it.

Shizuru propped up her chin on one hand and looked unconcerned. "Nine and a half out of ten Himeans have fingers coated in honey, you might say. And he has his reasons."

"He would throw the foreign auxiliary to the enemy in a pinch, Shizuru-san," Miyuki warned, unknowingly reminding Shizuru of words another legate had once spoken, a legate so well-loved that to be reminded of her now that she was dead brought a grimace of pain.

"Not now that I am here to keep an eye on him," Shizuru stated, masking her wince as a frown. "I would throw him to the enemy

before that. And he knows it."

"That may be why I find it hard to like him, you know."

At Shizuru's quizzing look, she explained: "That I shall have to keep an eye on my fellow legate just to be sure he does not overstep his bounds."

The corners of Shizuru's mouth lifted slightly.

"That sounded as though it were coming from someone without prior experience in politics," she teased. "Which you most definitely are not."

The other woman took the jibe with a little smile of her own.

"I dislike having to deal with more of it than I have to when it comes to the army," she explained. "Not that I haven't, as you say, but having to do it in a venture this large grates a little. A bit more is at stake."

"True, but the size of the venture itself also indicates how many personnel we shall have to keep our eyes on."

She had opened Ushida's scroll and was reading it. And then, in her superhuman way, she was done.

"It is a short letter," she said. "All Ushida-han says is that the cleanup of Argentum went as well as it could, the captives cooperated fully-he notes it is due to the penalty of crucifixion that was announced, though who really knows with captives?-and that they are on their way back. He also notes that, as we already know from our talks with the seized officers of the good Prince Hanu, Argentum is in ruins and the Mentulae took everything of worth. Hardly anything valuable in Argentum was left, he says. Well, we do have a great deal of what was obviously Argentum's wealth in our hold at the moment, courtesy of the Mentulaeans."

Her legate was still fixed on a particular phrase: " *Hardly anything* ."

"You believe he took whatever he could find, I see."

Miyuki angled her head. "He'd be a villain, Shizuru-san."

"Yet he would be my villain, which suits me for now."

"And after that?"

"After that... an accounting usually happens. Not always, but usually. That is the way things work in politics as well as war, and you know it."

Shizuru rolled up Ushida's missive and put it back in the cylinder in which it had travelled. She continued speaking while moving on to the other cylinder in her hand, the fat roll of inventory.

"He shall bend over backwards trying to prove himself to me for some time yet, which is precisely why I let him take charge of the cleanup mission for Argentum. A bit of a tedious task, but a necessary one-and one I would see discharged with all thoroughness, of course."

Miyuki agreed.

"I did not wish to spare either you or Shohei-han for that as I need both of you here at the moment; as for Toshi-han, who is signed on again as one of my official legates, he is best equipped to help Ikita-han with rebuilding Sosia and thus cannot be removed from the province just yet. Ushida-han needed to prove himself to me and is also least necessary for my current activities; hence, it was he who was sent off with the Fourteenth. Give me some credit, Miyuki-han: I am not about to send him to relieve Kenji-han in his duties."

That brought out a small grin. "Not that mad yet, I think."

"Most certainly not."

To send the newest legate to replace Kenji-whom she knew to be the one heading the legions sent to the passes, courtesy of a missive-would indeed be madness on her part. Not only had she sent instructions for the legate in charge of that area to liaise with the Otomeians supposedly at the border: she had also sent word to start infiltrating the lower west part of Mentulaean country, which was filled with ranges and generally uninhabited by "real" Mentulae.



The peoples living there were considered barbarians by their lowland counterparts, and were in tiny groups and tribes, generally ostracised by the Mentulaeans and very rarely in touch with people outside their mountain homes. To Shizuru, worth tempting into secession. She had faith that her old legate would manage the feat-although she had faith too that he would know to kill them if they looked to be treacherous accomplices.

She suddenly looked back up at the legate currently before her, who lifted both dark eyebrows at the stare.

"Have you taken a look at this?" Shizuru asked, tapping the inventory scroll.

"Yes," Miyuki said.

"What do you think?"

"I think... we need a lot more to be sent over if we are to leave Sosia the way we want it."

"Exactly."

"Should I draw up a list of everything we need?"

"Yes. I can just take a look at it after you have finished and make my own additions." The general frowned. "Would you tell Mikado-han-he *is* the one leading the officers Takumi-han sent over, yes?-to start making plans for supply routes and sources to the east? Argus may be our main supply centre, but I want land-based supplies coming to us through here."

"Rheia and the grain producers you are thinking of are the ones that supply Otomeia citadel too, aren't they?"

"Yes. But Otomeia also supplies itself sometimes with grain from its lower provinces and valleys." Shizuru tilted her head. "Of which it has many, although most are more dedicated to rearing horses and livestock, as well as to mining. Still, we shall have to see about sourcing produce from them too. At the very least they can keep us readily supplied with herds for our meat, and free of charge."

"A convenient resolution," Miyuki confirmed, before suddenly pausing and staring at nothing, her eyes narrowed. "When you think of it, Otomeia is really just another rich foreign empire bordering our territories."

Up went Shizuru's eyebrow. It was the one bisected by a small scar, and Miyuki found herself engrossed in that tiny defect on the otherwise faultless face. She thought it strange that it did not even register properly as a defect, but rather as something that belonged there.

"But one allied to us," Shizuru was telling her. "It makes all the difference."

A smile. "For as long as they stay allied to us."

"Naturally."

"I hope no one takes it into his head to change that any time soon, then, or even after we've won this campaign."

Shizuru's split eyebrow went up again: Miyuki had noticed that the woman preferred to raise it more often than its unbroken sibling.

"To be clear," Miyuki added, "I'm speaking more about our fellows than the Otomeians in this case."

Down went the eyebrow, dropping just slightly below the height it would have if relaxed.

"True," Shizuru said simply. "I suppose we just have to look out for those sorts of things."

"We rare breeds, you mean," Miyuki grinned in rare humour.

"Rare breeds indeed," Shizuru smiled.

Her legate sat up. Which was only to say that she lifted her chin, because Miyuki always sat perfectly straight.

"Well, for now the next shipment of supplies," said the woman briskly, her no-nonsense persona back in place as though it had

never gone away; Shizuru rather liked that about her. "I can take care of that now, Shizuru-san, if you can spare me."

"Yes, thank you."

Shizuru stayed behind to look over a few more matters, but soon left her tent satisfied with both her staff and her steward-who showed up scant seconds after Miyuki exited. She walked out of her offices with a jug of fresh milk in one hand and a basket piled with foodstuff in the other. Had she been less well-respected a commander, the sight of her as she walked down the path would have provoked merriment behind her back, as she looked like an unfortunate army officer pecked by a spouse into running for groceries. As she was who she was, however, she only got the usual salutes and a few warm greetings.

She was within sight of her destination when she ran into someone familiar. It was Mino, the stablemaster of the Lupine troopers-or what was left of them, at least. He noticed her shortly after she noticed him and the two of them stopped in their tracks as they met halfway, standing with the awkwardness of territorial animals meeting on neutral ground. He was obviously coming from the place to which she was headed and all at once there was a part of Shizuru wondering if he had made any headway with the Natsuki, another part hoping he had indeed made headway with Natsuki, and yet another part hoping he had *not* made headway with Natsuki, because it would infuriate her if someone other than she did it.

"Mino-han," she said. "Good day."

The old warrior's face looked much like she felt, she mused, wishing her greeting could be the end of their conversation instead of the beginning.

"Asleep," he said in his pithy way.

"Ah."

Again they looked at each other awkwardly. Shizuru was coming close to either a cringe or a dismissal. Then he shot a look at what she was carrying and grunted loudly enough to startle a few

legionaries walking some metres from them. The soldiers threw shaky salutes at Shizuru in their recovery and scampered off with many a glance over their shoulders.

Meanwhile, the Otomeian giant continued to stare at the things Shizuru was carrying. Lamely, Shizuru offered an explanation for the jug she was toting as well.

"Goat's milk," she said.

He grunted, this time more quietly.

"Good," Mino eventually concluded, although he was scowling at the food in her hands as though it were offensive to him. Although she knew it was merely his standard facial expression for everything, she had to tamp down the urge to narrow her eyes, it being that she had so much hope for the food that his critical expression-unintended though it may *or may not* have been-was an irritant.

"She will like it," he muttered.

"I hope so." Enough of this; she wanted to go. "If you would excuse me..."

He would, apparently, for he walked off with no more than a nod for goodbye, she doing the same. Three steps into the separation and both were assaulted by a powerful sense of relief as well as embarrassment at it.

Mino and Shizuru's was a curious relation. Neither one actually disliked each other-they could not afford to dislike each other, in fact, in deference to the girl they loved-but their circumstances made it impossible to like each other too. It was not just the ablation of Natsuki's leg and who was to blame for it, although that did play a part in some of the most recent awkwardness. Shizuru suspected that Mino would never be able to think of Natsuki's amputation without thinking of her as well. She understood that, as she still heard her voice echoing in her ears sometimes and giving the awful command: "*Sever the limb.*"

Even so, Mino had been one of those who did not truly hold Shizuru

accountable for the loss of the princess's leg. He had certainly been more understanding than the girl's cousin, who still gushed smoke from her nostrils whenever Shizuru came near. Mino, on the other hand, had made it clear that he understood the reasoning behind the surgery. He had even thanked Shizuru-with frosty sullenness and without actually saying the word "thanks" or any of its variants-for her speedy decisions, which he acknowledged were probably the only reasons Natsuki was still living.

*Despite all of which, we shall never be comfortable together,* Shizuru thought while nearing the tent, her mouth a little twisted as she considered the affair. Did she really feel bothered to be *un*-liked by someone so important to Natsuki, she wondered. If she had to be honest, not very much: she knew it could not be otherwise, so she could not entertain sufficient what-if's to feel wistful about it. Mino would always be the person silently fault-finding her worthiness of the girl he considered his daughter. As for her, she would always be the person who had introduced sex and forbidden things to the girl he considered his daughter. How could they ever be comfortable?

She passed the Otomeian sentries and entered the tent, nodding at the three servant-girls sitting in the receiving section. Two of these girls belonged to her. The third was one of Natsuki's servants: these had approached Shizuru after the Sosia siege ended and asked the Himean general if she would allow them still to serve their princess. As they had been separated from the girl for so long-most of them had been split off from her and stuck in Sosia citadel while Natsuki was stuck in Ushida's camp-they had been clearly blaming themselves for their mistress's bodily troubles, and had thus been fearful of being denied access to her again. Shizuru had been kind, however, and had quickly arranged lodgings for the anxious slaves. Ever since then these had been working with her own servants, specifically to look after the girl.

She set the items she was carrying on a table.

"Was Mino-han long here?" she asked. "Did she wake while he was in?"

They denied it.

"Look," she said.

The trio approached and she pointed out the things she had been carrying.

"Fresh goat's milk," she began, prompting the Otomeian slave to whine in delight; she smiled at the woman, sharing her optimism. "It was milked just now, off some choice does brought in with the baggage. We shall have fresh milk from now on. Apples as well, as you can see. And here are a few hard cheeses and some bacon, as well as some dried figs."

She looked at them as they touched the items reverently, murmuring over the apples in particular because they were such a wonderful shade and firm of skin.

"Has she not woken at all since I was here?" Shizuru asked once she thought they had finished appreciating the goods. "Eaten anything?"

They denied it worriedly. Shizuru was worried too: the girl had refused to take anything but the honeyed wine again that morning, and she was getting no thicker in the flesh.

"But if she has not woken that means she has not vomited it," she consoled herself and the other women, who agreed readily.

"The supplies are being brought in as we speak," Shizuru said quite inconsequentially: she knew they already knew it and had just refrained from watching the spectacle because of their duties. "Go to the stores and tell them I sent you. Fetch some barley and make some porridge for her. Do your people eat porridge that has been flavoured with bacon? Salt pork?"

The Otomeian servant said that they did.

"Good. Use this bacon, then, and add whatever flavourings you think she may appreciate. Nothing too heavy-you know how your mistress's palate favours the delicate."

"Let her direct the cooking," she instructed her own slaves while indicating Natsuki's servant. "She shall better know the spicing

suited to their people's taste. Fetch some wine from my stores as well and make some fresh *caldá*, just in case. We can use that to make more honeyed wine. Do we still have honey here?"

"The jar is low, Domina."

"Fetch more of that as well, then."

"Domina," said one woman. "Will all three of us go?"

Shizuru's eyes drifted to the tent's partition-larger than the old one, as she had had fresh screens brought in-and back to the trio.

"Yes," she said. "I shall be here anyway."

They bowed and excused themselves from her presence, taking only the package of bacon with them. Once they had left, Shizuru went out of the tent as well, stopping just at the entrance.

Two pairs of blue eyes glanced at her, as they had when she had walked in earlier. There was another pair besides them that Shizuru had not been expecting to see: a set of brown eyes whose owner she recognised immediately.

"Kyo-han," she greeted, addressing the Lupine Division's second-in-command. *Well, really the first-in-command now*, she corrected herself sullenly, still wrestling with the fact that the girl would never be able to lead her men again. Good god, the thought of it!

*Not now, not the time.*

She forced a smile with great effort. "The princess is asleep. Would you like to come in?"

He drew in his chin and looked embarrassed.

"I should not, General Fujino," he said.

"I doubt she shall mind it when she is not awake to complain, Kyo-han."

"No, thank you very much, General. It is not proper. I am sorry for

troubling."

He backed away one step and then another, but Shizuru followed him like a big cat scenting game.

"You came all the way here," she stated calmly, drawing herself up to her straightest posture and putting on the somewhat arrogant, extremely confident expression she always used when addressing her men as their commander. He was affected as she had thought he would be, and stood to attention instead of again trying to retreat.

"One of you does this just about each day, Kyo-han. But none of you ever enter. With the exception of Otanara-han and Natsuki's cousin, that is. Are you truly satisfied with just asking for news of her? Are you sure you do not wish to see her, even if only just for a moment?"

He shook his head with certainty.

"We only come to ask, General," he said after a moment's pause. His Himean was nowhere near as good as Natsuki's, so he had to think carefully about what he wanted to say. It was a little more difficult when the foreign commander-also the notorious lover of your superior-was staring you down.

"For us it is enough," he told her. "And it is not proper to enter her rooms. She is resting and... and they are also *your* rooms."

Shizuru was a little surprised by the last remark.

"Only, we want to know if she is well." He shifted as much as his martial stance would allow. "Every day, if it is possible."

Shizuru smiled. It was wider this time.

"Rest assured that it is," she said. "And she is as well as she can be at the moment. You may tell the others that, if they ask."

He nodded and thanked her.

"Was that all?" she asked him, taking a deep breath to steel herself for what she was about to bring up. "You do not have queries for her regarding your leadership, perhaps?"



That saw him twisting, although not for the reason Shizuru interpreted from it. She thought him twisting because it embarrassed him to think of something so ambitious at such a time, and that satisfied her questions about his loyalties; he was *in fact* twisting because he considered his captain's fall his direct failure, along with the nobles in their division who had been pledged by the king to preserve her before themselves.

"It... That will wait," he got out painfully, failing to hide the guilt racking him still. "The Princess is still the Captain. I am only a second."

He shook his head and repeated it.

"The Princess is Captain."

Shizuru decided even she was not ready to talk about it; she changed the topic.

"I see. By the way, I forgot to ask before, as it slipped my mind entirely," she started. "Have any of you seen Natsuki's black stallion, Niger? Was it one of the steeds that fell in battle?"

He opened his eyes in surprise and seized the new subject.

"Mino did not tell you, General?" he asked, face actually losing some of its lines as he delivered the small piece of good news. "Niger lives. He is well. Mino keeps him with other horses." He paused as if to think of what else to tell her, then added, "I saw him yesterday."

"I see. I shall take your word for it that he is well, then." Shizuru sighed. "Mino-han did not inform me of it. I suppose it slipped his mind and he forgot to tell me."

*Or just could not be bothered to disclose it until I asked, that cantankerous old man.*

Kyo agreed with her spoken words, not knowing what she was actually thinking.

"Very well, Kyo-han, thank you for the information," she told him, one hand going to rest casually on the belt of her tunic. "I shall tell

Natsuki you visited once she wakes. You are sure you have no messages for her? I shall be glad to pass them on for you."

"No, General Fujino," he said, bowing to her in his courtly way. It discomfited her a little as it did all Himeans-it was not normal to them to address even superior officers with such a gesture-but Shizuru hid it far better than the other officers and thus looked somewhat lordly as she let him finish his people's version of the salute. "Thank you very much, General Fujino."

She watched the wiry man as he left, her mind counting the number of times she had seen him or other members of the Lupine Division come to the girl's tent. They always stopped at the entrance with those oddly demure and unassuming looks on their faces, and always refused to enter by saying it would be improper for them to disturb the princess's recovery. Yet they had seemed unopposed to passing sullen vigils around the enclosure at one period, sometimes even massing outside it and clogging a part of the street. Once, there had even been a big enough and grim enough group of them to alarm the legionaries, who came out to keep an eye on the weird huddle of foreigners clustered near "the general's other place". Not that the huddle of giants had seemed to notice their apprehensive onlookers. They had just stayed where they were and muttered to each other in low voices, a pack of dour scarecrows grumbling in the wind.

The man running the Otomeian part of the army had explained it to Shizuru at the time, his expression a wreck of dismay as he talked to the woman his own commander would be sure to detest upon first meeting.

"She is Natsuki," he had told her. "Princess Natsuki of the Otomeians, uncrowned Queen of the Ortygians, Captain of the Lupine warriors... One of our best leaders and an irreplaceable noble. All these things come together. It is true that we are obliged to wish her well because she is of our nobility and because she is someone our nation swore to look after. But we also wish her well because we wish her well. So it is important for us to know what happens. There are many things demanding that we observe this."

Despite that, Shizuru had known that she had to send off the

concerned Otomeians, not just because they were blocking one of the camp's intersections but also because they were alarming her legionaries with their gloomy presence. Ordered firmly to go back to their quarters, they had agreed on the condition that two Otomeians would be permitted to guard their princess's tent daily, rotating the duty amongst the available and willing auxiliaries. Shizuru had been intending to cast some of her own slaves as sentries, so she seized this improved option immediately. The general was pleased because she cleared up her camp and got excellent guards for her mistress's tent; the Otomeians were pleased because they now had a fixed source of news about Natsuki.

The sentries made it easier for the rest to get regular updates. The pair on duty for the day would take notes from the Otomeian slaves inside the tent, then use those to answer the inquiries of Otomeians passing them on the street; these would then go back to the Otomeian barracks and spread the word to the auxiliary. The sentries also received and transferred inside the tent whatever offerings the other Otomeians sent. These typically poured in when word got out that their princess needed something. Shizuru still remembered the day the *medici* had recommended that oak bark be found for treating the girl's fever. Within hours of the prescription, there had been a mound of bark in the tent, some pieces even the size of the Himean shield.

*They love her*, Shizuru thought now, still quite moved by the foreigners' dedication to her girl. She had known Natsuki important to them, but had not understood just how famous her girl was-and now thought herself a fool for even being surprised by it. It was natural, she thought, and nothing one should really consider astonishing.

She turned to the two Otomeians she had originally intended to address: the sentries for the day. These shifted their focus from the street to her face and looked blue-eyed and attentive.

Again she noted the disparity between their fair looks and Natsuki's. Did they ever stop to meditate on her obvious differentiation from them, the girl they watched over so protectively?

"Let the women in once they return," she said, giving instructions to

the Lupine warriors as coolly as if they had been her own legionaries. "The same for my steward, Hermias, or my head slave, Aella. But no one else enters."

Two blonde heads nodded. Shizuru went back inside the tent.

There was an amphora of water on the table, near the things she had brought. She fetched a cup and poured herself a drink from it, pulling the water through clenched teeth. Bracing, but not bracing enough. It was always hard to have to go back and face her girl, and she needed all the bracing she could get for it. It did not mean she did not want to do it but it did mean that she could not help but be grieved each time she did.

*The reminders of your failings, she told herself, are always a grief to witness.*

She finished her drink. Picking up the basket of apples and the milk, she made her way to the other side of the partitions, ears picking out the sound of steady but laboured breathing. *Another grief.* She could still remember the nights when she had marvelled at the silence of the girl's lungs, the absolute calm of the healthy body when in rest. Now there was toil even in repose, and Shizuru did not know what she could possibly do to ease it.

*Inepte.*

She passed the partitions and went to the chair. There was always a chair beside the bed, and it reminded her of how there had always been a stool beside her desk. Times past now, for all that she remembered it so easily. Quite comically-she was aware of it-she was even quieter in her movements now than she had been earlier, when the slaves had still been present. Moving around the area soft-footed, inaudible as a ghost. Another parallel: the girl had done this with her all the time.

*Times past now. Stop it.*

The foodstuff went on the end table. She went on the chair, perhaps just a little too fast because she was discomfited by her thoughts. The chair creaked. She winced and lowered herself more slowly.

On the bed, the dark-haired girl continued to rasp in slumber. Shizuru sat back, content with just watching. That was a lie, of course: she was not content and wanted to touch the girl. But Natsuki rarely slept so peacefully these days, and sleeping was perhaps one of the few reprieves left. How could Shizuru possibly take that away?

So the woman famous for her grace clasped both knees with gawky fingers, like an ungainly adolescent who did not know what to do with her hands. Her mother would have rapped her knuckles had she been there to see. In fact, her mother would have rapped her knuckles for quite a number of things lately, Shizuru could not help thinking.

Sometimes, filial duty be damned, she was glad her mother was no longer alive.

She half-jokingly called this the dark chair, because she always fell into dark thoughts when in it. This chair always brought her to realise the many misfortunes that seemed to have been woven around but not directly into her. All with this girl. To be sure, Natsuki's pain was a misfortune to her as well-no day passed that she did not grieve over the loss of the girl's leg and everything that went with it. But Shizuru also knew that it was not she whose leg had been cut off. She was reminded of it each time she got up from her cot in the morning, unaided and independent of anyone else's power. If that was not enough to render the rest of the day bitter, she wondered what would be enough. Yet how much more bitter was it for the one who needed help just to get up?

She ran a hand through her hair and barely noticed its wild length, her head too full of the girl before her to even consider her own vanity.

She wondered what Natsuki was dreaming.

*Pray the gods it is something good*, she thought wistfully. *Or let her sleep be dreamless, at least*. She thought it unduly cruel if Fortune, which had so often hoisted her girl upon its crucifix, could not spare some kindness for even the girl's unconscious moments.

*She deserves that much, a little kindness.*

She put out a hand and touched the pillow, but pulled it back quickly so she would not succumb to the touching impulse. It was difficult and she fidgeted again, feeling as though the mere denial of the girl's skin were scalding her fingertips. She needed to feel her so badly, to lay hands on- *seize it* - the fact of Natsuki's existence. It was frail and it was hurting but it was close. That was a small victory in itself, for all that she would not dwell on it: it was close.

*A breath, at least, she argued, struggling. A breath, it shall not hurt. It shall be a small thing to her and everything to me.*

Finally negotiating an agreement with her control, she got up and bent over the sleeper, looking for all the world like a hawk looming over its prey. She was a tender hawk: all she did was drop her nose to the dark hair and inhale.

And then she was back in her chair, chest heaving a little more than normal as she considered the girl on the sheets. Her girl, who still smelled of pine and frost but now smelled too of the sickbed and of repeatedly applied herbs and medicines. Her girl, who now smelled too of suffering.

*I still believe you to be lucky, she thought wretchedly, unable to keep her face from crumpling as she considered the topic. Yet I see now the direction of your luck. You are a fortunate child, but fortunate only for me, somehow, and for my fate. Never have I been unfortunate when you were involved in any of my affairs, and only now do I understand why. It is as though Fortuna took your share of her love and made it so that you could only give it to me. Yet to you she has given more misfortune than one can bear. I wish I could understand the justification behind that; I wish to all the gods I knew why she would do it to you-and even do it repeatedly.*

But the distribution and reiteration of fortune had no reason, naturally. One only needed to think of Suou Himemiya and the way she had been killed to see that.

The thought came too fast on top of her grief over Natsuki; Shizuru was unprepared. Her eyes moistened before she could stop them

and she had to wound her lip, angrily willing the excess wetness in her eyes to dry.

*No tears, she commanded. No time for them now and certainly no right.*

So she considered it again, calming herself to think of Suou without letting the unhappiness interrupt the thinking. She could afford to be cold, because her revenge for Suou would be white-hot. She could afford coolness now because she could not afford to be otherwise.

*Yes, think. You can feel, but above that you must think.*

She thought. Cut down so young she had yet even to be formally accepted into Senate, Suou was surely one of the more unreasonable victims of poor fortune in her eyes. Just like Natsuki. Shizuru supposed it took one to know one, because a good number of Suou's letters-the ones Suou had never sent and which the woman's prostrate servants gave to Shizuru after the conclusion of the siege-had spoken constantly of the marvel of *Mis* fortune, which seemed for all the wrong reasons to hound Shizuru's girl.

*I hate to say it, but she is an unlucky little thing, one of the more personal "letters" had stated. Hold your rebuttal first: I know you consider her your talisman. And to some extent, I do agree. But I also hold to what I have just said.*

*You see, I agree with you in that she is lucky in certain ways-she has beauty and brains and battle-ready skill. I have already written of how she saved our skins several times, from the flight where she got her leg shot through to the time when she came up with the idea of firing the trees. So I must say that she is a most excellent creature to have by one's side in a pinch and a lucky little thing for us, certainly.*

*But-and here it is-I am beginning to think she is an unlucky little thing for herself.*

Suou had been right, Shizuru ruminated. Just another reason for her to wish the woman were still alive: then they could talk more on the topic. For she had no one else she could talk to about Natsuki, or no

one nearby that she could trust half as much as she had trusted Suou. Indeed, she had noticed from Suou's accounts-which were arranged and dated with inspiring organisation-that she also had no one else who could possibly have claimed to understand Natsuki half as well as the Himemiya had. The woman had come to know Natsuki very well, her interest in the girl clearly rising over time. In fact, it had risen so clearly that Shizuru's feelings on it were mixed.

She knew she was atrociously jealous. Shizuru hated herself for finding her old friend's interest in Natsuki suspect, but she could not help it. It only heightened her self-loathing that she understood exactly why Suou would have developed such an interest, innocuous or otherwise. Shizuru knew exactly how tempting it was to figure out the puzzle that was Natsuki. She also knew that the role Suou had taken for *her* sake had made the woman's study of Natsuki necessary. So it was not exactly a surprise that so many of the accounts left behind by Suou had been devoted to discussing the girl she and Shizuru had, in a sense, shared.

*You were right in calling her a child, Suou had written. I know she is a young woman already, but there is an innocence in her that persists. It is more than her liking milk over their people's beer, or fruit over bread and meat, or the times in between seasons over the seasons themselves because then she can do things like crack the first ice coats of the trees with a finger (her words, not mine). It is more even than the way she asks for the meaning behind a foreign word and demands both its written form and its precise speech, like a precocious brat out of the nursery. It is something more than all of this, and I see how you came to be addicted to it.*

*There are little demeanours that make being with her wonderful, even during the plainest of occasions. She cannot resist things that pique her curiosity, for instance, and tries to fidget her way into snooty indifference; I have been watching her out of the corner of my eye the whole time I was writing, and she has been dying to know the contents of this letter ever since I said it was for you. She is asking me, finally, and I have told her only that it is about her. Now she pouts and is displeased because I refuse to reveal more. No use scolding me, Shizuru-san-we both know you would do the same! You know how it is when she gives you that adorable look of*



*confusion: you end up withholding things you never intended to withhold, somewhat perversely.*

True, one ended up doing that with Natsuki, Shizuru considered. Suou had written a surprising number of things Shizuru knew to be true about interactions with Natsuki and even surprised Shizuru on occasion with things Shizuru had not known *about* Natsuki. Reading those, she would end up hating herself again for being suspicious of her friend, especially because said friend was dead already and would never be the friend she had once been-nor the possible adversary.

*I only discovered this recently, Shizuru-san. I am a fool for only discovering it recently. Our girl is wallowing in despair deeper than I realised, and that is saying something given that I have been keeping an eye on her all this time. It may be that my eyesight is simply limited, but it may also be that she is merely a genius of concealment.*

*I have never seen such violent misery, I think, so it shocks me all the more that she kept so much of it from me. I have never seen such stubborn silence either. She has thus far refused to show a shred of real loneliness before me, and now I suddenly discover she holds herself so tightly in the nights that she breaks her skin with her nails just to keep quiet. She is not going mad, I am sure of it, but that makes this more worrying.*

*I am not versed in such things, so I cannot be certain, but it seems to me that she is nigh-destroying herself. What is it she feels so keenly? I catch echoes sometimes-and again I must warn you that I am not certain of this-but I feel that these echoes are not only of grief at your absence. I know not why, but I feel that she actually feels guilt.*

*I cannot think of a reason for this guilt. If it is indeed specific to your situation, as I feel it to be, I am only baffled all the more. Let me say from the start, however, that I firmly disbelieve it to be due to any betrayal of you on her part: see, the girl is both too proud and too faithful for it. Whatever it may be, I am certain at least that it is nothing of that genre.*

*Still, I am trying to use this to gain a better understanding of her disease. I stand by the physicians in that it is due to her anxieties over your separation, but evaluating it now also causes me to think that it is also a form of atonement. For what exactly, I cannot say. I only wish I could absolve her of whatever it is she thinks she did.*

*That is all for now. I am also making a note to myself here to remind you to be even kinder to her. She is harder on herself than she would be on an enemy.*

If Suou thought she saw guilt in Natsuki, then guilt there probably had been. But guilt for what? The girl already had such immense stores of guilt-Shizuru wondered if Suou had ever discovered the circumstances surrounding the massacre of Natsuki's people-and though it was unjust and Natsuki was an undeserving filly to saddle with it, it simply was that way. Could this other guilt be something like that again? Shizuru would not be surprised.

*An unlucky little thing for herself indeed.*

Fortune was a capricious force, and Shizuru could not deny a part of her actually hated that force now for some of the things it had done to her girl. But she also understood that one could not but ride luck's currents as they appeared, and that she at least knew now how to prevent further misfortune from reaching Natsuki. It was a logical solution: if the girl's luck was meant only for her, then she would have to use her own luck to shelter the girl. As far as she knew, Natsuki had seemed to be most fortunate when under her wing.

*So whether she likes it or not, this is how it must be, she decided. I was foolish to allow her to be split from me before despite everything I was feeling: this proves it more than ever. I took the luck she was giving without a single thought and she got none of it herself. That injustice of luck was Fortuna's doing, so I cannot be blamed for it. But I can be blamed for not having realised she was being emptied of her own share of luck because of me. If all her luck is for me, so should my luck be used for her. It is now within my power to extract for her the recompense she deserves. Even if she objects to it, this is the proper order of things, and no one may say otherwise.*

Which meant that Natsuki no longer had a choice in the matter, as

far as she was concerned. Suou would have approved: she had even written something to that effect.

*Living under miserable circumstances with like chances brings out the better points in contrast,* the woman had set down in one of the more negative notes, one of those that had indicated the growing despair in the Masashi camp was affecting her as well. It had been a note unlike most of Suou's other ones: a missive written by the real woman under the Himemiya pretence of elegant negligence and detachment. Shizuru knew this colder and blunter Suou already, but it had still been strange to be confronted by it in a dead woman's handwriting.

*Juxtaposition is an effective configuration for taking measure of things. I find myself cleaving to the Seventh more than my fellow officers, half of whom would up and leave the men if they knew a way to spirit themselves out of this. I prefer to sit with the centurions instead of with the rest of command, which ulcerates with the most raffish wastrels that ever ran an army. Sometimes I even prefer to work more with the Otomeians than many of our own fellows: the auxiliaries certainly know how to spare the unnecessary chatter when working, which is more than I can say for most of our people. And speaking of the auxiliaries, I must say I prefer to be with your girl most of all, because she is the best comfort I have in this shambles of a situation.*

*Yet I know I am little comfort to her. I admit this stings a little, especially when I see how wretched she is though she would conceal it. You would be her comfort, but you are not here. I think now that we were cruel to permit this separation after all: I do not know how you fare but she is withering away, and I-the one who is not her comfort, we must remember-can do hardly anything. I know you love her, but place yourself in my shoes for a moment. Can you imagine how it feels to see it? The best comfort I have in this wretched place is withering away.*

*If only for her sake, I wish these unsent letters could reach you now. Perhaps that is the only good we have had out of this whole debacle, albeit also one of its greatest evils: we have been given, you and I, conclusive proof of what you wanted. It may be that you shall be angry with me later for saying these things, but I believe*

*they need to be said: your love for her seems to make you timid in the worst ways, and it serves neither you nor her well, judging from how she is suffering. We both love to call her a child, yet we never thought of how much she loves like a child. Almost blindly devoted, fully at the mercy of the parent. She suffers because you and I were too timid to see it and cruel enough to test it.*

*Take her with you next time instead of leaving her timorously with a pathetic stand-in. I foresee you arguing against the fairness of this again and how it disrespects her right to choose for herself, so let me point out to you that you have been unfair from the beginning: you made a child love you, so she shall never have a choice that cannot be completely overruled by one of yours. Please think of that before forcing an adult's choice upon a child again just because you want to be spared further culpability for your doings. If you do not, I fear we shall have words between us, you and me.*

Surprising as reading all of that had been, Shizuru had nonetheless realised the justice of it. Worse, she could actually see the other woman's face as she wrote it. Just the thought of that was enough to make her hunch over in her dark chair, because it was an awful thing to know you would only ever again see your friend from imagination, and your imagination happened to have her looking at you as though she found you to be a spineless disappointment.

It stung to be regarded that way, particularly by someone you had loved as a sibling.

A passing memory unexpectedly visited: she and Suou new adolescents, the latter being permitted to try out her elder sister's inherited bow, an inheritance of their family. Even now Shizuru could hear the horror in all three of their voices; the whiz of Suou's wild shot racing past target and through field; the silence when it caught one of Father Himemiya's prized peacocks in the hump of the chest and did him in. And then the panic-stricken laughter from herself as Chikane rapped Suou with the bow, forgetting for a moment that it was a prized object in itself and too precious to be used for disciplining younger siblings.

*Oh Chikane, how can you bear it?* Shizuru had to work again to counter the mist building under her eyelids. Suou was Chikane's one

sister, her only sibling. She had been the youngest member of their little group, though not quite their baby. It had always been Suou who kept all three of them grounded when they were together, as she was simply made more practically than the older girls, born dreamers and dreaming. Never again-impossible to believe. It still felt like mere days since she had murdered that peacock accidentally. How *could* Chikane bear it? *How can I bear it?*

The girl on the bed moved and it distracted her enough to send away the mist. Shizuru felt her world shift, all focus drawing in to that one cot and the loud breathing coming from it.

"Natsuki?" she whispered, leaning in to see if the girl was waking. "Natsuki?"

The dark head was still, the raspy breathing unbroken.

"Ah." Shizuru deflated back into her chair. "Well..."

She laced the fingers of both hands together and supported her chin. Natsuki stirred again, shifted until her head was facing Shizuru, and continued sleeping.

Shizuru smiled weakly.

*I can wait. I should let her sleep.*

It was slightly strange to see someone who had never been prone to naps suddenly napping at all times of the day. She knew it was because the girl had been ill, but these long naps seemed to her to almost be another sort of illness, one of unfamiliar lethargy. Even so, she supposed it was better for the girl to sleep. The chief *medicus* had said Natsuki's body still needed a lot of rest to recover, and he was probably right. He had been right in most things thus far, including in his prognosis for what would happen to Natsuki after the surgery.

He had predicted a terrible battle then, one with the poison still left in the girl's veins. And as it turned out, the fever did linger as prophesied, like a sustained crime staying to rape Natsuki long after the offending limb had been excised. This silent rapist was one of

sustained perversion, repeatedly violating the mind with the body. Natsuki's mind during her sickness was not the ever-clear, ever-grounded one Shizuru had known. It was instead a mind of high paranoia, where she would look at a familiar thing but think it alien, and stare at a cup of water as at a Tartarean devil. There were even moments of odd perplexity where she seemed confused by her own hand. There were times of lucidity too, but these were rare and momentary, and each headlong dive back into delirium seemed to wipe all recollection of them in later reprieves.

The body that housed the mind was no more constant: Shizuru knew she would remember for the rest of her life the awful time she had touched it and expected heat, only to find it mimicking the temperature of her sword. The general famed for her sangfroid had never fainted before but had felt close to it, felt the particulars of her consciousness fading into homogeneous black. It had taken one of the other members of Natsuki's medical staff to move both Shizuru's frozen hand and the sheets, his own fingers shaking with fear, to prove that the girl was still breathing.

There had been "a special staff" at the time - a full crew of *medici* and slaves monitoring the girl. Natsuki had never been without company, although it was doubtful that the girl was also ever sane enough to recognise it back then. This staff had been recently collapsed due to the patient's improvement, but it was still such that Natsuki was never alone.

She would never again be alone. Shizuru had promised.

Shizuru was a member of the staff to the present day, unsurprisingly. The day of the operation, she had had several of her necessities moved into the girl's recuperation quarters, including a sturdy desk and chair so she could work there if need be. She had also slept in that tent since then, occupying the extra cot left by the surgeons who had transferred to other premises. The surgeons in that tent had all been of average size for Himeans, which meant that the cot Shizuru had been forced to use was an average-sized one as well, and hardly made to fit a woman just a few fingers shy of two metres. Natsuki's survival had occupied her too much for her to have the oversight fixed: no attention was drawn to the error and she slept curled up for five nights. On the sixth day Aella found an

opportunity to do a more thorough inspection of the tent, and immediately replaced the tiny bed with a suitable one. She had also caned the slaves who had been changing Shizuru's sheets for their negligence.

Shizuru's official quarters stayed up despite her never spending her nights there. For a while she had considered transferring Natsuki to her place, then thought better of it after seeing how badly the girl was faring. She had intended to make the move once the girl got better, but it eventually slipped her mind and she just ended up being more and more ensconced in the girl's tent instead. She still returned to her own tent each morning to wash, just as she also worked from her proper office in the day. But she always returned to Natsuki's tent afterwards. And everyone in the camp knew it.

It was hard not to know. The general made the trip so often, even going over to the Otomeian princess's tent in the middle of the day before slipping back to her command quarters after mere minutes. It got so the legionaries learned to expect her pass that route several times in one afternoon, and took to calling it "The General's March".

It became something of a camp story and also a camp joke. There was a point when some legionaries took to placing bets on how often she would walk The March in a day. That stopped when one of the primipilii found out and gave the guilty parties a week's latrine duty as punishment, remarking that they were lucky he had been the one to find them and not the general or the chief primipilus-who would have strangled the "careless lot of *cunni* " (as he put it). Since the soldiers had not actually meant any ill by it, they went off properly chastised and swollen in the ears from the centurion's boxing.

Only vaguely aware of these inconsequential little side stories, Shizuru had continued to do her checks on the girl without fail, making the round at least once every couple of hours. After two weeks of this, her feet had worn a clear track to mark The General's March. By this time people had also learned not to try and intercept her on the way, because she seemed to have only one word for them then, no matter how small their question or concern: "Later."

It had been and still was an obsession. She knew that. She had an

inexplicable fear that if her eyes were not on Natsuki, something would happen to the girl. Why Shizuru would think that Black Fate would evade Natsuki if it knew she was watching was unclear even to her, but it served to keep her from falling apart at the hinges, so she did not spend too much time questioning it. It was simply a feeling, and one she thought better to heed than to discard automatically.

She remembered the stages even now, when most of the danger had passed. There was the time when the girl could not stop shaking, even despite the warmth of the day and her blanket. The staff had sweated virtual litres just trying to figure out how to stop the rattling of her bones. But the girl-ever the overachiever, Shizuru jested weakly to herself-had then played a trick on them, suddenly ceasing her shudders and outdoing them all with her own sweating. In fact, she had proceeded to sweat so much *so fast* that her caretakers had had to change bedding and bindings literally every hour. Two days of that had seen her so desiccated the *medici* feared it would be the dehydration that would kill her. Fortunately, it had eased up shortly.

She had been given water whenever possible and fed spiced and thickly honeyed wine when more cooperative. The honey they used was finest Hymettan, brought all the way from Greece and through Fuuka. Shizuru had purchased jars of this long ago from a Fuukan businessman whose trade was to supply such Grecian delicacies, and now thanked the gods that she had been smart enough to bring a few jugs on the march. Not that the quality seemed to impress the patient: she was more likely to spit out the stuff they flavoured with the honey than to swallow it.

*Always the troubles with food, always my worry with her weight. What was that she told me before? That she only ate "enough"?*

Feeding her had been and was still troubling. It had seemed to Shizuru, those early weeks, that for every cup the patient succeeded in getting down, there would be a half-hour of retching following it. Once, the girl had even vomited on Shizuru herself, as the woman had been trying to shift her to a more comfortable position when it happened. Natsuki had opened her eyes and given a massive jerk, then launched the curdled contents of her gut at the patrician's



hands. Not that the cleanliness-obsessed Shizuru uttered a peep: she had merely wiped herself as best as she could, called in the slaves to change the sheets while she transferred the patient to the other cot, soothed and washed and dressed the girl, then returned her to the fresh bed once finished. Only when she was sure Natsuki was again asleep had she spared time to change out of her own soiled tunic.

*It is a wonder*, she had found herself thinking several times, perhaps while cleaning dirty wrappings that stank of pus or perhaps while assisting the girl to a chamber pot and washing her off tenderly when she was too ill to make it. *It is a wonder even to me that I can do these things without flinching, I who would never have welcomed the thought of doing such mean services for anyone. I know I love her above all, and I would have done these things for her even were the urge to flinch present. Yet the reflex seems to be gone, for all that I expended no effort in vanquishing it.*

She would wipe the girl's mouth after another bout of vomit, cupping her hand to catch any remaining drops so that they would not fall to the fresh linens. Then she would cradle the still dribbling head to her chest and think with amazement, *I do this without disgust, without any revulsion. It is a wonder even to me, yes, but I would gladly do even more.*

A frustrated tenderness at the time: did it even make a difference to the girl, who had seemed to know nothing and no one? She who was referred to-often quite bitterly-as the Ulyssean Woman Never at a Loss had discovered startling gaps in her lexis while watching Natsuki's body struggle so hard to live it could barely spare effort to perceive. Suddenly she understood why certain terms she never thought useful existed and came upon the discovery that when the person you valued most was screaming at you as though you were a monster, there was some merit in saying the *fucks* and the *shits* and the *god-fucked cacks* in a language until you exhausted every ounce of salt in its veins.

She also learned quickly that these words, perhaps even all words, were largely overvalued. Natsuki had always tried so hard to teach her that, she supposed.

Yet words were her cognitive elements (and did that make her largely overvalued, she wondered); she had spent her first nights inside their shared tent just feigning sleep in her too-small cot, lying on one side and staring at the withering body of the one she loved while one of the physicians nodded off to sleep on the couch. She would play the physician herself, wording observations of the patient in her mind as though that extra vigilance could ward off harm.

She was careful, however, to never let herself forget what harm had been done. How could one forget what stared at one so keenly?

Natsuki made everything new, she acknowledged. Shizuru had thought herself inured to all sorts of atrocities-she remembered having been convinced of it after one of her earlier battles, when she had been but a cadet fighting with the rankers and had used a felled compatriot's severed limb as a weapon after her own sword got knocked away. A teenager then, she had thought sagely to herself that if anyone was so intent on survival as to strip the flesh from a fellow's arm-she had used the sharp end of the bone as the spearhead-well, that person was already beyond being shocked by atrocity.

The sight of Natsuki's deathly face, however, had seen her rethinking that youthful boast. It had seemed to her that she had never seen iniquity before that, had never seen an atrocity to compare to the unacceptable sight of a Natsuki so very clearly dying. There was no other word for it, and the *medici* agreed: Natsuki had been dying. The idea actually offended her almost to denial. She had known it was the girl the moment she had walked into that dim tent in Ushida's camp and laid on eyes on the singular dark hair-but the differences had struck her as well and had even tempted her to reconsider her knowledge several times. Even now, with the girl cleaned up and properly bandaged, some of those differences were still present. There was no chance she could ever fail to recognise Natsuki, but there were things now that were strange to what she knew of the girl: not precisely foreign, but exaggerated. Delicacy had always been there, for instance, but not to the point of infirmity. Angles had always been present, but not to this acuity. And pain had always been hidden...

She settled her elbows more firmly on her thighs and leaned closer,

unconsciously holding her breath as she performed an inspection she had been doing for weeks now.

The rims of the girl's eyes were dark. That was the first thing she noticed, because it had troubled her enough before to ask the Otomeian slaves if they were still applying stibium to the girl's eyelids. The answer had been no, of course. Indeed, the darkness was clearly non-cosmetic, for it had the red-edged translucency of a bruise, not the black solidity of stibium. But no bruise was the same colour for weeks, so it was not bruising.

Shizuru itched to take a moist cloth to it, as she had done several times before. But she could not disturb Natsuki's sleep.

She went on with her inspection. The face was much the same as the last time she had checked, a cobweb stretched over a sharp and tiny skull. Sometimes she feared the sharpness underneath would tear the skin, and she would cradle the skull in her palm as though to keep it still, afraid of what a jostle might do to it. She would stare down at it the whole time. A skin-veiled skull with dark eyelids and a huge scar on the forehead. It was a ghastly sight, in all honesty, yet still weirdly beautiful in her eyes. The promise of beauty was still so insistent in the fundamental structure that it was hard to consider the girl ugly even when she looked like death. Shizuru could almost hear her mother speaking the explanation for their own clan's age-defying looks. *It is all in the bones, was what she always said, that it was all in the bones...*

All in the bones, the fragile neck, the bars and crevices at the gutted collar.

The rest of Natsuki was concealed by the sheets, but Shizuru could conjure up a fair representation just from memory. That was the unpleasant remainder of another shock: her first sight of the girl's naked body since their separation. All she could think back then was that her girl had not looked like that when she had left. Her girl had been the epitome of slender youth the last time they had been together and undressed, not the flimsily-constructed puppet the surgeons' knives had revealed then. And though her girl had been light, she had not been *that* light.

She let another sigh leave her as she thought of it, recalling how Natsuki had used to feel in her arms before all of this happened. Small but reassuringly stable. Fine but endowed with sleek tangibility.

*Now she feels like nothing, she mused. I feel as though I am moving a bird from the nest each time I pick her up these days. Featherweight and hollow-boned, as though there were no flesh to her structure. I loved carrying her before because it was like cradling a dream, but this is a different sort of dream now. Insubstantial. Morbidly stimulating. On the verge of evaporating from my hands...*

The weakness finally overcame her at the thought: she struck out, her hand searching for the one resting on the white sheet. She breathed out her relief when her recklessness did not wake the girl, handling the dried-up fingers gently and telling herself they were real.

For all that she had been aching for this, all she got was meagre encouragement.

The hand in her grasp was far frailer than it had once been, now completely engulfed by her fingers without her trying. The bones were so pronounced that they seemed to push the veins up, quite painfully. She was so *young*, Shizuru marvelled; hardly any looseness or crepey folds, the skin almost trying to reconfigure itself to the new sizing. This despite the abuse it had obviously taken, what with all the new scabs and the greyness where it was not bruised, as though the blood had leached out of the flesh underneath. A fingernail was missing, and another had only started to grow back. There was a wide strip of scar tissue over her knuckles, the skin of which had been stripped away.

Even this little claw of a hand was a vessel of pain.

*My poor girl*, she groaned, trying not to clutch the fingers accidentally. *How could they do this to you?* She chafed the wrist and saw the other hand on top of the sheets, the whole of it bandaged from the knuckles to the arm just below the elbow. The bandages were white, but there were small spots, little yellowish stains. They looked to have soaked through from the inside. Were

the stains from some ointment the physician had put there or effusions from more resistant wounds? Which cause was better, at this late stage? Oh, what she would give to know as much as the *medici* !

This body, she thought, was but a pitiful, pain-encrusted version of the beautiful girl she had known. Yet upon finding it, Shizuru had given up the cameo she had been carrying every day prior to that-a cameo that depicted Natsuki as she had been before all this, unbroken and at the peak of her physical beauty. Shizuru had handed this cameo to the chief centurion's body-servant with instructions for it to be given to her own slaves, who put it away with all her private things. Those of her slaves who had seen the current Natsuki suspected she had parted with the keepsake to avoid facing the disparity of the image with the present person. A mistaken notion. It was simply that seeing the true girl had robbed the facsimile of any meaning. Shizuru supposed that it would be always so for her and Natsuki, and that no representation could ever compare to the her girl's presence in the flesh.

*No matter how attenuated she becomes.*

Natsuki was so thin now that it contributed to the difficulty of moving her, as the lack of cushioning meat made her insides fragile and especially tender. Shizuru had chosen to do most of the carrying whenever the girl needed to be lifted, especially because she knew she could take far more care than anyone else ever would in the doing of it. Even so, there had been times when she had still hurt Natsuki just by picking her up and setting her down. Most of the time the girl had suffered it with delirious complaints or unintelligible groans, but there had been one time where it so happened that Natsuki's delirium seemed to have reverted her to the intelligibility of childhood. And even now Shizuru could remember the look the girl had thrown her then, green eyes swimming with bewilderment and asking without actually saying anything, *You hurt me-why did you do that?*

*Why did you do that?* The question she asked herself each night and had to answer for herself each night. *Because it was for the best. Because it was the only thing to be done.*

Sometimes, even she could not believe her responses.

*Which makes me wonder why I ever hoped for her to believe them,* she reflected, thinking now to the time when hopes had seemed imminent and dreams had clouded expectations. She-all of them-had been so focused on just getting the girl through the fever that they had forgotten the more difficult matter afterwards: that of the girl's mind returning from wherever it had gone. Shizuru could still recall how much she had wanted for it to happen and could only shake her head now at her own naïveté.

In some part of her mind, she was still hearing the scream.

*That appalling scream,* she thought with a shudder . That scream that had sounded less human than elemental: a tempest loosed from a pair of tattered lungs that had screamed pure rain and thunder. And the way she had looked while screaming, the way she had twisted the blanket all around her struggling to get up, reaching again and again for a foot she could not find, her beautiful eyes sane and hysterical at once...

*I should have stayed up-I should not have gone to sleep that night,* Shizuru told herself again, having repeated it countless times since that day Natsuki's mind had come back. It had been exactly a week now and still the situation warranted that regret.

*We knew she was getting better, we saw her lucid each time she was awake. It was not often that she would wake - she would even be too weak to move during those occasions - but she was lucid and that should have been enough to warn us that it would happen. She even said my name-she said my name!-several times. I was so happy. I was so happy that I was foolish.*

They had hoped that the realisation could be gradual, that Shizuru could be the one to ease her into the idea of her new body. It had seemed likely to happen thus, for during those moments of consciousness she displayed to them after the delirium had broken, she had never once complained or inquired about her leg. She could not even have lifted her thigh to see the stub for herself, so it had seemed to be a fair plan for breaking it to her gently.

But again they were played by a trick. One week ago Natsuki had woken in the dark hours, far more lucid than any time before and assailed by a terrible itch. The itch was on her left ankle and she could not go back to sleep. Shizuru had been asleep in the other cot and the girl decided to fix the problem herself, summoned all her pathetic strength to move the other foot and scratch the itching one. Only to have her success touch nothing. An incongruity.

After that it had been a simple thing to redirect her dismal strength to her other leg and try to move it to scratch the ankle on the sheets. Only to feel-nothing. An enormous lack. A bigger incongruity.

She had woken Shizuru and the slaves with her scream, had forced them to scramble at lighting lamps and holding her down because she kept tangling herself further in the blanket, vainly trying to reach for the abnormality by working jellied arms and legs. Or leg. Did the remainder of the left count as a leg still? *It should*, Shizuru would tell herself over and over again in the days to come: *It is yet a leg, even if it is a different leg*. And this different leg was the only thing Natsuki ever looked at now, a week after being confronted with it.

This was why Shizuru now waited for her to wake with as much apprehension as longing, for Natsuki had yet to rupture the barrier she had put up ever since that awful waking. Since then she had woken looking pale and empty, her mind a hermetic shell and her eyes able to see only one thing. Hardly anything had the power to break her concentration on that single point, which was a vacuity.

*Just like herself*, a despairing Shizuru would occasionally think, wanting only the return of the girl she had found and recovered, only to lose again. *Ye gods, how many times must she be ripped from my hands? Give her back if this is your doing-give her back because she is mine. Let her be free to say my name again and acknowledge me as she did, before this silence...*

A silence that still held echoes of that appalling scream.

Suddenly there was an interrupting sound; the echo waned and rolled back. The servants had returned, so Shizuru got to her feet.

They were at the table. One of the women lifted the lid from a small

pot and a cloud of steam puffed out. Shizuru requested a spoon, which she gingerly dipped it in the porridge and held up, blowing wisps of steam off the surface of the spoonful she had taken.

"Yes, that would be right," she said, taking note of the delicate balance in both the tastes and the structure. Natsuki loathed both overly powerful flavours and dense substances when it came to food, so she knew the light, almost watery broth was perfect. "Would you pour some of that *calda*, by the way?"

Her slaves were one step ahead. They had known she would insist on auditing all the food for her mistress, so they had already poured a few sips' worth of the wine into a cup. It was warm as well, but not as hot as the porridge.

"That is very good," she pronounced afterwards, making the trio light up from the approval. "She is still sleeping, however, so I shall feed this to her later. By the way, where is the honey?"

The women showed her the fresh jar.

"Good. Do we have enough left in the old one to sweeten her milk, just in case?"

One slave checked the old jar, then turned to look again at the beaker of milk on the table, measuring it with her eyes.

"Just enough for that beaker, Domina," she determined.

"Then bring that over here, please, and use it to sweeten this already. I forgot to do that earlier."

"Yes, Domina."

A thought occurred to her and she twisted to look at the Otomeian servant, who bowed demurely under her gaze.

"Kavine," she said, demonstrating that she knew even the names of Natsuki's servants; she had no need to demonstrate the same knowledge for her own because they were aware of it by now. "I forgot this as well: do your people take milk cool? Or would it be better to warm it? I only ever saw her drinking warmed milk before,



back then. Shall she dislike it if it is cold?"

The woman considered it carefully, it seemed.

"We drink milk cool too, Domina," she said, answering in good, intelligible Himean. "But it is also more common to give it warm when the drinker is sick."

Shizuru nodded, looking so serious one might have been pardoned for thinking her in conference with one of her officers about the war.

"Of course, I should have thought of it- *Ecaster*, what a fool I am!" she frowned, clearly annoyed with herself. The other three women exchanged looks: it was generally a point of interest to the servants, especially the female ones, when the domina clucked over her lover; they thought it endearing, all the more as it came from such a generally composed woman.

"Would you mind warming it for me quickly, then?" she asked, whereupon all three women answered in the affirmative. "You might stir in the honey then - no doubt it shall mix with the milk better."

She glanced at the water clock on one of the tables. Some time had passed since she came back from watching the baggage train arrive.

"When did you last bathe her hair?" she asked them.

"This morning, Domina," one answered.

"When I was with you? No baths in between, then?"

"No, Domina."

"I see. Well, it is cooler now so that should be fine. Even so... You did not do any wipe-downs of her body at all, just to keep her feeling fresh?"

"We did not, Domina."

Shizuru was on the verge of pouring herself more water from the same amphora as before. Now she stopped and put down the jug

with a dull thud, having drawn what she considered sufficient data to conclude something.

"You know," she began, "for the past week"- *ever since she awoke to this nightmare* -"all of you, even those who are not here but have been seconded to service in this tent, have been reporting to me that you do not give her a wipe-down in between her set bath times during dawn and dark. I know that I said you should not bother doing it if she is asleep, in order to give her ample time to rest, but I know for a fact that she does not sleep the whole day, even if she does nap quite often. This tells me there is something preventing you from giving her a bath. What is going on?"

They were alarmed, although she had spoken quite kindly to them.

"Domina," said the eldest of the three, taking it upon herself to explain because she realised her status meant the other two expected her to do it. "We try, every day. *We try*, but..."

Shizuru tilted her head. "But, Zosime?"

"The lady does not permit it," Zosime revealed nervously. "We are very sorry, Domina. We do not know... we did not wish to force the lady. And Kavine and her fellows cannot counter their mistress's wishes-"

Shizuru latched onto a thought there, her eyes suddenly very dark as she regarded the trio differently from before.

"Wishes?" she repeated, cutting off her slave. "Do you mean to tell me she *spoke* ? Did she speak to any of you?"

Now they were truly frightened. Shizuru had not spoken kindly this time, after all.

"No, Domina, not a word," Zosime hastened to say. She knew why the domina would be rankled by the thought: the foreign princess had not spoken a single word to her either for the entire week. Had Zosime indeed received the girl's first words since then, she would in fact be outraged on behalf of her mistress. She had received no such words, fortunately.

"She does not speak to us, Domina," she clarified. "But she makes clear she does not wish us to touch her. She tries to-she slaps away our hands. We did not wish to trouble her, so we left the lady alone."

"What?" Shizuru turned to the others. "Is this so?"

"Yes, Domina," they both answered.

"We are very sorry, Domina," Zosime interjected.

Shizuru only stared at her, then at the other two women. She was trying to make sense of this information.

*But it does not make sense!*

This entire week, the empty husk that she called her girl had acted the part of a husk: she reacted to practically nothing and no one, no matter the provocation. They only managed to get her to eat by persistently pushing soup or beakers of wine against her lips, whereupon she would eventually tire and relax her mouth, let them tilt her head along with the beakers so she could sip or drink. More or less the same thing went on for her bath-times, where she let them move her woodenly so she could be bathed, not even bothering to put up the reaction of resistance. She was their perfect puppet, a creature they manipulated without trouble. At least, that was all Shizuru had ever seen from her this week. So why would she suddenly have a reaction to the slaves when being bathed in the midday, yet not whenever she was bathed in the morning and the night?

"Has this been the case for all the others as well?" she asked the slaves, confusion pleating her brow.

"Yes, Domina," Zosime answered again, and again added: "Truly we are very sorry, Domina."

"No. No, you need not be. If she did not wish it, it was wise that you followed. But I do not understand..." Shizuru put her hands on the table and braced her weight on it, still bewildered. "In the mornings and the evenings, she is so... cooperative. She slaps your hands, you said?"

Zosime's grimace looked like a shrug. "She tries to, Domina. She is weak, so it is feeble. But one can see from her eyes that she intends a slap."

A shake of the golden head; Shizuru blew out a puff of air.

"Domina," ventured Zosime after exchanging looks with the other servants. "If I may say something? It may be of help?"

Shizuru glanced at her slave.

"Yes?" she said, not knowing what to expect.

"Domina, in the mornings and the evenings, you are one of those bathing her."

Shizuru caught her breath. Her hands on the table flexed, the thought in her head sending little shocks of tension to every extremity.

"True," she said, nodding at the helpful-looking Zosime. "True, I am."

*So what does that mean?*

She hoped it meant what she wanted, which would make it a good thing. She hoped it so badly that she was afraid of going further in considering it.

She pushed herself from the table and straightened, suddenly energetic as an idea came to mind.

"Well, let that be set aside for now," she said. "I can just wipe her down later, as night is coming on fast and I need not return to the command tent today. Heat the milk first. I expect her to wake soon, and would like her to have it for her dinner. When you go to get that done, by the way, also get some warm water to be brought in for her bath. I shall take my bath later, after I have given her hers."

They nodded to the command.

"Bring the milk over as soon as it is warmed," she continued. "The same with the water for bathing her. After that, however, the three of

you may retire for a while to take your meals with the others. I shall not ask for your assistance with the usual things tonight, so you may simply return once you have finished with your food. And you may take your time-I shall not need you for at least two hours after all these tasks I am assigning are done."

They were smart women and caught on immediately. She wanted to try doing the usual routine without anyone else present; she was going to see if there would be a difference due to her, as they were suggesting.

"Do not forget to send over food for the sentries outside, as usual-and be sure to ask them if they have anything in particular that they desire. Our stores are finally full enough to accommodate requests," she told them.

"And your dinner, Domina?" Zosime asked.

Shizuru waved a hand with the air of someone who could not care less.

"Send over the usual," she said, to their astonishment. "The usual" was merely bread, wine, and a scrap of meat. But surely it would be ridiculous if the general were to dine so poorly on a night when everyone else seemed to be celebrating the return of better fare!

"I want nothing special," she said to their flabbergasted faces. "And tell Hermias I said that when you encounter him, as he shall be sure to ask about it. Tell him as well not to bother me for at least two hours, as I have told you. That should be all, so please go about all of this now."

All three servants bowed in unison, as though it were a gesture they had practiced several times before. They exited and again Shizuru was left to herself, her face conflicted as she stared Natsuki's food out of countenance.

*I want nothing special, eh?*

Well, she would soon see how special this night could be. Behind the partitions, she could still hear Natsuki sleeping. When she woke

this time, unlike last week, Shizuru would be there to supervise it. So the general went in to wait eagerly for that moment, blissfully unaware of the rider who had arrived only recently, overlooked in the hubbub of the baggage train. Said rider, now dismounted and striding through Shizuru's camp, was soon outside the tent the general shared with her Natsuki.

Shizuru heard the voices even from the inner reaches of the tent. Someone was speaking in Greek. *Beautiful* Greek, she amended, noting that the accents she heard were perfectly Attic.

"Yes, that *is* her tent, but-"

"-her troopers? Step aside."

"-please, it may be unwise!"

Shizuru was on the way to investigate when she heard the smack. Someone had just been slapped, she took it.

She was already past the partitions when a stranger walked in. Someone very tall, very angry, and very blonde. *The Otomeians let one of their officers in despite my orders*, was her first displeased thought, until she realised she had never seen this particular Otomeian before. She was about to demand the interloper's name when an Otomeian she did know came through the entrance gracelessly, his mouth open as if to say something. The sight of the two women clamped Otanara's mouth shut.

Shizuru lifted her eyebrow at the duo, herself more indignant by the second. The first intruder was staring at her eyes, she realised, and with a look on her face Shizuru did not like.

"Shizuru Fujino."

The intruder's lip curled as she addressed the general, her scowl mirroring Shizuru's glare.

"Give me my cousin."

## Chapter 58

*My gratitude again to the readers and reviewers, as well as to a few persons who sent very kind messages. They were very sweet, and I shall remember them.*

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### **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Aedile** - there were four of these: two were called the plebeian aediles and two were called the curule aediles. They were responsible for the structures of the city, among other things, but more importantly were also the organisers (and to a large part the funders, given the Treasury's parsimony) of the Roman public games. It was considered a very good thing if the aediles were rich, because it meant a better chance of seeing fantastic-and very expensive-games for everybody.
2. **Calda** - warm, spiced wine often taken during the cold seasons.
3. **Mea vita** - extremely affectionate endearment, literally "my life".
4. **Medicus, medici** - respectively, "doctor" and "doctors".
5. **NOTE on mushrooms** - the Ancient Romans were not unfamiliar with the use of certain natural substances for psychotropic effect, and quite a few mushrooms and plants were already prized back then as the equivalents of the drugs of today that have questionable legality in various states.
6. **Sponge Stick** - to be precise, a sponge on a stick. This was used by the Ancient Romans to wipe their rear ends after defecation.
7. **Stola** - women's garment at the time, based on a design from the Greeks.
8. **Tcheret** – may also be Romanised as "tjeret", a willow tree.

9. **Via Decumana** - one of the roads in a typical Roman camp: it runs from the centre of the camp (which would hold the general's headquarters) to the rear gate.

10. **Well of the Comitia** - the fief of the tribunes of the plebs, who held their meetings there.

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## ***Inter Nos II: Inde Ira et Lacrimae***

*par ethnewinter*

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Shizuru knew who the intruder was, but she was not about to admit that.

"You are?" she simply said, matching the woman's look of scorn with one of insouciance. It was partly effective: the other woman was obviously irked by the idea of introducing herself- *prideful!* -although she did not seem deterred by it either. The woman even swatted away her subordinate's attempt at performing the introduction for her, cutting short Otanara before he could so much as release the breath sucked in for the purpose.

"Alyssa, daughter to King Kruger of the Otomeians," the woman stated shortly, intent on driving back as soon as possible to the point of her visit. She had not covered several hundred kilometres in a week and ridden two horses to death (and another four near it) for nothing. "And you are Shizuru Fujino, General of the Himeans in their northern wars. I'm sure anyone in this camp can vouch for your identity, just as any Otomeian nearby can vouch for mine. I demand the Princess Natsuki."

Shizuru's eyebrow went up at this remarkable opening.

"You demand the Princess Natsuki," she echoed.

The other said nothing and looked, to Shizuru's amusement, very haughty and expectant. It was clear to Shizuru that she would have to puncture a very precious bubble here, and she was barely able to



restrain a smile at the prospect.

"Princess Alyssa-if that is indeed who you are," she said in deliberately infuriating tones of patience. "You are not in a position to make demands."

It did not faze Alyssa. "I am if my demand concerns one of our people. So again, I demand Natsuki."

She said this with the sort of disdainful sneer that would have set Shizuru snapping a crushing retort usually. But the Himean was paying attention to Alyssa's eyes, which were at odds with the sneer. What she saw were watching eyes, cautious and solemn. They were eyes far too aware of Shizuru for the sneer to be believed. Suddenly Shizuru realised why they looked that way.

The Princess Alyssa, she decided, was running an experiment.

*Her eyes need work: they do not clothe her interests entirely, she thought to herself. Still very intriguing, however: I wonder what she hopes to get out of this.* It was that question that stayed the instinct to boot the woman out of the tent in as embarrassing a way as possible. Shizuru was still uncertain of the experiment's parameters and purpose, but she was certain of the woman's eyes measuring her in detail, grave and intelligent under the pose of frightful brashness. Oh, this princess was something! Something of an oddball going from the strangeness of her little game, but the eyes said she was also intelligent enough to be a far cry from the offspring of Obsidian and leagues above even her own Otomeian siblings-or the ones Shizuru had met during that brief stay in the Otomeian capital, at least. And she had such an appealing look about her: soldierly and sharp-looking, this Alyssa was a representative of the Otomeian race at its peak. Shizuru would have been pleased to tarry and play with her for a while had this been any other occasion, but this was not a time for games and Shizuru was at heart an impatient being. She would have to dicker with the Otomeian another time, when she felt like it.

"I have things to do, as does the Princess Natsuki," she sighed, sounding bored though far from feeling it. "You may return in the morning and we shall speak then."

"But I wish to speak to my cousin, not to you."

"And you may speak to your cousin in the morning, but for now you may leave."

She was turning her back when the woman retorted.

"I understand this is her tent," said the other blonde, showing that her Himean was as natural as her Greek. "If she wishes me to leave, she can tell me, but you *may* not."

Now that, Shizuru thought, was a surprise. One might say it was so in more ways than one, in fact, as fashioning a retort by returning a word that way was *not* Otomeian. It was not common in the linguistic practices of their people, at least not from what Shizuru had noticed, and it was most assuredly not something she had witnessed in any of the other Otomeians thus far.

*Except in Natsuki.*

Though her interest in Alyssa was increasing by the moment, her irritation was far stronger than her curiosity on this occasion: this should be the time for feeding Natsuki, the time for giving her a bath, the time for a few precious moments for only the two of them. Instead, it was becoming time spent on putting this royal interloper in her place. One step, then another, and Alyssa was only a metre away.

"You are being unwise and impertinent," Shizuru told the other blonde, her voice still level though her look was beginning to change. "It is not good to test my patience, Princess."

Alyssa's response was swift. "One may say the same of testing mine, Himean."

"Then remove yourself immediately, so that neither of us be tested to the limit."

"I will only remove myself after I've seen my cousin."

"I said in the morning."

"I say now."

" *Again*, in the morning."

"And *again*, that is unacceptable," Alyssa replied.

Otanara, forgotten in the background, emitted a groan at their hardening voices.

"She's my cousin, Shizuru Fujino," the Otomeian insisted, her eyes unmistakably blue even in the yellow light of the lamps. "The Princess Natsuki is of our people, not yours. I am more her superior than you are, and I deserve access to my subordinate if I demand it."

"I very much doubt that she is in any way subordinate to *you* . At any rate, you should know that your cousin is under my absolute command, as she was granted to me by your father."

"Not an absolute command, and my father lent her to you for a limited time. You are misunderstanding the loan as a donation."

"I misunderstand nothing. The terms are clear and make her mine."

"And you've done an outstanding job of being proprietor, I hear."

The jab found its mark, snapping one of the cords holding Shizuru's temper. Her opponent watched it go with interest, squaring her stance a little just in case the other took it into her head to get physical. Alyssa knew a red eye when she saw one, and Shizuru Fujino's were nothing if not that.

"What do you mean by that?" the woman growled at her.

"Exactly what I said," Alyssa responded.

"You *overstep* ."

"No more than you have, it seems."

Shizuru whipped to Otanara, trying to keep the beast collared and caged.

"If you value your princess, take her away," she said to the troubled observer, who was clearly wishing he was elsewhere in the world but here. "Now, before it is too late, man!"

But her turning towards him gave Alyssa the opening she needed. Before either Shizuru or Otanara could speak again, the woman had slipped past Shizuru and through the tent partitions, moving like an eel into the other area of the tent. But the anguine Himean was a match for the anguilline intruder: Alyssa had no more cleared the partitions than the Himean's hand was nearly at her collar, there with every intention of drawing her back and perhaps even with some of dashing her head to the ground. But Alyssa veered to the side just as the hand closed and so evaded seizure-and possibly even death-without knowing it.

"Princess Alyssa!" Otanara cried, relegated again to the role of unacknowledged bystander. It was testament to his bad fortune, he thought, that he was being made to witness a clash between two women who thoroughly frightened him, although he was loath to admit it aloud. Another thing he was loath to admit aloud was that he was more concerned for his commander than for the Himean. Otanara had seen enough of Alyssa in the past and of Shizuru Fujino of late to know who had the more barbaric temper. Although Alyssa was a daunting creature herself, she had a steady, fairly cool sort of anger. Shizuru Fujino, on the other hand, seemed capable of looking perfectly calm one moment and crushing your windpipe with her thumbs the next.

His worries for his commander propelled him after the Himean, and thus had him running straight into her back-an unexpectedly hard one given how slender it looked-when she stopped without warning.

He pulled backwards to see what had happened, babbling a hasty apology to the indifferent woman.

The Princess Alyssa had stopped as well, apparently. For her part, she was standing beside a bed, on which reposed the person she had been demanding to see. The grip of sleep was apparently so powerful on this third female that she had not even been jostled out of it by the commotion. The asymmetrical outline of her legs under the blanket brought to Otanara an automatic wince and an

understanding of why the Himean and his own superior had stopped their escalating argument. To his mind, it would be unthinkable cruel to disturb that poor slumbering creature's only escape from this reality.

He murmured another apology and excused himself, fleeing the scene. He had seen enough, he knew, and could not be permitted to stay now that the drama had moved to this stage. His farewell to Alyssa left the two women staring at the third, neither of them concerned by Otanara's departure.

Shizuru eventually walked to the other side of the bed.

"Leave now," she whispered to Alyssa, whose face was surprisingly clinical as she studied her cousin's emaciated wreckage. "Leave now, Princess, and do not force my hand. Not here, not where she sleeps."

To her relief, Alyssa nodded.

"I shall leave now," she agreed. Then she added, "I shall take her with me."

That got Shizuru to drop her whisper: "You shall not!"

"Are you going to stop me from taking one of my own people under my wing?"

"She is in my charge and my camp. Technically, she is one of *my* people and under *my* wing."

A dark laugh from Alyssa. "A forced argument! She's mine, and you know it."

A darker laugh from Shizuru. "Try saying that again and see how long you keep breathing."

"I have the superior claim and I'm taking her if I want!"

"Not under my watch, you'll not!"

" *Your watch saw this happen to her !*"

*" It was not my watch, and you know nothing of it !"*

They had been edging towards the foot of the bed throughout the exchange, and were now nearly at the foot of the barrier, hissing at each other indignantly.

"I know more than you think," Alyssa snarled, tossing her blonde braids. "The Lupine Division, my nation's pride, has been reduced to a shell. Dozens of our most promising warriors were killed, some of whom I called cousins. The contingent I sent with Otanara has been halved, several thousands of my own men killed. This is the toll *your* war has taken on us! And now you add my cousin, a girl I have known since her childhood. Aah, do not say I know nothing, Shizuru Fujino, when I know all too well what you and your people have cost *me* !"

She slid forward almost to the mattress, one hand raised in a rhetorical claw and the other settling on her hip. She intended to launch another verbal attack before the Himean got over whatever was clamping her mouth shut, but was prevented from it when something flew at her. It nearly made contact with her side, but Alyssa had seen faster arrows: she deflected the projectile with a wrist and it bounced onto the sheets harmlessly.

The two opponents stared at the thing with similar befuddlement. The thing was an apple.

"Natsuki!"

It was Shizuru who said her name and drew towards her, but it was the other person in the room who held the girl's attention. The newly-awakened Natsuki goggled at her cousin, who gazed back with narrowed eyes.

"See what you have done!" Shizuru growled, supporting the shaking girl on the bed with an arm. Neither of the Otomeians responded to the provoked utterance, the elder of the two carefully dissecting the other's stricken face. It was clear to Alyssa that Natsuki had no more expected to find her here than the girl had expected to attack Alyssa in any way-even if only with an apple, and a weakly cast one at that. The attack baffled Alyssa as well, for it was not like the cousin she

knew. Natsuki had never been prone to rebellion where her elders were concerned and she had never before gone against Alyssa in either word or gesture. And even besides that, who woke up and threw apples at people nearby, anyway? Had Otanara's fears been realised about the girl losing some of her senses from that head wound? Oh, it would be a shame! The girl had possessed such a mind; Alyssa remembered it.

The Himean's glare was murdering her again and Alyssa shifted her eyes that way in defence, intending to address the woman once more. The flicker of green eyes moving that way as well put an idea into her head, however, and she followed it to look down at her hip, to the hand resting on it and next to the hilt of her blade.

She looked at the wheezing Natsuki, pushing away the Himean from her scope of attention for the second time since Natsuki's awakening.

*" Why this greeting, little cousin? " she asked in their language. " You cannot possibly have forgotten me? "*

Both blondes saw it: the throbbing swallow that raised the girl's shoulders, forced her to jerk her neck to cope with the sudden tension. The adjustment went badly, however, and the gulp ramified into a hacking cough. One blonde reacted by holding the girl's back with a palm. The other blonde only watched with rising intrigue.

Now she knew Natsuki did remember her and had not lost logic. She saw it in the girl's eyes, the struggle to understand why Alyssa had come as well as the fear of being punished for her insolence. To Alyssa, it was like seeing the trembling, nervy urchin they had brought to Otomeia citadel all those years ago. Intelligent enough to pretend she was not afraid, yet endlessly calculating with her fear. Perhaps, Alyssa considered, that fearful waif had never really gone away.

*" This is the woman I hear of, Natsuki? " she said, excluding Shizuru again through their language. The Himean reacted with a glare, whereas Natsuki winced. " She's interesting, I see it. See how she regards me. Like a wild animal, with such ferocity. "*

She squinted at the wild animal and continued offhandedly, " *But this does not change that she's a foreigner. I did not expect the Princess Natsuki to choose a foreigner, no matter how interesting said foreigner might be.*"

Shizuru's eyes were on Natsuki's face, trying to eke out a reflected translation of the words from there. And as she watched the sunken-cheeked face contract, she knew she did not like what Alyssa was saying.

" *Still a naïf,*" Alyssa murmured, drawing back to tilt her head as she eyed the pair. " *You cling to her like a pup to its mother. What is this?*"

She ratcheted up the understanding expression on her face, knowing it was all that was keeping the curious Shizuru from silencing her.

" *I know you've been ill and that troubles me, Natsuki, so I shall excuse this poor display,*" she said. " *When I return on the morrow, though, I expect a better account of yourself and a better reception on the whole. But keep this in mind: I'll not forgive any more pathetic assaults, Last Princess of Ortygia.*"

To Alyssa's delight, that brought the cringe she had been aiming for. She was unable to continue with the rest of what should have been her lofty farewell, however, for their Himean spectator gave her a nasty surprise: Shizuru put a hand on a clear space of the bed and vaulted over it and Natsuki in one leap, coming down to stand on the other side. The movement was so swift that Alyssa reacted a little slower than she should have had Shizuru been after her life.

And stepping back as fast as she could from the menace suddenly at her side, Alyssa knew it.

Shizuru did not stalk the retreating woman.

"This is my camp, in case you have forgotten," she said, her voice the softest that Alyssa had heard it; the Otomeian made a note that this must be how Shizuru Fujino spoke when she was most hazardous, and marvelled at that peculiarity.



"I am supreme here, Princess Alyssa, yet you contravened my order. Further than that, you have had the deplorable manners to exclude me from a conversation in what is still *my* tent, even if it is your cousin's as well. I told you that you were being unwise. Apparently you were bent on demonstrating ignorance as well."

It seemed that even Alyssa's dazed cousin knew that tone bore minding. She had already transferred her attention to Shizuru, looking even more afraid than ever before in Alyssa's estimation. Another note in her mind: Shizuru Fujino terrified her cousin.

"Your cousin is in my care," Shizuru explained gently enough, but in a way that perceptibly dropped the temperature of the air. "In an *absolute* way. You have obviously not been taken into your father's confidence in this matter, else you would know that he gave her to me upon my request before I left for my sojourn to Hime. I have his letters confirming this, but I do not much feel like digging them out just for your sake, so you shall have to take my word for it until you see your father again."

Alyssa blinked, surprised by that unexpected titbit: her father had *given* away Natsuki? Some of the astonishment must have shown on her face, because Shizuru pressed in for the kill.

"I do not care from what line you hail or what species of noble you are," the woman said. "You could be descended from blessed Jupiter himself and I would still shove a sponge stick in your mouth and stuff you in the latrines. I hesitate now only because of this girl beside me, who may be grieved if I disgrace you before her. The hesitation does not mean I have no limit. So let us make something clear before you touch the frontier: as long as you are in my camp, you do what I say. If I tell you to leave a tent, no matter which tent it may be, you leave it."

The wheezing from the girl watching them was even more noticeable now.

"Princess Alyssa," Shizuru purred. " *Leave this tent.* "

Alyssa studied the threat being presented and found it formidable.

She softened her approach faster than even Shizuru had expected, "Can I not speak to my cousin first?"

The other woman lifted an eyebrow.

"You already have," she said evenly.

"Those were only greetings."

"You have more to say?"

"Yes."

"Good. Keep it to yourself."

The woman certainly bore watching. Alyssa squared her shoulders and spared no time deciding to walk away, especially as she had already been on the verge of doing it earlier. She nodded to the Himean without losing her composure and turned a calmer look to Natsuki than before.

"I shall return in the morning, two hours past dawn at the latest," she declared, her language now the more inclusive Himean. "I shall speak to you then, Natsuki, so expect me."

And having said this, she turned and started to walk away, followed closely by Shizuru's gaze. But she had a final line that was only for the girl's understanding, which she delivered rather snidely in her exit.

*"By the way, if the woman needs a cripple to be protected from me, what does that say of her, cousin?"*

Alyssa walked out of the tent without waiting to see how that remark might be received by her breathless relative. She held absolutely no defeat in her face when she came out and met Otanara, who had waited for her. He was with the troopers she had ordered aside from the entrance earlier, and all three bowed when she emerged.

She returned the salutes with a nod.

"I require lodgings," she said simply.

"Please take mine," Otanara offered.

They left and took the *via decumana* out of the Himean camp, going into its auxiliary appendage. Because there were so many auxiliaries, they had been given a large, floating camp next to the already-large Himean encampment, to avoid choking the main site. There the pair retired to Otanara's quarters and sent away all who had come to see the new arrival and give her greetings.

Alyssa dealt with her visitors with characteristic shortness.

"Tomorrow afternoon," she told them.

Once these had gone, her attention moved to the people setting a table for their dinner.

"Get out," she said.

Soon there was only Otanara left, and she moved to the meal that was only half-set, positioning herself on the heavy rugs and motioning to Otanara to do the same. She picked up a hunk of bread, drew up some roast meat, and got started on her meal.

Otanara understood. He commenced his account, filling in the gaps in the missives he had been sending to her. Alyssa was content to eat as he talked, neither interrupting to ask for clarifications nor acknowledging his actual retelling in any way. Only once he was done did she talk, and what she did say was so ridiculously inconsequential that he had to pour himself some mead to wash down the disappointment.

"Shizuru Fujino is tall," she told him.

Otanara gulped down his drink.

"I don't like her eyes," she went on with a tiny squint. "They were right in calling them red-I thought they might be a dark pink-but hers were red through and through. Uncanny."

He agreed.

"Still, I can see how the rest might appeal to Natsuki. Descended

from gods, was it?"

"From Ares as well as Aphrodite," he replied, only to be given a disapproving scowl.

"Mars, not Ares, and Venus, not Aphrodite," she corrected. "Believe it or not, I did listen to my pedagogues when they were teaching me about Himeans, Otanara. The Greek gods are not the Himean ones, even if they are in some ways alike."

She narrowed her blue eyes at his somewhat greyer ones.

"Foreigners they might be, but that's no excuse to be ignorant of their ways. It makes us vulnerable, ignorance."

He apologised for his lack of learning. Having successfully chastised him, she returned to her earlier statement.

"Descended from gods of war and love, then. An ambitious claim, eh?" she said.

"Their people seem to believe it," he shrugged, inwardly admitting he did too.

"They would: it shows convincingly. The woman has a face, doesn't she?" Her own face betrayed her interest. "Though that one's goods obviously go deeper than the display shelf."

The other was quick to agree-although not *too quick*, to be safe.

"She's a good general," he said.

"And a good fighter, obviously," she said, remembering the woman's wonderful physique. There had been no hiding the athleticism of the figure under that soldier's tunic, or the strong and long arms under the short sleeves. There had also been that leap over the bed. While Alyssa had expected the Himean to be swift, the lightness with which the woman had done that feat earlier had been better suited to someone more gracile and smaller of build. Someone like Alyssa's cousin, for example, who always reminded Alyssa of a sapling of the tree they called *tcheret* in Egypt.

"She was very proprietary about my cousin, that woman," she ruminated, wondering why indeed her father had withheld what Shizuru said he had withheld. She sighed aloud, more puzzled than irritated: answers were already being produced and weighed in her head, and they occupied her too much to permit annoyance. "She was even more proprietary than I expected, and apparently with reason, if what she said holds true."

"What did she say?"

"I shall make sure of it before I tell anyone. Although I doubt she was bluffing. Not the type to bluff, is she?"

Otanara thought to what he had heard and seen of the woman in question, as well as his brief glimpse of the Mentulaean prince whose jaw she had nearly torn off.

"No, I think she's not," he said decidedly.

"The two of them stay in that tent?"

"Yes."

"Since when?"

"Ever since we recovered Natsuki."

"And has she touched my cousin since then?"

His discomfort was plain at the suggestive enquiry.

"Touched...?" he started, only to receive a glare that could have curdled milk.

"I'm asking, you numbskull, if Shizuru Fujino has bedded the Princess Natsuki since they began living in the same tent again." She lifted her brows wryly. "Or were you so stupid as to forget to ask Natsuki's slaves about that?"

Otanara was embarrassed.

"No, I did ask," he admitted. "And they said she hadn't, to the best of

their knowledge."

"To the best of their knowledge."

"They are not always in the tent. There are nights when Shizuru Fujino sends them to sleep elsewhere."

"Convenient for the lovers. But the slaves return in the morning."

"Yes, to care for her while Shizuru Fujino goes about her duties."

"Then they should have checked the sheets," Alyssa said, ignoring the furious colour that came to Otanara's cheeks at the suggestion. "If they assist that way, I assume they bathe her too. They should be able to test the scent of her thighs as well when they give her a bath."

He shuffled as much as anyone sitting on a rug could shuffle. She watched him, a vague sheen of amusement in her often sombre gaze.

"But the Princess Natsuki-" he tried to argue.

"Is in a foreign woman's tent," she finished for him. "She's at the perfect age where she should be in an Otomeian bed already-mine, as was the idea-but instead she's with someone not of our people. After that little indignity, I think she can bear a minor inspection of her parts every now and then, just to see if she's still being used for lewd satisfactions even in her current state. I *do* care for my cousin's health, you know."

He nodded mutely, knowing her concern was with keeping the other princess's strength up as much as possible. While it was an old school of thought that said people were drained of even their healing powers by sex, Alyssa was the type of person who preferred to hedge her bets when it came to beliefs. He knew that, of course: why else did he remember to ask the slaves about it?

He knew too that she was still displeased with him. She had told him to see to Natsuki and Natsuki had been-horrible word- *crippled* . An awful outcome and a huge failure. She was only biding her time before making him pay and Otanara knew there was no chance of

coming out of it scot-free. The price might be tomorrow, it might be years from now: either way, she was merely being patient. At least this gave him time to start making amends and soften the blow before it came.

"Shizuru Fujino leaves to conduct her business in her command tent every day, about two hours past dawn," he informed her, eager to show his worth even if only in the smallest details. "But she returns regularly to Natsuki's tent every hour or so."

"Shizuru Fujino has her own tent?"

"Yes, but she rarely spends time in it. I hear she hasn't even slept in it at least once."

She nodded and asked him to pass the water jug.

"Show me to that tent tomorrow," she told him.

"Why?"

"Because she will move back into it as soon as possible-tonight, I think," she said.

He regarded her with confusion.

"How do you know she will do that?" he asked.

"Because I would."

He nodded, not quite comprehending but wise enough to pretend he did.

"How are the men since your last report?" she asked suddenly after finishing her drink.

"In better spirits, I think."

"The horse?"

"Down, but sufficient for the troopers remaining." He hesitated but continued. "Also, Shizuru Fujino sent to the citadel for more steeds.

She's also requisitioning more of our horses for the Himean officers, I hear-for a good price, naturally."

"Naturally," said Alyssa with mild mockery. "Were this a logical world, though, she would pay as well for the horses that are going to be replacing our men's lost steeds, considering they were lost in a battle under her people's command."

Otanara qualified this carefully. "It was the other one who commanded it, though."

"The Masashi one, was it? Still, it was a Himean command, and chiefly Himean responsibility." She saw a covered basket yet untouched on the table and lifted the cloth covering it. A laugh came from her as she saw the contents. "It seems little Natsuki cast that apple far enough to strike after all!"

Her companion was confused, but she had no intention of clarifying the matter for him. She picked an apple from the lot and fiddled with her belt, retrieving a small knife. The crisp sound of a chip of fruit being shaved was followed by an offer of the piece to Otanara, who took it with a nod of gratitude.

"So, then..." she started, already shaving off another chip for herself. "I shan't impose on you long, Otanara."

"You're going already? When?"

"Let me finish."

"Pardon me."

"It's because *you're* going to be imposing *on me* ."

His face crinkled. "What do you mean?"

"I only have a little time to spend here. I'm leaving again in two days and you're coming with me-all of you left and some of the other divisions the Himeans have with them." She flicked a small chip of apple into her mouth and murmured around it. "It depends on how the talk goes tomorrow. I want as many as I can get."



His eyebrows went up. "For where? You mean, for the boundaries?"

"Where else?"

If possible, his eyebrows crested even higher. She had just spent a full week of riding from that area, apparently killed several horses from fatigue, and even sacrificed some portion of her sleeping hours to shorten the journey. Her only accompaniment had been another warrior who had promptly taken a bath and collapsed into a cot after she had dismissed him. Now she wanted to cover that distance again just two days after finally seeing rest, with him and his part of her army for companionship? Sometimes, his commander seemed bent on giving him a string of surprises shot one after the other.

*As if her sudden arrival wasn't surprise enough today*, he thought dryly.

"I need you to do a cull of the able-bodied tomorrow," she told him, "and to get the men ready for the journey. We need to get back as soon as possible, even if I did leave the border patrols with Miyu."

Otanara had not expected her choice of replacement commander to be otherwise. Alyssa's usual second-in-command and constant companion, Miyu, was a skilful warrior and a capable general. She was also noble, a baroness thrice removed from the Kruger line and someone who had more or less grown up with the current Kruger brood, ensuring her sophistication as well as exposure to the ways of the high aristocracy.

And she happened to frighten him even more than Alyssa did.

But perhaps fear was not the right word, he said to himself, thinking more deeply on it. What one felt with Miyu was the cold creep of hairy-footed discomfort, not the gut-emptying clench true fear brought with it. Alyssa's colourless right hand-Miyu was an albino-was very much like one of Hephaestus' automata, but designed for service to Alyssa instead of work for the forge. It was the dedication of that design that made you feel uncomfortable with her, as though confronted by something less human and more mechanical in nature.

"How is the situation at the rivers?" he asked. "Have you had any more battles with the enemy?"

"The Mentulae are slow to act," she said nonchalantly. "So only two more since the last missive I sent."

"All told, only three encounters," he summed up. "Not a lot."

"Tags to the first groups too, not new armies. It seems the Mentulae don't expect regular updates from their armies. Not regular enough, anyway. Otherwise, they would have known the fate of their other armies ages ago. Only one of the groups we encountered was dedicated to finding information about those-and far too late for them to act and regain advantage."

"Which one was it, the scouting group?"

"Two were supply trains, the third a small reconnaissance unit."

No need to ask what had happened: he knew Alyssa. Instead, he moved on to another detail.

"So you need to get more forces before they catch on to the reason their investigative party's not coming back too."

She hummed in agreement.

"The Himeans said they sent reinforcements for the southern borders," he said. "Did you meet them?"

"The legions called the Fifth, the Sixth, the Fifteenth, the Sixteenth," she recited from memory, looking puzzled for some reason. She frowned and turned a questioning look to him. "It's such a logical way of naming their army divisions. First, second, third, fourth, all the way to gods know what figure. What do you think of it?"

He measured that carefully in his head.

"It's logical, as you say," he said. "But not very impressive. And just because a legion's called the first one apparently doesn't make it better than the others, they said."

She chuckled and he reflected, not for the first instance, that good humour actually made her very good-looking. It was a pity she was not very given to it, being that her natural state was that of sobriety.

"The borders are getting longer," she said, making an abrupt return to their original topic. "The inundations of spring have been receding all summer and now that autumn is setting in, more areas of the rivers have become fordable. We need every able body if we're to continue to purchase time for the conscriptions-both ours and theirs."

He nodded fervently. "Ten thousand foot and two thousand horse can't be enough, even with the Himeans doing their share."

"Exactly."

They continued to eat in silence, brooding on the topic. For a while there was only the sound of munching and of Alyssa's knife cutting into the apple. Otanara broke the monotony with a sound of surprise.

"Yes?" she said to him, a little annoyed: she had been enjoying the silence.

"If you planned to go to back to patrolling the borders immediately," he observed, "you didn't intend to get Natsuki from Shizuru Fujino after all?"

Alyssa shot him a look that said he was being stupid.

"Why would I intend that?" she said.

He frowned. "But you told her-"

"You should watch that habit of eavesdropping, Otanara... at least, around me. I don't care if you listen in on other people," she told him, instigating a profuse apology that she cut short because she hated profuse apologies: there were better ways of making up for mistakes, after all. "Yes, I did tell Shizuru Fujino that. But I only wanted to see what the woman would do. Would she let me have Natsuki or try to keep her?"

He was astounded by her strange notions. Why take that for a trial in the first place?

"So," he said, "what would you have done if she *had* yielded the princess?"

But she turned and only picked at her dusty-looking sleeves with a sigh on her face.

"Have your slaves bring me bathwater," she told him, brazenly deviating from the topic. "I can still smell those dead horses. It must have added to the fright for her, poor Natsuki."

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She was right. Even if the indefinable scent of dead horses had not been among the bigger sources of anxiety for Natsuki, the girl's sensitivity to such things left her feeling sapped by the odours of decay-which she had only barely escaped with her life recently, herself. When Alyssa had departed from the tent, Shizuru had found the girl collapsed again on the sheets, looking as though she could barely hold her spine straight. Her eyes dragged up as Shizuru came near and the older woman saw the drain the confrontation had taken as well as the confusion over what had been said, and her concern for the girl had been so great she actually missed to note the crucial development: that Natsuki was looking *at her*.

"Forgive the commotion, Natsuki," the older woman said, bending to the dark-haired girl and helping her to a less crumpled position. She held her by the tender skin of her armpits and lifted the sagging body that way. Natsuki mewled, and she apologised again.

"I am sorry-did it hurt?" Shizuru asked worriedly. "I really should have stopped her before she got this far. That was thoughtless of me. I am so sorry."

She drew back to make sure Natsuki was perfectly arranged, and then hurried to fetch some of the *calda* the slaves had originally brought for Natsuki's meal. She tested the drink's heat first and found it acceptable.

"Here, drink this," she said, seating herself beside the Otomeian. Natsuki was still so stunned by what had transpired, she noted, that the girl did not hesitate to open her mouth, cooperating faster than usual. "It should help. I know it was a shock to see your cousin."

Shizuru let her have three sips of the drink and asked if that was enough. The slightest of nods said it was, so the older woman put away the cup, chest caving in with the realisation-finally, how could she have missed it?-that she was interacting with Natsuki. Even if the girl had not spoken a word, she had finally responded to Shizuru's own, which was far more than she had done the past week. It probably spoke to the Himean's contentment with this minor feat that the breath left her when Natsuki began to speak.

"Guh-guh-"

Shizuru tried to remember how to breathe as the girl wrestled with her tongue.

"Guh-" Whatever Natsuki was saying seemed to defeat her. "Ngh-guh-"

The older woman waited nervously.

"Guh-guh-guh-gave?"

Her voice was rougher than Shizuru remembered, but of course it would be. It was from lack of use and the same was probably the reason for the vicious stutter as well. Natsuki's old stubbornness apparently never rusted away, though: the girl hissed from the labour but insisted again on what she wanted to say, gritting her teeth between syllables as she worked through her impediment.

"Tuh-uh-tuh-tuh!"

Shizuru could not take any more. Much as she wanted to hear Natsuki speak, the Otomeian's breathing was starting to hitch and Shizuru feared the effort would soon see her choking. Besides, she could see the green eyes taking on a wet sheen and she knew the girl was near tears from frustration. Understandable. Even in the early days of their companionship, Natsuki had never suffered an

attack of her impediment this violently, and that gave Shizuru some concern as well.

Shizuru put a hand on one clenched fist, trying to show that she understood it already.

"Yes," she said to the bewildered young woman. "Yes, King Kruger gave you to me."

Natsuki looked as though her head had just reeled, and Shizuru sat down on the bed quickly so Natsuki would not have to tilt her chin up to make their eyes meet.

"I asked for you," she revealed, tightening her grip on the girl's fist. "Months past, even before I left, I asked him if I could have you as my... my companion, exclusively. What I told your cousin was true."

Shizuru persevered to explain, anxious and frightened herself as the girl looked devastated by this. This was most certainly not how she had imagined revealing this to Natsuki. Still, now that it was here, she could do little but have it out as soon as possible, given the complications the Princess Alyssa was threatening to present. Now that she thought on it, exactly what threats *was* the Princess Alyssa presenting? Did she want Natsuki for herself? Shizuru had not detected the faintest trace of jilted amours early, but had certainly detected a possessive streak in the other princess's display. Oh, she would have to find out what that character wanted and quickly!

"I did not purchase you or anything of that sort, Natsuki," she hastened to say to the girl. "Let us make that clear. I would never belittle you that way, and I very much doubt King Kruger would have allowed you to be exchange for coin. He did not sell you to me, so do not worry about that."

She was lying. She knew the king had more or less sold Natsuki to her already, even if not with coin. Her statement was true, then, only by virtue of that technicality. The ruler of the Otomeians had agreed to Shizuru's request only because he saw the benefits of keeping someone like her happy. It worked out for him and for the alliance with Hime, and it worked out for the Himean he was seeking to please. Shizuru could not be angered by it, obviously, for she was

one of the beneficiaries of the agreement. She was also a politician who understood the way things worked in the world, a politician who understood this way well enough to make it work for her own aims. Still, she did not know how Natsuki might react to such a view of the matter, and she preferred not to find out at the moment.

"Natsuki," she said gently, only just refraining from appending the possessive pronoun to it. "Natsuki, what do you think?"

Natsuki said nothing, eyes wide and mouth agape. She breathed through it, and Shizuru saw that what the girl thought had uncertainty and conflict.

"I had hoped you would not be opposed to it," she said calmly, for all that her heart was sinking. She was reluctant to leave it there, but she knew she had something else to do and little time to do it: dark was setting and she could feel the drop of temperature even where they were.

She got to her feet with a squeeze of the girl's hand.

"Please wait for me a moment," she requested. "I shall return presently, I promise. I only need to see to something."

She held the green eyes until she saw a flicker that told her Natsuki agreed, a part of her again inwardly rejoicing at this tiny measure of communication. She left the girl and went outside to see the Lupine troopers on duty. They ducked their heads at her appearance. Both were clearly embarrassed for having let Alyssa through earlier, although Shizuru knew they had had little choice but to do it, given who the woman was to them and their nation.

She still frowned while addressing them.

"You should have kept her out, as I ordered," she said. "I understand that you were caught in the cleft stick because of her identity. Even so, I fear this cannot serve. In this camp, my word is law. And that goes for all soldiers here, whether Himean or auxiliary."

The slaves had returned, accompanied by some porters to help with the heated bathwater Shizuru had requested. Her steward was in

the train, and Shizuru raised a hand indicating that they should wait where they were.

"We are going to move," she said to the troopers. "Though I shall honour the agreement to have some of you as additional guardsmen for the princess's sake if you insist on it, I am going to have my own guards posted as well from now on, as we are moving into my tent to prevent disturbances like this from repeating. Should you seek out Otanara-han or whoever is in charge of you to see what you wish to do?"

They exchanged quick looks with each other and then nodded. She dismissed them.

"Hermias, I am moving back into my proper tent," she repeated for her steward, who sidled up once the Otomeians padded off. He was holding a bowl of what appeared to be water and an immersed vegetable—a cucumber, she saw—in his hands. She peered at the odd offering, diverted for a second as she said dryly, "And I know I said I wanted something simple for dinner, but you do not have to be sarcastic about it."

His smooth-shaven face broke out into a smile.

"Domina, it is for your eyes," he said.

"My eyes are fine. I can see it, can I not?" she sighed. "Oversee the transfer. I want it done within the hour and without too much noise. Where is Aella, by the way?"

"Here, Domina," said the woman, who had been overseeing the procession of slaves carrying the bathwater.

"Assist Hermias and have that water brought to my tent. How hot is it?"

"Scalding, Domina."

"Pour it into the tub once you get there."

Aella immediately started directing the servants to the new destination. The rest followed Shizuru into the tent she was



vacating, Hermias already sending for more burly slaves to carry the heavier items. As for their mistress, she went straight to the sleeping area of the tent, her eyes meeting restless green ones discomfited by the burst of activity behind the partitions.

Shizuru bent over to the girl and explained what was happening.

"Pardon the noise, Natsuki, but we have to do a lot of work. We are transferring tonight to my tent."

Natsuki continued to look bewildered, clearly shocked by the series of upheavals being thrown at her so suddenly.

"We cannot have any more incidents like this, *meum mel*," Shizuru continued, the hypocorism slipping out again for the first time in a week: she had found herself unable to say it during Natsuki's bout of self-isolation, as though afraid of it being yet another disturbance to the girl. Now that Natsuki was meeting her eyes, she felt she could say it once more, even if she did still feel the slightest twinge of fear that Natsuki would reject the old endearments. How she hated that fear!

"This cannot do, darling," she said, insisting on yet another endearment to spite the uncertainty that made them stick. "It is not proper that anyone should be capable of getting into the place where we sleep without our permission. I do not want people able to barge in at all times, as the Princess Alyssa did just now."

The name sent a fine shiver through her companion. She looked like someone bracing herself for a slap, and Shizuru wondered exactly what Alyssa had said earlier to bring Natsuki to this pass. At least it had woken Natsuki from her stupor, she thought, but if the effect extended to this sort of timid apprehension, she could not see it as too much of an advantage: she hated seeing Natsuki this way almost as much as she hated seeing the girl lost in herself.

"It's all right," she hushed, reaching for her tentatively, wondering if the girl would push her away. Natsuki had never done so and demonstrated that she was not about to do it now, so Shizuru very carefully closed the embrace, mindful of the birdlike ribcage heaving against her body. "Do not think about it, Natsuki. Whatever she told

you, do not think about it."

Her steward's voice in the next room reminded her of what she had to do, and she drew back reluctantly.

"I have to carry you now, Natsuki," she told the Otomeian. "The sooner we do this, the sooner you can rest and I can explain matters better."

She drew away the blanket and prepared to lift her. She stopped when she saw Natsuki shrinking as though she had been molested, limbs folding inwards and body bending. That was when she remembered that this was going to be Natsuki's first time out of the tent since her recovery. Already the girl was trying to curl up her legs and hide her stump under her shift. The sight tore at Shizuru, who was unable to restrain the flare of pain on her own face.

Swiftly inventing a solution, the Himean took the blanket from the bed and folded it over and around the girl. The long drape of the sheet fell far past the girl's legs, and Shizuru essayed a soft smile while folding the last edge over the girl's side.

"It is cold outside," she said in the most cheerful tone she could manage while concealing her lover's crippled body from the world. "I know you like autumn, but I do not want you catching a cold from the chill. You were still feverish only a week ago and I am not chancing anything." She sent the girl what she hoped was a teasing glance. "And as I said before, you always needed a little more fat on you to keep you warm."

Natsuki only regarded her swaddled form with an unreadable expression.

"My apologies for this if it hurts, but I shall try to be gentle," Shizuru said once finished. "I must walk quickly, however, because it is cold outside."

She slid one arm under Natsuki's knees and another behind her back, not even needing to brace herself for this cargo. The hiss of breath was on her neck, and she whispered another apology into the black hair.

The relocation was brief. Hermias and Aella supervised the transport of the furniture and gear while Shizuru unloaded Natsuki carefully into her bed. She found something comforting in the idea of again having Natsuki in *her* bed. It had been so long since she had ensconced Natsuki in a mattress that both of them would share, as she fully intended with this one: it was large enough for two people, after all, unlike the other bed in the other tent, and very thickly padded.

While ensuring that the girl's back was bolstered properly by several fat pillows, Shizuru was struck by a tiny detail that she had not thought to see to before.

*It has been an age since I saw her draped in a purple sheet, she thought while pulling up the new bedspread of Tyrian purple over Natsuki's waist. How right she looks in it! I had nearly forgotten, and that was remiss of me. From now on I shall use only Tyrian purple for the sheets-despite all else she is still a princess.*

"Domina."

It was Hermias. Shizuru looked away from the royally-draped Natsuki and saw that the servants were just about finished. She had been fussing over Natsuki's comfort for so long that the time had slipped past without her noticing it.

"We have brought the food too, but it has cooled," her steward asked. "Would you permit us to reheat it?"

Shizuru nodded.

"But clear the tent already and just send it in once you have heated it," she said, allowing some tiredness to come through in her tone. "I would like some privacy."

She glanced around and caught sight of several blonde heads, most of which belonged to people arranging Natsuki's effects.

"And the Otomeians, Hermias," Shizuru said. "The Otomeian slaves here are Natsuki's. They have been serving me. Take charge of them, please. Assure them they shall still be permitted to serve their

mistress as usual."

"Of course, Domina."

"Now send these away and see to the food. The bathwater should be nearly at the perfect temperature now and I want some peace."

"As you wish it, Domina."

Once the tent had been emptied of other presences, Shizuru wasted no time getting to her purpose-which was not actually to bathe the girl as she had implied to Hermias. Rather, she wanted to talk to Natsuki.

She asked the girl first, very cautiously, if she wished to see the letters that had been mentioned to Alyssa. Natsuki declined with a shake of her head and proceeded to look bewildered again at the reminder that she had been "given away". Shizuru responded by drawing up a stool to the side of the bed, leaning forward and putting her weight on her elbows, which she settled casually on her knees. Not a pose she was prone to making in public, but this was Natsuki with her: she would have gone to her knees easily just to make the girl feel comfortable.

"Are you angry with me?" she asked. "For doing that behind your back?"

The girl looked torn on what the answer should be. Shizuru tried to steer her to the preferable response by explaining again.

"I only wanted to be sure," she said. "I wanted to know... that there would be no hindrance when I returned." She paused and reminded her, "I told you I would return, Natsuki."

Natsuki continued to look at her with a lost expression.

"I also got you the Himean citizenship," Shizuru proceeded, prompting the girl to replace the lost expression with one of shock. Well, she had expected as much for that particular piece of news, truth be told.

"The papers are drawn up and I only need to send them to the

keepers of the census," the older woman said. "I wanted to tell you that in better circumstances. And I wanted it to be a gift."

She trailed off at the sight of Natsuki's horrified face.

"Why does this displease you?" she asked, immeasurably hurt. Even now, she reflected, Natsuki still confounded her: the girl issued conflicting suggestions, one moment automatically striking a cousin under the misunderstanding that the woman posed a threat to her—an explanation Shizuru came upon at about the same time as Alyssa—and the other moment rejecting her most significant move towards securing their future together. Sometimes it tempted her to consider that there was indeed a fevered brain in the girl's lovely skull.

"You do not welcome this as I had thought you would," she continued, even as Natsuki tried to school her face. "Perhaps we should not talk about it now. I admit it is too much to take, all at one moment. I am sorry for introducing it at such a worrisome time."

The Otomeian looked conflicted but still shook her head slowly. And then she asked—as well as one with her speech impediment and agitation could ask—what the agreement Shizuru had made with the king meant for her. Shizuru realised this was central to whatever was troubling the girl about the matter, so she considered the query with care, wondering how best to phrase the response.

"At it simplest, it means that you cannot be promised by him to anyone else," she eventually decided, going the more delicate route. "I admit my foremost thought was that when first I asked him for it. Well, I am a selfish wretch after all. I fear I have not improved my skills at sharing in the time we have been apart."

The faintest of glints passed through Natsuki's eyes: to Shizuru, it looked like remembrance. She kept talking, afraid to let their interaction lull else it never start up again.

"Still, I see it is a good thing that I extracted the promise, going from what I saw of your cousin."

She saw the feeble protest in Natsuki's face and shook her head.

"Pardon my tongue. I did not intend to grieve you by saying that," she said, shaking her head again and frowning at herself: it would be thoughtless of her to suddenly revert to how they had been before, with Natsuki being the person made to suffer the complaints she hid from all the world. She should not be putting this on the girl, not when Natsuki had so many things deserving complaint as well.

"Never mind what I said," she dismissed. She sat up straight and tried to save her regard of Alyssa for the girl's sake. "Besides, I am not saying I dislike her. I did not like what she did, but I am not the sort of person who would base my full opinion on someone on one encounter alone, unless the encounter were of a more powerful, lasting kind than what transpired just now."

She remembered something and mentioned it.

"She was just as Suou described-at least, based on what she said to be her expectations of the woman in the letters she left. Your description of her must have been true. Your cousin is headstrong, I suppose, and more than a little arrogant... but that is not sufficient to condemn her in my eyes. Truth be told, my first impression of her is of a fascinating woman."

She withheld a wry smile as she realised she actually meant that. She could not feel a durable dislike in remembering Alyssa, even despite the egregious offence the woman had tendered. Perhaps it was because Shizuru still felt that the woman had merely been testing her-for the most part-with that wilful display earlier. Perhaps it might even be because she felt the draw of someone who, in some of the essential respects at least, was like unto her. The must of horse dung and sweat had not had the power to take away Alyssa's sense of puissance and intellect, and Shizuru, whose greatest frustration in life was the lack of strong and intelligent fellows, could not help but want to reach out to those traits whenever she found them-even if they did happen to be in headstrong foreigners who were clearly not thrilled about her being with their cousin.

She looked up at Natsuki, only to have her breath snag: while she had been expecting a livelier pair of green eyes than usual, what she saw definitely exceeded her expectations. This was most certainly not the Natsuki of last week, whose eyes had been but

garnitures to an empty box. For a moment she had difficulty deciphering the expression in the large eyes, even, because of its very effulgence, the unrefined nakedness of the feeling fuelling its radiance.

"Ssh-" the girl hissed, labouring even as her eyes filled. "Sssuou?"

As before, Shizuru froze. It was not the speech alone this time, however: it was Natsuki's eyes doing something she had never really seen them do before, the hiccupping gasps she now realised to be a part of the way Natsuki cried. And it was the name of someone she had not mentioned to the girl all this time, not necessarily hiding that person's fate but shelving it away and out of sight.

"Suou?" Natsuki repeated, pushing out the name with a sob. "Suou left - she left letters?"

*Ah yes, she does not know, Shizuru thought, still engrossed in this new face the girl was showing her. But now she does, and she knew it from those few words I let slip. Did Suou tell her those letters were to be given to me only if she died, then? It would seem so. She has not cried for herself ever since discovering her amputation yet the idea of Suou being dead moves her to this sort of heartbroken lament. She loved her, then. Well, I loved her too. I did not speak of her death only because it was not the sort of thing any sane person could have done: why tell someone already dealing with so much loss about another one?*

There was something tugging at her tunic. Shizuru realised that the girl had reached for her chest and balled up a clump of the fabric with her hand.

"Shizuru," she wrenched out, finally saying her name again though Shizuru could not appreciate it at the moment. "Shizuru. Suou is-is-is she?"

But Shizuru only responded with a sad look, knowing the girl could read the answer in that very easily.

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And over a month had passed since then. A month in which she had had to console Natsuki even while dealing with her own grief in silence, unable to unburden herself to the people she had expected to be her confidantes because one was suffering too much to be burdened any further and the other was dead. It was a bitter way to start a campaign, and she had never experienced a start quite like it. While it had not the power to stump her-Shizuru was a creature of adversity, in her own way-it did make for a less enjoyable experience. Still, she was conscious of her consolations and knew to be grateful for them. She was grateful, above all, that Natsuki was with her again, especially since the girl was no longer ignoring people around her.

It started from Alyssa's unexpected visit. Shizuru supposed it was the series of shocks that had cracked Natsuki's shell. The girl had been so devastated by the revelations that night-that of Suou's death more than anything-that she had spent the whole of the evening in Shizuru's arms, sobbing as though the news of Suou's demise would be the end of her as well. After that the prospect of meeting Alyssa in the morning had not seemed too grave a prospect. Indeed, when the time for meeting came, the other princess had behaved herself in a surprisingly different fashion from that of the previous evening.

The Alyssa that Shizuru saw after the first night was cool but also less abrasive, always clear on what she wanted and how to justify it. She had also been surprisingly forthcoming about her reasons for trying Shizuru the previous night, and delivered her opinion about the other woman's liaison with Natsuki in like fashion.

"I don't expect you to excuse my conduct, but you cannot expect me to excuse your affair with Natsuki either," she had told Shizuru flatly. "I *can* live with it, nevertheless, which is what I recommend you do too with what I did. I intended to marry Natsuki myself, which is the reason I'm irked by your arrangement with her and my father. That aside, it seems I cannot do anything about it for the moment. The least I can do then is ensure that she is going to someone who gives her the regard due to her station: I cannot let someone like my cousin be 'given away' to someone who would treat her like an inconsequential plaything. And in your favour, I begin to see why-



aside from the political reasons, naturally-my father let you have her for now. Of course, once you do let go of her, I shall be marrying her anyway."

"You mean 'if'," Shizuru had replied, not entirely sure what to make of such stunning bluntness. "And that is an 'if' that lies completely in the realm of pure hypothesis."

"If you say so," had been the dry retort. "I would just like you to understand something, Shizuru Fujino. You are a foreigner, so you don't understand some of our ways. Natsuki is not an obliging person either when the point touches on her, so I'm the one who must inform you of this."

"And 'this' would be?"

"I was about to get to it. Physical prowess and skill in warfare are among our most prized traits, which is why you people come to us for warriors for your armies. But among us, if a person is not strong enough to be a warrior, he must at least be a great mind and leader of the community. The chief way of measuring this is in a person's performance in court or council. I think your Senate works much the same for you senators, not so?"

"To some extent."

"My cousin was a great warrior," Alyssa continued. "And she has always had a great mind, one of the best I've ever seen. But our people don't count it as they should because Natsuki has a problem with her tongue and cannot speak properly. The measure does not favour her, which is unfortunate but a fact. Our ancestors were people of the oral traditions: even now the oral delivery is privileged by many of us. It's another reason people tended to shy away from Natsuki when she was younger-she was always too fond of books and most could not understand her fascination with the written word. So now I ask you, do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes."

"I thought you would. Let's leave it at that."

And they had left it at that. Alyssa had then gone on to explain the situation at the boundaries and used that to lead up to a very reasonable request for some of the Otomeians at Sosia to stiffen her forces. Shizuru let the Otomeian princess have all twelve thousand of the Otomeian foot and kept for herself only the cavalry, trusting her instincts about the other woman. Her faith would be justified later in the winter, after Alyssa would send news that she had already taken over several of the easternmost Mentulaeen towns. The area was an important location because the area surrounding it was fertile from the inundations of the rivers Atinu and Holmys, making it a precious source of crops and grain.

Shizuru ventured out to the ruins of Argentum shortly after Alyssa left with the auxiliary infantry. She was accompanied only by a squadron of troopers. Her purpose was simple: to see the extent of Argentum's destruction and assess the difficulty of rebuilding it. Shizuru wanted to restore the razed city, and this would be easier if some of the old foundations remained.

She knew there were many of its people who had survived, and they would be crucial to her goal. Much like many other city-states, Argentum's populace had never been restricted to its citadel walls: that was only the central city, where the government resided. A good number of Argentum's populace had actually survived. These were people that lived in the outlying areas spared by the Mentulaeen assault, and others were people who had been vacationing in other lands at the time of the attack. Shizuru banked that the ones among these who might care to restore their city would be back by the start of fall, and it was these Shizuru wanted to persuade to stay and reconstruct.

Now the Argentians were a hardy people. They had suffered like assaults on their existence before the latest one because of where they lived. When you teetered on the fringes of great empires, you were just naturally susceptible to attacks of the kind the Mentulaeans had recently visited on them. As such, by the time Shizuru arrived with her escort, there were already some of the remaining Argentians going through the rubble, trying to salvage building materials from the wreckage and getting rebuilding plans underway. These she promised as much help as could be given,

making her mission clear to them.

"You shall have to wait until we can get more supplies together from Argus," she said, bending over to feel the clay of the earth with her hands; this was where her Eighth had died, so her touch was reverent and laced with private mourning. "It shall be difficult, yes. But help shall come, so you must persevere. Argentum is not eradicated as long as you remain."

The foremost of the survivors, a local of respectable lineage, agreed.

"This has happened before," he said. "A long time ago, and even then it didn't take. Argentum's survived being razed before and it's going to survive it again. But the only problem is, how is our administration to proceed? Our leaders are all dead, and we need someone to head the restoration."

She took the hint and sized him up with a keen glance.

"You may function as the leader at present," she determined. "Select others according to your custom and rebuild your government."

He bowed to the waist, gratified by the appointment.

"Mind that I shall return to check on you," she warned him. "This is where one of my legions triumphed and also where it perished. I have no intention of letting this place be wiped off this earth by either Mentulaeans or corrupt administration. Many armies have come and gone here, and the surrounding area is not only rich with blood but also with the waste of thousands of livestock and men. It shall sustain life and grow crops tenfold in the years to come, which is perhaps some recompense for the deaths it has seen."

After that she had to reposition some of the western legions for her plans. Before the visit to Argentum, Shizuru received a communiqué from her legate heading the legions at the borders, Kenji Nakamura. He wrote to say he had succeeded in his primary mission, which was to keep the Mentulaeans from infiltrating through the southern passes. He had been successful in his secondary mission: the mountain tribes of Obsidian's southern empire had agreed to an

alliance with Hime, in exchange for assurance of their territories and the promise of additional lands after the annexation.

They were eager to help in both warfare and provision, according to Kenji. While these tribes were not very wealthy in grain, they did raise a lot of livestock, which meant the Himeans now had one more food source in the Mentulaean territories besides additional auxiliary reserves. Kenji also wrote that he had already started burning small towns and doing raids on the nearest occupied places, although the real prize in his eye was a sizeable fortress not too far from the Mentulaean massif.

*Our current camp is well-served. We have a nice supply line and our new allies work as perimeter lookouts to prevent the local Mentulaean governor's forces from sneaking up on us. We've not had to fend off any royal armies yet: but that will change once word gets out (eventually it should, I guess, even in this slow country) and the legions won't last long here in winter. I'm thinking of moving into that fortress-town and wintering there.*

*It's an interesting edifice, General, and you'd love to take it on yourself if you saw it, I think. It's built right smack on a spur projecting from the massif, and range right behind it is rocky as Tartarus, impossible to use as the attack point for a full army. Yet that's the only place you can run men into it without getting slaughtered immediately, because the rest of it's on such a steep incline in front.*

*Our new allies also tell me that the fortress is pretty well-stocked and has springs inside it. It's perfect for our purposes, that is. Also, it apparently has a nice cache of the royal treasures-which I think we deserve to collect as compensation for the trouble these cunni have caused us, if you'll pardon the language.*

*I'm going to use the mountain tribes to find a way to infiltrate the rear gate. The Mentulae don't know yet that we're working with some of the local tribes, since we haven't fielded them at all for any of our assaults. I'm confident I can take the place easily, thanks to our new friends-who seem to be absolutely afire with the idea of kicking out their Mentulaean sovereigns, by the way, whom they insist are not their sovereigns. All to the good for us if that's the case. We*

*Himeans seem to get along with peoples of the mountains, don't we?*

Shizuru sent back a short missive telling him to take the fortress-town as soon as possible. She also told him to soften his approach a little before being too eager with the torches, especially with the smaller towns.

*Fire only when you absolutely have to, she wrote. Otherwise, approach the people first with offers to shift to our side. Considering the things we hear of Obsidian's idea of government, I imagine most of the Mentulaeans shall only be too happy to defect. It also preserves our supply lines, since we want to make as much of the land as possible once we start mounting the full offensive. Remember that each time you set fire to a farm over there you are setting fire to a farm in what is going to be our province. I doubt I would be too happy with you if you reduced it to ashes before I even got started with my governorship.*

It was around the time she sent this letter that she also received one from Hime, forwarded to Sosia by her cousin in Argus. This letter was from her old senior legate, Chie Harada, who had chosen to stay at home and protect Shizuru's interests in the Senate, as well as press her own long-running courtship with the daughter of Hikaru Senou, arch-aristocrat and arch-conservative.

*My suit has seen some improvement, I admit, since I'm in better financial position than before thanks to my share from our campaign, Chie wrote to Shizuru. Thank gods the old boy is Himean enough to be softened by money, even if he is a monumental snob. It sticks in his craw that I'm a plebeian, although I doubt my money shall stick long in his purse!*

*Well, enough on that: the governor of Septentria (did you or Himemiya come up with that name, by the way?) has better things to do, I'm sure, than go through a missive dedicated entirely to the whinging of a frustrated suitor. Besides, I'm also writing this for our senior consul, who agreed that I should handle conveyance of the news from home for now. She's rather busy, you know, because she's been turning Hime upside down with her laws-which are proving, interestingly enough, that upside down is sometimes right*

*side up! She sent abridged copies of her legislation, which I've enclosed (yes, those fat rolls are abridged already). You'll find them interesting reading and thoroughly evocative of her usual legislative lustre.*

*Elections have finished, by the way, and the new crop is promising. Before I get on to the results, though, I would like to tell you a little point of note that rather flabbergasted everybody. In the final announcements of the candidates, Himemiya's cousin with the cartload of a name, Urumi Nemura Himemiya-Kanzaki, got up in front of Senate and People and made an announcement. She was going to run, she said, for the consulship!*

*Now as you can expect, no one saw that coming at all. Even Himemiya, it seems, for her face was painted with the most excellent look of "what-mushrooms-did-she-eat-this-time?" Oh, the bedlam among the others, though! Radicals babbling to the left, conservatives babbling to the right, and the maverick herself in the centre, grinning in all directions. Even I was babbling, I admit, because it's unheard of, a tribune of the plebs going straight after the consulship. Himemiya took her to task for it, of course.*

*"What do you mean you are running for consul?" asked Himemiya.*

*"I mean that I'm running for consul," said Himemiya-Kanzaki.*

*"You cannot do that, tribune," said Himemiya.*

*"But nothing in the law prevents me," said Himemiya-Kanzaki.*

*"Then I shall make a law preventing you," said Himemiya.*

*"Oh, well, in that case, never mind," said Himemiya-Kanzaki.*

*You may well say that over half of us fell over laughing, the maverick's other cousin the Princeps laughing loudest of all. Himemiya herself seemed in stitches by the incident, as her lips would not stop jerking up at the corners, no matter how much she tried to preserve her usual stoicism. Either it was simply a marvellous jest from her cousin on Himemiya's string of legislative schemes, or perhaps a reminder that Himemiya should try to provide*

*for even the most outrageous of incidents in her laws because we Himeans are creatures of the outrageous by nature. I incline to the explanation that it was both. Thank all the gods for the Himemiya! They're all raving mad, but they do make everything interesting. I believe this year has been one of the best we've had in a long time because of them (and you): senate attendance has been amazing this past year, according to the records. It's because no one trusts the two to be left without supervision, of course.*

*Moving on to other important matters, you should know first that the horse you were backing made it in: Keigo Onishi is the senior consul, with-as you predicted-Satoshi Ootori as his junior colleague. How's that for a pair? Both of them are still fairly young too: not as youthful as our current senior consul, true, but Himemiya's special. Anyway, it's always good to have some young blood directing the Senate, which is made up of too many corpses and hags.*

*The political inclinations of the consular pair are interesting too. While Onishi can't exactly be called conservative-middle-of-the-road, perhaps?-in his policies, he is a little more on the forward side of things, whereas Satoshi Ootori is typical Ootori, generally conservative but quick to support the radical measure if it means profit. Both are tied powerfully to the knightly communities, Onishi even to the same communities among which you have the strongest pull, as he is himself a lobbyist for the mining plutocrats. I know you and he have known each other for some time as a result and get along, and Ootori can be reasoned with given appropriate baksheesh... all of which means this coming year shouldn't work out too badly for you in the Senate.*

*The other officials-elect are not as exciting, with the exception of the curule aediles. I shall talk about the minor honourables first, though; I know you like the oblique approach. The tribunes of the plebs are more conservative than anything, although Himemiya's new bet got in. Still, I don't see anyone of Himemiya-Kanzaki's calibre, so it shan't be as exhilarating in the Well of the Comitia as this year. We have one of the Hoshino brood for urban praetor and a Futaba for foreign praetor next year. Solid conservatives there, along with one of the plebeian aediles, who is an Akagi.*

*But, as I said, the curule aediles are the more interesting characters:*

*we have Sachiko Ogasawara and Rei Hasekura. You already know that Ogasawara is chummy with Hasekura and should work nicely with her. That, taken with the fact that both of their families are quite well off (which is an excellent example of the understatement in Ogasawara's case, as we both know), means we can all look forward to spectacular games next year! What a pity you shall not see it, but I suppose you will have your own excitements to look forward to over there. May you prosper in your goals and carve out your new province easily.*

This was a letter that brought Shizuru some comfort, as she had missed her old friend quite a bit. She was more prone to missing people of late, and it suddenly dawned upon her, midway through the last month of the year and with her twenty-sixth birthday fast approaching, that she actually felt weary. This was due to many things-she was childishly tempted to say it was encroaching age that accounted for it-but the greatest source was perhaps the frustrated longing for the old relation with Natsuki.

Now she was not hoping for something that would never come back: Natsuki would never again be the same, just as the way they were with each other would never again be the same. She knew too that there were facets to the new Natsuki that would take some time to unveil, because it was simply too early and Natsuki was in her own way bad at sharing. But there were parts of the old relation that she still missed acutely and could hardly wait to find again. She missed Natsuki's deft humour, for instance, which had always thrilled her. She missed the girl's stunning grins, of which she had yet to see a specimen since their reunion. And she missed her touch, the old sexuality between them, that fearful urgency that they had felt whenever they had used to find themselves alone and in a room with a bed or any other feasible surface.

There was more to the last point, however, and it had to do with Natsuki's health. Frustrated lover though she might be, Shizuru was also a sensible woman: sensible enough to know, certainly, that the younger woman was not yet capable of sexual activities. The *medici* had also advised against it in their list of things their special patient could not yet be permitted-and advised against it with a great deal of trepidation and stuttering, for all that Shizuru had been her most



serene at the time.

Some of the old affections had to be modified too for the girl's health. Shizuru could not rest her head on Natsuki's breast as she had used to, for example, because her weight could trouble the frail chest. Instead, she now held Natsuki from the side or rolled the Otomeian on top of herself when Natsuki was willing. The Otomeian always indicated this by shuffling closer when Shizuru got into bed, and Shizuru would respond by turning on one side, holding the girl by the arms, then rolling carefully onto her back and bringing Natsuki on top of her with the movement.

Natsuki no longer touched her face in the mornings. It seemed a small thing, but Shizuru had always loved being woken by her that way. Shizuru also caught her doing something in its stead once: an inspection of her amputated leg's new topography through the bandages. It had been followed by the sound of swift puffs through her nose, and each snuffle had broken Shizuru's heart so badly that she got up, lit a lamp near the damaged leg, and covered the stump with kisses, each one drawing out louder sobs than the last. It was a firm message, and Natsuki no longer cried when inspecting her stump after that.

Despite events like this, Shizuru still despaired of being sufficient anodyne for Natsuki's anguish. Again the unfairness of their relation came upon her: Natsuki for her was enough to take away the pain of all losses, but she doubted she could do the same thing for Natsuki. It was true the crippled princess was strong and that she was genuinely trying to learn how to live with her new lot. Indeed, she had made better headway than even Shizuru had expected in her renewal after her cousin's unexpected visit, which made Shizuru wonder on occasion what Alyssa had told the girl in the brief interview she let them have with each other. But there were still things that worried her in spite of that, such as the lost expressions Natsuki showed when she forgot that someone was watching, or the girl's refusal to leave their tent even when Shizuru offered to carry her outside for a little "walk". The older woman was doing her best to help the girl heal, but she wondered if the place where they were might not be holding back the recovery.

It was partly because of this and other reasons relating to Natsuki's

recuperation that she made the decision to have a trip: she would be moving all but the Eleventh legion back to Argus, to winter there instead of in Sosia province.

"I agree it's the wiser thing," her legate Miyuki said in response. "Argus shall have better supply routes at the moment. Right now, I'm afraid we only stand to depress the Sosia supplies and reserves, which we should be rebuilding."

"Quite so," Shizuru said. "Besides, I think it is high time we managed to send the Prince Hanu to be held in Fuuka and shipped off our Mentulaeen captives for the slave markets. I do not intend to have to pay for the captives' keep this winter when I should be dedicating the resources to the legions."

Miyuki tapped a nail on the table thoughtfully. "To which markets do you intend to send them?"

"There are only a few thousand of them, so I shall not spread them out. I shall ship all of them for sale in Fuuka."

"Slaves are in demand right now. You will make a killing, to put it bluntly."

"So I think."

They were sitting in the command tent and joined by the rest of Shizuru's legates: Shohei Nagayama and Toshi Kumakura from last year's campaign, and Seigo Ushida, just recently taken on as part of the team. The latter was very chipper despite his defection from the hapless Takeda, who had taken the news of his friend going to the Fujino side with a few choice oaths and some choice liquor.

"I understand you've your career to think of, Seigo," the man had told Ushida sourly after another gulp of wine. "But you should be warned: the woman's not someone who'll further your goals, you know."

"Oh, now- *really*?" Ushida had responded at the time. "I know you don't like her, but how can you say that? Look at her records in the military alone. It's one victory after another."

"Oh, yes, she's successful! The gods love her-sometimes I think they'd drink her piss if she threw it at them," Takeda had replied with another swig of wine. "It's not going to be your success, is my point. It's all going to be hers, even if you do the work. Take the relief of Sosia. It was Nagayama who really did most of the work in ending the siege, yet she steals the credit."

Ushida's eyes had opened wider at this.

"She's their general. That theft is her privilege," he had said, knowing Shizuru Fujino had given her legate sufficient credit for the victory following the battle. It was also contentious to say it was Shohei Nagayama who had achieved the win: Ushida had been part of the command for the fighting and knew how crucial her arrival and flanking attack of the Mentulaeans had been in ending that long battle.

But even this was practically irrelevant before the main point. Shizuru Fujino had every right to call the victory hers if her officers had achieved it. That was the prerogative of a general, as Ushida had suggested: all triumphs were credited ultimately to her, no matter whose hands had directly fashioned them. The natural exchange was that all failures were credited ultimately to her as well, and she would have to be the one to absorb the blame. All senators knew this, and it was actually the reason that there were a select few who had made names for turning away just about every campaign offered to them. To these stay-at-home senators, the merest sign of a generalship was sufficient to bring on a fever lasting a week... or however long it would take for the Senate to offer that dangerous office to someone more willing.

So Takeda's interpretation of the rescue of Sosia was unorthodox, to say the least. Ushida was surprised that someone who was such a stickler for the traditional ways would fail to interpret the event in the proper, Himean way-but then again, he also surmised that Takeda did not wish to accept that principle at the moment, given how much censure he was about to face for his own generalship.

Takeda left soon after that conversation with his old friend, intent on journeying back to Hime and facing his inevitable fate in the Senate. It was then that Shizuru Fujino proved she could be refined in her

cruelty. She approached him about taking on a special task before he left: she gave Takeda the urn that held Suou Himemiya's ashes and asked if he would see it to Suou's sister.

She explained to him that she would give it to the courier of her letters, were it not that Suou had been too beloved to her as well as too important a person for her ashes to be delivered by a mere courier. Better that it be a senator to deliver her ashes because she should have been a senator, Shizuru told Takeda, who agreed because honour would not permit him to decline despite survival insisting that he demur. For he knew the meaning behind the task and how it added to his shame. Not only would he be facing the Senate and made to explain the abysmal results of his generalship, he would be facing one of the greatest aristocrats of their time and telling her how it was his orders that had seen her sister fighting in the front and eventually killed. It was a horrid prospect, yet what else could one do in his place? To turn away the request would have been even more disgraceful, and would have destroyed him in everyone's esteem just as easily. And looking into the red eyes as he swallowed bile and accepted the commission, he came to a new appreciation of his foe's venomous cunning.

This wrecked man was the one Seigo Ushida had traded for Shizuru Fujino, so Ushida ultimately did not feel he had fared too badly in his switch in loyalties. Tergiversation was natural in their job occupation and he liked Shizuru Fujino's glaring capability better than his old friend's duller light, anyway. Furthermore, he was instinctively predisposed to thinking better of her than Takeda would have it. She was a fellow patrician, after all, whereas Takeda-even if he was of impeccably good ancestry-was still of plebeian pedigree. The old divisions still ruled for Ushida, as they did for many others in the old aristocracy.

"Fujino-san, if the Eleventh legion stays here, who winters with them?" he asked now, fairly confident about his standing amidst the other legates. The eldest in the group, Toshi, spoke up at his query.

"I'd like to volunteer," the man said. "I've spent some time in Sosia for a while now, Fujino-san, and I know how to be of help to them in rebuilding their defences and the city. I can keep the Eleventh in shape with the construction work too, until you need it to be moved

out."

Everyone thought this an excellent idea and murmured approval.

"Very well then, Toshi-han it is," the general said, crossing her legs and leaning back in her seat. "Everyone else to Argus with me. Miyuki-han handles the supplies and logistics for our trip-please make a note to have the centurions double-check the cold-weather gear before marching-while Ushida-han and Shohei-han can handle the legionaries. I want everything ready by two days, departure at dawn."

She did not even wait to hear if they thought this feasible or not: if she ordered it, it meant she knew she could find a way to do it. And if she could find a way to do it, she expected them to do the same.

"Toshi-han, remember my regulations on constant communication now, please, especially as you are going to be the main contact point for our interactions with our Otomeian friends. Sosia is going to have to serve as a hub for Himean-Otomeian communications. Be vigilant in scouting the area as well, once we leave. If you have to employ a hundred extra scouts to do it, go ahead. Best not be caught unawares as before, even if I do doubt you shall find the Mentulae coming in this autumn."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because they should presently be getting word at the capital of their defeats at the boundaries and guessing what has happened to Prince Hanu's forces as well. They might be slow, but not static. And the King Obsidian is at heart a big bully. He shall dither for some time after getting word that the people he is bullying are hitting back, which buys us some time."

"So it's to Argus without fear," Miyuki said.

"But with a great deal of caution still, of course."

"Of course."

"I want a fast march, by the way." All but Ushida hid a cringe, knowing that meant she wanted cramp-inducing speed. "I need to

see Shizuma and the rest of the legions as soon as possible. The new legions should be by tyros, as you know, and we have quite a bit of work to do on them before they are battle-ready."

"How long *do* you usually spend on training before fielding new recruits?"

"That's hard to say because Fujino-san never stops training," Shohei cut in loudly, prompting Shizuru's laughter. "She just keeps flogging them and flogging them, I tell you, like the world's most persistent slave-driver. But who am I to complain? It's worked thus far!"

"The average number of days would be a hundred," Shizuru said to Miyuki with a grin, shaking her head at her old legate's forbidding portrayal of her generalship. "But that still does not mean they shall be good at fighting."

"True, it takes a good commander to blood them properly," Ushida put in, knowing what she was trying to say.

Shizuru nodded. "That having been said, proper training is still essential."

"Ooh, I can't wait to start drilling the greenies," Shohei chuckled, rubbing his hands with glee. The rest grinned at him.

"Remember you said that, because I want training to continue even to the dead of winter," Shizuru smirked. "Toshi-han, I have a query for you before we leave. How fare the Sosia mines and blacksmiths?"

"Oh, they've not suffered too badly from the siege, especially the mines. They're far out on the mountain range of the province, after all, and far-removed from the city."

"They have been producing swords and armour thus far, yes? To aid in the war?"

"Yes, that's so." Toshi smiled. "They're quick to jump in, the Sosia locals. They didn't even need any telling."

"Commendable of them," she said. "But I want to place a special

order that should be filled as soon as possible and by the best blacksmiths. Could you see it to the most dependable forges and foundries?"

"Of course, Fujino-san," he answered. Everyone was listening.

"I want five thousand axes," she told him. "Specifically, felling hatchets of the type we use for cutting wood in the army. Nice and portable, but very hardy."

He agreed, although he was clearly as puzzled as the rest of them.

"Are we low on the camp hatchets?" Miyuki asked worriedly. "I'm afraid I had not noticed anything, Shizuru-san."

Shizuru waved it away.

"Oh, no, it is for something else," she said. "Although it is true that I shall be having the legionaries using them. There are not enough of the hatchets in each legion, you know. Only enough for camp-making and clearing camp grounds. Really a sad deficiency."

The confusion was plain on their faces, but she did not enlighten them.

"Toshi-han, I want those quickly," she said. "To be precise, I want them finished by two months at the latest."

"Two months at the latest?"

"A month would be better. Send them to Argus then," she told him, managing to completely ignore the disbelief on his face. Again the message was clear: he had to find a way to make it work, no matter how daunting the deadline seemed. "That is it for today. Are there any queries?"

There were none.

"Wonderful. Dismissed."

She got up and left first of all, pausing only to nod as they bade her farewell before filing out of the tent. They did not bother following the

general with their eyes once outside, as they knew precisely where she was headed: to the larger structure adjoining the command tent, which housed her living quarters.

Shizuru stepped into that other structure and was met by her steward and two slaves.

"Natsuki?" she called through the inner flap, slinging off the cloak over her tunic and letting one of the slaves take it. They provided her with a bowl of water as well, and she washed her hands before going through the flap and into her private quarters. There she found the girl she had been calling, reading a scroll again as usual, but doing so on one of the couches and not the bed, as she had expected.

"How did you get there, *meum mel*?" she asked in amazement. She was the one who lifted Natsuki, after all, and she had not moved Natsuki to the couch before leaving earlier.

Natsuki raised a hand from her scroll and pointed behind Shizuru, indicating the slaves. They bowed when Shizuru turned to look at them, only her steward remaining with his chin still raised.

"You lifted her?" she asked, addressing the question specifically to Hermias.

He denied it. "We only supported the Dominilla by the arms, Domina."

"So she went part of the way on her own power?"

"That is so, Domina."

"I see," Shizuru replied, trying to remember when exactly her household had begun to refer to Natsuki with the diminutive form of her own title. She wondered too if it was wise to already be straining the girl's leg so with this new exercise-already she doubted it. "Very well, then."

She sent them out of the tent under pretext of preparing food for dinner, although all of them knew very well that someone was already in charge of it. They understood what she really wanted to



say, which was that she wanted them to come back at dinnertime and leave them alone until then . One of the servants lingered a moment longer, though, under Natsuki's behest. It was an Otomeian slave, and Natsuki ordered her to pour some *calda* for Shizuru before being sent out with the others.

"Thank you, Natsuki," Shizuru said after the last slave had left, moved by this small act of thoughtfulness. She brought her drink with her as she walked over to the couch and asked the girl if she was snug, studying the Otomeian as was her habit after each time they separated. It pleased her to note that Natsuki had regained a little more weight, although not enough to bring her back to her old state. The girl's cheeks were still sunken and her arms still twig-like, but she no longer looked like someone already on the road to the Underworld, to Shizuru's relief. And already the beauty of old was returning, even if it had undergone alterations. Her skin was far paler, for instance, as she had not been out in the sun for so long. Her glossy hair was longer too, and it festooned her shoulders in limp ribbons that touched her waist. Even holding a well-scarred scroll and rather well-scarred herself, she looked more unearthly than she had ever looked, and Shizuru let some of the awe shine through her eyes as they regarded each other comfortably.

"Well, it is good to see you out of the bed, Natsuki," she said, hesitating only a little at what she had to say. "But is it wise to go about like this? Did you speak to the *medicus* about it?"

The girl's gaze went flat very quickly.

"I take it that is a no," Shizuru murmured, taking a sip of her wine as she saw the clouds gather on the other's face. It was uncanny how easily she could conjure up the words being expressed there: *Can I not even move from my bed without needing to consult in conference about it?*

"I do not intend to hamper you, Natsuki," she said after her drink, folding one arm across her stomach and setting the elbow of the other arm on it. "No one does. But we do wish to preserve your health. I do not think moving about as the servants have just described is the best way to do that. And I am neither being overly paranoid nor overly protective. My concern is that standing upright

shall place too much weight on your leg. Light as you are, your body weight shall still be considerable when it presses down on the seal of skin-and the weight shall be concentrated on that small point, which may prove too much for it.""

Reason always did get to Natsuki, as Shizuru knew. The girl used her hair to curtain away her face after this, and Shizuru knew she had won by that gesture of defeat. The older woman did not like having to chastise her lover, but she knew she had to be harsh sometimes to get her message across properly. While she was willing to indulge Natsuki in just about every way, she certainly had no intention of doing so if it would jeopardise the girl's convalescence. If that meant hobbling an already crippled horse, so be it!

"I am only asking that you have yourself lifted next time," she clarified, smiling to take away the sting of the lecture. "Until we talk to the *medicus* about it, at least. I can arrange for someone to come in when I am not present to lift you. Or perhaps you may want someone from your own servants? This only need be so until we are certain you may begin to stay upright again-and then we can have some artisans design walking aids."

Natsuki's head was bowed already, but it turned away after this. Shizuru put away the goblet on the table next to the couch, bending over the girl so that she could pull the dark head of hair to her belly. Natsuki let her do it and she ran her fingers through the locks to try and comfort the younger woman. She knew it was painful to the Otomeian to be reminded of the loss of her mobility, but she was also afraid that Natsuki would lock herself away again if she did not accept her fate as soon as possible. So she could not shrink in this, much though she too was having trouble accepting the same thing.

"I am very sorry I must place this injunction upon you," she said softly, adjusting the girl's *stola* at the shoulder. It was a little too big, as all the rest of Natsuki's clothes still were. "But I only wish your good health. It is not so much that I ask, anyway: only to check with the physicians first. Is it not just that we do this, *mea vita* ?"

There were a few moments of silence, followed by a nod of agreement against her stomach.

"Good. Now would you allow me to see your leg?"

Again Natsuki nodded. Shizuru pulled away, then lifted the hem of the girl's garment to check on the stump and see if the wrappings showed any bleeding or discharge. Since they had amputated Natsuki's leg below the knee, she did not have to expose too much of Natsuki to see the bindings. She checked if they were clean and still tightly fastened, and then covered the stump again with the dress.

"Thank you, it looks well." Shizuru moved on swiftly. "What are you reading, by the way?"

Natsuki handed her the scroll and gave her space when she indicated that she wanted to sit on the couch. She unfurled the scroll and glanced through it, then at Natsuki with astonishment.

"Chikane's legislation? Why did you read this?" she asked, barely able to conceal her amazement again; when Natsuki was the one dealing the shocks, she never was able to dull them. "I left some new texts I purchased from some Sosia collectors-there were even one or two new plays from some recent dramatist in there. I thought you would go through those, certainly not this."

The face the girl turned to her was guilty.

"Nuh-nuh-not allowed?" she asked haltingly, obviously worried she had done something wrong by reading the scroll. Her voice was small when she explained: "It was there."

Shizuru knew Natsuki was referring to the table next to the bed, which was where she always left scrolls and other offerings like trinkets and comestibles to the girl before leaving to go about her work. She realised now that she had left the scroll there inadvertently, after finally getting around to reading it herself last night, it being the last in the long series Chie had sent her.

"Oh, I do not mind if you read it," she said hurriedly. "I was only worried you would find it dull reading. And I had not intended to leave it there, truth be told."

She turned over the scroll in her hands.

"How did you find it?"

Natsuki thought for a few seconds.

"Wise," she said.

"Did you finish it?"

"Mm."

"Was it enjoyable?"

"Mm."

Seeing that the girl would not be prevailed upon to expand on it, she switched topics and got on to her biggest news of the day.

"Natsuki, I fear you shall have to put up with a bit of trouble these coming days," she started, putting one hand over the girl's limp one. "Still, the *medici* tell me you can handle a trip already."

The girl's mind had not been dulled at all by her illness, so she guessed it immediately: "Argus."

Shizuru confirmed it. "Argus, in two days."

The dark head bowed in agreement, rivulets of black hair streaming down again. Shizuru tucked them away, her thumb ghosting over the scarred stitching on the girl's forehead as it was revealed. Natsuki did not flinch.

"I would like to winter in Argus," the older woman said, keeping her fingers in the other's hair. "For many logistical reasons, which I am certain you can already see. Furthermore, I must meet with my cousin, who is in Argus at the moment."

She felt the smallest tremor against her hand. The green eyes were staring at the floor, somewhere between studying and glaring at it.

"Her name is Shizuma Hanazono, remember?" she said, knowing

what was going on in the girl's mind. "She is my current senior legate and my older cousin. You shall like her, I am certain. And before you begin to worry, I am certain she shall like you. She is not the type of woman who would judge one by unfortunate circumstances beyond one's control, so please do not think ill of her even before you meet." She smiled at the embarrassment on the girl's face, which told her she was right in her guess. "Give her a chance, please. I am certain she shall give you one too."

Natsuki let herself fall limply forward until her cheek was resting on Shizuru's shoulder. The Himean patted her back gently, knowing this was the girl's way of saying she was sorry.

"You should be pleased we are going to Argus, *meum mel*," she murmured. "I expected more cheer from you at this news. Do you not want to see Shizuki?"

Natsuki drew back quickly, surprise on her face: she had been so troubled by the thought of meeting Shizuru's cousin-especially in her current state-that she had forgotten about her pet, whom they had left in the care of the Argus governor, Midori. She reached out for Shizuru's shoulders with her hands, squeezing the muscles to show her eagerness. The other woman chuckled under her breath.

"Terrible girl," she teased. "You forgot your pet. She is not even mine, yet I recalled her immediately."

The girl frowned.

"She is not my pet, Natsuki-she never was," Shizuru said. "I gave her to you, and she always liked you better, after all." A smirk. "I always said she was an excellent judge of character."

Her shoulders got another squeeze.

"Well, you shall be reminded of her in the flesh again, soon," Shizuru sighed. "As I said, we go in two days. The sooner the better so we can avoid the snows and sleet, even if winter is going to be tardy this year."

The girl shook her head, prompting Shizuru to stop with what she

had been about to say.

"Tardy winter." She sighed, as if those two words alone took effort: perhaps they actually did. "No."

Shizuru lifted a brow. "What makes you say so?"

Natsuki explained, very briefly and in the furtive voice she often used now, which always made Shizuru think the girl was afraid there were eavesdroppers hiding near them. She used the calendar used by their people instead of the Himean one and demonstrated with it that the seasons were on schedule at the moment.

"Last year was different," she said quietly, not even flinching at the recollection of a time when she had still been able to walk by herself: Shizuru silently applauded her for it. "Winter was early."

Shizuru thought about it.

"You are right as usual, Natsuki," she said after some consideration. "Last year's winter *was* early. It only felt otherwise because *our* calendar is ahead of the seasons, what with all the intercalations we have been missing. Yours must be better maintained, if your calendar is on time."

Natsuki's face demanded that she explain.

"The Himean calendar's year is of a length that requires intercalation," she said. "Intercalation is the insertion of an extra month every two years or so to keep the year in step with the seasons. This falls within the purview of the College of Pontifices, the state priests, who are expected to call for the intercalation whenever needed. Unfortunately, you know how we Himeans are when it comes to things like this. We may either forget, do not care, or simply do not do it due to political benefits."

She shrugged a shoulder.

"The non-insertion or insertion of an extra month can make a huge difference to the sort of electoral government we have in Hime. For example..." She stayed the explanation that had been on the tip of her lips upon seeing Natsuki's lips parting. "But you already see it,

do you not?"

"Longer terms," the other said. "Oh-oh-or shorter."

Shizuru gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek.

"Indeed," she replied after the gesture. "That is so, and that is partly why our current calendar is not in step with the seasons. Our pontifices tend to intercalate when they have an interest in extending the political term of some official, and conveniently forget to intercalate when they wish to prevent someone's term from being longer than necessary. Since our terms are year-long, it would be useful."

She winked at Natsuki, grinning easily.

"Mind," she said, "the ultimate power here would be the leader of the pontifices, the Pontifex Maximus, because he is the one who calls the meetings ordering intercalation. Our current Pontifex, unfortunately, is an enormous dumpling."

The remark caught Natsuki off-guard: it actually quirked her lips, which were almost always serious now.

"Dumpling?" she echoed.

"Fat and lazy," Shizuru sighed. "So it might be that our calendar is out of step simply because he is too lazy to see to it. Well, that and he is older than god." She was squinting thoughtfully in the distance when she said this, and thus missed another brief smile flashing in Natsuki at her words. "I hear he is not in the best of health. The College shall probably have to elect a new leader soon."

The other responded by letting her head rest on Shizuru's shoulder again, which Shizuru knew meant she should keep talking about it. She understood it was the girl's way of seeking diversion from the wounds still gaping inside her, so she went into a detailed explanation of how the state religion and priests functioned in Hime, delivering a lecture so thorough and so carefully-given that she did not even notice the head that poked through the entrance flap and vanished after only a second.

Outside the tent were three figures, besides the sentries on duty.

"No, they're still talking," Aella, whose poking head it had been, was saying. "Can't be helped - you'll have to clean it up later, when you bring in their dinner."

They ducked even further and apologised quietly, Aella looking up as a fourth person joined their party.

"What is it? It is not time for their dinner yet," said the newcomer, Shizuru's steward. Aella sighed to him.

"They forgot to clean up the plate the Dominilla threw at them," she said, also speaking in Greek. "When they hesitated to help her to the couch, she threw a plate at them and they forgot to sweep it away."

"What? Was that before I came in?" he asked the bowing slaves, who nodded. "I did not even see it! Where was it?"

"They said it fell below one of the corner tables."

"Thank goodness. Still, it should have been cleaned away immediately."

"I agree, which is why these two are only getting bread for dinner later. One piece each and no more."

Hermias said nothing, which made Aella sigh again: she knew he thought her too harsh, while she thought him too soft. Mindful of how her head servants viewed each other, their mistress often jested that between the two of them she would have the perfect adjudicator.

Aella sent the slaves away to their quarters, while she and Hermias went to see to their other duties.

"A piece of bread," he teased her. "There was a time when you would have forbidden even water."

"Yes, I've become a paragon of mercy," she said with her usual deadpan face.



"I believe it," he said with a grin. The smile softened. "It was thoughtful of you to decide to have the matter seen to later, to let them continue chatting."

"You mean 'her'," she replied. "Only one of them does the chatting."

"Ah, now, Aella," Hermias fluted cheerfully. "The Dominilla speaks in her own way."

She shrugged and urged him to hasten his steps. She thought him too mincing, while he thought her too brisk.

"However it is, as long as she keeps doing it," she said, reaching up to make sure the string tying her hair was tight, although Hermias knew it never really loosened. "You can tell the Domina about what the Dominilla did, by the way. That's your job, Hermias, so don't expect me to have to do it, even if I am a paragon of mercy."

## Chapter 59

*Oh dear, I am sorry it has taken so long. I fear various things conspired to prevent me from writing, so I offer my abject apologies to those reading the story. This chapter was in fact supposed to have been written about four weeks ago, but I happened to contract an illness that rather disabled me for three weeks. As people have no doubt guessed by now that I have a nearly useless immune system (chuckle), I pray you shall forgive me. I shall attempt to be better at updating now that both my itinerary and health are more willing to cooperate, however.*

*I send thanks as well to those who sent messages and submitted reviews. They were of great comfort during my convalescence.*

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### **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Polemarch** - (from Gk., "polemarchos") a very early term in Ancient Greece that was later supplanted by the more easily recognised "strategos", the best literal translation for it would be "warlord" and the duties expected of those with the title more or less those of a general, at least during the time I am referencing.

2. **Pontifex Maximus** - the head of the College of Pontifices, the group of state priests administering and seeing to matters religious. Note that part of their duties involved the maintenance of the calendar and ensuring that days were intercalated when needed (to keep the calendar in line with the actual seasons), although most Pontifices actually cared little for the idea of an accurate calendar and so simply did not bother. Romans generally did not consider it important.

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**Inter Nos II: Inde Ira et Lacrimae**

*par ethnewinter*

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The new year saw the environs of the Forum starting out a little calmer than before, but this changed quickly when the past year's president of the Tribunes of the Plebs proved she had no intention of retiring from the rostra. Prior to that, the only real event worthy of attention was when one of the new praetors demanded that the College of Pontifices explain why they had not intercalated extra days in the year for the purpose of keeping the calendar in step with the seasons. A cantankerous Pontifex Maximus, dragged out of premature hibernation by this imperious demand, replied that as long as a sunburn indicated summer and a shrinking cock indicated winter, no one "gives a shit about the calendar". As he said it with just the sort of nose-thumbing disdain that Himeans loved to see when their betters were squabbling, it was the Pontifex who was declared the victor and the unfortunate stickler of a praetor who was relegated to the sidelines for the rest of his tenure.

Aside from the brief interest this little episode drew at home, political attention remained on doings abroad. Asia Province and other locations experienced their share of trouble and were much-discussed in Senate, but as far as the people were concerned, it was the Northern provinces that remained far more of the moment. However, the more immediate fascination with that topic had shifted from the current head of the Northern Campaign to its former leader.

Takeda Masashi's life had become tremendously uncomfortable ever since his return to his homeland, although his last weeks in the North had been none too comfy either. Still, Hime was the worse place for a displaced deputy of the state after all that had happened. The whispers of the people as he walked the street, the barely-concealed jeers of his fellows: all this only drove home how miserable his reputation had become. What he had fancied to be the start of his ascent had been anything but that, and even now he felt the breath of a potent wind blowing his already-cantilevered fortune into freefall.

The name of the wind was Himemiya.

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As soon as Takeda had set foot on the compound of gravel, dried faeces and ancient dust that made up the soil of the greatest city on earth (as far as its inhabitants were concerned), he made not for his house, where he could wash off the grime of his long journey and take a moment to find much-needed comfort in his old nest. Instead, he went straight for the rich neighbourhood of the Palatine and found the mansion with the most distinctive steps in the city: rare roseate marble with smoky tendrils of lavender racing across it. Up them he tripped, then rapped on the knocker to request an audience with the lady of the house. After a little temporary confusion that the steward cleared up by informing him that there were *two* ladies of the house-although, the traditionalist in him argued, there was really only one-he managed to obtain an interview with the former consul, who eyed the urn in his hands with what he could only describe as resigned sorrow.

"I'm very sorry, Himemiya-san," he started, and meant it.

"As am I," she answered, taking the urn from his hands. "She was my only sister."

He nodded, having already known that fact before but never really appreciating its significance until now.

"She was very brave," he said, and was cut off by an arm movement and her instructions that he be seated. He did so with care, even if he was completely unaware that he was soiling a Tyrian purple seat cover with his filthy attire. She occupied all of his attention: an aching beautiful woman holding a bejewelled urn in her hands and regarding it as though it were the most wretched thing in the world.

But her eyes when they turned to him were free of tears, for all that they channelled a heavy regret.

"Even to the last moment, she was brave," he blurted out, forgetting his own dread of this interview for a moment; one could not look at a person with such eyes and not wish to assuage her. "She was a great woma-"

She cut him off this time with words.

"She was my only sister, Masashi-san," she repeated in her silky voice. "I lived with her all her life. Not once did she give me cause to dislike that arrangement."

She took the seat opposite his and did not relinquish the urn.

"There is no need to extol her virtues before me," she explained. "Not when I have spent years being witness to and recipient of their favours."

He murmured a quick apology. She motioned to the carafe on the table.

"You are parched from your journey, without doubt," she told him. "I may send for water if you would prefer that. I would pour for you too, but I ask that you forgive me if I do not desire to relieve my hands of this urn for the moment."

He offered to pour a drink for her.

"I would prefer a witness over wine, Masashi-san," she requested.

So out came the tale of what had happened, from the calm beginnings in Argus to the outbreak of the war and the siege where her sister fell. It took him well under a turn of the glass to finish the whole story, which was far faster than he had taken in the many times he had practised and rehashed the tale. A major reason for the speed was his audience's silence: she sat through all of it unresponsively, sitting with such inhuman stillness that there were moments when he stopped out of fear that she had gone into some type of shock without him knowing. Even when he had finished, her only query was whether or not he had anything else for her, obviously expecting a letter from the woman who had replaced him. He did have such a letter-which he had not read, of course, that would be dishonourable-and he drew it from his satchel.

She set the urn firmly on her lap to take the letter, then opened the missive before him and looked through it before rolling it up again. He watched her fingers nervously as they closed on the scroll, the long stalks white but unshaken. Once she had set the scroll on the table, she met his eyes with her own, and he readied himself. He

could not imagine her friend writing anything complimentary about him.

"You shall have to present an accounting of your mission to the Senate," she said with equanimity, as though the man whose command might have been responsible for her only sister's death were someone other than the one she faced. "It is a given, although I warn that it may not be too pleasant for you."

"I have accepted that and I'm going to do it," he told her, not quite knowing where she was headed.

"May I request that you do it in tomorrow's meeting?"

"I intended to do it then, Himemiya-san."

"I would suggest that you prepare for interrogations then."

"I'd expected no less."

"Very well."

She picked up the urn from her lap and rose. He did the same, astonished that this was apparently the end of their talk. And to think this was one interrogation for which he had so long prepared! Would she demand no further accounting of himself, ask no more questions? Would she cast no political maledictions to his face?

"Thank you for bringing my sister's ashes to me, Masashi-san."

There was a pause, and he fancied that he could hear the words, *I would have preferred you bring her alive, naturally.*

"She deserved no less," he said, considering his words.

"She deserved to live longer," she responded very gently. "You shall excuse me if I ask you to leave now, if you please. Others have tended to her body. Now I wish to tend to the dust they have made of it."

He nodded, saying that he understood perfectly. Yet how could he? He walked out of her palatial mansion not understanding how she

could have been so calm, despite the sadness she had clearly shown at the realisation of her sister's death; he did not understand how she could have taken his narrative sans a query or indication of scorn, when even the most self-sparing version of the story that he could come up with could not dispel the opprobrium of having been commander in a battle where her sister and a thousand others had fallen. Did he not know better, he would think her to have known it ahead of time: yet that could not be possible, when he was most certainly the first to bear news of it.

She was a remarkable woman, he thought while walking out of her house, down the gorgeous pink marble of her front steps. If he had admired her before he had done so from a distance and with much the same taken-for-granted esteem his peers granted to one with so illustrious a career and provenance, fractured only slightly by her eccentric choice of wife. Now that he had come face-to-face and spoken in private with the idol, he was struck by a greater admiration than before, commingled with perplexity and almost fearful respect. Anyone else would have burst into tears at being presented with the ashes of one they had loved as much she obviously loved her sister, yet not a single one had leaked from her eyes. And if indeed she scorned him for his part in the play, she had betrayed no trace of it to his face, which he thought far more civility than her close friend had shown. So deep was the impression she left on him, in fact, that when he went from her house to Sergay Wang's and elicited an astonished "Ye immortal gods!" from the man, his reply was, "I think I've just seen one."

Takeda's befuddlement would have been partly allayed had he known a simple fact instead of merely suspecting it: Chikane Himemiya had indeed known of her sister's death prior to his arrival. That this was so was due to none other than the person who had sent him to that dreaded errand.

The letter Takeda had been asked to hand over to Chikane held very little, only a few lines of commiseration. Even had Takeda not balked at the idea of opening it before handing it to its recipient, he would not have found anything impeaching him in the meagre contents. That was because it was a front: the real letter had been sent even before Takeda's company departed for Hime. Shizuru had

inked an account-as she had it from the officers and soldiers of the Seventh-of Sosia's siege and Suou's death, as well as a concise but systematic dissection of Takeda's tactics during the battle that clearly placed the blame upon his shoulders for Suou's fate, among others. That Chikane had not had tears in her eyes even when presented with the remains of her younger sister was because she had shed them already, keening into the sheets of Suou's bed in their mansion and huddled into one of her sibling's old cloaks. It was her astonished wife who discovered her in that piteous state and who covered for her by sending all the servants to have an early night that evening, making excuses for the sake of the patrician's dignity.

Himeko was not the only person who learned of Suou's passing before Takeda arrived to spread it. Chikane also made a cousin privy to the news, trusting that the younger woman would understand the need to keep it quiet until Takeda Masashi's arrival. Unfortunately, her own grief made her forget how close her sister had been to said cousin: Urumi Kanzaki-Himemiya was so appalled by the news of her cousin's death that she had to be held back bodily from running to the dens of the Subura and rounding up assassins.

"I'll make him bleed," the former tribune of the plebs had sworn in frustration, eyes running unashamedly. "I'll not rest until I make him suffer."

Chikane had forced her into a seat, feeling the frankness of Urumi's display picking at the scab just beginning to form over her own hurt.

"You shall, Urumi," she promised after taking a moment to compose herself. "But not by assassination. Nor by having your gangs assault him in a dark corner. You shall not harm him that way."

The blue-brown glare was furious.

"Your scruples are ill-placed," Urumi hissed, hands closing on either side. "Who cares how we harm him now? Suou didn't deserve to perish in that way. He practically abandoned her group in the front lines, going from Shizuru-san's account of this! This man doesn't deserve your moral considerations, Chikane!"



"Lower your voice."

"He doesn't!"

"Please," the other said, sinking into another chair and covering her eyes by setting a hand to her forehead. The sight of that dear, fair reflection of her lying trampled in a battlefield. All ashes now; there were no reflections in dust.

"He got my *only* sister killed," she said lugubriously.

"Then why should it not get him the same?"

"Because it should get him worse."

This judgement brought down the wrath of a long-dormant leviathan upon Takeda, a kind of mythical monster of the world in which he and his peers moved. The puissance of the dead legate's name now unveiled its menace, with the direct members of the Himemiya clan and all its offshoots and relations suddenly dusting off their linkages to join hands. There were marriages to be counted, adoptions and long-running alliances or patron-client relations held over the ages, a multitude of interconnections forming a vast web whose origins were in the very founding of Hime the Society, not merely Hime the Republic.

The fallout was easy to predict. No matter how much Takeda tried to deliver a good account of himself and his command before various parties, no matter how many of the conservatives who had backed his usurpation—that was what people called it now—of Shizuru's role tried to back him again, Takeda found himself pushed ever deeper under the political waters by this monster recently awakened, roused by Suou's spectre and over five thousand other shades who had died under his aegis. Even his foe abroad had a part to play: Shizuru's letters describing his failures showed up immediately after his first agonising presentation to the senators, and so effectively demolished the defence he had built for himself that every brick of his own construct added another lump to his already sore head.

It would have been a relief had it been Shizuru's accounts alone lodged against his. It would not have been good, but it would have

been better. His biggest problem, in fact, came from another document whose existence shocked even him: a series of scrolls from Suou Himemiya that chronicled the ill-fated Masashi Mission, and if nothing else, painted him to be an incompetent who had lucked into a major command and proceeded to bungle it, losing an entire legion, thousands of experienced auxiliary troops, and even several members of good and even noble families in the process. Shizuru Fujino was apparently in possession of these chronicles and had forwarded a tome's worth of selected entries to Suou's sister, who wasted no time in sending this abridged collection to the bookmakers and getting it published.

Some of Takeda's remaining allies tried to repudiate this account by saying that it had probably been written by Shizuru Fujino herself, who had tacked on her dead friend's name to the text in a fit of malice. This was by and large considered so ridiculous an attempt at denouncing the material, however, that even the vast majority of those who were still trying to help him scoffed at the idea. Besides, Suou Himemiya had been a prolific correspondent to many of her peers in her time: they recognised her literary style and confirmed the account's authenticity. Which meant, since the dead woman's prose was perfect and her narrative as riveting as it was convincing- and because there was just something irresistible about the notion of reading a dead person's letters as they destroyed a living one's career-the demand for the resultant book was so high that the bookstores could scarcely keep up with the orders. This only led to more headaches for Takeda, of course.

The worst blow that Suou Himemiya's chronicles dealt him was in an entry that was actually not penned by her hand, nor even by the woman some accused of having written the chronicles under her name. In fact, no one knew of its falsity save for the two persons who inserted it into the text. Prompted by the dead woman's sister, Urumi Himemiya-Kanzaki wrote a short but damning insertion into Suou's account of the Mentulaeans' invitation to Takeda-the one that had prompted him to try and march to Argentum, only to fall straight into the war. The inserted note rode off the original lines of the text, where Suou was expressing her scorn for the invitation and the flamboyant golden sculpture the Mentulae had sent as a gift. To this Urumi added two or three lines that she crafted for maximum

suggestion. The suggestion in its simplest form was this: that Takeda Masashi had been bought by the Mentulae.

"Which means, whether it's true or not, that people think he was in discussions with them, at least!" Sergay Wang said despairingly to his fellow Traditionalists, who had come together to discuss the matter of Takeda Masashi, among other things. "I personally think he'd never do it. Takeda-san is too much of a straight arrow for that. But since he himself admitted that the artefact in question was among his possessions, he's become a bought man in the eyes of the People."

"It's not the People who rule Hime's judgements, but the Senate!" was barked at him by Haruka.

"Oh, I know that," he snapped back impatiently with a roll of the eyes. "But it remains a fact that popular opinion-and *senatorial* opinion, mind you!-has shifted even more powerfully against the man ever since that little titbit got out. And leave us not forget what Harada-san brought up yesterday during the session, the flood of letters we received from our North-based peers last year critiquing his performance in Argus and Sosia when first he took over for Fujino. Face it, my friends: on top of all that, the issue with the sculpture was simply the straw that broke the camel's back."

Off to the side, Hikaru Senou managed one of his more advanced feats of aristocratic expression: a sigh that sounded as though it had been drawled. He plucked a grape from a tray of food a servant offered.

"If he had half a wit in him, he would have denied being in possession of the sculpture," he sneered, turning the grape in his fingers and inspecting it. "In fact, he should have sold it off quietly the first chance he got, even before he came back. Banked the money for himself, and no one would have been the wiser."

Haruka glared at him. "That sculpture belongs to the Republic!"

To which no one made a direct challenge, knowing it would be impossible to make her understand that every other person in the room would have done exactly as Hikaru had said, Republic or no

Republic. There were times when the Armitagian arrow ran too straight for sanity, and was best left on its solitary path.

"Anyway, he could have just kept it hidden and handed it over at a more opportune time," her dearest friend volunteered meekly. All eyes turned to Yukino as she continued, moving some of her mousy hair over her brow, "He could have declared it as being from some other campaign, or something like that."

Sergay sagged in his chair and looked defeated.

"It's too late for that now," he said. "It scarcely matters that he insists he was going to turn it over to the state and just plain forgot. To everyone, it sounds more like he intended to keep the damned thing."

His shoulders dropped as he tried to think of a way out of this predicament-for Takeda Masashi's crash from favour *was* just that. The archconservatives had been the ones backing Masashi's replacement of Shizuru Fujino in the Northern Command, and the latest events had proven nothing so much as that the horse the Traditionalists had put their money on was in fact an ass. Even the predominantly conservative results of the last elections could not help to reduce the swing of public as well as senatorial opinion against the Traditionalists... which meant it was going to be a tougher year for them than they had foreseen.

It also meant that Shizuru Fujino was safe for one more year.

Despite the care Shizuru and Chikane had taken in including a five-year ban on discussions of the former woman's command and future province, the archconservatives were already trying to work out ways to topple her once and for all. Laws could be repealed; new laws could overturn old ones. Failing that, there might also be ways to siphon funds and support from a command until it became so miserable the commander would be forced to resign from it herself. Yes, many things could still be done.

It did not seem to occur to the leaders of the faction-save perhaps to Yukino Kikukawa, who was never really paid much attention-that Hime was in very real danger of losing all her northern provinces

due to the Mentulaean attempts at invasion, and that they themselves could come up with no names as inspiring as Shizuru's when it came to the question of who else might spearhead that command. All that was important was getting her to abrogate her *imperium*, for their opposition to the woman had matured instead of faded with time. And why not? They had been opposed to her from the start, even when she had yet to shed her few pretences to tradition and amiability. Now that she had not only made them look like sheep in front of everyone but also managed to wrangle consular-level command from them afterwards, one could not expect the Traditionalist cause to be anything but justified. It gained new force from the moment Shizuru Fujino uttered that first thunderous "TACE!" in front of Senate and swore to destroy all who crossed her.

Due to the precariousness of their position at the moment, though, very little could be done save to plan for the future. So the Traditionalists settled for minor jabs at the Fujino hide instead, hardly felt because she was busy with her war abroad. Among the popular pokes they aimed at her were remarks on the present dearth of soldiers in the country-a problem for other wartime and war-threatened overseas governors, like Tanaka of Asia Province. He had been pestering the Senate for more legions to secure his rather tumultuous demesne, and the Traditionalists took every opportunity to point out, quite justifiably, that the tardiness of the answer for that request was due to the recruits all going to reinforce Shizuru Fujino's legions.

Few minded these little stabs from the archconservatives, though. For one thing, the elimination of an entire, decorated legion like the Eighth was still ripe in the popular mind. Such an event had not happened in decades, perhaps even a century, which meant that the vast majority of Himeans were praying for the success of the Fujino enterprise in their eagerness to see Mentulaean blood spilled.

Moreover, the former tribune of the plebs Urumi Himemiya-Kanzaki was always in the Forum with one or two of the new tribunes, drawing people's attention to the related matter of prosecution for Takeda the Traitor. At first the conservatives had tried to get her hauled off the rostra, it being that she was no longer a tribune of the plebs and thus did not have the protection of that office, but they

soon abandoned all efforts at it when every attempt only resulted in their people getting mauled almost to death by the people, whose protection the maverick apparently still enjoyed. So, Takeda Masashi's allies had no choice but to let the woman declaim what she would declaim and demand what she would demand.

After only a couple of weeks of Urumi's demands to the public, one thing was clear: one way or another, Takeda Masashi was eventually going to be brought to trial in the treason and extortion courts and not all the Traditionalists' best defence advocates would be able to help him.

"He can't be let convicted, damn it," Sergay told the others nervously. "If he's convicted, we'll have been shown up as having made a monumental mistake. Well, it's already clear that we did make a monumental mistake-but a conviction changes everything!"

"Can't we buy the jury if it comes to that?" asked Kazuya Kurauchi, only to wither when a dozen glares were shot at him.

"*You* might have enough money to contribute something to that," a sneering Jin Akagi told him. "But the rest of us can't afford to be so free of purse!"

"Beside the point, Akagi! Bribery is a vulgar resource for this problem!" Haruka interrupted indignantly, blissfully unaware of Yukino's mutter of "recourse". "I can see bribery being justifiable for a truly worthy cause-think to stop Fujino in one of her schemes, for instance, or to prevent a degenerate from occupying an important political office-but to defend *this man* ? Say what you will about him and his innocence, he's made us look like a joke! If we do end up helping Masashi, we should do it the proper way: as members of his defence counsel at court. We aren't even sure that it shall come to that."

"Oh, it shall come to that," Sergay huffed. "And whether we do try to bribe the jury or not, Haruka-san, it is a given that the Himemiya are going to bribe for a conviction too-and they'll get it, *easy* ! It's not just that they have more liquid assets among themselves than we do for that sort of payoff, it's also that the jurors will be predisposed to the idea of a conviction from the start. Nearly everyone is against

Takeda-san now, and the jurors will also want to please the crowd that's sure to attend the proceedings. Want to bet the crowd will be crying out for him to be convicted? They'll take everything-and I do mean everything!-off him, even the clothes off his back!"

"We have to get him to abscond," Yukino spoke up. "Voluntary exile is the only way to save him."

"But we already tried that!" Hikaru whined. "Sergay said he wouldn't go because he's convinced of his own innocence!"

"We all know whether he really is innocent or not is irrelevant," Yukino replied. She turned to Sergay. "Can't you make him see this? Perhaps if you tried again?"

"I can try again," Sergay said tiredly, raking a hand through his blond hair: it was already starting to curl, and he knew he was long overdue for a trim. Only that he kept forgetting to visit his barber. So many things to do!

"I doubt I'll get him to agree. The man's insistent on sticking it out." He nodded at someone's scoff of " *Thick!* " and continued: "But I'll try again, little good though it will do. What bad luck that man has! We lost a few other members of senatorial families in that battle, no doubt their families are among those drumming for his prosecution now... but of all those he could have let perish, *Himemiya Minor* ? I would've sneaked her out of the lines the first chance I got! Her name aside, she really was a promising young woman, you know-and far more likeable, I thought, than her sister or Fujino, even if she did not quite have the same glitter."

"Agreed," said Hikaru, with a moue of sorrow. "I liked that young woman."

Yukino was frowning pensively, and now voiced what she had been turning over in her mind.

"Do you know," she told Sergay, "I'm not quite sure that's right? Not about Suou Himemiya-san: she *was* genial, I always thought. But about the suggestion that Masashi-san ran afoul of luck when he allowed her to fight in the frontlines. I think, actually, that he ran

afoul of luck when he crossed paths with Fujino-san."

The rest exchanged looks with each other.

"We all know what blasted good luck that woman has, Yukino," Haruka said wearily. "I can't thank you for reminding us."

Yukino shook her head with a tiny smile.

"No-o, Haruka-chan," she said. "I wasn't actually talking about something esoteric when I mentioned luck."

"You're saying you think that the main force that was moving against him all this time was Fujino?" someone asked in confusion.

"No... not *exactly*," Yukino said. "It would be too much to move, for instance, that her hand was in Masashi-san's failures with the military, for those were her soldiers that were lost and we know how much she makes of her legionaries. I grant you that she's terrifyingly ambitious, but she's never *low* in her schemes, as I think even you would admit, Haruka-chan."

Haruka agreed, understanding what her friend meant.

"I mean, rather, that I think she's been the longer and more constant adversary to him than everyone else involved in the matter. Even now you can see her hand in this campaign against Masashi-san, and you could see the same dislike between them before that."

"Oh, everyone can see it!" Haruka said. "No doubt it's due to her being rankled that he managed to take her command off her. Fujino is a prideful person."

"True, in part, but I think it actually began before that-and that's what interests me. Listen." The others looked at Yukino in rapt attention as she began to explain without a trace of her old nervousness, the attention seeming to sit on her better now that she had had practice as a consul in the past year. "I know there's something a little... well... *simple*, perhaps, in crediting gossip, but when so many things and voices come together to support it, even gossip might prove true. Do you remember that rumour that came out last year, about some argument Masashi-san and Fujino-san had while they were



both in Argus Province?"

A snort from somebody. "You mean the one with the grossly sensational accounts that say they got into fisticuffs?"

"Yes, although I don't believe it came to that," Yukino said. "Or not an outright brawl between the two, anyway. I have difficulty imagining Fujino-san going at it with Masashi-san."

"I'd actually like to see that," Akagi confessed.

Yukino persisted: "Still, if we pare it down to its most simple form, what do we get? An argument between two persons over, so it's said-"

"The barbarian girl!" Hikaru breathed, sounding simultaneously scandalised and pleased with himself for having the answer.

"Ooh, was that the same girl Katsu Hitagi mentioned?"

"I heard she's a rare beauty."

"I heard she was a princess."

"Bah, a barbarian princess is still a barbarian!"

"Yes, yes, I think it's the same girl," Yukino said, when they had all calmed down from their gossip-induced babble. "Anyway, it does suggest something, doesn't it? If it *has been* the same girl all this time, this may be significant to us. Because it seems to indicate that there is something in there that gets to Fujino-san. Even if we don't believe the fisticuff account of her argument with Masashi-san, there must have been some serious quarrelling in there for him to have been forced to leave Argus right after their supposed altercation. Too many people have sent letters whispering of that rumour to be ignored. Then there was the mention of the girl in Katsu Hitagi's speech, right after which..."

"She erupted like Vulcan pricked with a needle," Sergay finished for her breathlessly, nodding. "I see where you're going, Yukino-san. This might be something." He finally drew a breath and made a note to talk to Takeda about it to see what he might extract. "It really

might be something."

Yukino smiled at his interest. She was gratified to have everyone's attention for once, and to be taken this seriously. Was that all it took, then, a little bit of gossip to get them to pay attention? So it was true: scratch the skin off a senator and you found little more than the average Himean on the street, rumour-loving and scandal-born!

"If it does, we have to be delicate in handling it." She lifted her brows at them expressively. "No more scenes like that with Hitagi-san, I should hope."

"Unless we can use it to our advantage."

"And risk getting burned the way even the river did when it threw itself against the fires of Hephaestus?" Yukino smiled sourly, still remembering Shizuru's hand swallowing hers during their last handshake, when the woman had promised that she would crush them all if her plans needed it. "No, I think it's too dangerous to do it that way."

"We'll think of something."

"So, what you mean to indicate..." Hikaru broke into the conversation, speaking with peculiar care because he was not certain he fully understood what was going on: it was hard for an aristocrat of his sort to accept that another aristocrat could be rendered defenceless by something like a mere lover-and a savage lover, at that. "You mean that this barbarian, whoever she is, is Fujino's weakness?"

Yukino turned her soft gaze to him, understanding his difficulty with the concept.

"That may not be the *right* word," Yukino said gently, mindful of Haruka's proud eyes fixed on her from the side. "But it's close, and it's a start. And it's definitely unconventional, but Fujino-san has never been conventional, Senou-san, so this bears investigation on our parts. If we look into this a little more, I think we might actually come to what we've been seeking out all this time: a way to break into Shizuru Fujino's shell."

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As planned, Shizuru pulled outside the provincial city-capital of Argus with three legions at the start of the year. She found four more legions awaiting her there, although the woman overseeing them was unable to meet her when she arrived. Her cousin was at the docks doing business with grain merchants, and Shizuru decided to let the other woman find her later instead of seeking her out herself.

She went to the governor's mansion first to see Midori Sugiura-who had been prorogued, as she had expected-and install her lover in their old quarters. As she had sent word on the march of her return, rooms were already prepared by the time she arrived. She carried the girl to their quarters herself, her steward and several slaves trailing them with their effects. She stayed only long enough to ensure that Natsuki was well-situated in one of the couches in the bedroom, then excused herself so that she could see to the army. The girl she left behind watched her until she left, then threw her attention to Shizuru's steward, who felt her gaze with the unerring instinct of one truly dedicated to service. He stopped what he was doing to ask what she desired.

"To read," she told him unsurprisingly.

He checked that the chest of tomes Shizuru had ordered to be brought in was already in the room. He made two of the slaves open it and turned back to Natsuki, who ran her eyes dismissively over the many scrolls packed away.

"Which of them would you like, Dominilla?"

"What I want is not there," she said quietly, addressing him in his native tongue.

"You have only to say what it is and I shall have someone run to fetch it from the luggage, Dominilla."

"Not in the luggage either."

"Then I shall have someone run to fetch it wherever it may be, Dominilla."

She inclined her head to that and looked away, almost as though the conversation had ended there.

"This mansion," she started, as though she were speaking to herself instead of to him. "It has a library."

Hermias waited, well-indoctrinated to her oblique approaches by now.

"The governor permitted me to borrow from it," she continued softly. "Before."

He allowed sufficient pause to let her speak again if she wished. "And what is it you desire to borrow from there now, Dominilla?"

She looked at him.

"Anything on Hime," she said in that low voice.

He nodded, showing none of his inner curiosity at the request.

"Would you not have a particular area of interest, Dominilla?" he asked. "For instance, its history, the myths, its poli-"

"Anything on Hime," she repeated.

He bowed.

"Anything on Hime," he echoed in confirmation, sweeping around to snap his fingers at some of the slaves to see to her orders.

Following that, he went on organising everything in the enormous room, working around her until everything was up to his rigorous standards. Up went buckets of correspondence and fresh sheets of parchment on the desk, along with new quills and bottles of ink and sand. The general's standard cuirass and mail shirt-not her parade armour, those were kept in storage until needed-went on some bars near the desk, along with a pair of socks, army trousers, a new scarf and cloak folded on a chair. More chests were brought into the room and set to the walls, their heft meriting a few grunts from even the burly slaves.

Natsuki watched them peacefully, not at all interrupting their work save when they passed-although that there was even an interruption then was not her doing, truth be told. It was simply that those who came near felt compelled to pause and bow to the lady on the couch, despite the fact that they did not need to and were not expected to do it even with their mistress when they were going about their tasks and not being addressed. The man watching them make these swift bows understood: the *dominilla* of the Fujino retinue exuded a heavy sort of majesty, one that people tended to attribute to the fact that she had managed to escape death only by paying it a near-unconscionable price with her body. People were wary of things touched by death and the *dominilla* certainly did not help that wariness with her looks, which were both paler and darker than ever before. The bows the slaves gave to the young woman, therefore, were the bows people gave in passing to dread deities' shrines, more instinctive than volitional and intended to ward off the incomprehensible malevolence of the arcane before it struck.

It was to some extent unkind, Hermias thought, even if it did ensure that the slaves would have a kind of respect for her. He had a healthy respect for her himself that did not depend on fear, especially one laced with superstitious feelings. Granted, it was wise to fear what she might do to them if they displeased her-or more properly, what her displeasure would cause their mistress to do to them-but it was nevertheless cruel to regard her as though she were a phantom left over from dire wars. She was not a phantom in his eyes. She was merely a girl who had lost her leg and many of her friends, and who was now only trying to cover up all the holes the losses had carved in her with an enormous, independent dignity that made his eyes sting sometimes.

At some point in the arrangements, he approached her to ask if it would not displease her to have her sword set on the couch next to her own, set perpendicular to it. He was talking about the sword that Suou Himemiya had given her, and which his mistress had discovered packed with the girl's effects during her illness. Ever since Shizuru had returned it to her, it had pleased the girl to keep it within arm's reach at all times. She allowed him to place the sword, sheathed, on the other seat.

He had another query for her after that.

"Dominilla, which scent would you prefer?" he said, holding up two small vials. She looked at them curiously, recognising them as the containers of fragrance he sprinkled on his mistress's bedding to make it smell sweeter.

"It is... your mistress's choice, no?" she said with hesitation; he had never asked this of her before.

"The Domina said it was yours," he smiled. "We have been using this thus far-" he shook one vial "-but we recently managed to obtain this too, which the Domina likes just as much. When I asked her if she desired a change, she said to refer the query to you." He removed the covers on both vials. "Would it please you to test them?"

She still looked a little confused, but tested them as he offered.

"Which one would be preferable?"

She indicated the vial with the new fragrance.

And then, showing how hesitant she still was with this fresh power given her, reasoned: "For a change."

"As you wish," he bowed, going to sprinkle a few discreet drops on the bed covers and one or two on the pillows. "Please tell us whenever you desire it to be changed back to the old one."

Before he and the little army of servants finally left her in peace, Hermias managed to hand to her the books she had requested, setting several scroll buckets beside her along with a table on which he arranged some comestibles, a jug of water as well as one of fresh milk, a goblet, and a lamp. She had refused even the company of her own attendants when asked whom she preferred to wait on her while waiting for Shizuru, so he also left a bell to make it easier for her to summon two slaves, whom he directed to take up posts in the corridor outside. Her new personal attendant, a hulking but surprisingly friendly Otomeian who had recently been posted as her bodyguard and body-carrier when Shizuru was not around, took up

a post outside as well.

"Dominilla," he intoned before leaving, "you are certain you need no more? Whatever it may be, we can fetch it."

She glanced at the table laden with everything she might need before her, the pillows he had placed behind her back for support, and the wrap he had draped over her lap only moments earlier. He had had someone inquire too if her old pet-Shizuki, whom she had asked for-was presentable, and had promised to have the panther brought over once the animal had been properly bathed. He had also sent word to her fellow Otomeians on her behalf informing them of where she was quartered and where to send for her should she be required.

Thinking of all this, Natsuki treated him to one of the things his mistress loved best about the young woman: a laughing smile about her eyes that managed by some uncanny exclusion to leave her mouth untouched. He answered with a grin and took the hint, finally excusing himself and leaving her to her thoughts.

Which was a relief, Natsuki considered in his absence, as she had enough to fill the room by themselves.

She reached for a scroll from one of the buckets the steward had left her and glanced at the title. It was an introduction to the Himean army-and while she supposed she might still glean from it a few points of information she was currently not aware of, she was also fairly confident that if there was anything she understood about the Himeans by now, it would be their army. She returned the scroll to the bucket and pulled out another. It was a more advanced text, this time dealing with a history of the Republic's class system.

She unfurled it and settled back against the pillows to read. For a while, this was all she did. She was not as fast as her lover when it came to dissecting the stream of letters that made up words and the procession of words that made up sentences, but she was still a swift reader, with a particular talent for cross-referencing information by memory because of the encyclopaedic stock of knowledge she had been collecting from books since childhood. She was pushing herself to read faster than usual these days, for she had a lot on

which to catch up. It had taken her cousin the Princess Alyssa to point this out to her and now she had to remedy that.

*You are a foolish girl.*

The words knocked against her ears again and she took the blow without resistance, let the memory return with full acceptance. The words spoken in the past usurped those in the text before her and brought back, afresh, that conversation she had had with her relative.

"This is a miserable condition," Alyssa had told her, doing a slow evaluation of the area in which they had had this dialogue. This had happened in the general's quarters at the Sosia camp, so of course it had been a handsomely decorated area, full of Shizuru's favoured colours and the fine furniture that gave the tent the look of a genuine and very expensive bedroom.

Yet what Alyssa referred to was that this same area was marred by the tracks of an invalid. Rolls of bandages spread on a peacock-grained table; ointments and balms sat beside a mortar and bowls of prepared concoctions; jars of healing herbs and all manner of medicaments were lined up on the cupboards. All of which Natsuki only noticed after her cousin's survey, so deep had been her retreat prior to the woman's arrival one night earlier.

"You are a foolish girl," the woman had said then, her voice the flatly even thing she used when she felt verbal theatrics unneeded, and the voice she used when telling the truth. "Wallowing in this swamp for a consumptive. Look at this place."

A sweep of her bright blue eyes, at once dismissive and aware of everything.

"It's a shrine to sickness."

Natsuki tried to open her mouth, for all that both of them knew nothing would come out of it.

"Save your breath," the elder Otomeian said curtly, stopping that which never could have begun. "I know. I heard it from Otanara and



the others. And from your men, whom you have not even seen since this happened. That is another of your errors, by the way."

She looked pointedly at the girl's amputated limb, not flinching from it at all.

"Your first error, even," she said. "You have been ungrateful, from what I hear. They saved your life, Natsuki, and I am glad for that." She scowled and said it more emphatically. " *I am glad for that !*"

Her eyes seemed to ask if Natsuki felt the same way, and also seemed to say that she doubted it.

"Why are you acting like this, Princess Natsuki?" she went on to ask more gently. "They tell me you have been behaving as though you have no more reason to live. But how can that be? When people save your life, you have reason to live. You of all people... you know this. It is no longer your concern or choice alone, Natsuki. You have to keep living."

Natsuki looked down, trying miserably to hide her humiliation.

"It's a heavy obligation," Alyssa admitted. "But the noble do not choose their obligations. And you are among the noblest of our people... in spite of the fact that you have recently chosen to act like an *ingrate* . That is not like the Princess I have known all these years. To be frank, you have disappointed me."

She reached forward to brush away the hair Natsuki was using to hide herself, and when she saw them, also brushed away the tears. Afterwards, she held out her hand and waited for Natsuki to take it. They held hands for some time then, saying nothing and both thinking of a past when the elder had asked the younger to take her hand like this, in order to lead her through what had then been a new and unfamiliar home.

"What did their surgeons say?" Alyssa asked after a while. "It is true you are out of danger?"

Natsuki nodded. She opened her mouth and when she spoke, did so in such a reedy voice that the other broke her grip in order to get a

cup of water.

"You've not been speaking again, I see," the fair woman muttered, watching her cousin wet her lips. "Ye gods, Natsuki. No wonder Otanara was worried."

She inhaled slowly, measuring the waif who was before her yet on the verge of disappearing.

"This is an unpleasant repetition, my dear cousin-in more ways than one, I think?"

Natsuki stiffened, paused in her drinking.

Alyssa asked the query: "It was the same leg, wasn't it?"

Natsuki put down the cup, eyes closing. Alyssa shook her head.

"It's unlike you to be superstitious," she said softly, almost sadly. "A great many things are coincidences, Natsuki. Not everything holds special meaning."

The response was clear in the stricken face. Alyssa had known her long enough to read it easily.

"Even were it a punishment of some sort, not all is misery," she retorted to the silent response. "If you fear this to be some sort of penance for that which was *not even your doing*, at least see it in this light: that which once brought you so much grief has been cut away. There is no more reparation to be made." She scowled deeply, again shaking her head. "There never was a need for reparation in the first place."

Natsuki had dropped her eyes to the cup in her grip, her green eyes fixed on her own fingers, white-knuckled and quaking. Alyssa blew through her nose in exasperation when the trembling spilled a little of the water in the cup and on the girl's lap.

"Give that to me and listen," she said, taking the cup from her cousin and setting it aside. "Enough of those thoughts. Turn your mind to what is happening and what has yet to happen. Your neglect of yourself has not been befitting one of your station. This body..." A

flat look directed to the stump under the sheets. "Your wound is *not* the end of your worth. Remember this, because it's what I came here to tell you."

The green eyes looking at her were confused and still grieving.

"You and I, we come from soldierly peoples," the other said firmly. "But it's a fault to consider that description paramount when there are other descriptions just as valid and as valuable. It's narrow-minded, and even less like you than it is for me. So you cannot ride off into the thick of battle any longer. What of it? You have your mind still and it is a mind worth considering. So you cannot strike an imposing figure to inspire your men in battle. Again, what of it? You have your face and most of a body that, from what I gather, has still the power to inspire a woman who has thousands of soldiers at her disposal. Take it from me: you are most assuredly not emptied, Princess. So do not act like it!"

She frowned, although the better way to describe her features was to say they were alight, not darkened.

"We make do with what we have," she asserted. "And you have a lot left. Your hold on Shizuru Fujino alone gives you a power unmatched in this camp, I am understanding, and may still be used in service to your country, if your fear is that you can no longer do anything for Otomeia."

There was a flicker that passed through the girl's face, followed by a hiss.

"Do not ask-" a gasp for air as Natsuki struggled to keep her emotions in check. "Do not ask me to - to - to *use* her!"

Alyssa lifted her brows and looked hugely haughty at this.

"I was not asking it," she said steadily. "And going from this reaction, Princess, I very much doubt that I could have. The two of you are quite taken with each other, are you not? She nearly went at me with her bare hands last night when I threatened to take you. And you... threw an apple at me."

The blush that stained Natsuki's cheeks was a shock against her ashen skin.

"I was..." She swallowed, telegraphed a plea in her face. "Cousin, I am vuh-vuh-very-"

"Yes, I know." Alyssa closed her eyes with what seemed a patient expression, then opened and fixed one glaring blue orb on the girl. "Would you have thrown worse had you had it in your hands?"

Natsuki was mortally injured by the suggestion.

"No!" she said with horror. "Never!"

Alyssa studied her with both eyes this time, expression unreadable.

"I've no desire to ask you to use her for my ends," she eventually continued. "And I've no need of it. After all, I'm merely going to do as His Majesty My Father has done, and use *you* instead. In which respect you need do nothing above what you have been doing. Feel free to enjoy yourself in this affair."

She exhibited a humourless grin at the girl's astonishment.

"What your lover said last night and this morning seems to be true," she said. "I believe father did give you to her, for the foreseeable future. I see how it could work out for Otomeia in the long run. Your lover is someone who shall always be a power in whatever world she occupies, an influential woman. And a beautiful one." She paused, looked evenly at Natsuki. "You think her beautiful?"

The younger woman's countenance assumed one of heavy guilt. Alyssa snorted, again without humour.

"*Of course* you do." Alyssa waited for the girl's eyes to come back to her from where they had fixed on the sheets. "All the better for His Majesty's plans, although I'm not best pleased with it."

She smiled after the confession that surprised neither of them.

"You knew this would be my reaction," she stated.

Natsuki smiled as well, but rather more weakly.

"She is not like other foreigners," the girl argued for her lover's sake.

"You are not like other Otomeians," Alyssa riposted. "You mistake my opposition as having only one root. There's more to this, Natsuki. My plan was to marry you last year, and were it not for Shizuru Fujino, I have every reason to believe father would have approved strongly of it. Had the Himeans not come, it is no stretch to say you would be my wife now."

She could not help but laugh at the utter shock on her younger cousin's face, and belted out a peal of laughter such as she had not had in many weeks. What would the woman hovering outside-was she the type to eavesdrop, Alyssa wondered-make of it?

She let her cousin recover her bearings for a moment before resuming speech.

"It's safe to say you did not expect that, Princess Natsuki."

The girl's mouth gaped as if to say something, was shut, then opened again to breathe a very windy, "No, Princess Alyssa."

"Yet I'm sure you see the advantages. Your dynasty with mine. And yes, I admit it, your wealth with mine." She stopped suddenly and bent over in the chair, reaching for the bag she had unceremoniously dropped on the floor earlier. She rummaged through it busily, clearly seeking something. "Though of course I would never have milked you. You know I'm not enamoured of gold in itself. The presence of a financial safeguard of the sort you offer for any ruler, however, would have been-"

"Expedient," Natsuki gasped out.

Alyssa grinned: "My word, your mouth."

She pulled out what she had been searching for in her bag: a blinding necklace of prodigiously large emeralds that made Natsuki blink several times to get the flash of reflected light to clear.

"I intended it to be my wedding present to my bride. Now it appears

that it shall just have to be my get-well present to my cousin-for now, anyway."

She placed the necklace on the girl's lap, resting it gently above the silky, deep purple sheets. The green lustre was enhanced by the contrast, and Natsuki stared at it with bewildered awe. She reached out tentatively to finger one of the emeralds-she had never seen ones so large before-and stopped midway, begging permission to touch it with her glance.

"You need not wear it now," Alyssa said with a smile, shifting her baldric so she could sit more comfortably in her chair. "I would not burden your neck with that yet, lest it break."

The girl perceived the suggestion immediately, a furious procession of moods running through her eyes.

*The most expensive gems from Scythia*, Alyssa thought, glancing at the emeralds on the necklace then back to her cousin's irises. *Still they fall short. I feel cheated.*

"Princess Alyssa," Natsuki whispered, pleading with her face. "Cousin. I cuh - cuh - cuh - huhn-"

"At peace. What did I tell you long ago about taking time to breathe when you feel pressed?"

Natsuki started breathing in and out obediently. Her cousin finished her statement for her anyway.

"And you cannot marry me, not at the moment, I know - I said so, did I not?" Alyssa said, sounding like someone conducting business, which in a sense she was. "As I said, go on and enjoy your affair as long as you can. Insofar as your interaction with her remains of benefit to our nation, I've no intention of getting in between. But remember that when this affair has run its course as it eventually must, my offer and interest will still stand. And I *will* be satisfied once there are no more impediments of this type."

Natsuki said nothing, still trying to regulate her breathing as the elder woman had instructed. Her eyes were very large as she

looked up, and her birdlike chest heaved and throbbed with each juddering inhalation. Again Alyssa smiled at the sight, for she really was quite fond of this relative.

"I'm not a very expressive person, but I hope you know how dear you have always been to me. I would treat you well." A beat. " *She* treats you well?"

Natsuki took a moment to breathe in and out before nodding.

"She..." She paused, took and passed a few more breaths swiftly. "She is kind to me. *Always* ."

"As would I be."

It was Alyssa's turn to draw a breath.

"I'm afraid I must go soon. I shall see to your troopers before I leave, although I think Kyo is looking after what remains of them. If you want him to be the new captain of the group, you should talk to them soon, however; the Lupine Division shall take no one else's words but yours come matters such as this. Your fanatics would not be content to listen to me if they know you capable of delivering words yourself."

The sunken eyes sparkled at this, which relieved Alyssa a bit. She knew it could not be easy to have to relinquish a command that the girl had held for years. Well, Alyssa had no intention of taking that completely away. As she had pointed out earlier, there was that excellent brain still to consider, which did not necessarily require participation in the actual fighting to be of use. And a clear message had to be sent to the other barons and nobles that the Princess Natsuki was not yet to be retired from her military duties, lest they begin consciously excluding her from the war proceedings: not out of cruelty, even, but simply because it would be seen as the right thing to do.

"I have to ask you to remain Head of the Lupine Division, however," Alyssa stated. "You have led and known them far too long for them to take well to the idea of anyone else managing their affairs, especially in court and military councils. I also need you to remain

an active member of the army, given how lamentably few are the minds in our own high command that are endowed with your talent for creative thinking. To that end, I shall have it announced later to the officials and send news to His Majesty that under the power he vested in me for this war enterprise, I'm endowing you with a new title for the military. The title shall please you since I'm borrowing it from your friends the Hellenes. You shall be Polemarch of the Otomeian Army, Princess, which combined with your status as Head of the Lupine Division means you shall still have duties in overseeing stratagems, policies, and relations with the allies. Novel, I know, but these are novel times as well as trying ones. I'm sorry to have to ask you to take on even more work as you recuperate, but I fear you are still very much needed."

Alyssa tried very hard to hold back her smile when her cousin gaped at the news, the small face crumpling as the younger woman burst into noiseless tears. Silly girl, to think she would be let fade away so easily! Surely she could not have expected her cousin to do nothing?

"The Lupine Division's figure needs to be brought back to full-strength," Alyssa continued, still in tones of strong decision. "I would ask that you do this first of all, in fact. It's been a while since we had to undergo auditions, but I've no doubt you still know how to proceed. I'm going to make my own recommendations from my men-I have several in mind who would be suitable for your needs-and will leave the list with Kyo. I will tell the other captains to recommend from their ranks as well and give Kyo their lists tonight, so that he can consult with you tomorrow on which people you find acceptable for admission to your Division. I need you to make the decisions by tomorrow too, as I am leaving the day after that and need to know which persons to leave here so that they may begin their training. Is this acceptable?"

The younger nodded, still too taken aback by all this kindness to speak. She followed the gesture by dashing away her tears a little childishly with the back of one hand, striving to regain her composure.

"That is all for now," the elder princess said. "There is a lot to be done for me-and for you, keep it in mind. You are doing your most



important duty at the moment, technically, by just being beloved of that Himean. But I see no reason that you should not endeavour to do it better by understanding her even more than you already do, as it may help you deal better with those from her people who may be less than kind to you. Do that reading you love to do, investigate their culture, learn as much as you can of her world: it may come to your advantage as well as Otomeia's later on. I am not happy that my cousin, whom I had long intended to marry, has to be the lover of a foreign politician in the interests of securing an alliance. But if it has to be that way and my cousin is pleased with it, I think that it would be well for my cousin to be the best lover that she can be for that foreign politician."

It would be wrong to say her eyes warmed: they never truly did. But they did soften.

"You wear excellence best of all coats," she said. "Never forget it. A princess with only half her legs can still be wholly a princess, Natsuki of Ortygia and Otomeia."

She got to her feet and leaned over the bed for the customary kiss on the lips she had always used in their greetings. She rather surprised her cousin this time, however, by putting more into the kiss than she had ever done before.

"For remembrance as well as curiosity," she said when she finally pulled away, leaving Natsuki's lips wet and swelling. "I wanted to know what I was missing. I also wanted you to know the same."

Natsuki sighed heavily at the recollection of that scene, rubbing her lips reflexively now as she had then. She had not done so out of disgust or some similar emotion at the time, but rather because she had been (deathly) afraid of what Shizuru might have done if she had suspected that someone else had touched her mistress's lips. No argument about light-hearted play or familial affection, Natsuki suspected, would convince the woman to rein in her viciousness were she to perceive something encroaching on her territory. And as disconcerting as her cousin's revelation about intending to marry her had been, Natsuki's love for her cousin was perhaps stronger than ever for all the woman had done, which meant she did not want to entertain Shizuru's hands laid on her relative. Alyssa was strong too,

yes, and could fend for herself very ably: Shizuru, however, was beyond strength when enraged.

The woman had such hands, she thought, remembering the time the woman had shaken her out of frustration. She knew Shizuru had still been holding back then, yet her arms had been tender for over a week after only a few seconds of that grip. Not that the experience had the power to dull what she knew even better of them, which was their immense tenderness and the warmth of them on her chilled skin. It was a fine point of irony, to her mind, that the hands she thought kindest in the world were also the most fatal with which she had ever been acquainted. They were hands that could make you die, yet could get you killed.

What else she had to think on that particular subject was interrupted by a sound from outside the room. She craned her head lightly to better hear what was going on, but the source of the noise actually made it easier for her: the door swung open with a crash and someone stalked in, the posted slaves from the corridor trying fearfully to stop her advance.

Natsuki's mouth fell open, her scroll dropping to her lap.

"Do not *touch* me," the intruder sneered, affronted by one of the slaves' hand on her sleeve. It was one of Natsuki's slaves, the huge Otomeian who served now as her bodyguard and carrier, Zidek. This gigantic man had been summoned from the capital by the Princess Alyssa as soon as she had heard of Natsuki's amputation, and he was just another of the things for which Natsuki thanked her cousin these days.

He held on to the intruder's sleeve despite the latter's snarl, and Natsuki waved a hand at him so that he would let go. She motioned to the door and he exited obediently.

"Domina, please, she is out," one of the remaining slaves was saying, making gestures in the air that begged the intruder to step outside again. "The mistress has gone to see to the army."

"Really," the woman dusting off her sleeve murmured, albeit absent the earlier heat. She was distracted by what was opposite her, which

was a raven-haired, fabric-swathed wraith with a lovely face and an open scroll atop her legs. What a picture for a greeting! Said wraith regarded her with a look that said it was as fascinated with her as she was with it, and that drew her mouth into a curve that her relative would have recognised as boding ill.

"Well, she's *new*," she said under her breath, suddenly giddy.

The slaves resumed their entreaties.

"Resume your posts - I will wait for your mistress here," she told the slaves in a voice that brooked no dissent. "And shut the door behind you. Go, before I have your mistress whip the lot of you."

The slaves exchanged uneasy looks, glanced at the still-staring Natsuki, then excused themselves to do as commanded. They had not yet shut the door behind them than the newcomer was already stalking over to the couch, approaching with a confident, *I-own-all-you-see* gait that further fascinated the watching girl for its familiarity. Whereas the walking woman's green-gold eyes were darkened by interest, however, the waiting one's eyes were tainted with disturbance instead.

Natsuki was seeing-experiencing-something worthy of unease. What had come into the room and was now walking towards her was a version of Shizuru drained of colour and recast in new metals, topped with a mane even more fantastic than her lover's because it was not white, not even grey, but steel. Another moment of staring at this unbelievable replica of her lover distinguished the image from the original and stripped away the illusion, but not the effect. There was still genuinely so much of Shizuru in the woman, flickering in and out of her narrowing eyes, angling into view with the arrogant lines of the jaw and the condescendingly patrician nose. She even observed Natsuki with something of the same slightly temperamental, secretly undressing gaze Shizuru had often given her at the start of their acquaintance. And Natsuki, who until now had never understood that she could feel physical attraction to anyone else save Shizuru herself, looked away with cheeks that burned as though she had been slapped, ashamed beyond words.

Shizuma understood, having seen the reaction in the girl's face

during her approach.

"Ave," she greeted at the end of her advance.

Natsuki glanced up at the woman, only to bow her head awkwardly and return the greeting in a whisper.

"These," Shizuma announced, "are my cousin's rooms."

She noted that the girl showed no surprise.

"Did she tell you about me?" she asked.

A nod.

"Then you know my name as well?"

Another nod, and that was all.

*Oh, of course - "Not a talker."*

"Then I should like to say we are even," said the standing woman, crossing both arms loosely and unleashing a brief grin. "But I feel I cannot, as I seriously doubt she spent as much time talking to you about me as she did talking to me about you, Princess Natsuki."

An incline of the head flashed a speck of green, but the hair curtained it away quickly.

"Natsuki is sufficient," the young woman answered, and Shizuma was pleased to see that her voice was as pleasantly whisper-low and feather-soft as she had been led to believe. Now if only the girl would lift her head and display her damned face! Why did she have to be so furtive, anyway?

"An odd thing for royalty to say," she retorted to the permission the foreigner had just given. "I have heard it said that those of noble stock still invested with their titles are most reluctant to leave them out of their address-certainly, if you come from a nation that insists on retaining titles, unlike *us*, it would be odd if you as an individual did not also insist on retaining yours. Are you certain you would not prefer me to remember your title, Princess?"

"Thank you," the low voice said. "Buh-buh-but I need no one's remembrance for my own."

Shizuma decided she might like this mistress of Shizuru's after all.

"Then it shall be 'Natsuki'," she said. "Although I shall never forget that the unspoken title of 'princess'."

The girl ducked her head again and Shizuma's lips twitched.

*Really very shy... and that is an unexpectedly adorable stammer; so far Shizuru has described her exact. But her face-I want to see the face I saw from a distance.*

The young woman opened her mouth: "Shizuru is-"

"Going to turn up, sooner or later. I imagine it would be the former option as it would be a fool who would keep you waiting, and my cousin is not a fool."

The girl was peeking up just then so she accompanied this with her most winning smile, the one that always got her a hitch of the breath from those who would later be opening their legs to her attentions. It was a test, in its own way. So when she heard that little almost-gasp from her favourite cousin's lover and whom her cousin had described as a woman beyond all women, she was somewhat disappointed and perhaps a little bitter. She immediately prepared to shift her attitude to one of cold courtesy-if she could summon sufficient civility for the girl who had fooled Shizuru and, for a moment, even her.

Her frosty farewell was stopped by the curious sound coming from the girl, though. Shizuma peered closely in curiosity and realised that the girl's shoulders were shaking.

She stared, unsure of what had just happened.

"Is there something you find something amusing?" she asked, distracted from her purpose.

"You..."

Shizuma bristled.

"... *are* her cousin," the girl finished, still trying quite hard not to give vent to her hilarity. Little puffs of laughter were coming through her nose, however, and Shizuma stared harder at her.

Eventually, the Himean found herself trying not to laugh as well.

"I see," she said, understanding now. "I see. Did she do that to you often in your early acquaintance?"

Another stifled chuckle. "Even now."

"Lucky girl, to be given such attentions!" Shizuma placed a hand on one hip and abandoned all her attempts at being distant: she had already decided to like the young woman. "My cousin may be a charmer, but not a flirt. Well, save on occasions where there is absolutely no danger of being taken seriously, in which case it would not really be flirting, would it?"

The look she received was calm and oddly clear. This time, it was Shizuma whose breath hitched as the new tilt of her companion's head slid away the many locks of hair, exposing the exotic planes her cousin had been lauding to her for months. How right she had been to do that! It was indeed *a* face, even better from nearby because proximity revealed the lustre of the eyes. Not even the effusion of adjectives Shizuma's love-struck relative had been using to describe them captured their colour. Neither leaf-like- *too lucent* - nor emerald- *too animated* -they were shocking little pools of green the likes of which Shizuma had never imagined possible in mortal eyes.

Then she caught and cursed herself. She had been staring, and the girl knew it.

*What a creature Shizuru would pick, and how like my cousin to pick this way*, she thought. She cast about for a subject and landed a glance on the unevenness of the rise to the lilac dress. She rejected that subject, knowing what it was as she had been informed by correspondence beforehand of this misfortune. Instead she directed her attentions to finding a seat, and her eyes went to the one with

the sword propped atop it. The seal on the sheath caught her attention as she was about to move the weapon aside.

"Why... this is of the Himemiya," she said wonderingly, picking it up and looking to her cousin's mistress for an explanation. "Why do you have it, Natsuki-san?"

The green eyes dropped a shutter: something was being concealed.

"Natsuki is enough," the girl murmured.

"Natsuki, then."

"It was a gift," was the answer.

"A gift," Shizuma echoed pensively, running her hand over the sheath. "From Suou-chan?"

The shutter went back up and Shizuma saw the flash before it could be hidden again: it was pain that had been behind them.

"Suou?" the young woman on the couch said with passion, body actually twisting towards her. "You know - *knew* Suou?"

Silvery brows went up at this familiar address, but she replied nevertheless: "Of course. I count her sister among my greatest friends, Suou-chan not far off. She shall be missed, and upon my word, avenged. With utmost prejudice." She paused, steely brows drawn together. "She gave this to you?"

An affirmative.

"Then take good care of it, for it came from a person of genuine worth." She set the sword gently beside her, careful to place it where it would still be within reach of its owner. She took a seat on the vacated space. "Now then. How is she?"

The look she got was confused.

"I mean my cousin," she explained.

"Ahh." The exhale was followed by a slow nod. "She is... well."

"How are you?"

Again the look was confused, and Shizuma smiled lightly.

"Your answer to this would answer the previous question better, I suspect," she said. "If you'll not clarify for me, I shall have to flesh out details myself."

Here she stopped to give the girl another evaluation, trying-with some difficulty, she admitted to herself-to ignore the extraordinary beauty for a moment and isolate only some aspects of the form. Perhaps it was easier at this range: this close she could see the shadowed patches of fatigue under the eyes, the light greyness of the lips. She could see how thin the girl really was, and how one could make out the fine traceries of veins around her wrist under what looked like the barest tissue of skin.

" *Are you well?*" she asked more earnestly than before.

It was apparent that she was asking out of fear that the person before her was at present in some suffering that she had not noticed quickly enough. Natsuki, who felt herself liking the woman better for that frank compassion, sought to reassure her with an almost equally frank smile.

As their luck would have it, that was when Shizuru walked in.

The general had been out checking that her officers had all in control and seeing to a few things she wanted to get out of the way sooner rather than later regarding the instalment of the legions in their cantonment. These minor impedimenta were actually quite quickly handled, but she had been detained longer than planned by a chat with the man running special espionage on the Mentulae for her.

Yamada was eager to ingratiate himself with the ever-rising young senator, especially given that he knew her friend had reported his recent period of inaction and would have predisposed her to be frosty to him. As such, he had paired his apologies with an offering: the latest information on what was happening on the Mentulaean side of the borders, which he knew would be significant to anyone in



her position. Fortunately, she deigned to spare time to hear him out, during which he explained that his network had discovered that the second force meant for invasion had been detained a little further north and farther from the borders than the Mentulae had planned. The Prince Calchis, its commander, had been forced to take this position owing to a sudden resumption of rebellious movements among the tribes he had supposedly already conquered there on his father's behalf. This meant that the central and eastern Mentulaean regions would have relatively fewer troops than expected: a boon for Shizuru's mission.

Shizuru showed little excitement at this intelligence, however, for it was not her intention to show him she thought it as important as he did just yet. After listening stone-faced to the man's presentation, she merely reminded him of their agreement, and asked if he truly was committed to it. Upon receiving an earnest affirmative, she then proceeded to shock the generally self-possessed man by informing him that she had already drawn up papers granting him the citizenship and that he could count himself a Himean that very day.

"As my client," she told him with the hint of a smile. "Which means I am now your patron. I should inform you that the conditions for patronage generally extend to the ability to call freely on the services of clients, absent pecuniary considerations if so wished. However, as I hardly wish to deprive you of your profit, I shall settle for a discounted price on your work for me. Shall we see say thirty percent off the total and a commitment to privilege my needs above all other potential customers?"

There was nothing for it but to agree to her conditions. He actually admired her more for them.

"I am glad we have that settled," she said, suddenly turning jocose. "Please remember that I shall geld you should I ever have cause to doubt your loyalty to me. My preferred procedure for traitors is actually to hang them from a joist upside down, skin the balls first, then follow with the actual castration. A delicate procedure."

"Any eunuch would stay in your bed instead of climbing into Obsidian's, Fujino-san," the man replied after a pause to clear his throat. "I'm the sort of safe gambler who bets on sure things, you

know."

She left well-satisfied with him. She had gone straight from that conversation towards her quarters, wanting to check on her girl one more time before she got on to more brass tacks for the army, but had been informed by the slaves outside their room that her cousin was inside and had thus been a little uncertain of what to expect on entry. She certainly had not expected to see her cousin sitting next-*so close!* -to Natsuki and Natsuki regarding- *smiling at!* - her cousin that way.

She stopped at the doorway and the pair turned to her with looks of greeting. Still unsure of how well she liked this image- *too close!*- she stepped from her post at the entrance gingerly, motioning to the slaves she had brought with her to stay where they were against the wall, unseen.

"This is a surprise," she said, her shirt making that hiss chainmail did when the links slid over each other; she bent over her lover and gave her a kiss first, then presented her cheek to the girl for a return of the gesture. It was a show, and her cousin was not fool enough to miss the fact that the show was staged for her benefit.

"I presume the two of you have gone through introductions," she told the pair afterwards.

"More or less," Shizuma said with a sweet smile. "Natsuki-" she drew out the name voluptuously "-has been very warm and welcoming."

"That is good." Shizuru's hand slid over her lover's shoulder and held on to it. "I was looking for you earlier."

"I could say the same to you."

The silver-haired woman rose from her seat and smoothed hands over the lap of her tunic.

"I assumed you would want to check on the new legions and have a talk with me, cousin. I would not blame you if you wished to put that off given what other, infinitely more appealing companionship you

have to occupy you here," she said, directing a smile at the dark-haired girl who was watching the two patricians with even greater absorption than she had shown with Shizuma alone. The silver-haired woman supposed she was comparing them, and she was right.

"I am tempted indeed," Shizuru said to her cousin, hand a little heavier on the girl's shoulder. "But I cannot leave my duties to others, or Natsuki would berate me herself: she keeps me in line, you know."

"Does she? You *are* fortunate to have such a person, cousin!"

"I count myself that each day, yes."

"Methinks I would profit from such help as well. I confess myself the one tempted now."

"To do *what*?"

There was a crisp rap from the doorway that interrupted the developing bicker-match. The would-be contestants paused to find Miyuki Rokujou at the door.

"Er... pardon if I am interrupting," the legate said with uncharacteristic hesitation. She kept glancing to something out of sight from the entryway and seemed to be consciously edging away from the side to which she was directing her suspicious glances. Shizuma was curious, but was unable to ask about it when the other legate asked to be allowed to enter. Their general granted permission, and Miyuki strode in at a swift clip, looking inexplicably relieved.

"Just arrived and two visitors in my rooms already. My, but I am popular today," Shizuru smiled at her lover, who lifted a brow that asked when she was *ever not* .

"What is it, Miyuki?" the senior legate prompted her old friend, still wondering why the woman was behaving so oddly. "Are you all right?"

"Oh - oh, right, yes," the usually collected woman said, running her

hand through her hair in yet another uncharacteristic gesture. "I came to see you, Shizuma. I was told you would be here... although I also thought I would see if Shizuru-san wanted to have me check on the new legions and prepare a report on them."

"No need, I shall check on the legions myself," Shizuru said, turning to her and exposing a corner of something Shizuma had not noticed before. She drew attention to it.

"Cousin, what is that... *thing* tucked into your belt?"

Shizuru smiled.

"Oh, yes, I nearly forgot," she said, drawing it out from behind her and grinning at the girl on the couch. " *Meum mel*, here is a quill made from a peacock feather. I saw it when I was passing by a scribe's store earlier. See how pretty it is."

She presented it to Natsuki with commendable grace for someone whose two subordinates were watching with eyebrows halfway up their foreheads. The recipient of the gift, however, accepted her present with grace equal to her own and thanked the gift-giver with acquiescence to another silently solicited kiss on the cheek.

"I thought it would please you," Shizuru said, either quite oblivious to Miyuki and Shizuma's exchanged glances or simply unconcerned about them. Either way, she certainly appeared very proud to them for a woman fawning over her foreign mistress shamelessly. "As would she."

The only seated person in the room raised her chin.

"She?" she whispered.

"Well, I actually I encountered them headed here, so I cannot take credit completely," Shizuru admitted. She called out to the slaves she had ordered to stay out of sight some moments ago. "Off with it now!"

The next few seconds were rather a blur to the girl, who watched the sudden explosion of movement from two of her companions in the room with some befuddlement. The finished tableau after all the

manoeuvres was one of Shizuma standing in front of Natsuki's couch and brandishing Suou's sword, Miyuki a little off to her side and looking ready to pull out her own weapon, and a very amused Shizuru still in her place, merely regarding her cousin's horrified face with a growing smile.

"*Ecaster*, Shizuru, have you lost wits?" Shizuma cried out, watching the approaching creature with sweaty fear. "Why would you unleash this upon your own lover? Or *us*?"

Miyuki, who had at least been warned of this even if she still found confronting the real thing unchained frightful, glanced at her friend and tried to explain. Shizuru beat her to it, however.

"As impressed as we all are by your heroics, dear cousin," the general said, "they are unnecessary. Let her pass. She merely goes to her master."

Shizuma stared at her again as if she had gone mad. Shizuru sighed and manoeuvred her cousin's arm down, literally dragging her away from her defensive position.

There followed a human cry of delight as Natsuki saw what had been hidden from her view by Shizuma's back, followed by an animal chortle as the unleashed panther leapt happily into its owner's arms. It had not forgotten Natsuki at all, and Natsuki certainly looked to have not forgotten it either. Shizuru watched the pair reacquaint themselves with each other, feeling just as gleeful as they did because it had been some time since she had seen Natsuki this visibly delighted. How nice to see her girl's smile so untrammelled again!

She clapped her hands at the slaves who had bathed and brought the animal and told them they could go.

"Jupiter," the slack-jawed Shizuma whispered beside her, finally dropping the arm with the sword. "Jupiter."

The blonde faced her.

"Shizuma, come now, I told you I gave her a cat," the younger

woman said in a scolding tone.

For the third and possibly not the last time that day, Shizuru got a look questioning her sanity.

" *Cat* ?" Shizuma echoed hoarsely. "A cat?"

"Yes."

"You told me you gave her a little cat! A kitten!"

"Well, it was a kitten at some point, you know."

"A kitten!" Shizuma sheathed the sword with some reluctance and put it on a different table from before, not yet willing to come near the two purring creatures on the couch. "Why would you give her that - that - *monster* ?"

"Oh, really, Shizuki is hardly deserving of such a designation!"

"Shi-are you insane?"

Miyuki chose to speak up.

"Again, pardon my intrusion," she said hurriedly. "But if you do not mind, Shizuru-san, I think I would like to wait for Shizuma outside instead. And for you, so we can check on the new legions."

She did not bother waiting for a reply and made her way out, whipping out a handkerchief from her uniform and dabbing at her mouth with it.

"I think I'd rather wait for you outside as well," Shizuma said disgustedly, clearly still bothered by the presence of the huge animal jumping around the couch. In what corner of the world was something that big, that fast, that *black* still referred to glibly as a *cat* ? "Come out quickly, would you, or I might come in with a pack of legionaries for fear you've both been mauled to death. Good gods, to call that a kitten! You've gone round the bend, Shizuru."

After which she made her way out of the room with as much dignity as one could muster while checking constantly over their shoulder

for an animal lunging at them. A chuckling Shizuru followed her to shut the door. When the general turned around, she received a reproachful look from *her* kitten.

"Yes, perhaps I did enjoy that a little too much-but I must say it is wonderful to see my cousin so riled for once," Shizuru confessed, coming over to stroke their old pet's head as well. It snorted at her, shifting its pawing attentions to the straps of her uniform's leather skirt. "She is so large, my darling! Did you imagine her being of this size already?"

"No," Natsuki said with a smile. "So large now, yes."

Shizuru stroked the furry black jaw, her hand tickled by the vibrissae as they brushed over her wrist. Natsuki kept her own hand busy on the panther's body and rubbed patterns into the gleaming coat.

"Still so docile," the older woman murmured as she heard the thrum of the beast's purr. "Thank goodness. She looks big enough to eat someone now."

She gazed at her girl.

"Was my cousin pleasant to you?" she enquired.

"Mm-hm."

"She is charming, do you not think so?"

"Mm-hm."

Her cousin would have tried to flirt. Shizuru knew this, and knew it would have been harmless and probably done partly to check how faithful Natsuki really was. Which still did not make her like it any better.

"My cousin..." Shizuru paused, wondering how best to word this. "Shizuma is fond of beautiful women. Do not think badly of her."

Natsuki's eyes flickered.

"I say the same to you of her, Shizuru," she said softly.

Shizuru wrinkled her nose with humour, not at all bothered that she had been found out.

"Am I so obvious?" she asked.

A speaking look was her answer.

"Then pardon me." She pulled in her lips and added, "But I care not for anyone's hand on what is mine."

The other woman held out her arms in response. Shizuru complied, abandoning Shizuki.

"Where do you wish to go?" she asked, when she had already picked up the younger woman. Natsuki hesitated-almost as though she had not thought of a location before holding out her hands, Shizuru thought-but eventually pointed to the bed. Shizuru dutifully carried her over and placed her on the mattress. "Is that good?"

A nod. The Otomeian refused to let go.

"All right," Shizuru chuckled, following her gently downwards, rolling to rest next to her with a laugh. "Although I should not be lying here: I need a bath." She felt another body suddenly bumping against her, one covered with short and thick hair, and laughed again. "Ye gods, I am surrounded by felines."

Natsuki murmured something in her ear, stopping her laughter.

"Ah, yes," Shizuru said, sighing and getting up. "I said I would talk to you about that soon. I remember."

"That" referred to what she intended to do in the winter. The topic had come up several times before on the way to Argus, not just with Natsuki but also with her officers, and the commander had not been forthcoming with either party, which her officers knew to be fairly normal for her when she was planning something where secrecy might be important. However, this had not been normal with Natsuki and had consequentially hurt the Otomeian, even if the girl had tried her hardest not to show it.

In hindsight, it would have been easier for her to leave it there,



Shizuru reflected. But she was unable to stand the hidden hurt in the girl at her refusal to share her thoughts, which had once been free and open for Natsuki's perusal before. Shizuru could not have let the young woman hold that hurt, especially when the true source of the hurt was in the girl's interpretation of Shizuru's confidentiality as avowal of her devaluation, something Shizuru would never have permitted even as a mere idea. So in order to prevent at least that wound from opening up in her lover, Shizuru had told her part of the truth, admitting that she did not yet wish to disclose her intentions because they would involve to some extent Natsuki herself, and the involvement was such as would be likely to require a private conversation between the two of them. This conversation, she said, was one that she did not wish to have while on the march and living amidst her officers in a tent that afforded limited privacy. She had then promised to take up the matter once they got to Argus and were once again afforded the confidentiality of a closed room with real walls and a firm ceiling.

*Still, this is not what I meant when I said "once we are in Argus", the woman considered dryly, looking at her lover's sober face. I should have expected her to take me at my word literally, I suppose. But this is a precipitous time for such a conversation and not the time I wanted!*

"I fear I have little time to spare at the moment," she said, knowing the words rang untrue even to her ears: she was commander of the entire enterprise and could spare time whenever she wished. "As promised, though, I shall tell you soon."

"Soon has come," said Natsuki, who was obviously getting antsy about the subject due to Shizuru's unwillingness to come to it. The girl was no fool: she had sensed that whatever Shizuru had to say was most likely something that she would not like, and when it came to things of that sort, she preferred to face them sooner rather than later. Especially given all that had happened of late.

"Soon is now, no?" the young woman pressed. "You - you cannot tell me quickly?"

Shizuru sighed and got up, standing beside the bed and assuming an apologetic smile.

"Soon," she repeated. "I shall tell you soon. But I have things to do first. I shall return to talk to you about it, but you heard what I said to my cousin. She is outside with Miyuki-han and you know I hate to keep people waiting."

She bent to give her what was supposed to be a farewell kiss, but met fingers instead of lips.

"Natsu-"

A thumb and forefinger held her chin, stopping her retreat. The steadiness of the eyes on her were surprising, to say the least, and they arrested for an instant what she intended to say.

"Come now, Natsuki," she essayed, smiling her way through the surprise that had given her pause. "I shall tell you soon. I have to take care of work first."

That elicited a shake of the head.

"Natsuki," she repeated. Again the girl shook her head and Shizuru felt something unexpectedly intimidating licking at her heels. A small line on her brow betrayed her confusion at Natsuki's insistence, but she permitted none of the hesitation to corrupt her tone. "Pardon me, but I really have no time."

The fingers let go, to her relief. She straightened and looked at the cat watching the two of them, its yellow gaze innocent yet oddly voyeuristic.

She looked again at her lover and tried a small grin to convey apologies in parting. She had already turned around when the low voice addressed her once more, speaking in a solemn tone she had not heard in some time. And in a language that Natsuki almost never used with her too, which she knew the girl had preferred for use with her-no, *their* dead friend.

"You said your intentions required my involvement," the girl noted to her back, stopping her escape. "And that it wuh-wuh-would require too a discussion between us."

Shizuru turned around and nodded, honouring the girl's seriousness

with her own gravity.

"True, that I did," she said, also speaking in Greek.

"Yuh-yet..." Natsuki swallowed, steeled herself to say what she had to say. "Yet you are going to tell your cousin what it is before you tell me."

Shizuru lifted an eyebrow, not gainsaying it because it was true.

"The conclusion one must draw," the girl finished, "is that the discussion you plan for us does not hold my involvement... except in agreeing to what you are planning."

Her chest heaved after she got out her accusation and Shizuru considered her in the ensuing silence, intrigued by the realisation that the girl was actually still very afraid of her yet was also daring to prod her just to get to the truth of this thing. Had the girl divined her plans already, then? Uncanny and unlikely, but she also had to wonder if there was some animal instinct already built up between them now that had allowed Natsuki to detect something in the air about her meaning. Not a divination by Thought, but by some other sense. Was it a matter of Sound, for instance, or even of Smell? Could Natsuki already sniff out the things she was thinking?

For a moment she considered yielding, but she had already given her word that she would do this at a later time. One in her position had to be stern, or so the stubborn side of her asserted suddenly.

"Natsuki, I am sorry, but I have decided the matter already," she said, adopting a firm tone she hardly ever used with the girl. "I must go with my officers first, but I shall return soon. You can wait for me for a few hours."

That there was even a reply to this was sufficient to knock her off-balance in itself.

"No," the girl said shakily.

" No ?"

"No, Shizuru." A yanked inhalation. " *They* can wait for you for a few

minutes."

Shizuru's face was the depiction of sternness warring with astonishment.

"Natsuki..." she said, shaking her head. "Be reasonable."

"Please."

"I shall meet my officers now."

"You can meet them later, Shizuru," the young woman said quietly.

"I have to check on the new legions-"

"A legate can do it."

Shizuru said not a word to this, her face turning darker even as Natsuki's chest-heaving got worse and worse. Finally, after a while of glaring sulkily at the younger woman, the Himean general turned on her heel and walked towards the door.

Miyuki and Shizuma were still outside. They had clearly been chatting during the wait, for the two were smiling when they turned their heads to their commander.

"You tarried long enough," teased her silver-haired cousin. "Thank the gods you seem to be in one piece."

"I shall meet you later," Shizuru said. "Give me a report on the new legions then, cousin. Miyuki-han shall help."

And she went back inside her room, shutting the door calmly as she vanished from view. The two women left in the corridor blinked at each other, both a little slack about the mouth.

"Unusual for her to change her mind like that," Miyuki observed. "Isn't it?"

Shizuma's flabbergasted look was all the answer needed.

Inside the room, the two were in the same positions as before,

staring each other down again. Shizuru lifted an eyebrow at the young woman sitting on the bed, surprised by her own actions. Had she just yielded to someone else's command in a confrontation? There could be no mistaking it: what she had just received earlier had been commands. Yet Natsuki did not look the least bit triumphant, which mollified her pride a little.

"Does this satisfy you, Your Highness?" she said with a hint of taunting.

As Natsuki's face lined with remorse, the older woman got herself a stool so they could sit face-to-face.

"It will satisfy," Natsuki whispered, peeking at her lover with pained apology. "It... Shizuru, what *is* it? Please, tell me?"

Shizuru settled in front of her lover and said, hardly able to help herself, "How nice to hear it phrased as a request again."

The girl on the bed reached for her hand. The older woman let her take it and also permitted her to press her lips to its curve, trying to apologise for her earlier insolence.

"Shall you tell me why I should not be displeased with you for ordering me around, *meum mel*?" Shizuru asked eventually.

Natsuki looked up, face half-hidden by the hand she was holding.

"Because you are not displeased," she murmured, doing an excellent job of shamming certainty in Shizuru's feelings. The older woman's lips quirked.

"Smart girl. It is true, I am not really," Shizuru admitted while crossing her legs and petting the girl's cheek. She cocked her head slightly to one side, considering the young woman with worry. "But that was unlike you just now to insist in such a way, and that is what troubles me about this. Is something wrong, Natsuki?"

Natsuki gave her a beseeching glance.

"I ask that," she said. "Of you."

Shizuru supposed she had to praise the girl here for her courage, considering that every part of Natsuki was shaking with an obvious suspicion that whatever Shizuru had to say was along the lines of a dismissal. Or was it something else Natsuki was thinking? Oh, who knew any longer? The Himean sighed deeply and reconsidered the matter, beating her own pride into submission for it. She supposed she had let the girl have enough grief over this: she had not know that it was bothering the girl this badly- *bad enough*, a voice inside berated-and she really did know better than to let the one she adored suffer such anxieties. Perhaps it was indeed best for both of them to get it done and over with as soon as possible, ultimately.

"Winter is nearly here," she started. "And we have every indication that once it does, the Mentulaeans shall be content to spend it in defensive attitude again, at least going from what we know of them from experience as well as actual intelligence from our sources abroad the country. Thus, I shall move forward in the winter, which they shall not expect."

Naturally, the sensitive ears picked up the inflection in the pronoun.

"You will lead the advance?" the girl said in a soft query, getting a nod. "And... and where do you go?"

"Through the lowest parts of the river border," Shizuru replied. "You recall: I pointed out the area to you before, the one at the very bottom of the River Atinu, near its section leading to the sea. I am going to put up a bridge on the wrong side of that area, then shall move west before joining Kenji-han and picking up the legions over there from him."

"The wrong side..." Natsuki's eyes went wide as she caught on. "You want to go through the major massif?"

"They shall be too busy keeping watch on the easier-traversed parts of the border to see us once we do come out of the mountains."

Natsuki was impressed. "In winter, Shizuru."

"If your people can march through the mountains, so can mine, Princess," Shizuru said. "Besides, I had some people investigate the

pass I plan to take. Rugged, naturally, but still manageable with the right organisation."

The look she received said that Natsuki thought her the type of person who would consider even the impossible manageable, so it was only natural that she would deem the massif so.

"Height?" Natsuki asked.

"Roughly twenty-five hundred metres."

"Then it matters little for the crossing, the season," said the mountain expert.

Shizuru nodded.

"True: at that height, the season does not truly shift, or not appreciably where my purposes are concerned. But the season does matter for another reason, which is that I mentioned earlier. It is harder to deal with rapid and unpredictable enemy movements if your defensive stance is static, which is precisely the attitude the Mentulaeans favour. They have figured out their winter positions by now as ones meant to deal most effectively with threats coming from the areas they have already pinpointed as origins of enemy forces. These are the crossings on the borders, your cousin's camp there and the camps of the legions I sent to police the edges with her, Kenji-han's position. They shall be considerably less prepared for a variable like the one I plan to throw at them."

"And your march will be occidental to force them to shift their forces from the east," Natsuki observed. "If they do... you will loosen the borders."

"Precisely, *mea vita*."

"It is a good plan," the girl confirmed with approval.

"Do you think so?"

"They will think you mad. But it is what makes it good."

"I am gratified that you approve, Natsuki."

"Um..." A frown. "But what is my involvement?"

Shizuru's smile vanished, in its place a sad smile already begging apology.

"You know, of course, that I cannot take you with me on this excursion," she said heavily.

To her credit, Natsuki only had to hide her eyes for a few seconds. Of course she knew.

"I would not risk your health," Shizuru said with hesitation, before adding with vehemence: "Not ever again."

Natsuki looked away, but only for a moment.

"I know this," she whispered. "That is all?"

Shizuru shook her head.

"I am going to have Shizuma move up to the borders to establish base camp there," she said. "This way I can have her closer to me." A swift inhale, barely heard. "And when that happens, I want you to stay in Argus until I ask for you to be sent up there too."

That got Natsuki to sit straight, every stiff muscle on alert and telling Shizuru she was going to protest. Her face quizzed the older woman's decision even as Shizuru expanded on her reasons for it.

"The war is going to be a tough one, Natsuki," the Himean said. "I want you somewhere safer than in a place so near the lines of engagement again. To have you stay in Argus for the moment would go a long way to ensuring that." She pleaded for the girl's understanding. "Surely you see that this is only sensible, given that-"

"That I am a cripple?" Natsuki cut in abruptly.

Shizuru's wince made it seem as though she were the one so disabled.

"Given that *things have changed*," she finished firmly. "Natsuki, this is my decision. You will have to stay here until I am certain that little



danger remains on that front, and not before then."

"And when - when is that?" Natsuki closed her eyes painfully. "It is a war, Shizuru. It will be a long time."

Shizuru exhaled with the same pained eloquence.

"Perhaps, and perhaps not. I would rather it would be the latter, but I would also rather, above all other things, that you are safe," she said with feeling. "So you shall stay here, and I shall leave most of my retinue, Hermias included, to serve as your own. Please understand, Natsuki. You only need wait for me."

But that got her a furious glance.

"You hate to make people wait," Natsuki replied with tones of great restraint, her jaw bearing a tremor as she threw back Shizuru's earlier words to her face. "I understand, Shizuru. I am a cripple, but *I understand*."

"Natsuki, would you stop using that word?"

"Even if I use another word, it changes not *thuh* - *thuh* - the fact," Natsuki hissed. "Euphemism, it cannot replace a leg, no?"

Abruptly she slid into Greek once more, fixing Shizuru with the most defiant expression the older woman had ever seen on her face.

"You forget, Shizuru," the Otomeian said deliberately. "I am not separated from *my* army."

Shizuru breathed out a loud exhale through her nostrils. "Many of your duties as the Otomeian Polemarch may be discharged from Argus as well as at boundary camp. It is no less vital to an enterprise to be the one seeing to matters such as communications, recruitment for the allies, and various organisational details, as I expect you to do during your stay here. Come now, *meum mel*, you know I am right."

"I know you ask me to wait for you *again*."

That arrow struck Shizuru squarely in the breast and it showed on

her face.

"Damn it, Natsuki, try to see it from my point of view," she said through clenched teeth.

"I do," the girl uttered, looking lost. Her eyes roamed the sheets, the delicate folds of her dress draped over her knees, the walls of their room. "I am such a burden..."

The way she said it made it impossible to tell if it was a statement or a query. Either way, it was enough to make Shizuru lean forward from her seat.

"My god, Natsuki, how can you say that?" she demanded angrily.

"How can you say *this* to me?" Natsuki shot back, hands balling up the fabric of the bed sheet.

"*You nearly died!*" Shizuru cried out, having had all she could take. Her nostrils flared as she struggled to keep her emotions in check, just barely lowering her yell into a spitting growl. "The last time I left you in the fighting, you lost your leg and very nearly more than it! Do you think I would let such a thing happen again? Do you know what I would do if something happened to you again because of me?"

"I can fend for myself!" the princess retorted, also having had her fill.

"And see what has come of it!" Shizuru hissed.

Natsuki's hand came out; heat exploded on the older woman's cheek.

"Ah-!"

The gasp was Natsuki's. The two of them regarded each other with equal astonishment, showing that even the one to have done the act was surprised by it. For a few seconds nothing was said, the swift retraction of Natsuki's hand to her chest followed by the bloom of a scarlet flag on one side of Shizuru's face.

It was Shizuru who broke the silence.

"You slapped me," she whispered, wide eyes betraying her amazement. She put a hand on her smarting cheek and felt the warmth emanating from it, marvelling at the pain infinitely more delicate than she could ever have expected going from people's descriptions before. The tingle was light but she felt more aware of it than any other pain she had ever felt, and it stung in a curious way that made her chase after it when it felt as though it would leave, pressing harder with her palm to stop the burn from evaporating.

When she looked again at the young woman who had given her this pain, she did not know what to expect, given that she would never have expected said woman to slap her in the first place. But the look on her lover's face signified a deeper burn than her own, laced with a heady dose of shock along with an acute and terrified guilt.

Hermias had warned her of the girl's thinning temper before, relating a few occasions of broken pottery and flying objects in her tent while she was out. All the incidents, Shizuru knew, had been related to the young woman's inability to get somewhere unaided, and were usually owing to Shizuru's injunctions too on what should and should not be permitted the girl. She had chosen to turn a blind eye to these alleged episodes of flaring temper when told about them, considering wisely that she could hardly berate the girl for anything if no major damage was done and no one had been harmed. Certainly she had seen or heard worse tantrums from others of her people and class, who would sometimes turn to flogging slaves out of misdirected anger.

*This is frustration, she thought. Again someone boxes her into a place she does not wish to be boxed into, and this time, she has even less means to fight back against that act. I should never have forgotten this-how could I? She is still essentially a free creature, one more at home in the wild and intrinsically independent, but now without the strength that free creatures must have. It is still an open wound to her, for all that she has done such a good job of hiding it thus far. It is only natural it would find a crack in the composure she tries to pile on it.*

She felt the warmth racing under her skin again, seeming to sear into the palm on her cheek.

*This is a big crack, and I am the one who pried it open.*

Yet how intriguing it was, she thought, that this assertive attempt was still so affected by the girl's other character, the one that held Shizuru as her master. The Otomeian was looking at her now as though Shizuru would strike her for her insolence or possibly even do worse-and as though she had held no intentions of doing that which she already had. Well, Shizuru believed the slap would not have been any conscious intention of the girl. Her frustrated, fearful, defiant girl.

" *Meum mel*," she began, taking her palm off her face. "The next time you slap someone, you should make it stronger and not take it back with your eyes afterwards."

She caught the hand that had slapped her and held it to her lips. She could feel the cold fear on it through her mouth, salty and chilled.

"That is my apology," she said to the ashen face. "Because of what I said. Please do not look at me like that, by god. I would not strike you."

But this only reminded Natsuki of the fact that she had in fact been the one to do the striking. The Otomeian withdrew her clammy hand in a jolt and wrung it with the other in what was coming close to a blind panic, Shizuru resorting to gripping both hands now in an effort to calm the girl's anxiety.

" *Mea vita, mea vita*, stop it," she said, pressing more kisses to the hands in her grip. "I am not angry, I promise. And I apologised just now because I did deserve it."

Natsuki regarded her anxiously and Shizuru tried to deliver more reassurances. They were interrupted, however, by the panther next to them suddenly bumping its head against the girl, perhaps trying to comfort its fretting owner. As it was so large now and Natsuki so lean, it nearly caused its owner to topple over, which prompted Shizuru to push away the animal firmly and press it down until it rolled over docilely on the sheet.

The animal quieted, she returned instantly to Natsuki.

"I mean it: I am not angry," she reiterated. "And I am not trying to... to leave you behind or retire you from the army, I swear it. If I could traverse those passes and fight our foes with you beside me as before, I would-but only on the condition that the gods themselves deflect any manner of harm that comes your way if I myself cannot provide sufficient defences to do it. But even I have my limitations and the gods can be weak in their promises. Natsuki, do you see what I mean? It is too much. Everything that has happened is simply too much..." Her face contracted, mouth twisting into an honest rictus of pain. "I cannot bear it. I cannot *live* with the thought of you ever being hurt again, Natsuki."

She turned and took a seat on the bed too this time, perching on the edge beside the other woman.

"It is selfish," she admitted, cradling her head in her hands. "I know it is selfish, and I ask you to forgive me for that. I am not even the one who has suffered the most, and I am aware of it. But ye gods, Natsuki, if something were again to happen to you... If I ever lost-"

She shook her head fiercely and bit off the idea, her expression hardening into one of cruel decision.

"A world without you would not survive me," she concluded.

Some moments passed following this assertion, which rang too true for either woman's comfort. After a while, Shizuru felt a weight fall on her shoulder and press into it.

"I will not leave you, Shizuru," she heard the girl whisper.

"Good," she replied. "Because I would never let you, anyway."

"Then-" the weight against her arm got heavier "-why will you leave me?"

They both knew she meant "do not leave me here", of course; Shizuru took time to think over it, saying nothing just yet because she really did find it hard to do even that which she knew to be the right thing when it meant a chance of putting the girl closer to harm.

The younger woman misunderstood her silence, however, and said something that startled the Himean worse than the slap had earlier.

"It is buh - buh - huhh. Uh." Natsuki took a few sharp breaths, then burst out: "It is because I am unlucky?"

Shizuru stiffened and twisted to one side, causing the other to draw away.

"*Natsuki*," the older woman breathed, appalled. "Good lord. How can you think that?"

Natsuki's hand on her trouser tightened.

"Truth," said the girl, hanging her head.

"Of course not!" Shizuru put her hand over the fist one clutching at her breeches. "Do not think it true for a moment. It is not worth thought, even."

The girl's head hung even lower: a silent argument. Shizuru shook her head passionately.

"You should not, truly." She drew the dark head of hair back against her shoulder, sifting fingers through the glossy strands. "You may have been unfortunate, *mea vita*, but you are not unlucky! Why, have you already forgotten what I always observed to you before, about you bringing me all my good luck in my doings here? It argues powerfully against the ludicrous idea of you being unlucky."

"But I am," the girl insisted in a very small voice thickened with fear. "Shizuru, I - I am thuh - thuh..."

She stopped, plucking piteously at Shizuru's mail-clad sleeve. Shizuru felt a sharper press of weight on one point of her shoulder and realised it was the girl's nose. She shifted, picked her up with a heave of both hands, then set the young woman on her lap.

"I do not want you to bruise your skin with the chainmail," she explained. "What is it, Natsuki? What were you saying? I would like to know, truly."

It took another few moments of plucking before the girl whispered it, having the air of one confessing to something worthy of extreme censure.

"I am afraid," she uttered.

"Of what?"

"What if I *am* unlucky?"

Shizuru took in the genuinely aghast face, the tears threatening to spill over her lover's cheeks. When Natsuki's meaning came to her, she had to give the younger woman an abrupt hug out of pity.

"Oh, Natsuki," she said fiercely, "do not fear it! Do not ever think it, do you hear me?"

She pulled away and kissed her cheeks, then her lips.

"What happened at Sosia was not your fault," she told her. "You even did a great deal, I hear, to try to remedy it before it got worse. No, that debacle and the unfortunate deaths during it, including Suou's, were the fault of an incompetent general on one side and a perfidious enemy on the other. People talk about luck often-certainly you have heard me speak of it as though it were something simply granted to me by the gods-but the truth is that people make their own luck. It is simply that there are occasions when those who are trying to make their luck make bad decisions and the consequences affect all those around them, who then have to try to make their own luck too in the aftermath."

She slid her nose against the girl's before continuing.

"As to what happened with your people, that again was the fault of none other than Fate-which is not Luck-conspiring with yet another perfidious enemy in the person of those who duped and destroyed your people." She searched the green eyes for some sign of understanding, or perhaps the barest hope of redemption.

"Understand me, Natsuki: *you did not cause those deaths* . Your touch is not marred by any curse save that of a troublesome past, and this is something nearly all of us carry in our own way! Yet we

move past it, not towards it."

She stopped, not spent but reflecting on the cruelty history had etched upon the girl. It was awful to have to think of all her scars, all her many stains where she had suffered the ham-fisted writing of Time, its quill scratching out lessons of pain that she had never deserved nor even needed to learn. What a precarious lattice of lines it had left, that unjust, unkind, utterly insensible hand!

She looked at her lover's still-downcast eyes and revoked her earlier decision then and there.

"If indeed luck may be possessed, then the only thing that is clear is that you *are* my luck," she declared. "And you were right earlier: I should have seen it before, but my fears clouded my judgement. It would be foolhardy to keep you too far from me."

Natsuki finally looked up, her beautiful eyes questioning.

"I shall have you accompany Shizuma to the new base camp at the borders once it comes time to do it," Shizuru determined. "If indeed luck may be had then you are the best talisman of it, as we have proven time and time again. Of course, having you there would also make it easier for me to see you sooner following my winter demarche, as well as spur me to clean up the boundary regions even faster. Overall, an improved situation."

She smiled at the look on the girl's face, inwardly scowling at herself. This was a heart she owned-she had to accept that now, even if the thought filled her with wonder and a near-unbearable gratitude each day. How could she have been thoughtless enough to have not spared that heart this worry?

"Please forgive my earlier thoughtlessness," she said. "I was only worried. You know. You said it before, after all: that I worry too much."

Natsuki's face tucked into her hair and pressed into it. Shizuru felt with her own hand the long fall of the girl's mane cascading nearly over her lap. She slid it through two fingers, finding comfort in it even in her private self-castigation.



"You slapped me."

She felt the body in her lap stiffen before the girl started pressing kisses again to her smarting cheek.

"Oh, Natsuki," she said, laughing at the frenzied attempts at apology. "You really are far too kind for your own health."

She pulled back a little to look the girl in the eyes.

"I really did deserve it earlier, you know," she said unhesitatingly. "So I understand why you would have been provoked to slap me, although I cannot understand why you would hold back as you did. And you cannot suddenly try to take it back out of fear that I shall retaliate, especially when it was so clearly merited. You know I would never hurt you."

The green eyes shot her a hurt expression nonetheless, and Shizuru responded by surprising both of them with a rough kiss, the likes of which they had not had in a while because the older woman was still tiptoeing around the frail thing she perceived her lover to now be. When their lips parted, hurting at the brief knock of teeth, Shizuru blinked slowly.

"That was the first time anyone slapped me," she revealed to the wide-eyed Natsuki. "I would have knocked anyone else's brains out. But it was you."

"You will knock my jaw loose instead?" the girl whispered.

She burst into laughter. It had been a while since Natsuki had let loose one of her quips on her, and she realised that she had missed them beyond belief, running awed eyes over her girl.

"I adore you," she told her with another kiss to the slightly parted lips. "So I agree to what you ask, as I said earlier. But you must promise to never entertain ideas of yourself being unlucky again. Please, for both our sakes, be assured that it is not true." A grin. "It is bad luck to think such things, you know."

Natsuki's smile peeked out.

"I will try," she said honestly.

"Talk to me if you are threatened by such thoughts again. I shall tell you as many times as needed."

Natsuki nodded.

"Ah." The girl's eyes showed alarm. "Your cousin, Shizuru. She waits."

"She can wait a little longer. Right now I need your presence."

Some moments passed.

"Natsuki," Shizuru said. "What did you really think of her? My cousin."

"Interesting."

The standard reply; Shizuru probed further. "People say we look alike, especially on first glance."

A narrowing of the eyes, followed by an affirmative hum.

"Should I be worried, *meum mel*?"

A sharp nose pressed against her temple, stroking the amber skin reverently. She had noticed Natsuki's growing fascination with her summer-darkened skin for some time now, and was privately very pleased by it. When Natsuki finally delivered an answer to her query, she burst into laughter again.

"Gold," came the sage words, "is always more valuable than silver."

She tickled the girl after that, chortling uncontrollably herself until something solid and heavy bumped into her ribs.

"Oof," she huffed. She lifted an eyebrow at the panther that seemed to be trying to turn her to her side. "Dear me, but you *are* big, Shizuki. What have they been feeding you?"

Natsuki smiled against her ear.

"Tell her to sit still, Natsuki, or we may both drop. She keeps pushing me."

The girl reached out a hand and grabbed the feline's head, drawing it to her knees. It settled down instantly.

"A glutton for attention," Shizuru remarked, pretend-scowling at the big yellow eyes. It shifted its attention from her to Natsuki, looking up at the girl with a rapt attention that made the Himean laugh. "But one with taste in women. Do you think you could teach her to do some tricks?"

Natsuki tilted her head. "Tricks?"

"Basic commands, as some do with their working dogs." Shizuru frowned in thought. "Nothing like pulling a cart, though. I think it would ease my mind more if you taught her to attack for you, among other things. She would make a wonderful defence, although even the very sight of her should keep people away, I think."

Natsuki hummed but did not look opposed to the idea.

"I am not defenceless," she murmured, however.

"Of course not," Shizuru agreed quickly.

"I am not."

She reached somewhere into the folds of her dress and whipped out her hand in a blurring arc. Shizuru heard a whiz before the thud as an apple on the table fell to the ground, destroyed by the dart that had cloven it. Shizuki leapt off the bed and went to investigate.

The older woman looked at her lover with wide eyes.

"A superb shot," she praised.

A demure nod.

"What are you hiding under there?"

Natsuki showed her the strap from her old military effects, which the

girl had modified to tighten and fit more comfortably on her thinner thigh. There were still several darts in the strap, hidden by the leather pockets. Shizuru shook her head and drew the folds of fabric over the exposed weaponry again.

"So that was what I felt over your leg. When did you put that on?"

"When you... and the slaves... left," the other said shyly.

"Indeed," Shizuru smiled, rather impressed. "I am not at all opposed to it, Natsuki, so you may put it on even when I am with you if it makes you feel more secure. Do you want me to get better sheaths done? I know you used to wear that over your uniform, so it may not be as comfortable against your skin. We can even come up with other kinds to hold whatever weapons you want."

Natsuki nodded, then seemed to hesitate over something.

"What?" Shizuru prodded.

"Also, I want..." She paused. "I want my daos. Here?"

Shizuru's face softened. She had in fact been debating whether or not it was time to bring out the instrument again from Natsuki's belongings and return it to her without causing too much pain in doing so.

"As you wish," she agreed, slipping the hand she had on Natsuki's waist higher and feeling the ridges of her ribs under the dress. She knew the girl's body was actually not as bad as before, although the femininity of her breasts had yet to return: her chest was still a topography of plains and gorges, geographic strata that only some weeks ago had been stripped almost to the bedrock. Only weeks ago they had never been dormant, perpetually shifting under tectonic efforts of respiration. Shizuru could still remember wiping down that area most gently of all during Natsuki's baths, wanting nothing more than to hold the girl as she was doing now until the tattered body calmed and those labouring lungs learned to relax again.

*But she is better now, see?* she reassured herself, still doing a

gentle inspection of the form under the dress. *She is regaining her old substance. And she is getting better every day .*

" *Meum mel*," she said to the young woman. "Is there anything you want to do? I want to make the most of the time we have here before I have to go. We have a week or two. Ask for what you want and I shall have it done, whatever it may be."

"Want... to do?"

"Yes. Anything you want to do."

"Um..."

Although Natsuki had the appearance of one considering the query, the truth was that the girl knew her answer the moment Shizuru posed the question. Her pensive expression was merely because she was thinking of what had so recently whetted her desire for what she was about to request: the glimpses she had had of the road and the woods during the march to this part of the country.

Their progress from Sosia had been one showered with multicoloured foliage. A beautiful time, to Natsuki, and indeed the season she liked best in the year. What she would have given to be able to travel amidst the red deaths of the leaves again! But she knew it would not be allowed on the march, not by the doctors nor by Shizuru. Even when the leaves had first started to drop and fly into their marching camps she had known what she wanted would not be allowed either-and not just because of her leg, but because she still been too weak then. But she was gaining strength each passing day and she knew they could no longer deny her.

"I want to ride," she said with decision. "You will help me?"

Shizuru did not immediately reply, a mess of conflicting feelings in her heart. There was some relief that what Natsuki wanted to do involved going out-she had been afraid she would have to coax the girl just to come out after so long inside tents, after all-but she had not expected to be asked this, and had her own concerns about such a venture.

Some of the apprehension must have shown on her face, for Natsuki spoke once more.

"I will not ride alone," she assured. "You will ride with me?"

"Of course-but darling, is it wise to do something so strenuous already?"

"I am not your steed, Shizuru," the girl smiled humorously.

"But the jostling..."

"I will not ask to go fast."

"Knowing you, you might try to kick the horse in the ribs once the urge took you anyway," Shizuru teased feebly.

"Please?"

The older woman sighed and gave in, running a hand through her mass of golden hair.

"Very well," she said. "But let us ask the *medici*."

Natsuki pursed her lips but did not argue it. She knew better than to try.

"Do not get your hopes up too much, *meum mel*," Shizuru warned. "They may say no."

"They will say yes," Natsuki said positively.

"I fear I doubt it."

"I can go now. I know." She was very determined. "I am strong enough for it."

"I am not certain of that."

"Why?"

"Because I am not even certain you can already handle my affec-"  
The Himean swallowed the rest, unwilling to let Natsuki hear it. The

girl should not have to worry about that too, above everything else: if it came down to just a little bit more self-control for the sake of Natsuki's health, she could certainly exert it without having to show her lover how parched she was for *her* .

"We shall ask the doctors," she said again. "If they say yes, I shall make arrangements that very day. But if they say no, you must ask for something else. No gainsaying their expertise, Natsuki."

"So if they say I can go, I will go," Natsuki said, eagerly repeating the parts of the terms she found most favourable.

"Yes, but no bribing them."

"I am not Himean," the girl said archly.

"What an awful thing to say," Shizuru responded, eyes twinkling. "But true. So what do you do to your people when you want to force them to do something?"

"We threaten them."

"Revolutionary," Shizuru chuckled, kissing her brow and moving aside the wing of hair that hid one of the new scars, one that always filled her with fury when she thought of whoever had been responsible for it. "I do wish they shall say that you can ride, Natsuki. I see how much you desire it, and who knows? Perhaps riding with you this way shall finally give me an opportunity to get horsemanship advice from someone whose manège I find truly worth of respect."

"They will let me ride," Natsuki said again under her chin, sounding more and more certain of it. "Because I am only crippled, Shizuru." She paused and said, before Shizuru could think of what to say to that: "I am not *weak* ."

Shizuru closed her eyes and uttered an invocation.

"May the gods never let me forget it."

## Chapter 60

*Good day and thank you to the readers and reviewers. My apologies for the brevity of this chapter. A great deal of activity is imminent in the next ones, however.*

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### **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Croesus** - Lydian king of proverbial wealth
  2. **Our Sea** - in Latin, **Mare Nostrum** . The Romans referred to the Mediterranean by this term.
  3. **Sagum** - (L.) a cape of waterproofed wool, very thick and hardy for use by the Roman legionaries in wet weather. A good sagum could last longer than a man's lifetime, and many soldiers only ever purchased one to use for all their campaigns.
  4. **Talent** - a unit of measure, typically the load a man could carry. A talent of silver would thus be the amount of silver a man could carry.
- 

### **Inter Nos II: Inde Ira et Lacrimae**

*par ethnewinter*

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She stayed in Argus for two more weeks, getting things ready for the beginning of the advance into what would, for the next half-decade at least, be her gubernatorial fief. A part of her found it amusing that even at this stage of her career she would be saddled with more than others (were there even any other senators who had been awarded provincial governorships that they had to earn first by an invasion?), but the challenge was not unwelcome, since she knew it meant greater distinction for her once she triumphed. There were



many things to be done but she was more than eager to tackle all of them. So deeply did she throw herself into the preparations that, even before the end of her two weeks in Argus, she was able to sit back and survey what she had already accomplished, well-pleased with herself and her officers.

"I am happy to say that we are going to have a fine start, even with the supplies. In fact, we have enough grain to last the winter, thanks to Shizuma's work," she told the young woman who had served as her sounding board for matters military and otherwise ever since their reunion. "I do believe she tapped every grain merchant shipping around Our Sea. Provided your people come through on the promise of more grain delivered to the holding vaults in Sosia, the army *and* the provinces should be capable of getting through to spring very easily."

"We will provide."

"The question is if what you can provide shall be enough."

"This harvest? Yes. The next? We hope."

"As do I. I have no intention of relying on Sicilia and Africa producing a surplus for the next harvest as well; one never knows when scarcity shall strike. Besides, I am providing for twelve legions now, and need more local resources."

"There are the Mentulaean farmlands."

"I know, which is why I am striking in their area first. Yet one has to keep in mind that we are not sure how many of them shall be spared from the firebrands... nor indeed how many of the people doing the farming on them shall be spared from the sword. People can be strangely unwilling to participate when they are being invaded, *mea vita*."

Natsuki puffed at her and rolled over. The two of them were on the bed, the Otomeian stretched out over the sheets while Shizuru sat on the edge, using it as a seat as she worked on the desk she had ordered to be pushed against it. Every now and then she would twist about to glance at her lover as they talked, usually to emphasise a

point or to inform her of something she had not before. She did that now, setting down the quill she had been using to write letters.

"By the way, Natsuki, I have decided on the arrangements for the border," she said, bringing up and folding one knee on the bed to make her position more comfortable. "When Shizuma establishes camp on the boundaries, I want you to stay on our side of the river."

There was a curious look from the Otomeian, who turned her head on the pillow to better regard Shizuru.

"Shizuru, I thought both sides were ours now," she said with a laugh in her voice, not bothering to put forth the query because she was expecting the older woman to explain.

"Soon there shall be no doubt of that! But I meant the current acception."

"Mm."

"To be clear, you shall stay *in a camp* on our side of the river," the Himean went on. "There shall be a mirror camp on the other side, and that is where the army and Shizuma shall be staying."

Shizuru treated her lover as an equal when it came to intelligence, and the girl had always shown the justice of that treatment with her acuity. She did not fail Shizuru now, taking the hint in the way Shizuru had intended.

"Your mind is a wondrous thing," she concluded, pronouncing the compliment in her sophisticated Attic.

Shizuru grinned.

"You do me great honour!" she said. "Thank goodness you are one less person to whom I shall have to explain it, though."

Shizuru was aware that not everyone would catch on to why she wanted two camps erected beside the river boundary that separated the Mentulaean lands from the plains adjacent Argentum's. It was yet another of her unorthodox moves, and one of safety as well as strategy.

As far as garrisoning the boundaries went, the obvious plan would be to erect a camp on the Mentulaeen side of the river border, in order to help the troops better defend their position and the main bridge for the passage. The construction of a second, equally fortified camp on the opposite side was Shizuru's unusual way of ensuring that should something happen to turn the tide swiftly against the Himean advantage-such as the unexpected appearance of an army too enormous for the border legions to deal with-there would be an immediate provision against disaster on the other side of the bridge, to which the legions could simply retreat and reform until reinforcements arrived. The battlements of the second camp would also be excellent positions for standby ordnances, which could be aimed at the bridge in case it needed to be shelled into collapse in a trice... say to prevent enemy forces from charging over it and onto the Himean side in the event of emergency retreats.

Besides these practical considerations was the psychological pause the plan afforded, of course. Provided sufficient display were to be made-a standing guard, people manning watch-towers even on the second camp-the foes would be prone to hesitate before attacking either fort because of the possibility of there being two full armies instead of one in the area. Why else would anyone waste resources to set up two camps, after all, if not to house two large armies that could not fit into a single one? If there was anything Shizuru had learned about the Mentulaeen military style, it was that its strategic underpinnings revolved around the might of majority instead of actual organisation. Their commanders would be very unlikely to attack a location around which there was a potential heavy reserve literally sitting across the river, especially if they had no idea how large that reserve really was.

"You shall probably have to cross from one camp to the other almost daily, though," Shizuru told the girl, who hummed with the attitude of one who thought that to be no trouble. "You could use your camp for work with the auxiliary, at least. How goes the training for the new Lupine units, incidentally? Are any of them giving you trouble?"

Natsuki shrugged as well as one could shrug when lying down. Shizuru's sustained gaze exerted pressure on her, however, so she expanded dutifully on her answer.

"Well," quoth the girl.

To her puzzlement, Shizuru's response was a disappointed sigh.

"Do not misunderstand: if indeed all goes well, I am pleased for you," the older woman explained. "Yet it seems to me that either all the Otomeian affairs go well or must be matters of powerful secrecy, given your taciturnity on them."

The other blushed guiltily.

"We have troubles too," she eventually admitted. "But there is no need to worry, Shizuru."

"Do *you* never worry?"

"I?"

"My concern here is over your worries, not worries I might have as your commanding officer. What I meant was that you never seem to express any to me, Natsuki. You should know that you can."

"But it is not... for you to worry about," the Otomeian replied. Then she realised that what she had said might be misconstrued as a rejection of Shizuru's invitation, and so added hastily, "I mean that you have much already on which you worry and - and I will be thoughtless by adding more."

"You must think me a self-involved wretch then, considering how often I unburden myself to you."

The other's eyes went wide at this interpretation.

"No!" Natsuki responded. "I do not. But Shizuru, you are - you are *the general*."

"And this means I have more right to trouble you than others?" Shizuru teased as she continued scribbling on her parchment. "Yes, I suppose that is one perk of generalship."

"It means you have more trouble than others," the girl retorted. "You have more worries than I-than all others here, I know. I thought

because of this, I would not be suh-suh-so unkind an officer."

"I am touched by your consideration," Shizuru said to that. "I genuinely am. But as I suggested earlier, you are not just an officer, and I do wish you would remember that. It is not exactly pleasing to hear you say this as though you were forgetting who you are to me, even if I know the thought was for my behalf..."

A line petered out mid-stroke. She dipped the quill into the ink again to restart it.

"But let us simply put it this way. What may not be permitted others here may be permitted or even encouraged of you. I am always willing to listen to and possibly even help to solve your problems, Natsuki, because they are *yours*. Even if I cannot aid you in solving them, I would rather you felt comfortable enough to talk to me simply to air what issues you may be bearing every now and then. I spent most of my life being unable to complain to most people around me about many of the things I found grievous in my environment-and I know a little about what it costs to have to bear so much so silently. I know the toll it takes on the temper."

"I think it helps to have the ear of someone you can trust when you are oppressed by troubles," she went on. "It is true that understanding is limited... and that it may transpire on occasion that the person to whom you are unburdening yourself cannot grasp the extent of all that you are expressing. That does not make the unburdening futile, all the same. I believe it is not, and have felt for myself that it is not."

She shot the girl a glance: "And the admission of worries, I should think, is not always a confession of inadequacy."

Natsuki had been staring at her ramrod-straight back all this time and now lifted her head from the pillow to answer.

"I *never* think you inadequate, Shizuru," she said, putting all her conviction into the words.

"I know, and I thank you for that," was the other's answer. "I trust you enough to unburden myself to you without fear that you shall

think me weak for having troubles too or for admitting lassitude on occasion. I do not wish to pry into your life forcefully, *meum mel*, but I simply want you to know that revealing some of your worries to me would never qualify as you prying forcefully into mine."

She stopped there, knowing it need no longer be said that she hoped Natsuki would eventually return the same trust she had described. With that she returned to what she was writing, dipping the dry quill into the inkwell once again. She had already managed to put the final words in the letter, which was to her legate Toshi and regarding the hatchets she had ordered from Sosia, when Natsuki spoke up from behind.

"I have - I have some worries also," she said in a small voice. "Some."

Shizuru picked up the bottle of blotting sand on her desk and smiled, not bothering to turn around. She asked calmly what it was that gave Natsuki trouble these days, although there was a split-second where she felt a slight fear that the girl would point to her leg and say, *You have to ask?*

"The recruits," the girl confessed to her. "The Lupine Division."

"So they are giving you trouble, after all?"

"I would not - I do not say they do it *to make trouble*," Natsuki specified duskily. "It is a matter of ability, Shizuru."

"Ah! Slow to train?"

"A little."

The Otomeian hummed to herself, trying to figure out how exactly to phrase what she was thinking: these were not concerns she was used to airing so directly-especially to Shizuru. There was still enough of the tender insecurity of a girl in her to be intimidated into wanting the older woman's respect... and admitting problems like this, as Shizuru had guessed, did make her feel a little less impressive in front of her lover. Still, she was also sensitive enough to pick up on the fact that Shizuru needed this too, this sort of

openness that did not depend on presenting as perfect an image as possible to each other all the time. Shizuru needed her to be unguarded, she realised, and she was fair enough to know that Shizuru deserved that much. Besides everything else the woman had already done, she had also personally nursed her back from the precipice of expiration, for heaven's sake!

It did take work to do this, though. She had to pause every now and then to fit her ideas into a verbal construction, parsing her mental stream as best as she could and running through her Himean vocabulary in an effort to do it justice.

"It is this, Shizuru. Kyo-and I-we push them as far as we can. I will borrow your words, if you do not mind: we drill them hard, then we drill them harder."

"All right. And?"

"And we do realise it is early days."

"True."

"But I think, even so, it is still too slow. They are too slow."

And then, because she had the sort of antiquated nobility that disdained those who pronounced judgments on others too hastily, qualified, "For me, I mean. It is my opinion. It could be it is not so to others."

Shizuru had a response to that: "But you are the head of the Lupine Division as well as Polemarch and Princess of your army. Your opinion matters more than most other opinions."

"Yes." The corners of her mouth turned down as she let her head plop onto a pillow, eyes contemplating the ceiling. "I know this. That is my concern."

Shizuru sprinkled a little more sand on the wet ink of her letter.

"I understand the concern," she told her lover. "Yet given what I have seen of your unit, Natsuki, I know that it is no easy or quick thing to produce people capable of doing all that is required of it."

"It is so, Shizuru," came the heartfelt reply. "I think to myself, 'I must be patient.' But - but still, I worry."

"Did not your other troopers undergo a similar training? Surely it took them some time as well before they got to where they are today," Shizuru said, not even bothering to ask Natsuki how long it had taken for her to acquire her own skills. It was not just a matter of starting early: it was also a matter of talent, and Natsuki's talents at martial learning were not normal. Perhaps this was part of the problem in that such self-assurance skewed the girl's expectations of others, she thought-before remembering that a lot of her own friends had used to tell her that the same thing regarding her own self-assurance.

"Yes," Natsuki said to her. "But that was not at a time such as this."

"During a war, you mean."

"A war such as this, if I am to be - to be specific," Natsuki determined. "Of urgency, there was little before. Compared to now. Before, they were smaller, more scattered foes. Not an empire."

She huffed loudly enough to prompt Shizuru to look over her shoulder: the beautiful face was tight with trouble, her eyes narrowed enough for the green to be shaded over into a dark glitter, hidden away by the sweep of black lashes.

"It could be I am being unfair, Shizuru," the girl said with clear pain in her voice. "I know this. *I do not wish to be* . But I think... I think..."

She stopped and ran over her thoughts in an effort to articulate them better, licking her lips gently as she pondered over her diction once more.

"If the urgency does not go away, the only solution is that the person must change to satisfy it," she settled for saying. "I expect them to be faster because the situation, it requires that they be faster."

She sat up and pulled into a cross-legged pose. Shizuru, who was still eyeing her from over her shoulder, noted that she also clasped her hands over the end of the leg that had been severed, although



the stump was not visible because of her dress.

"I think this, and so I am hard on them," Natsuki admitted wistfully. "But I admit that - that I also think I am being unjust, so I worry double."

She looked up and saw Shizuru watching her.

"I do not mean to put you in a bad position in this, Shizuru," she suddenly added, earnest as ever. "I do not say this to ask if you think me unjust or not... even though you may say what you think if you think either. But I do not mean to make it seem that - that I am forcing a judgement from you."

Her lover smiled.

"I understand, though I have no problem in confessing I think you far from unjust here," Shizuru said honestly, privately charmed by the girl's tender and rather noble dignity. "I agree that they should rise to the occasion. But given how many times I have been frustrated by subordinates myself in such expectations and shown that many people are bizarrely incapable of rising to the occasion, I must confess too that I am perhaps not the best person to give a pronouncement here, so it is just as well that you are not asking me to make a judgement, as you say. They do satisfy you in other ways, though? I collect that you are not completely displeased with them."

Natsuki nodded.

"So is it the daos that is the problem? Training them to use it to your satisfaction?"

"Wuhh-were it a question of *my* satisfaction, it would be the problem with all of them," the younger woman said in their other shared language, voice turning sulky even as Shizuru chuckled. "No, there is more. It is the weapons. Some are good at only two; some, at only one."

"And membership in your division, I know, demands excellence in the daos as well as all the basic weapons-as indeed you yourself have proven. I understand that you must be exacting and that you

worry about how long it shall take them to be properly skilled in the other weapons as well." There was a good-humoured smile on Shizuru's face. "Although it does make me wonder how I would fare were I among those you were training."

A lift of the black brows.

"It is not in you to settle for anything beneath excellence, Shizuru," Natsuki pointed out.

"You forget that I nearly crushed my own head like a melon the last time you let me try out your daos, Princess."

There was a whoosh of surprised laughter as the girl recalled that incident, which had happened quite some time ago. She had laughed as well at the time, although the older woman had not known that it had been partly out of hysteria: what if the Himean *had* crushed her head like a melon? Oh, if Shizuru had only known how horrified she had really been!

"If part of your worry stems from my eagerness to move forward quickly in the war, ease it," Shizuru continued. "I shall let you have sufficient time to train them to your heart's content before drawing on them again for the heavy work I used to demand of your division. Your people are bringing more cavalry, anyway, and your cousin has quite a lot of auxiliaries at the borders that I can call on should I ever need it."

"Ah. Yes."

"Besides, they might surprise you yet. A few skirmishes with the aid of their new fellows just might hone the abilities you find dull."

Natsuki lifted her chin and inhaled deeply.

"It is my hope too," said the princess, sombre again but also slightly more relaxed than before; Shizuru could hear it in her voice.

"Blooding them, yes, as part of the Lupine Division. It is one thing to fight in the normal regiments..."

She mulled it over and nodded to herself once.

"Yes," she decided. "It is possible it is experience that will push them."

"I hope it turns out well for you. And not just as your commander." Shizuru brushed off the sand from her letter and rolled up the sheet, picking up a stick of wine-coloured wax and holding it over her lamp. "Pardon me for interrupting the conversation, Natsuki, but would you hand me my signet ring? I took it off earlier before we ate. It is on the stand on your side of the bed."

She felt the girl roll over and crawl on the huge mattress before returning to crouch beside her. Natsuki held up the requested object, but the Himean shook her head instead of taking it.

"If you please," Shizuru said simply, holding the melting wax over the scroll and letting a puddle form over the edge. Natsuki stamped the ring on the puddle to leave the impression.

"I am sorry, Shizuru," said the younger woman after the deed was done, looking mortified.

The other was astonished.

"Why, whatever for?" she demanded, turning to the woman beside her.

"It is not in the centre."

Shizuru laughed at her lover's crestfallen face. "Natsuki, that does not matter!"

"It is better when it is in the centre."

"Believe me, *meum mel*, the recipient shall hardly inspect it for that." She shook her head again. "You have the oddest compulsion to be precise sometimes."

The young woman said nothing, still eyeing the off-centre seal on the wax with regret.

"Really, do not worry about it. Going back to what we were talking about," Shizuru pressed, "would it help if I asked Shizuma to

organise regular raids using the troopers on whatever nearby Mentulæan settlements might still be in the border area? You could work with her to blood your new recruits into the Lupine way better." She cracked a smile of conspiracy. "Although I have no doubt you yourself might have been planning to propose this to her later, one way or another."

Natsuki finally tore her eyes away from the wax.

"Yes," she said. "But thank you, Shizuru. I think it, um, it helps if you say it to her too."

"You are welcome." The Himean picked up another sheet of parchment from her stack and spread it on the desk. "We poor commanders have to stick together."

There was a muffled sound of something hitting the mattress: Natsuki had her back on the sheets again.

"Poor commanders," she echoed quietly, as though questioning the adjective. "Shizuru?"

"Yes?"

"That legion you will take through the massif-the Thirteenth," she said. "It is going to drill today too, no?"

"Of course."

"Um. Do you drill it more than the others?"

"Not necessarily. Drilling is pretty much a quotidian activity for all legions, not just the ones I plan to take with me on my next move. Variation depends on how a legion performs during the drills and if my centurions deem 'more' to be necessary. Why?"

"To use such a legion - a raw one - for such a march," Natsuki pondered aloud. "It is such a risk, no?"

Shizuru stopped her writing again and faced her lover.

"Of course it is a risk," she said. "But as I told you before, Natsuki, it

is a risk I have to take if I am to justify my creation of a Thirteenth."

Once Shizuru had managed to set up her temporary office in Argus, the first thing she did was to deal with the reorganisation of the legions under her command. First, there was the matter of the long-suffering but hardy Seventh, which was still understrength after its travails under Takeda Masashi's guidance. The veteran legions of the North, the Ninth, the Eleventh, and the Fourteenth, had given up one cohort each to fill in what the Seventh had lost in that bloody first stage of the war. Even so, Shizuru wanted the Seventh a little stronger, and so took a cohort off one of the raw legions in Argus to give to it too.

This left her with five slightly understrength legions of the total, each missing only one cohort for the full count: the Seventh, Ninth, Eleventh, Fourteenth, and the Twentieth. The rest of the legions were full-strength and all raw, with the exception of the two legions Kenji was using in the southwest amidst the Mentulaean mountains, the Fifth and the Sixth. These two legions were mixed in composition, made up of both new legionaries as well as veterans from other campaigns who had signed up for this new war.

Now that she had this many legions at her disposal and a command of this importance, Shizuru felt justified in renaming the legions and using numbers already assigned to other Himean legions in existence and posted elsewhere: the legions with the same numbers in their names would simply be referred to with a specifying adjective in their nomenclature when people wished to distinguish them from the other similarly-numbered legions based in other territories. Hence, the Fifteenth became the Third Septentrian (in reference to the official name to be used for the Mentulaean territories once annexed) Legion, the Sixteenth became the Fourth Septentrian Legion, the Seventeenth became the Eighth Legion, the Eighteenth became the Tenth Septentrian Legion, the Nineteenth became the Twelfth Septentrian Legion, and-rather controversially-the Twentieth was named the Thirteenth Legion.

Of the renamed legions, only two were not given the specifying adjective. One of them, the newly-minted Eighth, did not need it yet because it was the only Eighth in existence in all of the Himean territories. When another Eighth was created for Hime's army, then

the adjective would be applied to it. The other legion to not receive the specifying adjective, the Thirteenth, was in a similar position in that there was no other Thirteenth in existence. However, it differed from the Eighth in that it was unlikely to ever need the specifying adjective of "Septentrian" in the future.

Thirteen was an unlucky number to the Himeans. In fact, it was so unlucky that their legions were traditionally numbered to skip it. There had never been a Thirteenth Legion, which was why Shizuru's announcement that she was using it to name one of the raw legions- and the only understrength raw legion, at that!- set off ripples of triskaidekaphobia through the army, which she only managed to quiet after a brief speech she made herself. She held her ground even when the officers pleaded with her to change her mind, and no amount of begging seemed to persuade her otherwise.

"It is a foolish superstition, and I shall demonstrate it," she told her officers quite simply. The others' fear was that the morale of the Thirteenth would be down from the very beginning because of the negative associations their name held, but Shizuru replied that she would turn those associations on their heads. The fact that the legion was the only raw one that was understrength had actually initiated her decision, for she had known she would have to vest these recruits with more confidence than the rest to make sure that their understrength status did not discourage them. It was then that she realised it: why not vest them with so much confidence, in fact, that she would create another mythical legion, one with the same gritty determination and thick-shelled confidence her old Eighth had possessed? Why settle for anything less than a legion that had so much belief in itself that it believed itself capable of taking on anything for her, the person who would help it discover its luck?

Few knew better than the lucky how luck was made, and Shizuru had always been considered among the luckiest persons in the world by those who knew her. She made her choice and named the raw and understrength legion with the unluckiest number possible, knowing full well that luck was not possessed by numbers but rather by the people who dealt them. Her promise to her officers and the soldiers-as well as to herself-was this: that by the time she was done with the Thirteenth, people would consider thirteen a lucky number.

"I am the best person for this task," she told Natsuki, returning to the explanations she had given the girl before. "I can make the Thirteenth a legion people shall want to join, a legion that all shall remember. As I said before, the trek through the massif, which no one else has ever attempted, would be the ideal first step to such a..."

She trailed off even before finishing the sentence, finally realising what had led to this conversation being repeated with Natsuki.

"... and I am apparently slow today, *mea vita*. Pardon me for not catching on faster," she continued, a smile building on her mouth. "You only brought this up again as your way of telling me that you are a little worried about it, right?"

The girl was sitting up again, and in her eyes was one of her old Sphinx looks: one of those that Shizuru thought one could fall into and never reach the bottom.

"Only a little, Shizuru," she admitted, her low voice textured with emotion. "I know things will work well because it is you. Even if it is a raw legion with what your people think is an unlucky number. But there is still part of me that worries. This is a worry that is... hmm... *irrational*, a worry from the part of me that worries in spite of logic. It is not that I do not know you will do what you say, because I know you can do everything. I only worry because it is you-although I also do not worry because it is you."

Shizuru smiled softly at her, warmed by the words.

"I thank the gods each day for every part of you, you know," she said, prompting an embarrassed smile from the girl.

"Even for my temper, Shizuru?" Natsuki asked, eyes bright with humour.

The patrician snorted inelegantly, turning both eyes heavenward.

"I have far more cause to ask you that, considering mine," she said as she returned to her work.

Warmth and fur brushed beside her all of a sudden as Natsuki's pet,

which had been sleeping on one of the couches, decided it wanted to join them on the bed. She heard Natsuki coo to it as it settled on top of the covers, pushing its body as close to its owner as possible.

"Besides, as far as you are concerned, Natsuki, my stance is that I love a passionate woman."

"A passionate woman is one who slaps you?" Natsuki whispered with amusement, curling against the length of her pet and throwing a leg over it. It hummed against her, a cavernous rumble far louder than that of any house cat.

"I did try the passionate woman quite sorely," Shizuru answered gamely. "Although I would certainly not be opposed to it were the passionate woman to extend a little more patience to the sorry creatures around her-if not to me, then at least for the poor servants, who are a little less used to facing the aggressive use of projectiles than a war-seasoned military woman like me."

She heard Natsuki's breath hitch and kept her face to her desk, hiding a grin.

"Do not be mad at them for telling me, Natsuki," she said. "They *are* my slaves, after all."

"I am not mad," came the near-breathless reply at her back. "But I am not - I - Shizuru, I am sorry. Only, I wuh-wuh- was-"

"Sorely tried, I know," Shizuru said. "Oh, I am not angry, Natsuki. I understand, trust me. But I am only asking that you try to be a little more patient with them. They are not, well, accustomed to facing down such displays from *their* mistress."

"Mine are not used to it either!" the girl burst out indignantly, sitting up. "Shizuru, I do not do such - such things. I never did! Not - not before..."

"I thought so. I have always seen you to be a mild person with your own servants, after all."

"And it is not-Shizuru, it is not that I wish to harm them!" came the earnest protestation.



"Oh, I know that too, Natsuki! Had you actually been aiming at them, we would be having a discussion about dead servants and not frightened ones, after all. The problem, however, is that *they* do not know that." Shizuru looked over her shoulder and winked. "These silly slaves, hm?"

Natsuki smiled shakily. She ran one hand over her pet's black fur and apologised once again and with great feeling, seeming to be very put-out by the idea that the slaves had thought her to be aiming at them. She had never done so, of course: Shizuru was right in saying that had her target been one of the servants, she would have struck him on first cast.

"You will tell them?" she pleaded. "That I did not - do not wish to hit them?"

"Hermias has been doing so for a while now, although it cannot be helped that the sillier ones are not yet convinced. I shall talk to him about it once more, though."

"I will not do it again," the girl swore.

"All right."

Sufficient time passed in silence after this for Shizuru to finish the new letter she was writing and spread sand on it when Natsuki suddenly spoke up, voice so low it was caught between a growl and a whisper.

"Shizuru."

"Yes?"

"I did something."

Shizuru stopped what she was doing. Down on the desk went the bottle of sand, off came the felt slippers on her feet, and up went her legs on the bed as she turned her back to the desk, facing the dour-looking girl with a twinkle in her eyes.

"All right," she said. "Which of the slaves did you hit?"

The Otomeian's jaw fell open.

"Shizu-I hit *no one* !" she exclaimed resentfully, a blazing flush suffusing her cheeks.

"Oh, well, my apologies then," Shizuru said, trying not to laugh and failing miserably at it. The younger woman glowered at her for that, but she carried on impenitently. "It was merely that you said it so seriously that, given our topic just now, I was worried you had actually managed to nick one of the slaves with a plate and everyone was simply too afraid to tell me about it."

Natsuki sniffed with great injury. Hitting slaves, in her opinion, was beneath her dignity.

"So what did you do?" Shizuru prompted.

It took a while of the girl brushing her hands over her panther's coat before she finally answered, requesting permission-rather stiffly, Shizuru thought-to employ Greek for the conversation because she wanted to be sure she expressed herself as precisely as possible. The older woman agreed, thinking this must be something of an official order; Natsuki usually just used Greek without asking for permission whenever she felt like it.

"Some days into the march here from Sosia," the girl began, staying true to her intent of precision, "I asked to speak with some of my people at night, after we made camp."

She stopped here and looked up at Shizuru as if to ask if she recalled it. They both knew Shizuru did, but the older woman nodded anyway.

"Five of the Otomeian nobles left the next day," the girl continued. "One was from the Lupine Division and another was my cousin."

Again Shizuru nodded. She knew this already, but now she was getting more and more curious about whatever it was that the girl might have to reveal.

"I presumed those went under your orders, Natsuki."

"It is so."

"Then go on."

Natsuki's face was frightfully grave. Shizuru did not know whether to worry or smile at it.

"The arrangement was for three to go to the borders, two to the citadel," the Otomeian princess-for that was how her lover saw her at that moment-said with her frightful gravity. "Their tasks were in aid of accomplishing a single directive."

She frowned and explained the directive, speaking with slow concentration because she wished to get it right the first time.

"The directive was to send Otomeian envoys to the northern parts of Mentulaean territory. The purpose was to foment unrest among the secessionist peoples of those territories and to offer monetary aid in their struggles against their Mentulaean rulers."

Her breath rushed in loudly after she got all of that out, and she looked to her commander, obviously hoping for approval. Shizuru was regarding her with flat-out surprise, however, and that melted away the gelid professionalism she had been employing to conceal her nervousness.

"Shizuru, I have done wrong?" she stammered out worriedly, wondering what she might have forgotten to take into account in her calculations. "I - I know I erred in that I should have told-oh! Perhaps I have ruined a plan? Please forgive-"

" *Natsuki* ." Shizuru held up a hand to quiet her, which it did in an instant. "No, you did not ruin any plans. In fact, you have just improved them. What you have done stands to enhance our position greatly, *meum mel*, and I myself was planning something similar to it, at least in the sense of drawing up an alliance with those selfsame tribes later on. So I thank you for your perspicacity in beating me to it."

The relief that washed over the girl was so palpable that Shizuru saw it loosen the rigid post of her spine.

"I am glad," she breathed.

"You certainly appear to be," Shizuru said in response, amused.

"Natsuki, did you really think I would disapprove of the idea? I do wish you had told me first-and expect you to tell me first next time if I am this close to you, mind you-but I know you enough to know you would never have given that order unless you thought it would help me." *And unless you thought I would approve of it*, she added in her head. "I hope you do not think me so dense as to fail to see the advantages of your plan."

"No. No, I do not think you to be so." Natsuki's shoulders dropped a little as she finally relaxed enough to smile back. "The probabilities of you formulating a strategy that would - hmm - invert the value of mine were low, Shizuru. But a low probability is not a total exclusion. There is also a condition to my arrangement I have not yet revealed."

Shizuru was smiling very widely, she thought.

"I still cannot get over how utterly mathematical you can be in Greek," the older woman explained with a wiggle of the brows. "I find it delightful from you in quite a different way from how I find your Himean delightful. At any rate, what is this condition that prompted your hesitation to tell me earlier?"

Natsuki looked away for the briefest instant, but there was no mistaking the decision in her face when her gaze returned.

"It concerns the financial aid to be offered to the tribes," she said. "Besides what the King will give, I shall add money from my coffers."

That wiped the smile off Shizuru's face.

"Natsuki, I cannot let you do that!" she said with a gasp. "You should not need to use your personal funds for this war!"

"You do it."

"I am the general."

"And I am the polemarch."

Shizuru shook her head. "Not quite the same, *mea vita* . I do not want you losing money because of what is in a sense still *my war*."

"I am involved too. Also, Investments are not losses. Or not always, no?" the girl said gently. "It - it is my money, Shizuru. To dispense as I will. If it serves to protect my people *and* help you, I do not see how it can be a loss. I would give it all if I could for such ends. It is to be considered too that few investments have such success as you. What in this is a loss to me?"

And before Shizuru could think of what to say to that, she added with unexpected impishness, "Also, I should say to you that I am rich too, Shizuru."

Her smile was so mischievous that Shizuru ended up setting aside her qualms for a moment, intrigued by the young woman's tone.

"Are you now?"

Natsuki nodded, eyes sparkling.

"How rich?" Shizuru smiled back, playing along.

The girl told her.

"What?" The answer wiped Shizuru's smile off her face. "Are you serious, Natsuki?"

The girl nodded.

" *So much ?*"

Again the girl nodded.

"Would you say you could produce..." She paused to think of an astronomical sum, the type only Croesus himself could produce at a snap of the fingers. "Say, ten thousand *talents* if you needed them at a moment's notice?"

And inevitably, the girl nodded.

" *Ecaster !*" Shizuru scowled, the golden fur of her eyebrows glinting

as they drew together. "You *are* rich!"

"Umm." Natsuki gave her a funny look. "But you are too, Shizuru."

"Even so, I had not thought-"

She broke off and looked away, then threw another scowl at the young woman.

"And it is all sitting there, in the royal vaults at the citadel?" she demanded. "Have you other assets or investments accruing profit for you?"

The girl was still trying to understand why her revelation would cause Shizuru to look so appalled, but answered honestly anyway, unconsciously reverting to the Himean tongue: "I have land in our lower territories also. Grazing land, for cattle and horses."

"Which horses? The prime horses?"

"Mm-hm. Like Niger and Albinus." She chewed fitfully on her lip, then seemed to decide it was better to come out with all of it at once: "Many of the Lupine Division's horses, they come from my stock. And - and some of the suh-suh-steeds for the cataphracti."

"Do they fetch as good a price among your people as they do among mine?"

"We were fair to your people, Shizuru," the girl said, seemingly affronted by the suggestion. "There was no difference in price."

"Which makes each horse worth a small fortune," the other observed, brushing off the Otomeian's miff. "Do you keep the money you get from that in your personal funds or do you add it to the vaults that are properly the Ortygian Treasures? You do your private banking separately, of course?"

Again Natsuki chewed on her lip.

"Shizuru, I think I must explain," she said with awkward gravity. "The Ortygian Treasures are *mine*."

She struggled for a moment, then proceeded: "The Treasures, they were not the collected wealth of the people who - who were part of our tribe. It is not the wealth of individuals. Those were taken by the Mithrii. What is in the vaults is the rightful wealth of the rulers of the Ortygians."

"Which would be you," Shizuru said, staggered.

"Yes. It is what you can call, um, *my* private bank, in a way."

There was a pause as Shizuru let that sink in, weighing it over in her mind.

"So all of it is yours," she summarised for the girl. "Unequivocally and totally?"

An affirmative.

"And what happens to it once you are gone?" Shizuru asked, seemingly caught between awe and dismay. "For I cannot see a single person exhausting so much wealth in a single lifetime. Your wealth sounds as though it would rival mine. Is there anyone who is next in the line of inheritance?"

"If I adopt or have a child, yes. Otherwise, no."

"What of your cousin?"

"Nina? No." She sounded positive. "Nina is not close enough to the ruling line to be considered part of it. She is my cousin, yes, but she is a - a distant one."

"So who else can touch it after you?"

"No one."

At the older woman's flabbergasted look, she enlarged on it further.

"It is *bound* wealth, Shizuru. Like a curse. Many of the Otomeians even say it will curse their bloodlines if they try to use any of it, and this holds even more for those of us - the Ortygians - who remain. It was in the oath, and the oath holds."

"The oath?"

Natsuki explained the original agreement between the Otomeians and Ortygians to her.

"It is good, I think. It means people do not even want to steal from me," she said with a small smirk afterwards.

The blonde shook her head, still dazed. Did the girl never tire of giving her surprises? She had expected the Ortygian Treasures to be extant in some form or amount, perhaps hidden away somewhere known only to their relatives, the Otomeians. But to have them publicly known and to have *so much* of them remaining... How could this not have been made known to her before? Why were people unaware of it? For if they were, she knew, there would certainly be far more belligerent nations making attempts on the citadel of Otomeia.

"So, I go back to your question," Natsuki told her, ever the stickler for tying up loose ends: "I put my profits each year and booty that belongs to me there too, sometimes. Sometimes I bank it elsewhere or invest. It depends on which is of more convenience or - or opportunity, yes."

Shizuru closed her eyes and pressed on the lids with her fingers as though she were having a headache.

"Pray do not mistake this to be an offence, my darling," she murmured. "But I had not taken you to be a businesswoman."

"Only a little, Shizuru," the girl answered. "I only do it because I think it is, umm, what is the word you use? Ah, *wasteful*. Yes. I think it is wasteful not to have at least a part of it work." She switched to Greek for a clearer explanation: "I think it is also a responsibility of those with wealth to see that it circulates."

Even in her dismay, Shizuru could not resist smiling at her lover.

"And apparently you are versed in economics too," she told her. "I disapprove of hoarding money as well, so I agree."

Natsuki nodded, watching her closely. "But you are troubled."



"I am indeed," the older woman admitted, red eyes grim again. "I suspected its existence, but never the vastness of your inheritance, Natsuki. I know you are not given to hyperbole, so this means I cannot but trust in your word as to its size. You are *fabulously wealthy*."

"And this is a problem, Shizuru?" Natsuki asked, eyes twinkling because she was secretly amused-besides being worried-by this reaction. Was it normal for someone to be dismayed by the fact of a lover's affluence, after all? She could not recall feeling anything negative, herself, when she had found out about Shizuru's money.

"I am afraid it is in fact a problem," the other said, running a hand through her hair. "Natsuki, answer me frankly. Have you mentioned or even intimated this to any of *my* people? Or spoken about it within the hearing of any Himean-officer, ranker, or servant?"

Natsuki baulked at the idea: it was ignoble to brag about wealth, in her opinion, especially when one had so much about which to brag. Joking about it the way Shizuru often did about hers was all well and good, but since she considered herself not very good with jokes-although Shizuru kept telling her the contrary, but she suspected she was only good with jokes in front of Shizuru, so it did not count-she certainly could not joke about her wealth with others either.

"Never," she said with feeling.

"And I have not heard about it until now. Why is that? Your people do not talk about it, do they?"

"No. It is *never* talked about, except once, when each Otomeian is told of the oath and the bond. All Otomeians are told the promise, and then they do not speak of it again."

Natsuki squinted when she saw that the older woman was still looking for assurance on the subject.

"I told you before, Shizuru," she went on. "I will tell you again: it is like cursed wealth. No one talks about it because it is not something they wish to touch, even. It is forbidden to use to all but those with the blood of the Ortygian rulers. It is not forbidden to talk about it,

not specifically. But it is held to be wiser. They do not talk about it because they have no reason to."

"Whereas there is every reason to keep it that way." Shizuru frowned at the girl to show her she was deathly serious. "You might need to talk to your people at some point, Natsuki, just to remind them to keep to their code of silence on it. Ensure no Otomeian even mentions the Ortygian Treasure or even admits to its existence before my people-at least not with a tone of factuality. Do all of them know how large the wealth is, by the way?"

Natsuki considered it for an instant.

"Very few are permitted to see it, even, Shizuru. Many know it is large because of the tales, but..." She smiled shamefacedly here. "But perhaps not as large as in truth."

"With good reason. What you have just described to me sounds as though it would be sufficient for a nation, not just one person." She started, checked herself. "What am I saying? Of course it would be so. You were supposed to be queen of your own nation, after all!"

Natsuki was still smiling.

"I am not, um, *extravagant*," she explained, smile widening after saying that: she was pleased with herself for getting out the Himean word properly, it seemed. "I spend not much for myself. So many think there is not so much in there."

"And that the tales of its size were inflated myths, I suppose? But some do know, of course, few though they might be if it is indeed as you say."

"Mmm."

"Natsuki, listen to me." Shizuru sat up straight. The fantastic eyes were riveted to hers, showing her Natsuki was listening. "This is important. You should not admit to your wealth, or never anything even approaching the true extent of it, within hearing of any of my people. You may admit to wealth you have gathered from other campaigns, or wealth you hold as a member of the Otomeian

nobility-in fact, pass off all your wealth as that, if ever a situation arises that you are questioned-but do not admit to the wealth your family left you. Tell your people not to speak of it either, as much as possible. Never talk about the Ortygian Treasures. Do you understand?"

Natsuki nodded, although her brow was wrinkled.

"But Shizuru," she said. "Why?"

"Because were my people to know that such a hoard of riches were in Otomeia, it would not take long before they found reason to annex it."

Natsuki's eyes regarded her with a studying expression, not astonished but not absent queries either. Shizuru saw that she had considered this possibility herself, but had not really come to a conclusion yet.

*Yet she told you*, she told herself, chest swelling with gratitude that the girl would trust her so much. *Not even as a test, for she could never have taken it back. She told you.*

"Is this true, Shizuru?" Natsuki eventually asked. "Even if we are allies?"

Shizuru's smile was humourless.

"It is the way of my people," she said. "Not for nothing do we have a reputation for conquest, Natsuki. Usually, it comes from the ambitions of those leading our armies, from senators salivating after power, or money, or fame. I admit I belong to those ranks, *meum mel*, but I am different and I have my share of scruples. I would not destroy a faithful ally simply to grab his money and I love you more than myself besides. But many among my peers would do what I would not."

She rubbed at her temples, not noticing the girl's wild flush at her casual profession of love.

"Your people's history and their fabled wealth would see many a greedy ear perking up," she continued. "Many of our wars in the past

have actually been impelled by a single senator's relentless agitations or manoeuvrings to seize for himself as booty the wealth of another nation. Granted, in my case, what I really want is glory and the chance to enrich Hime, not specifically myself-but I understand what motivates my peers all the same. Perhaps I am only fortunate in that I have never lacked wealth and also happen to believe in alliances more than dependencies where possible... but while I would never think of taking your wealth or what is better known as the Ortygian Treasures, I am only one person among four hundred. I have no doubt that over half the Senate would come up with designs to get their grubby hands on your fortune by taking over your country."

"They would find it very hard," the girl replied with flinty determination.

"Even so. Let us not give them any reason to try it at all." Shizuru clicked her tongue in annoyance. "Although it is a given that they shall find out sooner or later."

"My people do not talk of it, Shizuru."

"If your people know it exists at all, tongues shall eventually wag and fables of wealth repeated, Natsuki. It only takes a few cups, as they say-and if you have not noticed, a good number of your soldiers and mine fraternise over liquor. Damn."

Natsuki looked worried now. If Shizuru thought something sufficient reason to curse, after all, it must be a grave possibility indeed. She got on her hands and knees and crawled forward, instinctively seeking the warmth of her lover's side.

"Shizuru," she said upon reaching her destination, her tone asking what she should or could do. This was a point of great sensitivity to her, after all, given her fears over being a talisman of misfortune for those who hosted her. If Shizuru's worries came true, she might end up being the undoing now of a people who had taken her in after she lost hers. What a wretch she was turning out to be!

Shizuru saw the self-castigation in the large eyes: she put an arm around the girl and kissed the top of her head.

"Do not fear, Natsuki," she told the young woman, who kissed her shoulder. "I promise that I shall think of something. It shall not be a problem for as long as this Northern War lasts, at least, so we need not think of a more definite, set-in-stone safeguard yet. And even after the war is done, as long as I am alive and you are known to be linked to me, no one in the Senate would dare the idea I have just put forward."

The green eyes turned to her and she went on, smiling to soothe what she had just ruffled.

"Really," she said. "You are fortunate indeed, my darling: had your lover been any other Himean, you would probably be in trouble. But no one shall try a trick on you because they are not stupid enough to dare touch what is mine or what I have taken under my wing. For now, you may take comfort in my protection there. My cousin would undoubtedly add her protection to you too, among others."

"Shizuma," Natsuki murmured.

"I hope you are just saying her name because I mentioned her and not because you are already confusing us."

She got a light tap on the arm for that, although she pretended it had hurt, rubbing the muscle dramatically. Her statement had been a jest on Natsuki's regular-if-unspoken comparisons of her with her cousin.

"All right now?" she asked.

"All right," Natsuki responded.

They looked at each other.

"Shizuru, when do you meet her today?" the girl said, clearly eager to move on to a topic of less gravity for them. "Your cousin?"

Shizuru glanced at the water-clock.

"In an hour," she replied, pushing Natsuki to lie down. She followed by lying down herself, facing the girl so they could talk even in this position. "You can see the clock. Tell me when it is time, please. I want to while away the time with you until then."

"Mm."

Shizuru put her palm against the other woman's and laced their fingers together.

"You know, the winter gear we ordered should have arrived by now," she purred, playing idly with the hand in hers. Despite the scars on it, it was so white it could have been fashioned out of pure alabaster. "No doubt the troops already know that the winter shall not be a quiet one. If they have not gathered it yet from the ceaseless drilling and constant injunctions to 'be prepared to mobilise at a moment's notice', they should have gathered it from the rumours of me buying out the stocks of the sock- and scarf-makers in the city."

"Ah." Natsuki's eyebrows were up with curiosity. "Shizuru, I have a question."

"Speak it."

"Why did you not commandeer them instead? The socks and scarves and things? They are for a war that also saves Argus, no?"

"True, they are."

"So why pay for them?"

"Because I can," Shizuru answered, pinching the girl's fingers. "I could have commandeered them by that logic, true, but it would only have been the proper thing to do were it the case that I absolutely could not afford them. It keeps my name smelling sweeter too to pay for what I can pay."

"Oh," Natsuki said with some dismissal. "The politics."

"Yes, the politics," the other replied, lifting a fine eyebrow. "To commandeer things so carelessly is rather a royal way of thinking, Your Highness. It shall not serve an elected Himean politician well."

"Huh. So you think your legions... they will know you plan to march in the winter due to this?"

"Yes. Rumour gets around faster than you would credit among the

rankers, especially as they mingle more than we do with the common folk, or the local markets. I doubt any of them have an idea of where I intend to take them. But as far as the plan of marching in the winter goes, they are probably expecting it already, all the more as I directed the centurions to encourage the legionaries to go to the bagnios as much as possible these past two weeks." At Natsuki's frown, she clarified: "To the brothels. The warehouses?"

The rapid series of nods the girl gave nearly made her laugh, but she held back behind a wide smile. The prude in the Otomeian was obviously afraid she would come to saltier synonyms or descriptions if she continued-which had in fact been her intention.

"And - hrm! - the prostitutes," the girl said, actually producing a delicate cough that rather expanded Shizuru's smile. "Why the need for them? Why does it tell the legions you will march?"

"Let us answer one question first," Shizuru replied, propping up her head with one hand by crooking an elbow and setting it on the pillow. "As you well know, military life tends to make for cold nights, especially given how we disapprove of liaisons between the rankers. Not necessarily a whipping offence, of course, but something that is not encouraged and which can lead to dishonourable discharge in certain situations, as a general rule."

Natsuki nodded: it was a given in an army, naturally.

"For this purpose, we have a culture of encouragement that supports a view of the army as one's family," Shizuru proceeded. "Rankers are siblings, not potential lovers. Incest is taboo in our culture, so it helps to prevent affairs from popping up. And we encourage homosexual liaisons very strongly-I think you do the same, correct?"

Again Natsuki nodded, adding, "To prevent complications such as childbirth."

"Precisely," Shizuru agreed. "People understand this and expect it when considering active military duty. This is pretty much given in the Himean army, as they probably are in yours. But with a powerful difference: we Himeans have rather a more sexual culture than you

do."

Natsuki did not nod, but the colour on her face sufficed for an answer.

"Part of ensuring that I have the soldiers' absolute loyalty is in keeping them happy whenever I have the wherewithal to do it," the older woman continued. "And in ensuring that in between the tough times, they get their rewards. Sometimes I do it with bonuses in the booty. Prior to a long march where they shall not be granted access to women or men, I do it by making arrangements with the local brothels to see to the soldiers' needs. The discounts the legionaries are being given when they visit such establishments are ones I have actually paid for already to the Mistresses and Masters of the brothels. This way, all the soldiers get their romp in the hay, as it were, and at an affordable price so that they can do it as much as they need to before the march."

"This is why they already suspect that we are going somewhere soon," she concluded. "Because I typically do this when I am going to put them in camps or take them on marches where non-combatants like slaves and the usual prostitutes you see following the legions shall not be allowed. They know I do it to let them glut themselves on sex if need be so that they think little of being forced to be more abstemious for a time afterwards."

Natsuki was very quiet and thoughtful after that, and Shizuru urged her to say what was on her mind. The girl smiled with a bit of embarrassment.

"Your people," she started. "They - they make much of *this*."

Shizuru smiled and flipped over onto her back.

"Whereas it matters not for yours," she responded.

"It matters," the girl replied with surprising swiftness, Shizuru thought. "Only differently."

"Quite."

They were not the only ones to sense that the context of the



conversation had already been altered to something more secret as well as sensitive: the panther still stretched out next to Natsuki flicked its ears, sensing disturbance in the air, and then got up and padded away to the corner where its water bowl was kept. The sound of its tongue lapping was low beneath the other sounds floating from outside: muted but still understandable calls from the people on the streets, slaves inside the mansion's courtyard going at their work, carts trundling on the roads. After a while, Natsuki's voice joined this background symphony.

"Shizuru," she called.

Shizuru hummed to show she had not fallen asleep.

"You have-" She stopped and composed herself. "You have been tuh - tuh -"

"To a brothel? Yes, I have." She clarified immediately: "Never to touch any of 'the wares', so to speak. The first time I went into one it was merely out of curiosity, and all I did was talk to the proprietor of the establishment and the friend whom I had accompanied there. I have never gone to a brothel for sexual companionship."

She turned her face to Natsuki's patently relieved one and asked, "Did you think I had?"

"I - I thought the possibility was very small," she admitted.

"I meant: did you think I had recently?"

"Ah, I..." A swallow. "No. I thought, no."

"As well you should. I have not and shall not seek companionship in such places. And I did promise to be faithful to you."

She sat up and heaved a breath before looking over her shoulder and casting an unreadable glance at the girl.

In her mind, she was thinking, *But I am still Himean like my legionaries, at the end of the day.*

This thought did not signify any desire to visit a whorehouse to get

her needs seen to, but rather her frustration over the fact that the two of them had not made love at all since their reunion. While a great part of that had used to be due to Natsuki's illness at first, Shizuru had to admit that part of it now had to do with her, and so blamed herself for it even while at a loss on how to resolve the matter. It was not that she felt no carnal longing-far from it, in fact-but rather that there were subtleties of fear that now informed her decision to chain down the hunger.

A good deal of the fear had to do with her self-knowledge. Her attraction to Natsuki, she knew, had always been one of remarkable power. Time and more intimate acquaintance had built upon that foundation a deeper, even more remarkable affection but it had never really subdued the gravity the fleshly foundation exerted on the construct. It was why she had always been rough with her in the past, no matter how many times they started out tender. She had developed a strong urge to protect Natsuki as a result of her love now, true, yet that urge had not managed to kill off the initial response her body still held to the girl's. It was something to which either of them could attest based on all the times she had tried to crush, to bite, to practically *animalise* Natsuki's body in the past, and all because her own body continued to be as disturbed by the girl's as much as it was enraptured by it.

So how much more savage could she be now, she wondered, that their separation had clarified her desires to the level of supreme violence? This was complicated by her belief that Natsuki was still convalescing and not yet fully recovered-or as recovered as she could be-from the toll the war had taken on her. While her amputation and all the other wounds on her had sealed up quite cleanly, she still looked so fragile in Shizuru's eyes that the older woman continued to cosset the girl in her care. And for good reason: why, the girl had not even resumed having her courses yet! Shizuru knew this because she had asked the girl's loyal attendants, who said they had not needed to wash her bleeding rags for months, and that the drought of her courses had started even before the outbreak of the Mentulæan incursions. Worried about what this might mean, Shizuru had taken up the sensitive matter in private with the chief of the *medici*, taking him aside one early morning.

"A common outcome of poor nutrition," the experienced physician had told her, having been called in by worried parents before for the same thing regarding their teenage daughters back when he had still been practising his trade in the city. Back then, though, they had also called him in to ascertain that there was not a secret pregnancy in the wings, although in the case of the general's lover he was very certain there was no such thing: the meanness of her form and what she had just undergone could very well explain it.

"I believe it is the body's way of ensuring that vital functions are provided for, Fujino-san. It reserves what strength and life fluids it can spare for the more important parts of living, and not procreating."

"So it is not a serious thing?" she had asked, more genial to him than she had been before because he had been partly responsible for saving Natsuki. "Shall this lead to something worse, perhaps? And what can be done about it?"

"It is only indicative of a weakness of the body, nothing more," he had assured her. "Does she complain of any pains in her lower stomach, General? Any, ah, unusual discharges?"

"No, none at all," she had answered positively.

"Then there is no fear of worse things. As long as she regains her strength-which she is doing nowadays-and eats properly, her body should resume its normal activities by itself. She should not be troubled at all by it. If she is or does complain of pains, call me. Otherwise, please do not worry too much."

Despite that assurance, Shizuru had been unable to set her mind at ease, the words "weakness of the body" echoing about her head. She knew the girl was indeed progressing, and Natsuki herself did all she could so as to not be viewed as weak, exerting all her wonderful strength of character-but then Shizuru would see the stump, the scars, the skeleton of her collar and the slash of her ribs...

So she was caught in the cleft stick, afraid to let loose for fear she would end up devastating the girl without meaning to and aware too

that the longer she checked herself, the more aggression was built up under the surface. She had not felt this before in their separation due to worries, she suspected, and not immediately upon their reunion either due to Natsuki's sickness. One could not have seen so mangled a body as the girl's had been as an object of sexuality but rather one of pity. This only compounded her confusion now because said body was not yet completely healed, yet no longer as brutalised as it had been when she had picked it up and practically felt the life leaching out of it. It was in an ambiguous, almost-interim state, midway between its non-sexual and war-torn form and its healthy and sexual past. Shizuru could and did already lust after it: her mind said it was still sacrilege to desecrate so frail a body that way.

Thus she struggled with her needs and fears, wondering how to reconcile them. It had reached the point where she actually felt the desire as a dull ache in her teeth, a nagging in her gums that felt as though she had to bite something. At some point she considered touching herself but gave that up within mere seconds of the attempt, realising it gave her no pleasure at all because she did not want to touch herself: she wanted to touch *Natsuki*. But Natsuki still felt untouchable. So she would wick away her passion only to suffer it anew every time she helped the girl bathe, smelled the provocation of her and touched the absurd softness of little ears and still-adolescent skin. Every time she parted her lips when kissing and encountered again that clean honey-and-milk taste, the flavour of Homeric Greece and the Ithaca of Ulysses...

The very voice and touch driving her mad cut into her meditations.

"Shizuru," the girl was saying, having been plucking at her robe for some time now. "Look. It is the hour."

"Ah." A glance at the water-clock confirmed it. "Yes. Thank you, *meum mel*."

Natsuki watched as she got up, tracking her movements to the chair where Shizuru's slaves had placed one of her red military tunics. Shizuru stripped off her robe unashamedly, her long back and legs exposed to the girl, and proceeded to change. As always, Natsuki stared with a faint sheen on her cheeks, crawling over to the edge of

the bed and lying on her belly. She was still fascinated by the edges where the bronzed skin from the summer still showed darkly against the Himean's true colour, which was very fair.

When Shizuru turned around again, tunic on and properly belted, and her sandals around her feet, the girl flicked her eyes to one folded item on another of the chairs, which was placed atop an alternative tunic the slaves had also set out.

"Not the toga?" she asked.

"Not today. There is little use for it when I am going to simply deal with military matters, anyway." Shizuru strolled over and bent over the bed, kissing her lover's nose on its point. "Why, did you want to see it?"

"No-o," Natsuki answered, before cocking her head and narrowing her eyes at the garment. "Only, I wondered."

"Yes?"

"Do you think I will know how to put on those things?"

Shizuru laughed at the idea. "Want to try?"

Natsuki was intrigued. "How?"

"Try putting it on me, if you do remember how it is supposed to fold."

She fetched the bolt of cloth and handed it to Natsuki, who unfurled it and gawked at its length: it was clear that her memories had made it seem shorter than it really was, especially as she had only ever handled it in its unfolded spread now. Shizuru urged her to try, standing in front of the bed so the girl could do what she wanted.

"While I have your attention or some part of it, Polemarch," the older woman said, suffering Natsuki's mumbles to herself as she tried to figure out which part of the cloth to throw over what part of her model's body. "I would bear a request to you. The cavalry archers are considerably lower in number than before."

Natsuki knelt up a little shakily-she was still getting used to the

proper distribution of her weight now that one foot and part of one calf were gone-and was steadied by Shizuru's hands on her hips. She thanked the older woman with a nuzzle against her collar, then fussed around the Himean's neck with one end of the toga.

"We are replacing them," she said.

"Good, but I want to increase them."

"Un-Himean."

"You're telling me!" Shizuru cried, emitting a laugh. "But what makes you say that?"

"Shizuru. Your armies, they have not had archers in - in centuries, I think. Always, you get your archers from the auxiliary."

"True. Do you know why?"

"Stupidity?" the girl murmured, undoing a fold she had figured out to be wrong. Shizuru cuffed her affectionately in the chin for her cheek.

"Fair enough," the older woman admitted anyway. "I confess I find the low opinion of ranged combat among my people stupid as well. That said, the practical benefits of having uniformly-trained troops and just outsourcing other troop types cannot be denied either. But back to what I said! I want more cavalry archers. We shall be going into quite a lot of plains later, based on my readings of the Mentulaean maps, and cavalry archers are crucial. As shall be your cataphracti."

"I will see it done."

"My thanks. Now what in the world have you done with me and my toga?"

She was referring to the horrendous tangle of fabric that Natsuki had managed to weave around her torso, arms, and neck during their conversation, which was as far from the proper arrangement of a toga as Otomeia was from Sicilia. Natsuki regarded her failure darkly and flopped back onto the bed, sitting back to survey the uncooperative garment with irritation.

"You are too tall," she grumbled. "I cannot reach properly."

Shizuru was incredulous. " *Now* you say this? You, an Otomeian?"

Natsuki waved a hand dismissively, still irked that she could not figure out what had gone wrong with her attempts.

"You are the tallest woman I know personally, Shizuru," she said.  
"You are taller than even some of our men."

"Therefore this is what causes you to make a toga look like a tool of either capture or persecution?"

The answer was a pout and, unexpectedly, a knock on their door.

"It's me!" said Shizuma's voice. "I thought I would meet you here instead. May I come in?"

"Yes!"

Shizuru's cousin came in and shut the door behind her, stopping when she saw Shizuru's sartorial circumstances.

"You look stupid," she observed.

The other Himean rolled her eyes. "Apparently it is because I am too tall."

"Well, you are, though I fail to see how that relates to this."

Shizuru told her.

"While I see the merits of immobilising *her* this way, Natsuki, it actually goes on like this," the white blonde said, coming forward and untangling the toga about Shizuru so she could show how to properly do it. "Don't move, cousin."

Her young cousin looked on the verge of grumbling, being far less willing to stand still for a demonstration if it was not Natsuki doing it, but Shizuma shushed her before she could get up a decent wind of complaint.

"You're right in deeming her overly tall," she said, addressing the girl watching her demonstration. "I myself am considered statesque, but as you can see, she'd beat me to the rafters. She's rather an ogre, really: just look at those feet."

"Why *are* you here?" Shizuru said, interrupting her with a frown as Natsuki stifled a giggle.

"For one thing, the gear you wanted has arrived."

"Ah!" The commander was pleased. "And do we have all of it?"

"All accounted for, as a matter of fact. I went through the equipment myself." Shizuma put the last fold of the toga in place, moving aside so Natsuki could see the finished product better. "I talked to the centurions of the Ninth and Thirteenth too and they are primed and ready. I thought you would prefer to be told here, instead of in the staff room where people can overhear us, that your insane march through the mountains is good to go. "

There was a smirk from the darker Himean: Shizuma had tanned less than her cousin over the summer, having preferred to shade herself a little more than her cousin over the march. The still-brown Shizuru seemed even more golden when standing next to her, as a result.

The golden woman now winked at her lover and said, "Thoughtful of you to come here for that, Shizuma, but are you sure you did not come here too to get away from Suzumi-han?"

The other woman's face puckered as though she had just tasted something sour.

"That young woman hates me," she muttered, walking over to the bed and seating herself next to Natsuki-or trying to, if not for Shizuru coming over too and pushing her at least a foot away from the girl, who could not help but laugh at their antics.

"I shan't do anything to her, idiot," the silver-haired woman glared, resigning herself to sitting a little further away from the Otomeian than she had intended. "I'm only trying to sit a companionable



distance, for Jupiter's sake."

"I find that distance companionable enough," Shizuru retorted, displaying all her magnificent teeth. "Now what has Suzumi-han done to you this time?"

Shizuma explained as her younger cousin started taking off her toga.

"Nothing, if you discount the fact that she looks to be praying for me to be sent to perdition," she groused. "Oh, it's all well and good when my mind is on work: she troubles me not at all then. But let me approach just another of the other tribunes to say a friendly word and suddenly Tamao-san is by my side and pestering *de novo*, pecking at me like some offended mother hen!"

"It is not so much you approaching the other tribunes as one particular 'other tribune', is it?" her cousin said. "Aoi Nagisa, that is?"

The green-gold eyes gave her a jaundiced glare.

"Just so you know, I have not even done a thing to Nagisa-chan," Shizuma sneered. "Nothing that would merit Tamao-san's rancour! I have been naught but amiable to Nagisa from the start, yet her damned friend acts as though I were the most licentious cur to ever approach her, rudely cutting short every attempt I make at simply engaging the girl in friendly conversation. As though I could violate her chastity with an affable word about the weather!" she spat.

"But you do intend that," Shizuru pointed out. "Eventually."

"So?" Shizuma was surly. "Does that mean I cannot be friendly with her first?"

"No, but *do* you have to be friendly with her first?"

The other patrician hesitated.

"Well, it is not as though vengeance would be satisfied with simply having her, I suppose," she murmured, sounding, her cousin thought, less enthusiastic about her plans than expected. "It might be in my interests to have her actually fall for me. Genuinely. That

would be a far better way to show up those puckered-up asses of relatives she has, don't you think?"

Her auditors exchanged a swift, near-invisible look.

"If you say so," Shizuru said.

The older woman glowered at her again. "I do say so. Do not patronise me, Shizuru."

Shizuru held up her hands in surrender. "After all this time? Gods forbid! But what of Suzumi-han, then? Do you want me to assign her to someone else's staff?"

"Why?" The silver-haired woman seemed puzzled. "Had I wanted to do that, I could have just sent her off to one of the other legates myself."

"I merely thought it would be best for your appearance if the order came from me and not you. So you do not want her off your team, then?"

"No," Shizuma sighed, letting her chin fall into one hand as she bent over her knees grumpily. "For all that she can be irritating, she is in fact a superb tribune. Does all I require and absent complaint or complication, yet with a great deal of capability. You've seen the records she made of the local influentials offering their resources to the campaign for one request or another?"

"Oh, yes! Outstanding organisation, I thought. And she also negotiated very wisely with several, I hear."

"Yes," the other agreed. "So I think I would rather keep her, because she is, quite irritatingly, a genuine asset to have on my staff. Especially when you compare her to that prat I have to deal with, Satoshi."

"Who?" Shizuru asked, returning from having deposited her toga in a closet.

"Satoshi Takamisaki."

The Otomeian listening avidly to them noted that while Shizuru was already standing still when her cousin answered, she nevertheless seemed to freeze over at the name.

"*What?*" the younger patrician hissed. "Why, by all the gods, is he here?"

Shizuma smiled wryly at her. "He is one of my-and by extension, your-tribunes."

"Cousin, he is a cretin."

"No argument there." Shizuma shrugged. "But his mother came to me before I left Hime and begged position for him."

"From what I recall, the mother too is a cretin," the tawny blonde said, looking disgusted. "Good god, you could prop her up next to a caryatid, Shizuma, and no one would be the wiser as to which figure has a head made of granite! Why did you agree?"

Her cousin was incredulous.

"We're related to him," she reminded.

"Rubbish. We're Himean nobles, which means we're related to half the imbeciles in Senate. I notice said imbeciles are not here."

"Related to him a little more closely than most of them, then."

"We're related to Tomoe even more closely than to him, at least on paper," Shizuru riposted. "And I would never consider *her* for a tribunician role in any army I commanded."

Shizuma crossed her legs, sitting up.

"An extreme and unfair example," she said, twisting her mouth ruefully. "Not only did Tomoe employ your name for fraudulent purposes but was also, we know now, in league with the Mentulae in conspiring to get you sent back home so they could deal with a lesser commander. Satoshi's a cretin, but hardly touches upon that class of malice!"

"Granted," Shizuru said with withering dryness. "After all, he is far too stupid to think up a plan like that and far too much of a snob to dicker with Mentulaeans, rich and princely or not. Yet a cretin can, on some occasions, be as perilous as a harpy."

"Perhaps, but he occupies only a minor role here, Shizuru, so he can be managed," her cousin responded. "And more to the point, I had to give him a post and you know that."

"Do I?"

"Don't you?"

Shizuru folded two lean brown arms in front of her chest and said, "I find it a geriatric mode of thought. Why should we have to give people rewards for merely being related to us? I chose you because you were capable of being the chief of the legates on a campaign such as this and could be trusted, not because you are my cousin. Why should merit not be our standard for all such appointments, Shizuma?"

The other blonde opened her mouth to reply but shut it abruptly, seeming to remember something that kept her from presenting a retort just yet. Shizuru realised what it was when the older woman glanced at the girl sitting near her.

"Speak your mind, cousin," she said. "I can tell you now that I keep no secrets from her and that this shall eventually reach her ears, even if you do take it up with me when Natsuki is not here."

Natsuki smiled sheepishly at the legate, who exhaled heavily and shot a speaking glance her way.

"Actually, I was refraining from saying my piece just now not because I was worried about that," Shizuma clarified. "But because I did not want your lover to hear me giving you a sermon, Shizuru."

The younger patrician chuckled, not failing to see how Natsuki's ears seemed to perk up at the prospect.

"Go on, then. I have no doubt Natsuki would love to hear that, in fact," she said.

"It dampens my passion on the subject to have you invite me to it," Shizuma complained, shaking her head. "But have it your way. I understand what you mean about competence being the primary virtue, especially in the military, but the military is only one part of our world. The other part is one where nepotism reigns, and while that may displease you, it is yet the rule that holds and to which one must make concessions every now and then. We have to remember that a good number of your appointments for this campaign have already been considered unconventional. And with all the posts we have been handing out to conservative family members, how do you think it would look to refuse actual family?"

"I imagine it would look like plain good sense in this case. Everyone knows Takamisaki and his mother are cretins."

"Oh, for-!" The silver mane stirred as Shizuma threw her hands up in exasperation, swinging about to look to her cousin's lover for help. "You understand what I am saying, I hope?"

The girl seemed to be smiling at her, Shizuma thought, although why she would think that when the Otomeian's mouth did not even curve up at the corners she had no idea.

"It is not that I do not understand," she said hesitatingly. "But I see the justice of both, um, accounts."

"Do you ever run into issues of this sort in Otomeia?" Shizuru asked her, interested.

Natsuki thought it over. She eventually told them that it was a balance that had to be maintained in their world as well, although she also noted that it was very difficult to keep a military post in Otomeia-and one had to remember that many of their administrative posts were also technically military ones, given how deeply war was ingrained into their culture, she said-if one lacked merit, as it was possible to be challenged to a duel for it by someone also interested in the position. Duels were generally supported only if the person being challenged was considered to deserve that challenge, which meant skilled leaders were unlikely to ever get a challenge.

"But it is rare now to do it, a challenge," Natsuki finished.

Her audience considered the information she had just given them, intrigued by the savage-seeming custom.

"A duel to the death for command," Shizuma eventually murmured. "Well, it may work for military commands, but not for bureaucratic ones. Would one challenge a state treasurer for his job?"

Even as her cousin laughed at the notion, the girl answered, "No, but one can for... um... treasonous accountancy, I think you will call it."

"Why, whatever can that prove?"

"Nothing. Only, it is an opportunity to kill him."

The Himeans looked at each other, then to her.

"That is not how we do things," Shizuma told the girl who had succeeded in astounding them. Natsuki was not done yet, however.

"It is not how I wish to do things either," she confessed.

They asked how she would prefer such a situation to be handled.

"I think," she said, pondering as she spoke, "that there is - there are always possibilities of theft being more, mmh, complicated in big organisations. Even if you discover one thief among the treasurers, it is possible it is not a - a - an act from one, but from a number more - um - nebulous."

"That is a good word," Shizuru praised, prompting her to flush and nod in recognition of the compliment.

"So I think to kill the one you catch will let the others escape. If there are others, I mean. Also, I think to keep them alive gives a chance of recovery. One may still recover what has been stolen by investigation. But investigation, it is hardest on the dead," she said with great sapience.

She looked up from the sheets to find that Shizuru's cousin was looking at her with a smile, and she blushed even harder.

"Are you certain you're not Himean?" the silver-haired patrician teased.

"My girl," Shizuru interjected with particular emphasis, "is just naturally level-headed. I agree with your opinion, Natsuki. But we have rather strayed from our point."

She was solemn as she turned to her cousin.

"You may keep him on the staff if you find it necessary, cousin," she ruled. "But keep him well away from me and keep an eye on him. Do not send him to any of the other legates: they might not know how to handle him as well as you do, because they might end up thinking of his relation to us and act unduly gentle around him. So keep him with you. Any slip-ups that reach my ears will get him packed off or assigned to shit duty, depending on my mood. At the very least, we have already given him a chance: I can hardly be called unkind to family if family disappoints me and gets what it deserves afterwards."

Shizuma flipped her mass of silver hair off one shoulder and sighed.

"Fine," she said. "I shall keep him on my staff. This is the thanks I get for thinking of your image?"

Shizuru puffed air through her nose dismissively and came over to her lover, stroking her hair.

"We are going to the staffroom now, *meum mel*," she said. "You said you had an interview with the local artisans here?"

"Mm-hm."

"I say, how *is* that going?" Shizuma asked, getting up too. She was referring to the process of creating an artificial leg or support for the girl, for which she knew Shizuru had commissioned some of the best artificers and inventors in the city. "I wonder that it is taking them so long to produce something. What, did you not breathe fire under their rears, Shizuru? You should have told them to be faster."

"They actually already had some prototypes yesterday," her cousin informed her. "But Natsuki said she wanted changes made to them."

What did you ask them to change, *mea vita* ?"

Natsuki had not liked the weight of the leg, she told them, so she had asked the craftsmen to trade in oak for lighter woods. They asked her which woods she had selected.

"Cedar and African Cypress."

Up went two fair pairs of eyebrows.

"Wood for ships and boats," Shizuma observed. "Interesting."

"This is a wet land," the girl answered. "Other light wood, it will rot."

"Clever," her lover said. "Anything else?"

"Strips from a *sagum* on the soles."

"Even more clever!" Shizuru laughed, her cousin nodding quiet but firm approval beside her. "That would certainly dampen its sound, as well as soften and make more bearable its contact with the floor."

"Perhaps you should have her as head of your artificers, Shizuru."

"How about it, Natsuki?" Shizuru teased, her long fingers brushing over Natsuki's earlobes. "Interested?"

The girl shook her head at them with a smile.

"I do not know," she said, playing along. "I have already so many titles."

"Princess, Polemarch, and now President of the Artificers," Shizuru's cousin listed, putting a hand on one hip and slanting her head at the Otomeian. "Saturated with titles indeed. Are you not worried that someone will come to ordain you next as a god, my dear girl?"

"That is a big leap," Natsuki protested.

Shizuma jerked a thumb at her cousin. "Not for this one. She already worships you."

"And with good reason!" the younger of the Himeans proclaimed,



bending over so she could press a kiss to the girl's white forehead, then to her pink lips. She had intended to stop there but caught a whiff of the girl's hair and ended up sliding her nose into the dark mane as she straightened, inhaling deeply so she could tide herself over with it for the next hours.

"Well, we shall cease troubling you for now, *meum mel*, " she said. "But would you come over to the staffroom once you are done with your own errands so we can trouble you again? We promise to do it with utmost reverence."

"Oh, does that mean I can also press kisses to her altar?"

Natsuki sighed as the cousins started bickering again, pushing both of them away from the bedside and pointing to the door.

"Go now," she ordered, looking upon them with fond forbearance. "It is so. You two *are* trouble."

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King Obsidian was aware that something had gone wrong with the first sally in the war against the Himeans. The last they had heard from Prince Hanu was the letter bearing news of the triumph at Argentum, which had sent the royal court into a transport of jubilation. While the king had participated in the festivities and announced fresh honours to his son as reward for the coup, his feelings had been more complex than displayed: on one hand he was authentically pleased, deeming the victory a positive herald of their future; on the other hand he was eaten up by envy, grudging his son a triumph that had been denied him when he had met that demon-eyed Himean outside Argentum's walls.

It was that incident and the monumental *laesa maiestas* he had taken away from it that had seen him ruminating after his retreat to the Gorgo citadel, licking at the thorn the Fujino woman had driven into his kingly paw. He discovered it a thorn not easily pulled out too: dentate and noxious, its poison seeping even to his subjects. It did not take them long to get news of what had happened from those who had witnessed it, tongues wagging enthusiastically in dark corners of the royal palace. It did not take him long either to see that

the members of the court now glanced up at him doubtfully from under their bows, their praises of him less passionate and fearful than before. He knew the signs, having been sensitised to them from birth and throughout his upbringing. He knew they were losing their faith in their king.

At any other time, he would have responded by ordering heavy massacres of the still-insurgent tribes in their newly-won territories to the North, and perhaps finished that off with some showy executions of the less likeable aristocrats in his court. Those sorts of demonstrations were par for the course when you wanted to secure power. But this was a special case, and even he had to admit their loss of faith was understandable. He had been cowed into a retreat without a single arrow even being fired, a humiliation compounded by the fact that in retreating, he had been forced to leave one of his sons in the foreigners' custody. This required a stronger demonstration than before, and his own pride demanded that he acquire vengeance for the insult besides.

It was thus that, even as his subjects thought him already a conqueror manqué, ready to present his rear for the Himeans to bugger more thoroughly, the king of the Mentulaeans schemed. To Obsidian, it was time to get rid of this noisome neighbour of theirs, time to show the rest of the world what soft skins Himeans still had. It had been a stroke of luck that another of his sons, who had been sent to the Himeans' city to pretend to seek an alliance-to blow smoke in their eyes while they took over Argentum, as was the intention-had remained in that far-off city longer than expected, and could thus be sent a note of recent developments, events and intentions.

The son in Hime, Prince Nagi, was perhaps the smartest of his offspring. He interpreted the missive from his father as an order not to return until he had done something in aid of the royal intent of invasion, then worked a trick that had even Obsidian surprised, somehow managing to get the Fujino woman-who represented the greatest mental obstacle in the king's mind to his plans, so impressed had he been with her-out of the picture and back to her godforsaken country. After that, it had been an easy thing to proceed... and the first thing he had done was to regain first his

people's faith by declaring that he was going to rid the North of the ordure that passed for the Himeans, steal their territories from them in order to add to his growing empire. How the barons and princes and princesses had cheered, gasping with pride in their king! He saw then how close he had come to peril, and how many ambitious sons and daughters were waiting in the wings, how many nobles watching for his exposed neck so they could slit the royal throat.

Thrones were held with a mixture of power and paranoia. Hanu had razed Argentum to the ground, destroyed one of the Himean legions, and was martial and well-liked in court. After Argentum's destruction, Obsidian feared how the people would view his old failure against the blaze of his son's success. He spent several weeks plotting how to get rid of Prince Hanu after the prince's part was done in the war-only to be greeted with the news that the lack of communiqués following Argentum was actually because the Himeans had finally managed to throw up their defences on the boundaries. He let one more week pass, then announced that he believed Hanu and the first invasion force lost, deploring the Himeans forcefully and promising vengeance in front of his Court while privately thanking the foreigners for at least doing him a small favour. No threats to his throne could come from that son now!

Despite the fact that there were now Himean legions apparently policing the borders, the king was not overly worried about the possibility of the Himeans coming up with sufficient forces to return the blow they had just been dealt. He knew the way the Himeans worked: small armies to respond to provocation, not the massive forces necessary for a proper invasion. They were not invaders, being unable to produce the sheer hordes needed for being true aggressors. The old fame of Hime as an invasive force had been reduced to that of a commercial and diplomatic nation that only traded on the fame of its old conquests to maintain its status. How long had it been since Hime had invaded anyone, after all? The best they had done in the last century had been interventions for and with their allies, annexations of territory abutting theirs that had been defended by no more than barbaric tribal peoples, not empires with armies that went into half a million strong.

Compare that to his wherewithal. For every legion Hime could throw

at him, he could put up five times the manpower. Even the enormous force Hanu had taken on that first sally and which was now lost to them was a loss the king considered conscionable: more soldiers were being found from the people every day, and there were still three of the royal armies to consider, besides the smaller armies some of the barons and more favoured nobles kept. Yes, the loss of Hanu and his army was fine. What mattered was that the first blow had been struck and had taken the Himeans off-guard. He had no doubt that Hanu had destroyed more of their cities and farmsteads as well as soldiers before finally being arrested at-they guessed-Sosia. And that would have been a fine disruption in their favour.

Originally, the plan had been for the Prince Calchis, one of his most favoured sons, to follow Hanu with another of the royal armies. But then there had been a disruption in their own lands, a massive outbreak of insurgencies in the North that Calchis had had to put down. During that time, the Himeans had been able to call on their Otomeian allies-oh, he owed that nation a reckoning too!-and thickened the boundary defences, tearing down with surprising speed every bridge on the Holmys as well as on the Atinu. Obsidian did not bother sending scouts to find fordable spots the foe had left unguarded on the rivers: the Holmys and Atinu were not mere capillaries, and were in fact the largest as well as deepest rivers in the North, which was why they had been chosen as the demarcation of the western bounds of his empire.

Fall dropped upon them and the king sat darkly on his throne, rethinking his plans. The Himeans would not hazard any major movements in winter, so he could be relatively quiet too. They would stick to the boundaries, as was their wont, and any retaliatory strikes on their parts would be made on the Mentulaean territories in that area, no further.

Calchis was made to stay in the north to keep the rebellious tribes quiet for the winter, but also instructed to move a little closer to the border. Another of the royal armies stayed in the centre and at the citadel of Gorgo, which the king vacated in favour of moving to his cushier winter palace to the west. With him went the royal court-including the Prince Nagi, who had returned from his sojourn in the

Himean capital. Other, smaller armies were directed to take up positions near Gorgo, in cities capable of sustaining their bulk. Cities and towns near the border were instructed to either shore up fortifications or relocate citizens westward, bringing with them their most able-bodied to plump the armies.

*Let them come, the king thought. They do not know these lands the way we do; here, we have the advantage. They will come in and be swallowed up by our might, our numbers. My suspicions were right: the woman I met in Argentum-the one who destroyed Artaxi's army with a force outnumbered by five-to-one, the one Nagi managed to tie down in their country-is only one among many. She would have to be, for no people could possibly throw up someone of her sort regularly. Even so, I regret that I did not kill her back when I first met her: why was I so afraid, so tentative about provoking Hime? Hime is a great farce. That woman was just a special case among its products, and she is no longer here to deal with. Whomever they send to contend with me will fall far short of her. All the more once I've trimmed his head off for my pike.*

# Chapter 61

*Good day to everyone. There have been stirrings on the site of which I have been apprised only recently. My gratitude to those who informed me of what has been happening. I had in fact been searching for a backup fanfiction site in which to store this even before, but have been so overwhelmed by the number of choices that I could not choose easily. To the other writers: would you please share your suggestions for which sites may be preferable among the many, if it would not be too much trouble?*

*And to the readers, I am so very sorry for how long this has taken. We all have moments when fate delivers a lesson in irony, I suppose, and my earlier projection of possible good health was perhaps nothing short of an engraved invitation for it.*

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## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Ala** (s.), **alae** (pl.) - a cavalry unit. Estimates vary for the precise number of troopers per ala, but for this story, the standard shall be set at 500 per ala.
2. **Jupiter Feretrius** - the aspect of the great god that presided over the creation of various contracts, especially treaties. Rome's treaties were regularly brought to the temple dedicated to it.
3. **Mea vita** - (L.) extremely affectionate endearment; translates to "my life"
4. **Meum mel** - (L.) endearment; translates to "my honey"
5. **Octet** - military unit within the Roman army, composed of eight men. Each century divided its soldiers into octets.
6. **Quartan ague** - familiar to those with some medical knowledge, no doubt: this is the strain of malaria that recurs at four-day (quartan) intervals.

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## ***Inter Nos II: Inde Ira et Lacrimae***

*par ethnewinter*

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"You there, clean up the body." A rustle, footsteps moving away, footsteps coming in. "I am done."

"That was all?"

"Yes."

"That was brief."

"The gods will reveal no more. The carcass has ceased twitching."

"Did you learn anything?"

"I always do, my prince. How it may be useful is usually what is unclear. The knowledge we gain is not always the knowledge we seek."

A sigh that yet managed to convey great restraint misted the air of the tiny glade. The trouble with having been raised by a personal tutor who was also among the most respected (and thus, outspoken) of the druids, thought the Prince Calchis of the Mentulaeans, was that it brought a more-than-fair share of pontification for the student in its train. He gave his old teacher a sigh and a mild look of warning, impatient to know what the old man had gleaned from the auspices.

"I asked the questions you wanted," the druid, Hiempnos, answered. "But I had to do it fast and could not ask more, I fear. The gods are reserved tonight."

"What did they say?"

The old man was crouching down to the earth, washing his hands in a puddle where the water from a nearby spring had pooled on the

forest floor. He wiped his hands on his robe afterwards and moved nearer to the prince, the two of them holding their heads together and speaking very quietly.

"When I asked if we would win the war against the Himeans, the responding movements were very vague, very strange," he said. "Only the smallest hint of a nod did I see. It is only suggestive at best. I take it to mean that we have a good chance of prevailing but are not assured of it yet. And then I asked if the king would die in the war. The answer was yes. When I asked when, the head jerked thrice, each jerk a twin of the one before it. Three years. When I asked if your plans would succeed, there was no movement in the body. The gods reserve their wisdom on that topic, I take it."

Calchis took in the news, worried at his bottom lip.

"The signs aren't too favourable," he decided.

"They are not too unfavourable either," the other reassured him. "What is crucial, My Lord Prince, is that they offer hope. Perhaps it is the gods' way of telling us how conditional the outcomes of our actions are. A reminder that you should not stray from your path and resolve else you lose that which you have been working towards. Your plan can fail, but the chances are high it will succeed. You may yet be king after your father sooner than you think."

"Or I may join him where he will be in three years."

"Were it to be so, there would have been a clear negative to my question regarding your success."

The prince's voice took on a note of wonderment. "Three years! It's not so long a time, is it? Could it really be?"

"The gods have no reason to deceive us. Why should it not be so?"

"You taught me that gods deceive men often."

"When the men are undeserving and their causes base. You suffer from neither weakness."

"Three years," the prince repeated, now even more wonderingly.



"Be warned, My Prince," the still-upright old man said, blue eyes turned dull grey by the evening. "It is one thing to have the king dead. It is another to succeed him. Three years is indeed not so long a time, which means there is all the more reason to prepare your claim to the throne now and quickly."

"I've been preparing for years, Hiempnos."

The crown of white hair glowed even in dimness: Hiempnos bowed to his prince and- *Dann and Dagda be willing!* - future sovereign.

"I know that better than anyone, My Lord," he said. "But preparation does not stop until you achieve the goal for which you have been preparing."

Calchis sighed again, but this time out of wistful agreement instead of impatience.

"And there are many other, smaller goals along the way," he uttered in his low and hoarse voice. This was one of his few defects. Calchis was widely acknowledged one of the best-set-up of the royal children in many ways, a big and soldierly man in the pink of health, attractively masculine of face even if not a stunning beauty, and a proven leader of armies. His voice, however, had a peculiar roughness to it that could not be described as husky or gravelly. Rather, it had the sound of one either afflicted by a chronic cough or recently obliged to swallow a mouthful of chaff. It was most uncomfortable to auditors, who often found themselves reflexively clearing their throats upon hearing the prince talk, and was thus something that the prince privately wished he could change in his person. One thing he did to compensate was to boom his words-especially his orders-most of the time, since speaking softly exacerbated the cough-afflicted quality of it, but he did not do that now and spoke in uninspiring, chaff-filled tones to his druid.

"For now, I have to find a way to put down these northern barbarians first," he whispered. "At first it was useful to prolong my fight against them. But now it's an inconvenience, and the worst of it is it's not an inconvenience I can sweep away as quick as I thought I could. They're canny, more than you would expect them to be. The moment they think our attentions are being drawn elsewhere, they

make trouble. They don't stop trying, they'd even go out of their old lands to burn our northernmost towns if I let them alone! How can I distinguish myself in the war against the Himeans if I can't be assured that these belligerents won't blaze up again come spring or once I leave?"

They were walking away from the site where Hiempnos had taken the auspices, leaving the druid's helpers to remove the body-a captive from one of their recent skirmishes with the northern insurgents-that had been used for the ritual. It would not be hard to clean the victim's blood off the large slab of rock on which they had set him: a light rain had begun to fall, blanketing the area with a greyish mist. The two men made off with their cloaks thrown over their heads, both grimacing against the winter chill.

"Have you no ideas at all about how to keep them quiet, Prince Calchis?"

"I'm still thinking."

Hiempnos grunted as he almost tripped on an overgrown tree root that had curled up and made a loop in the forest floor. He paused to utter a quick apology to the tree-it was an old tree, obviously, and thus a *living one*.

"If only we could have an all-out battle with them," he offered after making his apologies to the forest spirit. "We could finish with the north quickly."

"They're too canny to engage us out in the open. There are still some cunning weasels among barbarians. At least its winter, so they're quieter than usual. But when spring comes? It's like a fever, rises and keeps rising."

They trudged on a little further in silence.

"What do you think about trying to lure them into a parley of some kind?" the older man asked. "Discussions for peace or even for terms-say you wish to know what they want, exactly. Say you wish to speak with their leaders under a flag of truce."

"And kill the bastards while they're at their meals? I wish I could do it," Calchis growled. "It would break down the resistance in a flash! But if they don't trust me enough to face me in open combat, they wouldn't trust me enough to sit with me at dinner."

"It is worth attempting: we do not know how men shall react to an idea until it is put to them. And you do not even have to kill them. Not immediately. You could hold the leaders captive and see what advantage you could gain from it."

The prince mulled it over for a few seconds, the hiss of the rain masking his heavy footsteps.

"It might be worth a try," he said eventually, sounding less troubled. "Even if they refuse, I've thought of how to handle them. If they want to play at avoiding me, let them do it. I'll play at avoiding them from now on and focus on the local villages instead. I'll destroy any that's said to harbour them, even if we don't find any rebels in the place when we do ride in. It's been enough leniency from me-every time we do visit any of these reported 'hot spots' sympathetic to the rebels, all we find is soft people as quiet and meek as yoked donkeys. Well, we've all had suspicions about these donkeys and what they're hiding. I don't care anymore if they say they don't have any rebels among them: from now on, we'll go into the damned towns and burn them at any warning of insurgency."

"A harsh policy, my prince. Is it wise to punish even those not proven to be rebelling?"

"The problem is that we can't prove anything, Hiempnos," the prince answered. "We'll never prove anything. And there's an itching in my thumb telling me that nearly every little town or settlement we've spared thus far has been full of lying cheats. They house the rebels and ply them with food when we're not looking. It's where the rebels get their supplies, the towns themselves. Where else would they get the grain to feed themselves in the wilderness, where they hide when we come running after they've struck another of *our* own towns and settlements out here? So I'm cutting them off from their supply. Even if I have to destroy all the natives' villages to do it."

Hiempnos nodded. "I see, yes. Eventually, even their own tribes

would cease supporting their fight out of fear."

"Or I could wipe out every settlement they have. That's not be a bad thing either, I'm sure I could get the king to see it. We could just repopulate this accursed land with more of our own people instead."

"A great improvement on the local population."

"On any population. Either way, it works out well for me." His face set, his eyes glowered. "And soon, perhaps in three years' time even, things will work out even better."

"Pray the gods it is so, for it has been a long time in coming."

*Oh yes*, Calchis thought. It *had been* a long time in coming.

Calchis was still fairly young, yet he already felt his years acutely, having spent most of them working to attain various things and securities. Even his current position had demanded a long climb up a summit whose peak yet eluded him. But that was the way it had to be: life as one of the king's legitimate sons was an arduous upward trek from birth, rendered more perilous by the presence of other climbers scrambling up the same mountain face you did while attempting to sabotage each other. Accompaniment here was not something sought out: it was a lonely climb, of necessity, as well as a perilous one.

Prince Calchis had something his rivals did not, however, and it was to his advantage. He had a helper, and most importantly, a helper who happened to be both usefully well-born and absolutely loyal. This was his full sister, the Princess Faris. Ever since her birth two years after him, she had been nothing but accomplice to any cause of his, and he himself felt a loyalty to her that was made more unusual by the fact that they were in a position where sibling rivalry was as natural as it was deadly. Thus the two had confounded everyone early on: they were ever with their heads together, ever assisting each other in all matters. Such was their bond that they were even mistaken for twins in their early years, before nature took over and forced puberty upon them. Simply, the prince and princess shared everything, including their likes and dislikes. For example, they both disliked their albino brother more intensely than all the rest

of their siblings, bastards and unacknowledged royal spawn included. Which meant, of course, that their albino brother had better look out once Calchis became king!

They were closer to this goal than ever, with Calchis very likely to be pronounced the next in the line of succession very soon and Faris in a superb position to consolidate his power in Court since she was a fixture in the king's administrative council. They had managed to get this far through a mixture of luck, ability, and base cunning. Certainly their birth had done a good deal of it for them, but the rest they had had to do themselves, with the occasional windfall of fortune that the gods would throw their way.

King Artai IV, styled Obsidian of the Mentulaeans, had like his predecessors taken several wives into his household-and continued to do so even after his first children had already reached adulthood, every now and then stirred into the desires of youth by some noble beauty in one of his lands or offered a new wife by those seeking a political alliance. His first marriage, done to secure the support of a powerful baron, had been childless. The second, third, and fourth marriages-as well as many of the marriages after them-fared better. However, the children of the latter two marriages came first. Which meant that Calchis and Faris, though birthed by the king's second wife, fell far behind their older siblings in the line of succession, with the better-positioned Calchis merely being fourth in the royal pecking order when he was born.

Three older siblings: three serious obstacles. Luck took care of one early, when the second-in-line was struck down by the quartan ague in adolescence. Cunning weeded out another when what was supposed to have been a daring cavalry raid during a battle failed catastrophically, the enemy having received an anonymous tip about what tactics would be employed by the Mentulaean side. And just recently, luck had appeared to aid them again in one of the oddest guises it had yet to take, acting through the Himeans who seemed to have swallowed the army of the prince who was supposed to have been the next in line (though their father had not proclaimed it yet), Prince Hanu.

The Himean affair was an interesting element that had been affecting the siblings' plans. It had blown both good and bad for

them. First it had seemed to be on their side when Artaxi-another brother they disliked, despising him as a sadistic loon who took pleasure in the application of pain without purpose-had been trounced and was eliminated as a competitor, and later on when the king himself had been humiliated by the Fujino woman, who had sent him home with his tail between his legs like a whipped cur. It had been a prime opportunity for a coup, and the siblings had already been planning for one that would ride the waves of dissatisfaction the king's humiliation caused in Court. It was for this reason that Calchis had prolonged his handling of the northern tribes so much, so that he would be able to hold on to his huge army until the time came to move against the king and his foremost rival.

But then the Himean breeze had blown against their sails. The king declared war and gained strong support in Court again, and Prince Hanu was sanctioned command of one of the royal armies. Not so headstrong they were blind to circumstances turning against them, the siblings had put off their plans once more and wait for a better opportunity.

Now that Hanu was to all appearances out of the way, though, they were back in business. Calchis was now the eldest legitimate heir, the first in line, the one nearest the summit. The peak was only a few steps away... but the siblings were aware that it was still ringed with so many perils. Now they had to tread ever more carefully and give the king no reason to suspect them even while remaining high in the Court's favour by distinguishing themselves, Calchis in battle and Faris in policy-making. If they played the game right, soon, *very soon* the king would make an error in this war and show himself inadequate while proving his son the better general, the better fighter, the better man in every way. And then they would strike.

Calchis only prayed that the king would not be canny enough to strike before they did.

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Shizuru gave her Thirteenth and Ninth only a few day's warning prior to the march, calling a private council with her legates in order to inform them of where she was taking the two legions and what she wanted to be done with the rest. The plan floored the officers, of

course (who crossed a massif with an army in winter?), although the shock was not visible in the legionaries on the day itself. Even the raw recruits of the Thirteenth looked trim and bright-eyed when they pulled into their columns in the dawn. But then, it was Shizuru's centurions who had trained them; if there was one thing Shizuru's beloved centurions knew about their commander, it was that she expected every unit of the legions to be constantly ready for a march, even down to the last octet's mule.

The commander thus managed to spend less time ascertaining the soldiers' readiness than making clear to her officers her strategies and intentions. The nearest possible crossing for her on the river boundary was the one Kenji Nakamura had taken to the southwest: a spot just a little north of the great massif. The bridge there had already been demolished but the crossing was still watched from both banks by armies from either side of the war. This crossing, she told her officers, was not what she would be using.

"I do not want to engage the army they have positioned there: it is too large, it would take too much time and I lose the element of surprise once the strongholds and towns further west of that spot get word of the fighting," she said. "River engagements are always time-consuming too. They would likely manage to move enough troops from the central Mentulaean lands to stiffen the southwest by the time we finish, and I have no intention of giving them allowance for that. So instead, I shall be bearing further down the river in my march and for the *Via Fujino*, then over the bridge that connects the northeast limits of Caledonia to the southwest limits of our Argus Province. That is where I cross."

"The bridge near the estuary," said Shohei, frowning as he-like most other people in the room-tried to figure out where in the world she was headed. Certainly he could see how going over that other bridge to cross the Atinu River would spare her an engagement, but that was an advantage rendered futile by the fact that she would end up on the wrong side of the country and the massif.

The bridge she was referring to had roads that led south, as she had noted, to Outer Fuuka and the lands of one of Hime's neighbouring allies, Caledonia. These roads, including the major highway of the *Via Fujino*, ran even further down to Fuuka Proper and eventually to

Hime. There were no roads to the north once one crossed the bridge she wanted to use because they were blocked on that side by the geographic boundary distinguishing Caledonia and parts of Outer Fuuka from the southern Mentulaean lands: the Caledonian Alps, a prodigious series of ranges whose width at the thickest point more than doubled Argus Province's total breadth and whose highest peaks scraped the sky. To anyone's mind, the ranges were a far more insurmountable blockade than that the Mentulaean camp at the other crossing presented.

Yet the general leapt that blockade as though it were a mere pebble at her feet.

"I am crossing the massif," she said bluntly, causing jaws around the table to go limp; only her cousin remained unmoved, having been told of the plan beforehand. "There is a part of the most eastern ranges-the ones nearest the estuary and thus nearest us-where the height of the mountains is not as forbidding as in the other parts of the Alps. Under twenty-five hundred metres at the peak."

"Measly, really," her cousin drawled.

The general's lips quirked even as she continued speaking.

"As I said, I shall cross the more southern bridge, start from the wrong side of the country, then take a turn northwards to enter the massif. From there I shall cross the watershed and stay within that height as long as I can. According to the scouting parties, it shall be possible to march at that height for about five hundred kilometres to the west-provided no heavy wagons come, of course. Perfect for my intentions. I am hoping that the height as well as the season means that no Mentulaeans shall see us during that time, so that we shall be able to pass the Mentulaean army watching the other crossing. I plan to come out of the massif about three days' march away from that enemy camp-or seven days' march away from it, if we use the Mentulaean marching pace-which puts me within a few days' march of several of their towns in the southwest and closer to Trogum, Kenji's position."

"That would be a good outcome, Fujino-san," someone finally said after some time. It was Miyuki Rokujou who spoke. Like the rest, she



was still struggling to come to terms with this unexpected plan, and spoke more to confirm she had heard aright than anything else. "But crossing a mountain *in winter*?"

"Ask the Otomeians: at twenty-five hundred metres, it is always winter," Shizuru said with dismissal. She wanted to get on to her commands quickly. "Why else did you think I was buying up all the socks and scarves from the Argus tailors, to become a sock merchant? Now as I mentioned, the Ninth and Thirteenth are coming with me. As are you, Keigo-han. Fancy a bit of mountain air?"

Keigo Kurauchi blinked, startled by the honour of being selected-especially as he was brother to someone firmly in the political camp that criticised her most strongly. To be chosen for this sort of venture was an honour and he knew it.

"I hear it does wonders for the health, Fujino-san," he said with a smile, prompting unsteady laughter from the others.

"I shall send Kenji-han a letter telling him to come down from the mountain fortress he has taken over to increase the size of army I have with me," Shizuru went on to say. "I am taking three alae of the cavalry here for my foray too, but not with me through the mountains, of course. The passes I am going take are better suited to mules and grazing shall be sparse and strappy."

She spared a nod for the two Otomeian representatives in the room: the polemarch was present, as was the baron who would be leading the three alae she had mentioned. Two military tribunes had already been selected to give Himean leadership to the auxiliary horse too, of course, and they received a quick glance from her as she continued.

"The cavalry I shall be using will go with the Fourteenth, which shall march with Avaro-han." A new legate, who received this appointment with a pleased look on his face. "This group shall head for the current position of the Fourth Legion."

The Fourth legion was the one locked in a staring battle with the Mentulaean army at the other crossing. She pointed to its representation on the map on the table.

"Before you and the Fourteenth Legion come within sight of the river, Avaro-han, send a courier ahead of you to the Fourth and to Ayase-han and Okada-han, who are heading that legion. Tell them that to break up camp and make as ostentatious a display of it as possible, then start marching upriver to join the Third Legion at the major crossing in the north. That is going to be our main base on the borders, as Shizuma shall explain later."

The man nodded, intelligence glistening in his small eyes as he thought over what she had just said. His newness to her staff showed, however, when he hesitated to speak even after she paused for him. It took one of the old Fujino legates, Taro, to prod him into speech.

"Oh, for god's sake, Maiza, she won't bite if you ask a question," he teased, compelling the council to share some friendly laughter with the overly-careful new legate.

Maiza apologised.

"And we're to take the Fourth's place, Fujino-san?" he guessed.

"Yes, but not immediately. Stay out of sight for as long as you can and wait for the Mentulaeans on the other side of the crossing to break up their own camp and head west."

"Why would they do that?"

"Because I am going to be making such a ruckus after I come out of the massif that they shall be obliged to deal with me before anything else." Shizuru tapped one of the small wooden figures placed on the map in front of her. "This is their position. Besides them, the nearest Mentulaean army of any note is more than a week's hard march away at our pace, far closer to their capital than to any of their Southwest Frontier's towns."

Her long, large hand covered part of the map.

"The southwest is their most sparsely militarised area because they believe it the safest. There are the mountains hedging it, after all, and the river getting closer to the sea is stronger, harder to cross

than at other areas, at least without a bridge. Of towns there are many but cities are fewer and farther away from each other than in the central territory. According to our intelligence, the cities are smaller as well and there are no major barons or princes who have major claims in the area. They would be of even less concern to the empire in a war, then, simply because there shall be hardly anyone with interests in the area strong enough to compel him to bring the centre's attention to it."

She took up a new wooden figure, this one with the wood stained a shiny red, and placed it the left of the figure representing the Mentulaeen army she had been talking about earlier.

"Once I emerge from the mountains here, I shall be just a short distance away from the enemy army at the crossing, as I mentioned before," she told them. "I am not going to increase that distance too much. Even if I work my way west for a week, they shall still be the nearest army. Which means they shall get wind of my presence soon enough, probably scratch their heads at how I got there, and then abandon their post temporarily to deal with me. After all, by this time, the thing locking them to the border should have already vanished: the Fourth should have long gone and no legion appeared to take its place."

Her legate was grinning wide enough to split his cheeks.

"While I with the Fourteenth and the cavalry should actually be in hiding, waiting for the right time to occupy the old position of the Fourth," he finished, delighted by the subterfuge. "So you want us to throw up the bridge as soon as the Mentulae vanish and send the cavalry over?"

"Yes. The Fourteenth has some of my best engineers, Avaro-han. They should be able to throw up a bridge faster than even the Mentulaeans could credit."

"I think we generally do things faster than the slowpokes can credit, Fujino-san," Shohei interjected.

"True, and I plan to push the bounds of their credulity in the coming months."

She looked to the people leading her cavalry, then to Maiza.

"It is vital that you wait for them to move out before you show yourselves, though," she specified. "Otherwise, you sacrifice a crucial advantage. So watch them with care and wait for the right moment to present itself. Once the Fourteenth has established base, it has more or less done its job. The cavalry shall have the harder task afterwards, for it must cross the river, then shadow the Mentulaean army and find a way to overtake it unseen. It should meet me here."

She moved the figure on the map again.

"I expect to be in the massif for fourteen days," she informed the cavalry leaders. "Fifteen if something goes awry. Meet me at this location two months at the latest after leaving Argus. Earlier, if possible: you should be able to find me around the area even if you arrive earlier."

Maiza had another question. "When should we march?"

"Two days after today. The same day I do." Her eyes went now to her cousin. "The Seventh, Eighth, Tenth and Twelfth may march a little later than that, to give enough time for their baggage trains to be arranged. Cousin?"

The general sat back and the senior legate leaned forward.

"The rest of the legates and auxiliary are coming with me," said Shizuru's cousin, resting both elbows on the table and lacing together the fingers of her hands. "Our goal is to establish the main base at the bridge near Argentum, held by the Third and the bulk of the auxiliary. We have a lot to do in the next few days. Every detail in the army is every legate's concern, naturally, but here is a rough division of duties: Miyuki and Zanki-san will handle the supplies and general logistics, Shohei-san and I will handle matters with the soldiers, and Taro-san and Ushida-san will help the Argus authorities in organising a militia and setting up better defences in case the enemy penetrate the borders again. Once all of this has been settled to satisfaction, we shall leave Argus."

Like her cousin before her, she extended her hand to the map to move some figures around and illustrate what she was saying.

"The Eleventh, currently in Sosia, is going to be moving up to join us there at the end of the winter," she began. "More details and orders shall be given once we get to the Third Legion's base, but for now that is all you need to know. Focus on getting your respective legions ready and duties discharged as quickly as possible. You heard what my cousin said: speed is an advantage we have on the enemy in this war. If you catch anyone wasting that advantage by dragging his heels, give him a prick to speed him along."

She sat back and bored her light hazel-coloured eyes into each legate's, one by one.

"There is another thing you do need to know now," she said. "While we typically get word out to the legionaries of where we are headed by means of general musters, I want the final general muster until we get to our destination at the border camp to be held here. Should any alterations in our route or movements be made necessary along the way, word of it shall be disseminated quietly through the ranks instead of being shouted out from century to century. Shizuru and I have been talking about it and while the Mentulae do not appear to have any intelligencers left to speak of on our side of the river, we can hardly be certain there are none who are unsympathetic to the Mentulaean cause or that there are truly no spies at all in our lands. Screaming where we plan to go and what we plan to do just makes it that much easier for them to know what we intend."

"Good," said Ushida, approving wholeheartedly of so much military sense. "So it's going to be a quiet march to the border."

"Not at all," the general threw in, drawing their eyes to her once more. "I actually do want some screaming to take place. Shizuma?"

Her cousin took over again.

"We do want the soldiers to do a bit of theatre when opportunity presents itself-say in a skirmish or sighting of Mentulae across the river," the silver-haired woman said. "But it has to be clear to the legionaries, of course, that it's only for the purpose of theatre. To be

exact, we want it given out regularly within hearing of the Mentulaeans that official orders forbid that the Himean legions stray from the river boundaries."

Never had she seen such a pack of wolves as the simultaneous smiles revealed around the table, Shizuma reflected. Then she thought better of her notion, remembering her experiences in Senate. Or were the smiles in that particular body better likened to those of jackals?

"So we're going to be pretending that our policy is going to be non-invasive and defensive?" Shohei asked for clarification.

"Yes."

"But what of Kenji Nakamura-san's position in Trogum?" Ushida enquired. "He's already penetrated that far into their southwest, after all, and they can't consider that anything close to non-invasive."

"A fluke, minor because it is so isolated, so small, and also happens to be positioned in the least-threatened of their territories," Shizuma replied. "And several of them already know how Himeans can break off from the central command just out of greed or desire to distinguish themselves with an independent incursion into foreign lands. They do it themselves. They would hence be more inclined to think Kenji-san's little army a little splinter that has broken off the Himean wall on the boundaries. We've not even sent any reinforcements to Kenji-san all this time, to add to it."

The others nodded, taking it in. They knew, of course, what this meant: they would probably be penetrating deeper into Mentulaeen territory shortly after arriving at the base camp. Why else give out such a deception, after all? Certainly it might prove useful to their commander's planned foray in the southwest too, but given where they were headed and the routes where they were likely to spread the false intelligence, it was more likely a shroud put in place for their own concealment.

"So make sure it is clear to the men which orders are true and which are intended for enemy deception," Shizuma followed. "The centurions are going to be instrumental to this, of course, but so

shall the octet leaders: be certain to tell the officers to make good use of them. Anything to add, cousin?"

The commander shook her head and looked satisfied, smiling.

"Then this meeting is adjourned," said the senior legate. "You have your orders. Let's all get to work."

The Ninth and Thirteenth left on schedule after two days of packing, gear inspections, and organisation. They went on an almost perfectly western route as they exited Argus, trailed by a baggage train that served them for as long as they stayed on the Himean side of the river. Their general led them, again riding her horse only to cover the gamut of the column and exchange a few friendly words with each century. Every now and then she made jokes to the men too, laughing with them about how the foes' faces would look after they marched out of the supposedly impenetrable massif.

"Probably look like their mothers-in-law come for a surprise visit," one of her centurions quipped, causing everyone in the vicinity to double over laughing.

"Trouble at home, Hakase-han?" said the general, whipping away a tear of mirth.

"Pray it's the type of trouble you'll never face, General," he said with a grin. "If only you could make a legion full of mothers-in-law, though! Whip every enemy into shape in seconds, by Dis!"

"But then you'd get all their sons- and daughters-in-law deserting!" someone laughed at him.

There were many of these sorts of talks between Shizuru and the legionaries throughout the march. Even those who were new to it, like the legate Keigo Kurauchi and the greenhorns of the Thirteenth, were swiftly sucked into the Fujino army's appealing rhythm, soon coming to look forward to the times when the general would pass by their century for a chat again. She was so friendly and casual while remaining commanding that her presence was something the men found a genuine comfort. It gave them a bit of warmth against the cold, something to stiffen their backs and harden already-leathery

feet for the long and chilly climb they faced.

Shizuru knew this, which was why she never let her good cheer fail, it being that she was the arbiter of everyone else's attitude. Due to their dependence on her, few of them probably realised that she was the only one in the army to whom comfort was not readily offered, for she had no one like herself to keep her spirits up as she plodded. This did not trouble her at all, however. For one thing, she was the commander and commanders had to fuel themselves almost all the time, stiffening their backs with self-belief and hardening their feet with their own steel. In her case, she also had the added benefit of a tingling in her bones that told her that her luck had returned in all its fullness and had turned again to her its most munificent face.

Even more concrete than the tingling was the exceedingly welcome yet totally unexpected assurance of her luck's return that she had received in Argus before departing. Time and time again on the march, as she returned to it in her memories, Shizuru would accord that assurance the same reverence one granted a divine visitation. For how else could one explain the boldness her shy, primly Otomeian lover had suddenly shown on that evening following her announcement of the march to the officers?

Had Natsuki herself been asked (and inclined) to explain, she would have spoken of lip-gnawing deliberations more mortal than divine, however. Human concerns were what birthed the assurance Shizuru regarded with such reverence, more than anything. It was undeniable that the girl's own needs were a motivation too, naturally, but as had become typical for some time now, it was Shizuru's needs that bore greater weight in the measurements Natsuki used for her decision.

The younger woman had noticed the restraint the Himean had been applying in her touch ever since their reunion, noting the familiar signs of the patrician's arousal and noting too the look of near-antipathy that flashed through the red eyes shortly after, cutting short any possibilities of indulgence. At first she had been hurt by these indications. Her thinking was that the jerky retractions were signs that her maimed form repulsed her ever-perfect lover, that the pathetic little stub of bone and flesh below one of her knees was enough to prevent anyone's desire from truly rising. But as time



went by and delivered more information her way-and as she began to make her peace too with the loss of her leg and started to discard what she realised were useless insecurities over an unchangeable thing-the consummate observer came to a conclusion very different from the first and far closer to the reality.

It was strange, she came to think, how so fearless a creature as her lover tended to harbour so many fears for her sake. Her heart melted at the woman's concern, springing as it did from a powerful affection that had been proven to her beyond all doubt recently, but she worried nonetheless at seeing the complex trap Shizuru had walked herself into due to these same feelings. It took a great deal of time and thinking for her to fully appreciate it, but the epiphany itself only struck her between the eyes one morning while watching the older woman fuss and pick about their breakfast: as always, Shizuru had separated the best parts of the stuffed fish, slicing out the whole of the fatty belly and forcing it on the girl's plate. Watching Shizuru do it in that finicky and almost ritualistically obsessive way, the Otomeian was reminded suddenly of the priests back home and the way they offered sacrifices to the deities, taking extra care to cut out only the choicest parts of the calf or the sheep to lay respectfully on the altar.

Well, Shizuru had always pretended to worship her as a tease, she thought, but now she had to wonder if the Himean was aware of how much she had fallen prey to her own jest. For what Natsuki suspected was that Shizuru now viewed her as a species of sacrosanct object, to be revered and touched in only the most delicate of ways lest she be defiled or broken. It did not matter that she had already been broken, in a sense: indeed, it might have fuelled the Himean's reverence all the more, since Natsuki guessed that it only served to prove the possibility of graver defilement. Shizuru's own confession recently that she might not even allow Natsuki to enter battle any longer even if the Otomeian were still whole strengthened the hypothesis, which was that Shizuru the Protector now ruled so much of the Himean's affection for her that it now tied down Shizuru the Lover.

Natsuki knew something had to be done. It was not just for their relationship that she had to come up with a solution, but for Shizuru

herself. The Himean was so attuned to the needs of the flesh: it was one of the things Natsuki loved most about her. But the sensuality of the Himean's nature also meant that this self-enforced abstinence took a heavy toll. Natsuki was aware that her lover lacked sleep, knew she was forcing herself to sit at that horrid bedside desk covered with work only so she could tire herself enough to get into their bed without being jerked into arousal by a touch. She fixated on Natsuki's scars and stub whenever they bathed, asking again and again about their healing as if to convince herself that the girl was still recovering-and thus, not to be interrupted in that process by less-than-gentle handling. Ah, her poor Shizuru! She must have thought the purity of her attentions was convincing. But Natsuki still felt the tremor in the woman's hands each evening when she finally left that damnable desk and curled up behind her.

It was up to her to do something and she knew it. Shizuru the Protector was hardly about the buckle in on itself, so Natsuki was the one who had to batter on its armour. At first she agonised about the means-how did one entice another, for heaven's sake?-and spent a fruitless day trying to imagine all sorts of seductive techniques that had her flushing so much that her lover summoned one of the doctors, fearful of a fever approaching. After suffering an uncomfortable check-up by the mystified physician, she finally accepted the simple fact that she had no head for seduction and had no experience whatsoever in premeditating it. The straightforward approach was the only way and the one most likely to work, since Shizuru found her-strangely enough, in her opinion-most provocative when she was not trying at all to be.

This still took a great deal of courage from her, it must be said. For it was not just that she was going against the grain of her character and cultural upbringing. It was also that she had to face the very real, very terrifying prospect of her theory being erroneous. Nonetheless, she took heart in the idea that it would help both of them-Shizuru especially-if she turned out to be right. She chanted over and over in her heart while preparing for the moment that even if she had to do something like this, at the very least she was doing it for the right reasons and the right woman, undoubtedly.

So it was that Shizuru had been arrested in the middle of reading a

communiqué one night by a decidedly shaky but insistent voice asking her to turn around. The Himean was on the bed and facing the desk she kept pushed against it, as was usually the case in the evenings, when she usually worked and chatted with Natsuki until the latter fell into slumber. As usual, she planned to work a little more until she was exhausted enough to trust herself in bed with the girl, as the Otomeian had guessed, and only then would she sleep.

But that night, it was not to be.

She turned at the request and ended up freezing at the sight of the girl naked, sitting next to a pool of cloth on the bed that she took to be the nightdress the Otomeian had been wearing. She was certainly no fool, so she interpreted the blush and nakedness as the invitation the girl intended. But as she was shocked beyond measure too, all she was able to actually do was look, swallow, and say like a dunce, "Are you not cold, Natsuki?"

Natsuki frowned, obviously discomfited by the reception.

"Are you?" she responded.

Again Shizuru acted a dunce, privately wondering why her mouth felt sandy.

"No, not really. This mansion has a fine hypocaust, I think. I was saying it to Midori-han the other day." She swallowed, cast about wildly for more. "Oh, but I am not the one naked, of course. I do not wish you to catch your death of the cold, Natsuki."

Another frown, this one cast at the bed on which they were sitting.

"In... here?" Natsuki asked.

"It is winter, after all."

The other bit her lip. "I am cold now."

"You may want to put your clothes on, then."

"That is what you want?"

A despairing look. "You should not ask me what I want right now, *mea vita*."

"Shizuru." The young woman was close to tears, frustrated beyond belief. "Please! I also *want*."

All hope was lost the moment Natsuki uttered this. Shizuru found herself atop the girl and the girl atop the sheets faster than her mind would allow her to count the seconds, sparing no thought for the scroll that fell to the floor and the jar of blotting sand Hermias would have to clean in the morning because she had kicked the desk in her haste. All thoughts were for the naked girl in her arms, whom she discovered to be a fresh empire to conquer even if not a strange one. Shizuru had plundered and plumbed the very deepest parts of this creature before, but now discovered new treasures mixed with the old when the young woman reciprocated her touches with a fresh, savage fervour that she found as rewarding as it was astounding.

It was perhaps the combination of that fervour and the pressure of her desires that led to her defeat. Before, she had been able to hold her own fulfilment at bay long enough to give Natsuki hers several times over, even if it had often cost her a shrieking pain in the temples afterwards. But now it was Natsuki who did the destroying, slipping from her arms like a snake and tunnelling between her legs so hard that the first touch had her wrenching the girl's head away.

"If you do that, Natsuki," she gasped, "I will spend on you in an instant!"

"Please spend on me," was Natsuki's answer.

And in mere seconds, Shizuru did.

But if she thought that was the end of it, she discovered her error quickly: Natsuki fed from her so long and hard that by the time the girl finally relented, her mind had left her more than once-the last time so viciously that she had to thrust her own hand downwards to grab herself after the other's mouth left, in an attempt to calm the hip-yanking spasms that forced her to spit every breath like a curse. She was aware that Natsuki watched her unrestrained display with

almost perverse absorption, but was powerless to stop the paroxysms still whipping her belly despite the embarrassment. She had never lost control of her own body in such a way before and certainly never in front of a spectator. But this spectator evidently enjoyed her performance, eventually coming to lavish kisses on her stomach and causing the taut muscles there to rise with long, slippery strokes of a hand on the wet skin.

"My god," she said through her teeth after a while. Another echoing clench caused her to swear and jerk again, teeth gnashing at the spasm. "You are insane!"

Natsuki looked at her from her belly.

"You are tired," she said.

Shizuru narrowed her eyes at the pride in the other's eyes, knowing Natsuki was right.

"Yes," she admitted. "Yes, you tired me. *Brat*."

A pleased laugh from the Otomeian, who clearly liked hearing this old moniker. Shizuru took a few more breaths to let her sweat-soaked body regain itself.

"But I am not all spent," she said, pulling the girl up. "Even if you did wreck me terribly."

"Ahh."

"Wonderful, terrible girl. Of course this is not something you prepared for by practising it, I warrant?"

Natsuki smiled slowly, flattered and feminine and suddenly all too assured of her own power. Shizuru jetted air through her nose, subject to an aching desire to break the girl's lips with her teeth.

"No practice," Natsuki told her.

"Tell me no one touched you while I was away." They rolled over. "Tell me you touched no one."

"No one touched me." Arms went around Shizuru's waist. "I touched no one."

The Otomeian moved a little but to great effect.

"You touch me," said the young woman, taking Shizuru's ear between her teeth. "Now."

This also-desperate-for-her Natsuki was a revelation. Shizuru bit and was bitten, subjugated and was crucified in return, and was lashed back into a frenzy after each torturous climax. At one point she grew so thrilled yet maddened by the Otomeian's reciprocations that she resorted to twisting one of the bed linens into a cord and bound the girl's arms behind her back. Undaunted, Natsuki retaliated by hooking both legs around one of the Himean's as though sitting cross-legged, shifting up and more tightly against the older woman until even her lower back was lifted from the bed. Their last position was thus a difficult tangle with Shizuru on her knees, both her hands cupping Natsuki's rear and pushing it harder against herself while only the girl's upper body and bound arms remained in touch with the sheets: every other part of Natsuki was in the air and locked around or against the Himean, whose own torso pressed on the girl's and emphasised the strange diagonal they drew from the bed and to their pelvises when their frantic coupling concluded.

"This colour becomes you," she said later, wrapping the now-untied purple cloth around the waist of the girl straddling her as she was fed wine from a cup. The wine's tannic, velvety depth mixed with the sweetish female tastes she already had on her teeth and tongue agreeably and she shared it with Natsuki.

"It becomes you too," was the response.

"I think it favours you even more," she said. "You look sumptuous in purple. You absolutely ooze royalty, Natsuki: I adore that about you. Why not be my queen? I have already kissed your very toes, after all."

Natsuki laughed at the notion.

"Barbarous," the girl uttered. "To demand such of a subject."

"Call me barbarian, then. But would you never entertain the idea?"

The other paused, uncertain now as to whether or not this was still a jest.

"What idea?" she enquired.

Shizuru took the empty cup from her and let it roll on the bed, beside them.

"Being my queen, so to speak. More properly, my wife."

The younger woman paused in the act of reaching to stop the rolling goblet.

"Shizuru?" she said, clearly requesting assurance that her ears were still functioning properly.

Shizuru gave it: "I am asking if you would consider marriage. To me."

*Well now*, thought the older woman upon seeing the girl's flabbergasted expression, *it has been a while since I got her to play the startled statue like this.*

"Surprised, hm?" she teased.

Natsuki's face asked why she should not be.

"And here I was hoping you wanted a firm future for us," she said, still teasing.

Up went the fine eyebrows. "Shizuru. I do. But... *marriage*?"

"Well, marriage would help with that, would it not?" Shizuru abandoned the teasing tone. "I do not say that marriage would make my love for you any firmer than it already is: your meaning to me is more than any contract of this type could ever express. Nor is it a matter of grave dissatisfaction with you and what we have. Still, I should like to be able to give you more than I do now."

Natsuki gave her the smile of one truly astonished.

"You gave me life, Shizuru," she said, causing the other to wonder if she was referring to her nursing during her illness or to something more abstract. "I cannot ask for more."

"And you should not have to ask for it," Shizuru told her. "Without taking away anything from the power of my affections for you, there is great sensibility to this course of action as well."

"Would you say the word... it is 'expedient'?" Natsuki interrupted unexpectedly in Greek, causing a suspension in the delivery of what should have been a fluid and well-worked speech. Shizuru looked at the girl, wondering at the remark and worriedly picking at her own justifications for the proposal to see what in them could be viewed as ones of expediency and just that.

"I suppose it would serve, but as I just signified, to call it solely that would be to rob it of sentiment," she replied, leaning into the pillows against her back. "And there is a great deal of sentiment here. You should know that by now."

Natsuki was silent and she took that as her cue to proceed.

"It *would* be expedient, however, in the sense that it would certainly provide for several things that could be cause for worry in the future. You would have to take on the Himean citizenship first, but I already have that ready when you wish to assume it, so it is not a difficulty. As for your status as an Otomeian, I doubt it would be entirely nullified in such an event, and I know your hereditary aristocratic titles-though probably not your assigned ones, I confess-would persist even were you to become a Himean citizen. Marriage to me would then ensure that you receive the full extent of protection that I can offer: as my lover, I can shield you by repute and word; as my wife, I would be able to shield you with the added strength of law as well. It would give you the benefit of Himean citizen's privileges and rights, and would also permit you legal access to my assets." She held up a hand. "Of course, your assets would remain yours: there need be no fears of that, *mea vita*, and I shall draw up legal documents providing it, as certainty."

Natsuki was watching her with an expression caught on the fringes of both amusement and awe, clearly fascinated by how much



thought Shizuru had given to the idea. She betrayed nothing to indicate she would agree to it, but the older woman saw that the girl was at least not evincing displeasure either.

She probed her again.

"Does it sound unpleasant in any way, Natsuki?" she asked. "Surely you can see how it would be of benefit to you."

The girl's eyebrows drew together. "Umm. Buh-but how is it of benefit to you, Shizuru?"

"Surely you can see that as well!" the Himean said, eyes wide. "I wish dearly for you to be my wife, for one thing. I wish dearly to protect you as well, as I already mentioned. And, if I am to be honest, I wish you to be mine."

"I am."

She lifted the young woman's hand to her lips. "I am grateful. But I meant legally too."

"Himeans," the other murmured, tracing Shizuru's mouth. "Always legal."

"Would it grate on you so to be thus considered? I would be yours too."

"And now? You are not?" the girl said slyly.

"Again I meant legally too," Shizuru winked.

Natsuki chuckled as a hand turned her face away, lips finding the spot where the jaw met the throat.

"Again..." she sighed. "Always legal."

The older woman stayed her answer long enough to make another mark on the other's skin.

"You know I do not always live completely within the law, *meum mel* ." She sent a pleading smile the girl's way. "I realise it must seem

abrupt, but please believe me that it is not. I had thoughts of it even before, when I had to return to Hime. It was the reason I arranged matters with your citizenship as well. I am not saying something in a passing moment of rashness: this is something I have thought on and decided with care."

"I... um... I am honoured by this, Shizuru," Natsuki answered after a moment of pondering it. "You honour me. I know not how to say thanks."

Shizuru smiled, a little tickled by the apparent framing of her proposal as a courtly gift. The girl took her amusement to mean that the older woman was taking her words as mere expressions of rote, however, and took one of the Himean's hands to set on her chest.

"My words are thin," she continued. "But my heart is full, it leaps, you feel it."

Shizuru's smile faded as she felt the thudding under her palm and became engrossed in the beat of this tiny but powerful drum.

"I do," she replied.

"It is because you - *you have me*," the other continued in a throaty, emotional voice. "Legal or not, it is so. As long as you wish."

Shizuru's eyes sought hers. "Forever."

"If you wish." A deep breath. "Buh-buh-but if it happens that-if one day, you wish it no more -"

"That negates the idea of forever."

"Even so, it will be and I will go," Natsuki persisted. "But as long as you wish, I will stay. I make oath for it even without marriage."

"I shall never wish you from my side, but I thank you for that," Shizuru said gently, seeing where Natsuki was headed. "That said, I still want to marry you, Natsuki."

She smiled to hide the slight feeling of disappointment, seeing that it would take more argumentation to convince the girl of this course.

Well, of course it would: what had she expected? That the girl would gasp with delight and immediately say yes? Perhaps there was a foolishly romantic part of her that had hoped for it, she admitted, but she knew that her girl was a rational one and that what she was proposing, for all her nonchalance, was no small matter. She would have to give her more reasons. And time, perhaps. She would have to give her time.

It must have been the fact that she had to leave her side again soon: she suddenly felt that she had very little time to spare.

"I apologise," she spoke. "I know I rather cast this at you without warning, Natsuki. Still, I would actually like to discuss it with you right now. Sensibly, of course. Is there anything in it that would be off-putting to-no, rather, would being married to me cause you some trouble? Or is it that you do not want to take the Himean citizenship?"

Natsuki brought her head from side to side slowly.

"May I know what it is then that gives you pause? I know this is a grave decision, of course, and thus merits pause by virtue of that alone. But I would still like to know if there are other objections or obstacles to it that add to the hesitation."

Her calm seemed to encourage Natsuki, who thought about it.

"I wonder only, Shizuru, if marriage would answer," she eventually confessed in a soft voice, bringing her arms over Shizuru's shoulders as if aware that the older woman needed the touch badly at the moment. "I said to you earlier. You know you have me. Even-" her eyes darted about swiftly "-even my property is yours, if you have need of me to use it."

She held back the Himean's protest with two fingers on the lips.

"All I have is yours already, is what I wish to say," she continued. "So why marry *me* ?"

"I already explained why, Natsuki. "

"You spoke of my gains," Natsuki returned, pleading with her eyes

for the Himean to listen for a moment. "But you gain nothing if you marry me. I know you will say it is so that - that your mind is calmer as to my protection. But what protection you give now is already powerful. You are confident in it, so the added calm to you would be not so significant, I think. The good of this marriage, it all falls upon me. I do not see it treating you the same." Her mouth turned down at the corners. "I should ask if it is wise, Shizuru, to enter a marriage so slanted."

"I gain more than you think, *meum mel*," Shizuru said. "I gain you for a wife."

"But I am yours now. It is only the name that is different."

"There is more to it than nomenclature."

"More?"

"I have been trying to say it all this time, Natsuki."

"But what you said, it was *more for me*."

"It is for me too."

"Then what is 'more'?"

Shizuru frowned and exhaled a deep sigh.

"It would be in the fact that people would treat you as my wife," she admitted heavily, "instead of slandering you as my lover."

They stared at each other for a few moments, silent. Shizuru's eyes conveyed apologies to the girl, who answered them with an understanding expression.

"So it is to make me, hmm, respectable, no?" she said, prompting Shizuru's protestations instantly. "No, Shizuru, I understand. No, shh-I take it not as offence. All people are so about their race. It is that I am not of yours; I understand, it is simple."

Shizuru was staring off into some corner of the room, lips curling in indignation that the girl would not feel herself.

"I can only ask your pardon for my people's small-minded chauvinism," she said. "Were they only to know - were they to have sufficient honesty and fairness to compare any specimen of our nation to you - no one could deny that you would make them all look miserable by mere juxtaposition!"

The Otomeian hushed her again with soothing hands and lips.

"It is not that I do not think you respectable, please understand," Shizuru pleaded with a touch of anxiety. "But I do not like the idea of them making free with their censure when it comes to you. You already know I have many enemies. They launch animadversions at me without halt and they would not spare my lover."

"But Shizuru," Natsuki said. "Why would they spare a wife if the wife is such as me?"

A wince complicated by a grudging smile: "Oh, you *are* a smart girl."

The Otomeian smirked, patting her lover's cheek.

"I admit I cannot be certain they shall," Shizuru allowed carefully. "Nearly all of my people will see only one thing: that you were not born of a Himean, wife of a Himean or not. But if you were to be my wife, Natsuki, it would at the very least spare you a little of it. And it would make it easier in many ways for me to exact reprisal for any insults they cast at you."

"I do not need such reprisal-"

"But I do," Shizuru interrupted. "I see no future without you, *mea vita*, which means I intend to live out the rest of my time on this plane with you by my side. But I do not wish to do it in any way that belittles you in the least to others' eyes. It is a mere matter of convention, I know that. Yet silly as it is, it shall make a difference in the view of many including, I think, your own people. A mistress is someone people consider to be sufficient material for the bed yet undeserving of wedlock. A wife has all the mistress has and more: there is the nod of respectability, among other things, and more legal protection for many situations."

The black hair fell softly on one shoulder as Natsuki slanted her head.

"Again this is for me, Shizuru," she said contemplatively. "Not for you."

"What is for you *is* for me as well."

"There is a difference still."

"No, not any longer, and that is what I have been trying to explain all this time." Shizuru leaned back into the pillows again and launched into a speech of absolute honesty. "It is time for you to realise that my jealousy goes beyond that of simple possession. It is no longer a matter of ownership, strictly speaking: it is a matter now of identification. One might even call it selfish. Some would call it insane. To me, it simply *is*. To me you are already an extension of what I am and what I have that others can never take away, of things that are inseparable from Shizuru Fujino and that I must therefore protect for self-preservation. My self. My mind. My heart."

Natsuki's expression was open to her, and she saw that the girl was appraising her words with wonder. More significantly, she was appraising the words with no fear, which made Shizuru conscious of a great relief settling somewhere in herself.

"Does this not frighten you at all?" she asked, brushing a knuckle under the girl's chin. "This is not a normal love. I know that. But it is the love I have for you and I feel in my bones that I shall never know another. It is the only love I can give and like it or not, it has already been decided that it shall be given. As I am already being honest, I must confess this too: a good part of this is that I want to bind you as firmly, as irrevocably as I can in every way possible. A marriage to me would only be part of that."

*What a horrible lover I am*, she thought while observing the girl's flushed expression, trying to imagine how she herself would react were a lover to say such things to her. Would she break away, concerned for her freedom? Would she deem her lover insane and be frightened? She could not be certain and she could not imagine such things coming from Natsuki herself. Despite that, she did

understand how terrible were her demands and how singularly unattractive was the proposal she had just put forward; what lover painted the picture she had just painted, which was that of marriage as an assimilation, an absorption of all that was oneself into the dominion and identity of another?

"It sounds frightful, does it not?" she quipped, still criticising herself in her mind.

Natsuki looked up at her in surprise.

"No," said the girl. "I think it an honour, I said."

"Even after hearing that?"

"I find nothing - hmm - unattractive in it." A cock of the head. "Or in you."

"You are just saying that to please me," Shizuru said in good humour.

"I am glad it pleases you, Shizuru," the other replied. "Truth, it is rarely pleasant."

"My wise little love. But?"

"But I... I have doubts still about the idea of this. Not of you. Of marriage."

"All right. Go on."

"One thing is that I-no, we are still young."

"Which is wonderful, as it means that we can get started on married life earlier."

Natsuki burst into more of the soft, low laughter Shizuru found so appealing, green eyes wet and narrowing with mirth.

"Your friends will say you have already started," the Otomeian snorted once her mirth permitted her to speak again. "They called you-what was that word? A strange word. Ah, it was 'uxorious'. I

remember."

"It would be another argument in my favour. You could say I already have enough practice behind me to prove my worthiness as a spouse."

Natsuki shook her head in amusement.

"It does not prove mine," she rebutted.

"Actually, they called you uxorious too, Natsuki."

"Me?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Whenever they called me that."

"I did not know," Natsuki said with wide eyes, obviously tickled.

"Now you do. Any more objections?"

"Only some. But most important is that I am still an Otomeian, also," the other replied. "Not Himean. And I think of *your* career, Shizuru."

"Ye gods, how noble you are! I thank you for the thought, *mea vita*, but that concern no longer matters. There shall never be a point in my career when you are not by my side. You might as well support me in it as my wife instead of just an unusually constant, ever-present lover then. As I said previously, this would not mean you would not draw censure, but it would mean our situation could be better-fortified against the assault."

"But is it worth the gain, that sacrifice?" Natsuki held on to her lover's hands tightly and began speaking in her most deliberate tones. "Shizuru, I will stay with you even without marriage, I said. I will stand the - the reproach you mention. I am prepared, I need not marriage to shield me. But you are such a great woman-"

"As are you-"



"A great woman whose people watch her with care," Natsuki persevered, clearly in earnest. "I appreciate this, Shizuru. It is so that you will become consul one day. I believe more than once."

"You have been studying our government," Shizuru smiled.

"Shizuru, there is no Himean consul with an - an Otomeian wife. No, listen, please. It is expected you will choose a Himean for a wife. Not a person who will-hmm-tarnish your *respectability*. Your people wed too for political alliance and advantage, I know this. So why not suh-suh-save your marriage for that, Shizuru, and wed one more proper?"

"I could never love someone other than you, Natsuki," the Himean replied indignantly, jerking up from her slouch like a pricked cat. Natsuki pushed her back into the cushions with one palm flat on her chest.

"It does not need to be of love-"

"It needs to be for me."

They stared each other in the eye.

"There was a time when I would have said otherwise," Shizuru said, suddenly wishing the girl was not so noble after all. "But I have changed and I have you now. To wed someone else would demean you as my mistress, even were my wedding merely for convenience. As I said, I would never demean you and by extension, myself."

She plucked the hand on her chest and kissed its pink-scarred knuckles.

"And aside from the fact that you should never call yourself tarnish again, *mea vita*, you should remember one critical fact: most of my peers already consider me tarnished by the many radical things I did even before I knew you. They believe propriety as they define it to be distant from my kind. Whereas I believe propriety as I define it to be in giving all I can give to the woman who owns my life."

The beautiful features in front of her melted between exasperation and fondness. Natsuki exhaled a sigh of resignation, then chuckled

briefly.

"You will insist on this to the dawn," she predicted with a smile tugging at her mouth. "I see it."

"You see exceedingly well, Princess." Shizuru wiggled her eyebrows, smiling back. "But I must say you *react* well too. You are taking this very calmly, Natsuki, all things considered. Most people are often unable to think straight, never mind reason with fair soundness after having been presented with a proposal of this kind and with such suddenness. I wonder now if I gave you any hints before. Were you in some small way expecting me to do it, perhaps?"

The young woman denied it soundly and Shizuru nodded.

"Yes, I did not think so," she said. "Yet your composure is remarkable..."

A thought sent a flash across her eyes for an instant and she asked, "Was it because this was not the first marriage proposal you have received in recent time?"

The lack of response was sufficient answer, and she asked another question scorching patches of white into her sight.

"Your cousin? Was it your cousin? Did the Princess Alyssa ask you to marry her?"

Natsuki tried to head off the eruption before it could happen.

"Shizu-"

"When?" She ground her teeth angrily, wishing she had dashed the Princess Alyssa's brains out when she had the chance after all.

"When she came to visit you? Was it then, Natsuki?"

"Yes, but-"

"Oh, but that woman needs a lashing from more than a tongue!"

Realising she would never get a word in if she did not head off the furore somehow, Natsuki took the physical approach and captured

her lover's face with both hands, forcing the woman to look at her instead of at the imaginary Alyssa she was no doubt subjecting to all manner of indignities. She ignored the glare the crimson eyes threw at her and threw her own assault: kisses onto the sulking mouth, kisses on the proud nose, kisses on the crease between golden brows.

"So jealous," she hummed, amused and showing it. "Always without reason."

Shizuru touched their noses together.

"She has some gall to proposition you when she already knew her father gave you to me," she uttered, still irritated. "And I warned her that you were mine! Can you blame me for being displeased? Your cousin is begging for correction, Natsuki."

" *My cousin* is a good woman," the girl answered, somehow feeling that the two would not get along even were she out of the picture. Both autocrats, both persons who wanted to dominate their world even if they had different styles of doing it: such persons would eventually clash, one way or another. "I ask you to be kind to her, Shizuru."

An eyebrow arched haughtily in response. "In this situation, it does not make me feel more charitable to her when you are the one asking me to be so, *mea vita* ."

Natsuki poked the hollow of the older woman's cheek with a finger.

"I consider your proposal, Shizuru," she said. "Not my cousin's."

Shizuru's expression lightened in the time it took Natsuki to blink.

"So you shall consider it?" she asked enthusiastically with another jerk forward, her mood taking one of those perilous turns Natsuki had by now learned to ride. "Mine? Only mine?"

"Yes."

"Truly?"

"Yes."

"Then that shall have to do for now."

She sat back again and Natsuki went with her: she had to because her arms were around the older woman's neck once more. The Otomeian shifted closer after that, getting comfortable by sitting nearly on Shizuru's waist and pressing more kisses onto the woman's shoulder. Shizuru accepted her caresses with the look of a happy cat expecting a dish of cream.

"I suppose it can wait a while," she said. "As long as I know you are giving thought to my proposal, Natsuki."

She felt short bursts of air puffing against her shoulder and asked Natsuki what it was while leaning forward, grabbing a greyish pelt from one side of the bed to drape on the girl.

"I love this. I love the white line of your neck and belly under the fur," she said, gazing at the strip of skin left bare between the fur wrap's edges, running from the collar downwards. She traced the pale strip with her fingers and stopped at the navel. "Why were you laughing just now?"

A small smile. Natsuki said nothing.

"Very well then, keep it to yourself with all your other secrets," Shizuru said, caressing the flat of the other's belly. Hands looped about her sides in response until there were palms cupping the sharp projections of her scapulae. She felt fingers trace the blades.

"You are thinner." Natsuki sounded worried. "I knew. I felt it."

"I did not lose as much weight as you did."

"You must eat."

"I shall." She nuzzled her, feeling the hands on her back crawl up her neck, one of them caressing the back of her head. "I shall eat properly, but promise me you yourself shall not miss your meals while I am away? I worry about you."

"Mmm."

"And do not be afraid to talk to Shizuma. For anything."

She kept very still: Natsuki was alternating suckles with licks to her lip.

"And consider my proposition. With care. And openness."

A sighing laugh blew wind over her lower lip, drying the wet on it until the suckling and licking started again. She let it go on for a moment, then said something with great nonchalance that made the caresses halt.

"You know, *mea vita*, you shall eventually agree to marry me in the future. So you might as well save yourself the trouble and just give your assent now instead of later."

Natsuki pulled away from her lip with a wet pop and stared, eyebrows and corners of the mouth shooting up though she was obviously trying to prevent it. The Himean nodded and looked as all-knowing as she could, aware it would provoke the other further.

"Trust me, I know," she stated matter-of-factly.

The lip Natsuki bit this time was her own as she grinned at the smug woman sharing her bed.

"I see now," she told her, "why they think you arrogant."

"They also think me very persuasive."

"I thuh-think people think me stubborn."

"I think they think that of me too," Shizuru whispered conspiratorially.

"Oh, Shizuru! I promise I will consider. But enough persuasion for tonight, no?"

Although she did renege on her own ban quickly, allowing further and more pleasurable persuasions when the Himean covered her again. While an answer was not to be had for Shizuru's question

that night, the older woman nonetheless discovered a benediction in the girl's arms that evening, a reaffirmation that the forces in her life had returned to blow the way she wanted. So when she slogged with her soldiers through the dusty snow of the mountains, taking her turns with the soldiers at the front to clear a path, she was as cheerful a commander as she had ever been, powered by the immense confidence that had long gotten subordinates to trust that whatever she endeavoured would lead to a win. The Ninth and Thirteenth joked and dug their way up the range with a general who seemed so irrepressibly, inimitably happy in those two weeks that even the snows of the range seemed less freezing in some way.

Shizuru led her army down from the mountains precisely fourteen days after entering them, undetected and whole save for a number of minor injuries and only four deaths. The beauty of entering the mountains in the winter, as she had been counting on, was that there was even more snow than usual at the altitude they had traversed: in other words, those who might slip had more padding waiting for them on the ground if they fell. People looked out for each other too and the officers overseeing the affair were among the general's most seasoned. All of which did not take away anything from the daring of the journey and the brilliance of the mind behind it.

But it was just the beginning. No sooner had they exited the range than Shizuru took the legions on one of her notorious forced marches, rushing them over to the nearest Mentulaeen town so quickly that its inhabitants barely had time to gather all their possessions before retreating behind their walls. Shizuru raided the abandoned granaries and farmsteads to feed her legions, then parked the Ninth and Thirteenth in front of the town gates. She had her heralds announce that Shizuru Fujino would give the townspeople an hour to surrender peacefully and that all who did surrender would be spared provided they signed the oath and treaty naming their new master as Hime. Whereupon the townspeople replied that Shizuru Fujino had best take herself elsewhere because they would not surrender and Mentulaeen armies would soon come to succour them sooner than her tiny army could break into their defences.

She got her tiny army to some big work. She had the men bring the planks stripped from the cottages and barns and stockpile them along with rubble from the same sources. She let an hour pass, then had the legionaries throw together a makeshift siege mound and ramp with breathtaking speed. Since the walls were low-she could only wonder at what Mentulaean peoples thought was an impregnable position-the legionaries were over them in minutes. The locals were mostly unarmed and had no militia of which to speak. In less than an hour, the town was finished.

After pillaging all she could from that town and stuffing her men's food packs again, Shizuru headed further west for another settlement. She gave the same terms and was met with the same answer. The fallout too was the same.

By the third town warnings (and smoke fumes) were beginning to travel, so she found the people already well-ensconced within their walls by the time she set the legions down in front of them. This was also the first big town, already a small city, that she had encountered since coming out of the range. While it had no militia or army too, it did have massive walls, far more than double the height and probably thickness of the walls belonging to the first two towns she had encountered. Yet the construction of the walls of this third settlement had her smirking within seconds, flashing an awful grin when the hour's grace she had given elapsed.

This time, she sent her heralds in first to shout something towards the anxious faces atop the battlements.

"Tell them this happens when walls are made of wood," she laughed, and sent the pitch- and torch-bearers in.

After she had raked through the ashes for what booty might have survived, she pushed on to the next place on her list, another big-town-or-small-city on her map of the Mentulaean lands. This time, a delegation of the town leaders was waiting for her outside the walls, requesting a parley as soon as she came close enough for words to be shouted across the distance. She set the legions to work on making camp and had her heralds tell the town leaders to come to her tent for a meeting.

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The person who headed the deputation herded to Shizuru's command tent was a woman of aristocratic birth, yet not quite high enough in the Mentulaeen aristocracy to be a regular of the Royal Court. Of course, had she been a regular of the Court, she would most likely have been resident of a place other than the supposed backwaters of the Empire. She was uncontested in her prominence in the city, however, and it was thus she who was nominated to hold an audience with the foreign general. When she indicated this to the foreign general's officers, they exchanged looks with each other.

"Just to be certain," said one of the foreigners, all of whom seemed to wear the same uniforms as their rank-and-file soldiers. "You are going to speak on behalf of the entire delegation, and thus your city, er...?"

"Ertuala."

"Ertuala-san." They were all speaking in Himean, which every member of the Mentulaeen delegation naturally understood. "You require no accompaniment from another member of the delegation?"

"No."

The officer turned to the others. "Are all agreed to this?"

They answered in the affirmative.

"Then please go inside. General Fujino is waiting."

How polite they were! All without hinting violence, businesslike and serious but absent the arrogant condescension typical of the Mentulaeen officers and nobility. Ertuala took her leave of the other town leaders and walked into the huge tent, which resembled a proper building from inside, complete with windows and furniture. There were several desks and more uniformed Himeans inside, and as they turned to look her way, she followed their eyes to see where they would instinctively turn towards next, knowing that person would be their general.

A tall- *extremely* tall!-woman with blonde hair was standing near one



of the windows and talking to another Himean. When the eyes in the room turned her way, she stopped her conversation with the shorter Himean and found Ertiyala with her eyes, which flashed a strange colour from a distance. A trick of the light from the window, surely.

Someone guided Ertiyala to a seat at the desk at the end of the room while the officer to whom she had been talking outside approached the pair at the window. She sat and waited primly as the tall blonde—who was clearly their general—listened to what the man had to say, and after that she watched the woman's every step when she left the window and headed for her. Ertiyala was actually one of the few in the city to have seen Himeans in armour before, during her travels, but she had still been young then whereas she was silver with age now. Even so, she could certainly recall none of them ever strutting this way and making all those drab layers of grey metal and leather look like a casual and suspiciously attractive fashion choice. The beauty with the golden hair got closer, towering over her even from a polite distance, and when she got close enough for the rather weak-eyed Ertiyala to see her eyes and face to full advantage, the Mentulæan could hardly resist a gasp.

"My eyes are a shock, no doubt," the Himean smiled, taking a seat.

Ertiyala gulped, the crepe-like folds of her throat moving. *Among other things*, she wanted to say.

"Yes," she said simply. "You are General Fujino?"

"Shizuru Fujino, to be precise. Ertiyala-han, yes?"

"Yes."

"Have you no title by which I should address you?"

"My name is sufficient. I'm only a minor aristocrat."

"Very well." The young god in front of her reached for a beaker on the table and poured water for both of them unselfconsciously, somehow managing not to relinquish an iota of her glamour in the deed. "These are my terms. In surrendering to me, you shall cede fifty hostages, all of whom shall be inspected prior to acceptance

and who shall be returned to you after the war is over. They are to be surrendered to my army to serve as insurance for the treaty I wish the city's leaders and all the heads of the families of note to sign today. The treaty shall establish your new masters to be Hime and its legitimate representatives and revoke all your previous alliances with your old masters in the person of the present Mentulaean ruling dynasty, namely Artai the Fourth, who is also known as Obsidian, and all members of his Court and Party."

The tent was very quiet. Ertyala had a suspicion that it was not just the situation. Whenever this woman spoke, everyone was most likely listening.

"The terms shall be effective forthwith upon agreement," the woman continued. "Which means that Asterion-" the name of Ertyala's city "- shall be obliged by law and the sacred oath that binds the treaty to lend all aid that may be required of it by Hime and Hime's representatives. Naturally, Asterion shall also be obliged to refuse all aid that may be demanded of it thereafter by the present Mentulaean ruling dynasty and its representatives, and shall do all it can to repulse all enemies of Hime and her interests in Septentria."

Ertyala's brow rippled at the unfamiliar name.

"Septentria?" she echoed.

"The name we are giving to the Mentulaean Territories once the war is finished."

The assumption was obviously that they would win, Ertyala ruminated.

"Should you agree, the sort of aid we will expect is typical for campaigns. We may well require grain from you at some point, naturally, but as we have just stripped the granaries of the towns we came to before you, it is not pressing at the moment. The comestibles that are perishable and which we have already run out of, of course, we shall have to requisition from your stock while we are here. But we shall take only as much as is feasible for you to give, or that which is in surplus. Other needs, such as extra iron or leather for our use, may be asked of you as well-but for these we

shall pay the fair and going price. These shall be considered trade merchandise, while food and grain may be considered your first tribute to Hime."

Ertuala's eyes looked as though they were about to pop from her head.

"I shall instruct the legionaries to treat your people with respect provided they do the same to us," Shizuru continued. "I shall permit no looting, no rapine, and no abuse to people who shall effectively be under my authority as the Himean *propraetor* of this new province. If anyone does molest any of the civilians absent prior provocation such as life-threatening assault, I shall have him flogged. Anyone who steals from you shall get the same treatment."

"You're too generous, General Fujino," the older woman gasped, hardly able to believe her ears. For she could never have expected an invader to offer such mercy, especially since her only point of comparison was based on the usual attitudes of the Mentulaean armies and the people leading them. Yet here Shizuru Fujino was willing not only to be clement but also—oh, what was the word for it?—*reasonable*, was it?

"Do not misunderstand me, Ertuala-han," the Himean said. "There are other things you are expected to do for us in return, aside from providing my armies with whatever supplies might be necessary. You and the other town leaders are expected to keep the peace and ensure that your people stick to the oath. If you have dissenters who would refuse the terms, either lock them up or surrender them to me as added hostages: I promise I shall not kill or wound them unless they somehow render such actions necessary to my cause, but they shall nonetheless be my captives and their fates thus mine to decide. Taking care of such contrary elements would in fact be more for your sake than mine, I hope you see that."

The other woman nodded emphatically, understanding exactly what the Himean meant.

"There is also the fact that I cannot be here all the time," Shizuru continued. "This is a war, after all, and I can hardly play bodyguard to a single city. While my armies shall be moving throughout the

country, there may be times when none are close enough to defend you should your present masters take it into their heads to suddenly pass by and besiege you. Very unlikely but still possible. If it does happen, you shall have to defend yourselves until one of my armies comes to help-which it shall, that is for certain, but the question of when it shall is not. We shall give you some assistance in improving the fortifications of your walls prior to our departure, however, just to be safe."

She stopped talking and reached for her own cup, then took a leisurely sip. When she had finished, she looked expectantly at the Mentulaean.

"Well then, what do you think?" she asked.

Ertuala pondered it.

"You're very confident, General Fujino," she said cautiously, minding her tone lest this strangely urbane, bizarrely courteous foreigner suddenly proved more vicious than she seemed. Well, she had to be: had she not annihilated several towns before getting here? Best tread carefully, especially when those weird eyes kept putting the image of flames into her own head.

"I hope you don't take exception to my questions, General," she went on. "I'm compelled to ask because I'm making a decision for all of the people of Asterion. I beg that you understand why my position would demand it and do not think me taunting you."

"I understand your position. Please go ahead."

"If I may ask, how can you be so certain that you will win the war?" the older woman said. "We may be far-removed from the centre, but I know the king has armies to spare. I've seen only one of them... yet it could have swallowed up yours in one bite, I think."

"Size is not the measure of an army," the Himean responded. "Surely you have heard of the battle that took place on the other side of the borders, the Battle of Argentum that the Prince Artaxi lost?"

"Word did reach us that one of the royal armies was defeated there."

"I defeated it. The royal army outnumbered mine five to one."

Ertiyala's look was speaking.

"It is true, I assure you," Shizuru said, amused. "I see news is as concentrated in the capital here as it is in Hime. I take it they lied and said they were the ones outnumbered when they announced the defeat, but you know the way empires of this type are run. Propaganda to perpetuate fear."

Ertiyala shook her head.

"No, they didn't even announce it, as far as I know," she said frankly. "I have friends in the capital and they wrote that there were no great announcements. Most of the talk was through backchannels, and while the king was said to have sworn vengeance for the capture of his son, the disparity in size wasn't acknowledged at all. I actually did hear rumours that the royal army outnumbered the enemy a great deal, but they were never confirmed." She shot another telling glance at her auditor. "Still, General Fujino, five-to-one is hard to believe."

"I would tell you to ask the Prince Artaxi, but I already packed him off to my country for captivity. The same for the Prince Hanu."

That was a shock, and Ertiyala showed it. "The Prince Hanu? You captured him as well?"

"Yes, outnumbered again."

"And he's..."

"He too has been sent to Fuuka."

Ertiyala looked so staggered that Shizuru had to urge the woman to take a sip of water.

"He was likely the king's heir," the Mentulaeen uttered after taking a gulp of the cool, sweet beverage. "It wasn't confirmed yet. But people were saying he would be next in line."

The Himean general was looking at her officers, who were murmuring to each other. They quieted down upon feeling her gaze, showing Ertiyala that even these bizarrely egalitarian Himeans had their forms of autocracy.

"Be that as it may, he is now a captive of Hime and shall lead no more armies against us," the general said gently. "So there is your proof. Numbers do not always win. Besides which, I have other armies of my own to pit against your king's-and I assure you that I shall prevail."

The golden-haired, faintly golden-skinned young woman spoke her next words with a confidence that Ertiyala found fascinating for its subtlety. It had the air of factuality rather than force, which was perhaps why Ertiyala found herself privately agreeing with what the Himean was saying.

"Hime is going to win this war," Shizuru Fujino stated. "Even your Empire, vast as it is, cannot compare to the might of Hime and all its territories, which spread from these northern regions to lands all the way to Africa and Egypt. And though you may have worthy generals of your own-although I have yet to run into one, I must admit-all of them shall have to contend with *me*. I may look young, Ertiyala-han, but I have seen more wars than many of your princes ever will. Ask any of my officers here and they shall tell you I have an unblemished record as well. Never have I entered a war where I was not the victor and that shall not change any time soon."

Ertiyala believed it, but said nothing.

"The question now is whether or not you shall accept the inevitable or be destroyed by it," Shizuru continued. "I would prefer that you sign the treaty, in which case your lives and belongings would be spared, but I would not shrink from what I must do if you chose the other path, in which case your lives and belongings are automatically forfeit. I assure you, however, that if you do take the latter choice, you and the rest of the deputation shall be permitted to return to the city unharmed in order to inform the rest of your decision and reasons for it. Of course, I shall have my heralds accompany you to shout confirmation of your stories to the walls, that the people may know you are telling the truth and have chosen

as well as your lights permit you to do so. After that is done, however, I shall attack and grant no quarter."

The woman was no fool, Ertuala thought. If Ertuala chose to decline the treaty, she and the rest of the deputation would have to return to the town with the foreign heralds on their heels and roaring the details of the Himean's generous offer of clemency to the people, who would most likely lynch Ertuala and the rest of the aristocrats for choosing the obviously less attractive option, the one that would see them all dead. There would be no opportunity for dissimulation, no way to spare themselves what would most likely be a more brutal massacre at the hands of a panicked mob.

She found her lips pulling into a smile. This was a very sly woman she faced, but so much more than that too. Capable, obviously, and staggeringly confident. Even more regal than any of the nobles she had met or seen during her visits to the capital. And what spectacular looks! Very tall for a woman or even a man, endowed with a splendid physique, and vested with one of the most beautiful faces Ertuala had ever seen. Were all the Himean commanders like this? No wonder the king hated them so much, then: were the other local leaders to meet this Shizuru Fujino, Ertuala had a feeling they would make their decisions to shift masters even faster than herself.

"How can we be assured you will keep to your word if we accept the route that grants mercy?" she said.

"I am hardly a savage unable to keep to an oath," the other responded, lifting an eyebrow. "A treaty is sacred. Besides which, my preferred policy is generally that of clemency."

"Yet you destroyed three towns since you appeared in our lands."

"You know as well as I do that there are situations where ink may only serve once blood has preceded it. They proved this was one of those situations. I gave them a choice. They made theirs."

"And you killed them all."

"Again, blood and ink." Shizuru smiled brightly and the Mentulaean was surprised by its friendliness. "I made them reasonable offers, as

I make you one now. Make a treaty with Hime that you and all you represent do so pledge everlasting allegiance to us instead of the Mentulaean Kings and shall aid us in our war against them, and in return you shall enjoy more than mercy in the fullness of time. You shall have *my* protection as the governor-general of the Septentrian Territories. You shall be in particularly good standing, in fact, as the first of the local peoples to demonstrate reason by making an alliance. This shall gain you my especial good favour. The first demonstration of which shall be in my granting you the neighbouring lands of Limnias, whose city is now gone and whose fields and farms shall be added to yours." She let that sink in first. "If not to you now, they shall eventually go to someone else. Hime prefers to leave local administration of resources and farmlands as well as cities to locals in our provinces. I see no problem with giving the leaders of your town that honour for Limnias as well. I am a reasonable woman, as well as a generous one."

Ertyala's brown eyes glistened with interest.

"And once word of your largesse to us gets around, more people will think of surrendering," she observed.

A grin. "You're quick."

"I'm also reasonable."

"Then we are agreed?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Excellent! Let us bring in the other members of the deputation, that they may be informed as well."

Shizuru entered the city with the deputation and a cohort of soldiers for guard and made a speech with the leaders of the city to the people, who were obviously relieved by the choice the deputation had made and the terms that had been granted by the foreign commander. While Shizuru was prepared to deal with malcontents, none appeared: the fact was that this far away from the capital, there was very little feeling for the Mentulaean king, who almost never approached this part of the empire and whom many of the



locals had never even seen. The only real touch the locals felt from the royal presence on the throne was in the yearly tax hikes that were being levied on them, and which thus rendered them more predisposed to cursing the occupants of the capital than singing their praises. It gave no citizen of Asterion grief to agree to the oath of allegiance to Hime, as Shizuru observed to Ertuala during the signing of the treaty.

"We've no opportunity to see either the king's kindness or majesty here," the older woman said to her as the rest of the leaders filed out of the room with the lively chatter of the relieved. "Of his greed, though, regularly."

Shizuru nodded. "Once the war is finished, it is my intention to spare the local citizens taxes for five years. There shall be a great deal of rebuilding necessary then, and taxation shall only hamper it. After the five years, taxes shall be collected again-but at non-extortionate rates."

"Truly too generous!" The Mentulaean licked her lips and looked demurely curious. "By the way, General, Limnias held one of the offices of the exchequer in these parts, and the city proper had a treasury."

"Wars cost lives as well as money," Shizuru replied, eyes twinkling. "Fortunately, in your case, it need not cost both."

So Shizuru obtained the first treaty in her war, which she would send later on to Hime to be nailed to the Temple of Jupiter Feretrius, along with all of Hime's other treaties. Shortly after it was signed, Shizuru took to her horse with a century of her veterans and rode for the pass where she had arranged to meet with her cavalry. She left Keigo Kurauchi in charge of the army in her absence. He was a little nervous at first, but soon fell into the role quite comfortably. No complications arose that might make his life as the temporary commander more difficult, and the locals were genuinely helpful and ready to provide whatever he might requisition. Admittedly, the occupants of Asterion did remain more than a little wary of the soldiers encamped outside their walls and often venturing into them for the first few days. The Ninth and Thirteenth followed the general's orders on good behaviour so strictly, though, that the

locals soon got over their fear and started thinking Himeans terrifically agreeable, even if they did deem them bizarre too due to it.

As for the commander of the bizarre legions, she found her band of Otomeians exactly where she expected to find them. It had waited for the Mentulaean border army to decamp, as instructed, then made a hasty crossing after the Fourteenth constructed a new bridge on the remaining pylons of the one that Kenji Nakamura had torn down months before. They had then taken a looping route that took them past the Mentulaean army, which was at the time of their reunion with the general still snailing its way to the second town Shizuru had razed. Shizuru led her cavalry back to Asterion and immediately called a war council.

"A small change of plans: we are going to deal with that army here," she informed her officers. "We have led them on a merry enough chase and this is as good a place as any to finish it. First things first, however."

She turned to the chief of the Ninth's *primipili*, whom she had asked expressly to attend the meeting.

"Nao-han," she said. "How much do you trust your new slave girl?"

The primipilus grinned.

## Chapter 62

*Thank you very much for the advice, reviews, and readers from last time. I am still inspecting alternative sites, but once I do choose one and it proves necessary, I shall simply note which site it is on my DeviantArt account. I myself am not taking this story off this site, however.*

*On another note, some persons have told me they were saving copies of the story. I responded to a number of these advising them not to do so: I had yet to go over past chapters to edit them to be more to my liking, after all. Please recall that many old chapters-especially those prior to Ch.30-were pounded out by a typist I would corral into taking down the text for me over a duration of one hour or so. Even the ones after that tended to be horrifically rough: I often uploaded them without reading through the text in order to make uploads faster. Some of the earliest readers shall recall I actually uploaded once or twice a week at the beginning of this story, in fact. The earlier chapters were thus rather dreadful. I finally managed to return to most of them (up to Ch.40) to make some necessary changes. To be clear, I did not "rewrite" whole chapters. I merely changed some parts, omitted others, and corrected the language and punctuation to be more in line with my preferences-again, recall that some of my poor harassed typists were American, which gave both of us problems over where I wanted marks to go and how some words should be spelled. They kept arguing with me over inverted commas in particular (chuckle).*

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### **Notes/Vocabulaire:**

**1. A Reminder on Army Policies for Booty** - material loot was generally split up amongst the members of the army and the state's Treasury (with bigger portions going to those higher up, naturally, and with the commander retaining the prerogative to increase or decrease booty shares for particular persons/positions as he or she

saw fit). Captives to be sold as slaves, however, were entirely the general's: all profits from that went to him or her.

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## ***Inter Nos II: Inde Ira et Lacrimae***

*par ethnewinter*

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The commander of the Mentulaean army that had been pinned with the Fourth Legion was a baroness named Thorak, a noble of middling position in the Mentulaean Court's hierarchy. Her father had been more highborn than her mother, but the latter had been richer, and this meant Thorak came into a split inheritance: she got wealth and thriving partnerships in good businesses from her female parent; she got titles and lands accompanying them from the male one. The wealth allowed her to collect and fund the troops she used to face off the Fourth at the river boundary, and it was the aristocracy that allowed her to actually lead said troops herself. However, the same aristocracy only extended so far, as was seen in her assignment.

Had Thorak been higher up the Court's pecking order, she would certainly have been assigned a far better post than what she got. Granted, she was being given an important job in a way, one for a river crossing with a garrison of enemy soldiers on the other bank. But it was still one of the subordinate crossings and its bridge had already been torn down. Besides-and even more to the point-no one expected anything very exciting to happen in the south for this war. These were the backwaters of the empire, largely made up of mountains and agricultural plains and a few not-too-large cities and even-less-large towns in between. Thorak knew her army was stationed where it was for only two reasons: first, as a reserve force to be held ready for further movements along the border come spring; and second, for protection of a largely hypothetical nature for the region. Even the tiny Himean army they knew to have penetrated the border months ago was unlikely to come down from

its defensive squat in the citadel of Trogum, far west of the Southern Frontier: it would be eaten up by the larger Mentulaean forces on the plains. So no danger was expected from there either. In effect, Thorak was little more than temporary warden of a rather unexciting ward.

Yet the baroness had no desire to inhabit some other commander's shoes in this war. While not actually a coward, she was of a sluggish temperament that meant she was pleased at least by the out-of-the-action location of her post. The appointment itself, though, did not initially please her. She had been hoping to winter elsewhere this year, and the king's declaration of war with Hime had already crippled her original plans to travel out of the empire for a nice vacation away from the fast and furious company of the Court. When she presented her obligatory tribute of war materiel and troops to the king at the capital, her hope was to at least be allowed to return to her lands for the cold months. No such luck for Thorak! Still, to be assigned to the sleepest place in the country was some consolation to this sleepy aristocrat.

Thus expecting the military equivalent of a sinecure, she was considerably troubled by recent events in her area of concern. These included the sudden exit of the enemy force facing hers across the river and the strange reports of another enemy force running rampant nearby, on *her* side of the river. One was naturally more troubling than the other. When the first event had occurred, all she had been duty-bound to do was send a letter to the camp near the larger crossing, higher up the River Atinu and near Argentum. The letter bore warning to the commander of that area, saying another enemy force was heading nearer their post and possibly reinforcing the enemy camp defending the crossing there. That was the span of her obligations in that matter, and after the letter had been sent off by courier, she and her army had settled down again to enjoy a fairly cushy time, even more relaxed than before because the army fronting them was gone.

When news of the second event came upon them, though, she knew she would have to actually bestir herself from her camp. Part of what troubled her so much about this matter was the difficulty of ascertaining truth from rumour: at the time, all that was for certain

was that two Mentulaean towns had already been razed by this phantom foe they kept hearing about. Of the foe itself, though, they had only garbled and confused accounts from local witnesses too panicked out of their wits to deliver anything more reliable.

Some claimed the enemy to be the force that had been holed up in the far southwest, in the mountain fortress of Trogum. Others alleged that it was actually a different army, one that had been just been hidden in the region and lying in wait for the right time to come out. Some even claimed that it was an army that had come to the area by-and here was an unbelievable rumour indeed!-crossing the Great Southern Alps, also known as the Alps of Caledonia.

Obviously, one account was more plausible than the others. Thorak was hardly about to credit something as fantastic as an enemy force passing through the great massif in wintertime. Far easier to believe that it was the army that had been holed up in Trogum Citadel-which the Himeans knew as Kenji Nakamura's group. That explanation was made more believable as the few reports commenting on the enemy's size said it was just about the same as that western army had been reported to be months ago.

Ah, but that little western army had a daring leader, Thorak thought: first he had managed to seize the supposedly impregnable fortress of Trogum, presumably by some treachery from inside the citadel. His army had been left alone even after Trogum was taken because the Mentulaean command believed, from what was known of his army's size, that it posed little threat, especially given that it was separated from all its allies across the river. Furthermore, Trogum was generally held to be impossible to siege, owing to its rugged mountain perch. Everyone had thus been pleased to leave alone the Himean army settled in that citadel for now, choosing to focus on the forces across the river that were the bigger threats. Yet here this tiny, ignored army was proving itself a worse troublemaker than its fellows across the border, its commander taking his soldiers out for a romp through enemy lands and acting as though the Mentulaean Southwest were his own damned garden.

It intrigued Thorak that anyone could have such audacity. That said, she was certain she could trounce this audacious army even so, since all the accounts did agree that she had the far larger force.

Thorak was a typical Mentulæan commander, so this was typical Mentulæan thinking: numbers determined the battle. Besides, this was also her home turf, so to speak, and the enemy was an outsider. If anyone knew the place well enough to get a tactical advantage and would be getting support from local peoples as well as nearby garrisons, it would be she.

So when Thorak marched out of her camp at the head of an army twenty thousand strong, she had few misgivings rattling about her mind. The only ones that did ring a clatter every now and then were the uncertainties she yet had over the precise identity and origins of the enemy. Well, all in good time: she would find out more once she saw them for herself, was her philosophical position on the matter.

Thorak's army traced the footsteps of the enemy force and followed a path taking them farther and farther from their origins at the river border. They picked up more bits of information as they went, talking to locals who had escaped their foe. Overtime, they managed to solidify to near-certainty several of the rumours: the enemy was indeed Himean, judging from the armour and speech; the enemy was certifiably fewer in number, possibly only half their own size at most; and the enemy had already burnt down a third town and now seemed to be on its way to a fourth.

Hence it was to the fourth town that Thorak marched, taking a straight route from her position instead of tracing the Himean army's footsteps again. The plan was to try to catch the Himeans there before they ran off and had to be tracked down once more, so Thorak made her troops go even faster than they had already been moving, almost doubling their pace. By the time they were only about ten or so days' march away from their goal, however, something happened that compelled them to speed up yet again and with even more purpose than before.

One dusky evening, as Thorak and her soldiers settled down in camp, two weary riders were rounded up by the night's watch. The watch said that the pair claimed to be from Thorak's very destination: the city of Asterion. They were servants of one of the city's magistrates, said the male messenger, who also brought with him a brief letter bearing what looked to be a Mentulæan aristocrat's seal; it was supplied as proof of his and his companion's identities.

The letter also served as support to the pair's tale, which Thorak and her officers digested with fascination.

It seemed that while Thorak and her army had been marching to save Asterion, the city's leaders had decided to capitulate almost instantly to the Himeans parked outside their walls, deeming it the wiser ploy instead of trying to resist what had thus far been proven to be an irresistible force. The Himeans had proceeded to build camp outside the walls and then used the city's facilities and fare as they saw fit after that, greedily sucking up Asterion's stored-up food for the winter into their own mouths because this had been the first town they had not been forced to set on fire (thus destroying granaries) to defeat. Asterion had not made an effort to resist the depredations, giving the foreigners all they wanted until the Himeans began to deem the town truly subjugated and hence became laxer with their policies of entry and exit. Once they relaxed enough, though, Asterion had taken revenge.

The commander of the Himean forces had apparently taken well to being feasted by the local leaders and quickly came to enjoy her dinners with Asterion's magistrates, where they pulled out every delicacy and drink they could to satisfy the woman's finicky tastes. At one of these dinners, the town magistrates arranged for the commander's sparse guard to be overcome and the Himean commander herself taken hostage. After this, they had shut the town's gates and refused all Himeans entry, holding the enemy leader as insurance to prevent the troops in the camp outside from attacking and waiting for succour to arrive. Succour that it now appeared Thorak was going to provide.

Immediately after the enemy leader's capture and before the city gates were shut, the magistrates had sent off the two messengers that now told Thorak the tale. Their order had been to ride for Thorak's old camp at the borders, as they had not known her to be moving their way already. It had been good fortune that led them straight to her watchmen and eventually to her command tent, where they were able to regale her and her officers with the story.

"How did you manage to escape their own watchmen?" Thorak asked. "Surely they set guards around the town?"



"Yes," said one of the messengers. "But we know paths out of our city better than any foreigner ever could."

"Besides, they wouldn't have noticed us even if we'd ridden in front of their noses," the other messenger, the dark female, snorted with derision.

"Why is that?" Thorak said.

"Drunk, the lot of them," said the woman. "We plied them with drink to see if it was true what they said about Himeans, General, and it was. They down wine like fish drink water. By the time they noticed their commander was missing, it was past noon of the next day, since they'd been drinking through the night."

Thorak smiled: most people around the Himean Sea knew of the Himean weakness for liquor.

"So you slipped out without notice, good," she said. "How many of them are there?"

"We couldn't count perfectly," one messenger replied. "But our master reckoned about nine, ten thousand."

"Half ours, the others were right," one of Thorak's captains muttered.

"Where did they come from?" another officer asked.

"Down the mountains from the west, I think they said."

"I told you so!" the officer who had asked the question crowed to someone else at the table. "It's those ones."

"Well, of course it's those ones," the man responded to his friend. "I never said I believed that shit about them coming over the massif."

"Never mind that for now," Thorak sighed. "What's important is that we get there as soon as we can, before the Himeans get antsy enough to try anything drastic like storming Asterion despite their leader being held captive in it. That *is* what your master begged in the letter," she said, addressing the two messengers.

They nodded in earnest.

"Tell the others," she said to her officers. "We'll march as fast as possible tomorrow, crack of dawn. Even if holding their leader might seem strong insurance for Asterion for now, you never know with these Himeans. They're insane enough to come down from a nicely fortified spot like the one they probably left in Trogum to start up this commotion in the plains and in the middle of winter. We'll have to go fast or Asterion's trick will go to waste."

And fast they went indeed, making what even the much-faster-on-the-march Himeans would have considered fair time. Thorak sent scouts ahead to survey the situation and once they had cleared more than half of the distance to the city, those returned with reports corroborating the Asterion messengers' story. They told Thorak of what they had seen, which was the Himeans milling confusedly around the camp they had put up beside Asterion and occasionally sending groups near the city's walls to yell threats to the people looking down at them from the towers-who, more often than not, retaliated with jeers and a rich variety of rude gestures that the scouts took great pleasure in replicating for their commander. The Himeans had apparently grown so discomposd by the abduction of their general that even their watch had eased sufficiently to permit Thorak's scouts to get in close during their observations.

This relaxation of discipline was obviously something to be taken advantage of as soon as possible, so Thorak and her officers spurred the men forward again. Thus they arrived at their destination two days ahead of schedule, panting from the effort but rewarded by the sight of a tiny Himean host beating a hasty retreat from its posturing near Asterion's walls. The Himeans ran to the safety of their camp-another of those weird structures the foreigners seemed to like to build, the ones with the rows of ditches outside its walls, Thorak noted-and locked their own gates upon spying the new army on the scene.

The Mentulaean force parked itself menacingly in front of the Himean camp, sitting between it and the city. Meanwhile, Thorak prepared a contingent of one hundred soldiers to accompany her into Asterion, where they would fetch the enemy's general. The town leaders had said that they would only cede the prisoner to the

Baroness Thorak herself, being wary of tricks from the Himeans-who might attempt to slip their general out of the city by impersonating some other officer under Thorak's command.

"Are we going to threaten to behead her in front of them?" asked one of her officers as they waited for the guard to be put together, earning a nod from his general.

"That should get them to give up their arms," Thorak said with confidence. "It wouldn't have worked if the local officials had done it, of course. They don't have an army behind them and it would have lacked the pressure needed to convince those Himeans out there that they've no possibility of winning even if it came down to a fight. With us here, it'll be all over as soon as we flash their commander at them."

"Yes, that makes sense." He heaved a sigh of relief. "At least this'll be over quickly, then."

Thorak agreed. She could hardly wait to settle down again for what was left of the winter, keeping to herself as she had been doing before this accursed foe had come along and obliged her to trudge all over the region following its tracks. If she could bring all these in alive too, she would be sure to get an added reward, for the king would enjoy making examples of them. Their commander would probably be paraded around the capital's streets naked and dragged from the heels by a donkey, made to suffer the taunts and excrement the capital's inhabitants would be encouraged to throw at her. And as for Thorak, she would probably be given gold, lands, or perhaps even added titles. These did not really exert as strong a pull on the baroness as the chance of asking the king for something, though, which would be to ask for a position that would strategically keep her out of the fighting from now on in this war. Somewhere nice and quiet, as was the idea.

"General, we're ready."

Thorak surfaced from her thoughts. "All's done? Where are the messengers from Asterion?"

"Over here, General."

"Let's go, then."

The two messengers directed Thorak and her guard through the smaller of the two gates Asterion had. The bigger gates had been barred and even fixed shut from inside, they explained, to withstand battering ram attacks from the Himeans. Thus Thorak and several of her officers were obliged to walk into Asterion through a narrower entrance than was ideal for a guard over a hundred strong-which number was severely abridged when the townspeople gathered at the mouth of the gate to welcome them drew out swords and started to cut down Thorak's surprised guard with the efficiency of veteran soldiers.

So quickly and capably was the ambush carried out that Thorak and her officers were already divested of their own swords and drawn aside before the fight concluded. Not all of the Mentulaean soldiers guarding their commander were slain: over a third of Thorak's guard escaped, fleeing through the gates before these were shut and heading for the safety the rest of Thorak's horrified army afforded outside. As for Thorak and what remained of her party in the walls, they were obliged to surrender themselves quietly to their assaulters, who started shrugging off their civilian cloaks to display mail-shirts underneath.

One of the supposed magistrates of the city-these had been standing in wait in the formal style at the end of the courtyard and had watched the fray without once joining in-detached from the rest of the group and strode over to Thorak and the rest of the captives. The person pushed off her cloak's hood and gave them all a friendly and decidedly glorious smile.

"Which is the Baroness Thorak?" she enquired.

"I am," Thorak said, still stunned by what had just transpired as well as the looks of this new character.

Out came a hand. "Shizuru Fujino. I am pleased to see you were not hurt in the scuffle."

"Fujino. Fujino..." Thorak muttered, wondering where she had heard the name before. Ah well, who cared? It was highly unlikely to

matter now. "Himean, of course?"

"Yes."

"Ah."

Thorak's hazel eyes drifted away, still blank with shock, and fell upon some of the bodies around them: those of her guard who had been dispatched by the Himean ambushers. How quickly they had died! Was that normal? She had never been this close to the actual fighting before, so she did not know. It seemed to her to have been a curt battle: most of the soldiers had provided argument only once and then ceded the issue almost without retort after that. How could such brief disputation have given birth to all those glorious paragraphs of description the writers and poets often generated in their accounts of war? For some utterly inexplicable reason, she felt a greater disappointment in the brevity of their fight than in the fact that she had just been played for a fool and made captive.

"So you hold Asterion," she mumbled. "What happened to the city's magistrates? Did you kill them? Were we too late?"

Shizuru indicated the people still grouped behind her and watching with varying degrees of curiosity.

"Those are the magistrates," she said. "We certainly did not kill any of them."

Comprehension dawned on Thorak: "Ahh. It was a lie."

"It was a lie."

"And you were never captured."

"I was never captured."

"Yes, I see," Thorak sighed wearily, looking her up and down. "You don't look the type to get captured."

Shizuru flashed her glorious smile again.

"And you do not seem the type to rave when faced with a situation

disadvantageous to you," she returned to the Mentulaeen, who looked more tired than sulky, annoyed, or anything else along the same lines. "I approve strongly of your composure."

Thorak took a deep breath and slanted her head to one side in a shrugging way.

"It won't do any good if I start screaming at you now," she told Shizuru. "So now that I'm your captive, what's going to happen?"

"Ideally, you are going to go with us quietly to the top of that tower over there, where you shall be in full view of your army. You are then going to tell them to surrender to us if they wish to live. You shall remind them that they are not only absent a commander and most of their superior officers but are now presently in the middle of two enemy camps, in the perfect position to be enveloped by their foe, and are also still weak in the knees and winded by their long march. You shall make all these things clear in order to show them the wisdom of capitulation. After that, you shall have a drink with me and a bit of refreshment. I think we both shall have earned it by then."

"I understand."

"I am happy that you do."

They brought Thorak to the top of the tower on the walls nearest the Mentulaeen army, and from there overlooked Thorak's confused army for an address. Thorak saw that the Himean army at the other camp had given up its pretence after the scuffle at the gates: it now stood arrayed in proper battle lines before the Mentulaeen force. It was bigger than Thorak had thought and been told, and she said so.

"And you still have more soldiers in the city, I see. They said there were fewer of you."

"There used to be fewer of us," Shizuru told her, and left it at that.

They trumpeted the horns to draw attention to the tower and began their address. By the time that address had been finished, the Himean artillery was already ranged on the other towers and being

pointed threateningly at the dismayed Mentulaeans, who also had to watch as yet another army issued from Asterion's big gates-which had not been barricaded and fixed shut after all. The army coming out of Asterion was actually the one Shizuru had been marching with all this time, since the group now lined up outside the Himean camp was Kenji Nakamura's army: these were the Fifth and Sixth legions. They had come down from their post in Trogum at their commander's behest about a month ago, reaching Asterion after a blisteringly fast march that ensured they would reach Shizuru's position in time for her plan. It was two days after they arrived at Asterion that Shizuru sent the pair of messengers to the Mentulaeans she had known to be shadowing her, and thus set into motion the deception.

One of these two messengers observed the surrender as it was managed, her mistress at her side and acting as one of the chief supervisors of the weapon collection.

"Do you ever think any of them will try to get a hack in or something while the others give up their arms?" she asked her mistress, who snorted.

"That'd be damned stupid," said Nao.

"Well, sure. Who said it'd be smart? I meant as something out of desperation."

"Not likely."

The primipilus barked an order out to some legionaries first, then turned to look at the dark-skinned woman muffled up in local winterwear.

"You see those looks, Poll?" she said. "Those're the faces of people who've been beaten already. It takes the heart out of you, you know, to see your commander in the hands of the enemy and to suddenly be shocked into facing a foe much bigger and nastier than you'd been told you'd ever see. They're past desperation, no fight in 'em left. There'll be no hacking from them now. They were done even before we started taking their swords and spears."

Pollonia nodded, crossing her arms across her chest as she regarded the surrendering soldiers again.

"They were sure livelier when we first ran into them," she mused.

"I'll bet." Nao had turned to the work again, but threw Pollonia a look over her shoulder. "You did your job perfect, Poll. This's some good work you've done here. I'm pleased."

Pollonia grinned hugely. "It was easy."

"Good to hear."

"And it was fun!"

"Even better. That local we sent to play messenger with you made trouble?"

"Oh no. I think he enjoyed it as much as I did," laughed the other woman.

"Yes, I thought so," Nao said, smiling. "The one we picked for the job was another regular villain. And he'll be getting rewarded for it."

"Will I be getting a reward too?"

"Definitely."

Nao grabbed one of the pole-arms the legionaries were gathering from their captives, testing its weight and the blade on it. It was new and cut a tiny line on her finger; she licked the bit of red away instantly.

"Even if I don't reward you myself, Fujino-san will," she told Pollonia with a smirk and the taste of her own blood on her lips. "Twenty thousand! She'll make a fortune off the lot-not that she needs it, mind you. But every time she makes money, she gives her soldiers nice chunks of it, bigger chunks going to those who've been of more help. She's right generous, she is. You'll be seeing a fat bonus next time the pay is issued."

This was indeed standard practice in the ever-lucrative Fujino army.



While material booty had made up bulk of the returns for it in this war thus far, its commander actually expected more loot soon from slave sales. She had been utterly ruthless in her marches ever since entering enemy territory, putting everyone from all but one town to the sword, but that had been out of necessity and not cruelty: she had wanted to exploit the advantage of her unexpected arrival as much as possible, and it had served to demonstrate that she was a foe to be reckoned with. Had she not completely destroyed those first three towns and their populations, she knew Asterion would never have surrendered to her and made this latest victory possible.

Taking all those slain as slaves to be sold in the great markets of Hime and Greece would in fact have been an alternative to killing them, of course. However, it would not have worked in light of her aims. Captives would have slowed down the army's pace, hampering them in her efforts to lead Thorak's army on a merry chase through the Mentulaean Southern Frontier. It would also have obliged her to split her men's rations in order to provide for the captives. This was why no prisoners had been taken until now.

What made the difference now was that she had Asterion as a temporary base for holding her prisoners. The added resources being supplied by the city would also help in tiding over everyone in her army until she could move the captives to another location.

"Send messengers to Avaro-han today to inform him of what happened," she told Keigo as they surveyed the armour and loot their captives had surrendered to them. There were both legionaries and noncombatants working on sorting out the items, and other officers directed them on where to put certain objects. "I want you to take one of Kenji-han's legions-the Fifth shall do, I think-and bring the captives with you to Avaro-han's camp over the river. Arrange to have them sent on from there to Argus, where there should already be some slave traders waiting to buy them and have them shipped off. I shall prepare letters to inform my banker's representatives here on how to handle it, so you can simply send those over to Argus as well."

Her legate nodded.

"I am allowing you a slower march than usual," she went on, "to

allow for the fact that you shall have an entire cavalcade of prisoners walking with you. However, I still expect you to make it to Avarohan's camp by early May, provided you leave in the next few days."

*Of course*, he thought with an inward sigh: to Shizuru Fujino, a slower march than usual was actually about the same pace as a truly "usual" march for any other commander. Not that he really minded, however. Now that he had seen how effective her ruthless speed was, he was pleased to do all she ordered. And though he probably would not be able to admit it aloud to his brother and the rest of his senatorial clique later, he was enjoying himself under her command, finding it more thrilling than anything he had yet done.

"They're going to go for a fat price," he observed, thinking of those twenty-four thousand prisoners being auctioned off. "It's been a while since we had a proper war, so we've not seen this many slaves for sale in a while around Our Sea. The demand's been a bit higher than the supply for the past few years."

Shizuru smiled at him.

"True," she said. "Slave prices may go down a little in the future, as we shall be getting even more throughout the course of this war, but I predict they shall stay up for quite a while yet. From what Shizuma told me, several of the other provincial governors-Asia Province comes to mind-have been demanding more soldiers for their garrisons of late. Some of our other territories seem to be getting their share of threats these days."

He frowned. "But if those threats break out into conflicts too, wouldn't that have the potential to drop the slave prices as well by providing more sources for captured slaves?"

"Only if they develop into wars and only if the other governors are as successful," she said, her tone obviously implying she thought both unlikely. Had Keigo not seen her in action in the past few months, he might have been annoyed by her easy dismissal of the other governors, but he had spent enough time with the woman now to see from where all those mountains of confidence arose.

"Even should those conditions come true," she said, "I do not think

you shall see them realised in the next year just yet, at least from what I know about the territories in question and the people administering them. Which means that able-bodied men and women are currently being siphoned out of Hime by her territories through the military conscriptions-our recent ones included-such that there are going to be fewer and fewer labourers at home for the industries, fields and farms. Result? Hime is going to not just want but actually need more slave labour. So you see, I shall have technically fuelled as well as filled that demand. That may develop into an issue later, once the wars are over and legions start coming home, but it should be easily remedied with the right legislative action."

"I see," he said, impressed by her economic acumen and uttering a silent apology to his brother and other conservative friends for it: but it was so hard not to be impressed by the woman! "It's amazing, though, that we got this many without even having to fight. I admit I'd never have believed you if you'd have told me this could be done, Fujino-san. Well, most of the things you've recently shown me can be done haven't been the easiest things to believe, in all honesty. I was even sceptical about this latest trick until the last moment. So much about war is about deception, though, isn't it?"

"As it is in politics," she chuckled. "Thank you, however."

"For what?"

"For never questioning me even when you were sceptical of my orders."

They looked at the sorting of the loot again.

"What should we do after the slaves have been sent off to Argus?" he asked.

"Join forces with Avaro-han and come back here. I expect both of you here in Asterion by June."

*Another furious march.* "Will you be here?"

"No," she answered. "I am going to cause a little more mayhem around this region to distract their central bases once you leave, and

then I shall head over to Shizuma's camp."

"Fujino-san!"

They turned to the call and saw a woman trotting towards them, hands lifting the hem of her dress above her ankles so that she could jog faster. Keigo heard the air puffing through his commander's nose at the sight and sucked in his lips to try and prevent his smile.

"Good day to you, Harumi-san," he said once the woman had reached them.

Harumi patted down her cloak and dress and self-consciously smoothed a palm over one side of her head to make sure her hair was in place.

"Good day to you too, Kurauchi-san," she returned. "And you, Fujino-san. Everything went beautifully today, didn't it?"

Shizuru gave her a smile.

"Yes, it did," she said. "Thanks to your help and that of all the other citizens of Asterion."

"Oh, we were glad to do it! Those boors would have as soon killed us as saved us from so-called 'invaders' if they thought it would be amusing."

Shizuru hummed and nodded. It was Keigo who answered her with actual speech.

"We'll be seeing you at the dinner Ertiyala-san is giving tonight, Harumi-san?" he enquired.

"I wouldn't miss it!" she said, with a glittering flutter of her eyes at the woman standing by Keigo's side. "I hope I can sit beside you later, Fujino-san. I heard that you were quite a lover of poetry and I thought I might discuss it with you then."

Again Shizuru gave her a smile.

"That sounds lovely, Harumi-han," she said. "I fear you might find my knowledge of poetry disappointing, however, as I might not be as versed in it as you may have been led to believe. Besides, I very much doubt the others attending the party shall find it as scintillating a topic as someone with your learning would, so we might ostracise them by discussing that then."

"Oh, pooh on them! Or we could simply talk about it over dinner at my house one evening. I daresay you might find my library interesting, and you could give me opinions on the local poets there too. I have copies of all the most popular works."

Shizuru sighed expressively and made an excuse about needing to check on something before walking away, actually intending to go to the town's main commercial street to see if there was anything worth bringing back for her girl. Her legate stayed behind to give the thwarted Harumi a helpless smile.

"A word of advice, Harumi-san," he said. "The general has someone waiting for her back home."

The woman lifted her brows at him and he reflected, not for the first time, that she was actually quite handsome. The Asterion local had large blue eyes and masses of thick auburn hair, and her face was a heart-shaped, well-formed one that actually suggested that she was noble, which she was. If his general had been rejecting all her blatant invitations all this time it was not through any real embarrassment in her form, he thought, but simply due to the fact that all these virtues still did not quite put her in the league of her competition.

"That never stopped anyone before," she told him now.

"It will stop you, trust me."

"Well!" She frowned, looked put-out but not devastated. "It's a girl, of course?"

"Yes."

"She's not married, though," she said with a note of triumph.

"No, she's not."

"Then there's still hope. Besides, all people are faithless lovers sooner or later, Kurauchi-san. It just takes time."

Keigo chuckled at this and explained, upon receiving a questioning eyebrow, that he was of the opinion this did not apply to the case at hand.

"Somehow, I don't think either Fujino-san or her girl count as 'people'," he laughed, mystifying Harumi even more before he also walked away and left her alone himself.

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When the Lupine Division was training, it often cleared its chosen training ground of people without intending it. The troopers had a reputation for getting energetic and the division's trademark weapon was known for whizzing perilously near bystanders' heads during their sessions; though no actual accidents had yet been recorded, the mere breath of that paw shooting past one's ear was sufficient argument for most onlookers to clear out of the environs in moments.

So when the Polemarch of the Otomeians came for her inspection of the troopers one chill day in the winter of Shizuru Fujino's alpine march, she was one of the few observers present. Joining her were three of the most important of the Lupine officers, the only ones excluding themselves from organisation of the current exercise. The rest of the officers were right up against the fray, barking and snarling at any of the troopers they thought not pulling his weight. Since the exercise was for the division's latest draftees-and since it was common knowledge in the army that a draftee was never considered to pull his weight for at least the first few months of his service-there was a lot of barking and snarling taking place.

As for the trio of officers not involved in this harassment of the recruits, they were also observers today, though not of the troopers themselves. Rather, all three were observing their polemarch-princess, who sat primly on a stool they had fetched for her and had her own gaze on the exercises. She and her fellow observers were

silent: the quartet neither spoke nor looked away from their respective subjects. The only sound was from the whooping troopers and their steeds, and from the snapping, scowling cavalry officers telling the sweating troopers to *Move, damn it, or you'll be snorting mud!*

The princess herself appeared too fixed on the activity to pay any mind to the three officers watching her, but she was in truth very aware of their eyes. She knew it was less eagerness to see her reaction than routine that kept them looking: her officers had already spent years of doing it and could no longer kick the habit. It had started from their paranoia over her welfare when she first joined their ranks-she learned about it only later in her command, but the leaders of the Lupine Division had apparently been threatened with execution if they failed to keep the last royal Ortygian alive in her first battles as a young trooper-and it had been encouraged over time into dependence due to the style of leadership she had long employed with them, where she delivered commands as much with her eyes and body as with her tongue. They had simply grown so used to looking over and to her, she knew, that they were hard-pressed to stop it now.

This was the very logical explanation she gave her lover when that woman had remarked on the fixity of the Lupine troopers' gazes on herself. Shizuru had accepted it as a sound answer; however, the Himean had also taken care to point out that said logical explanation passed over the adoration that was also present in the stares, almost as if dismissing the emotion aspect of their motivations from the theory. Natsuki had admitted the justice of this criticism-albeit not without gentle protestation that she had not *explicitly* dismissed emotion. She was fairly aware of her troopers' emotions, she contested, and never considered what she knew of them irrelevant.

Those notes had been exchanged after an observation not unlike the one taking place at the moment: but that earlier one had been conducted by Shizuru herself, who had come one day to view the Lupine Division's exercises. She had actually obtained permission to do so from the polemarch, asking if she could escort the girl to the location and observe the Lupine Division's recruits during their training at least once, some days before she had left to go on her

mountain march. Her request had been phrased so gently, with a hint of timidity that Natsuki had found uncharacteristic enough to merit curiosity.

"If it pleases you," Natsuki had said to the request, pushing herself up to stare at the Himean on whom she was resting. It had been very early in the morning when this conversation happened and they had still been in bed. "You are my commander still, Shizuru, even if I am now Polemarch. You need not ask. You need only tell."

Her commander had smiled.

"With anyone else, I would," had been her response. "But I do not wish to step on your toes, Natsuki."

"With your big feet."

She was literally spanked for it, the older woman's hand coming down on her rear with a smack and causing a squirm.

"Oh, your cheek! But yes, unfortunately, that is indeed what I mean."

"That you have big feet?"

"Do you want me to spank you again?"

She asked what Shizuru had meant.

"I do not want to intrude on your fief, so to speak. I may be your commander but everyone in this camp knows I am more than that for you-and we already know some are not inclined to thinking well of our relationship, even among your people."

"The same goes for your people, Shizuru."

"So it does, dear. But you are the subject here, not I. And I do not want to injure you out of my own wilful recklessness."

"You think I could be injured if you come to see my troopers at work?"

"Let us simply say that I do not wish to impose myself on the



situation carelessly and harm your dignity in the process."

"My dignity is never harmed by your presence."

"How sweet of you to say so. Very well then. Still, I do wish you would appreciate my asking you for permission first instead of pointing out its non-necessity due to my rights as the commander of the army. It's unromantic, *meum mel*, and perhaps slightly inconsiderate of the one romancing you . "

"Do I harm your dignity with my lack of consideration, Shizuru?" she had asked then, laughing.

"No, darling, but you do injure my ego."

Which had prompted Natsuki to laugh again, as she considered Shizuru's ego so monumental it was already beyond casual injury. Natsuki liked the high points of pride in the other woman, finding them as appropriate as they were charming. Shizuru's attitudes generally had reasons, she thought, and when the reason for your self-confidence was as great as the woman's, it was only to be expected that you would have a healthy regard for yourself. Indeed, the woman's self-confidence was so deuced assertive that it even made you feel silly for worrying about her during some trial, on occasion!

That reminded Natsuki: she had to ask her servants if all the sacrifices she ordered had been made already. Having them finished earlier was better, naturally, although she was not opposed to a bit of delay if it only served to enhance the sacrifices' preparation and contribute to their propriety. One had to be certain that the right offerings went to the right gods because the deities were finicky creatures. Perhaps she should go ahead and double the offerings to the gods of war and triumph? Yes, and send for one more calf to be sacrificed to the altar of Shizuru's ancestress. Shizuru might laugh at her many precautions were she to learn about all of this, Natsuki supposed, but that was fine: what mattered was that the woman would be blessed by enough fortune to laugh at all, even if Natsuki had to be the object of said woman's amusement.

She emitted a long exhalation, her three officers perking up at the sound.

"Better," she pronounced, which caused all three to frown. They knew that she saw a difference between something that was better and something that was *good*.

"They're still learning, Captain," Kyo offered, only to receive a sharp look. He caught himself and amended the title: "Polemarch. They're still learning, Polemarch. Please pardon me, Natsuki. I'm still getting used to it."

"As am I," she told him.

"We need to get them into even more skirmishes with enemy cavalry to make proper Lupine troopers of them."

"Mentulaean cavalry are a poor standard against which to measure ourselves."

"Then what are we to do?" said another of the officers. "We already have them sparring with each other and against the enemy when opportunity allows it. What more is there here?"

The green eyes turned to the one who had asked the question.

"A lot," she said. "This is not pushing, Zofel. You have them fight each other or each other with the veterans distributed evenly between sides. What in this is a challenge?"

"Then what must we do to make it more challenging?"

She mulled it over for a few seconds before answering, flicking her black hair out of the furred ruff of her cloak.

"Put all new members together instead and collect the veterans in the opposing team. Have them use only the daos."

Her officers digested the idea.

"Excuse me for saying so, Natsuki, but that doesn't sound like a match to me," said the last member of the trio to speak, a blonde

who had a look of the Kruger brood about her. As well she might: her father was the king's half-brother. "If we put the veterans into one group and the tyros in the other, it's an inevitable conclusion which side will see victory. Especially if we forbid them from using anything other than the daos in the skirmish! It won't be fair."

"This war is not fair, Arania," was Natsuki's retort.

She tilted her face to the sky and shut her eyes with a look similar to that of a basking cat. Yet the sun was already dying in the west and could not truly reach her through the clouds.

"Do you think our division great?" she asked Arania, face held up that way and unreadable.

"The greatest in our nation," Arania told her.

"This is known." Natsuki's eyes opened again, sliding to fix her very distant relative with a meaningful gaze. "And our greatness is our ability to always match the odds, no matter how unfair the measure."

She then transferred her attention to her humming pet, bending over to catch its black head in her hands. It sniffed her jaw noisily and she smiled.

"I give the parameter on what weapon may be used for a reason," she said, dropping a kiss on the big cat's nose. "See their timidity. That is fear of the daos. They fear what it can do to them even when they are the ones wielding it."

"With good reason," Arania said, tapping her right ear. Kyo and Zofel smirked at their comrade, knowing the crescent of missing flesh on it had been lost in a mishandling of the daos when she was younger.

"Yes," their polemarch allowed, her eyes smiling as well. "But also only within reason."

Kyo grunted; the princess's mind was set.

"I understand," he said. "It will be done."

"Good," she said.

"Which paw of the daos should we have them use?"

"That is your decision, Captain."

He shook his head and looked put out.

"I just can't get used to it," he told them.

They all grinned at him, Zofel patting his back.

"You can," Natsuki told her subordinate. "You shall."

She took a quick breath to brace herself, then got to her feet. The weight on her left side was distributed between her walking stick and the prosthetic buckled to her left knee. She was still getting used to the latter, even if she showed no actual struggle, and the newness of the object to her was betrayed in the long pause she took once she was off the stool. The trio she was talking to-as well as some of the officers directing the training-watched her intently, their jaws tightening. They knew of the prosthetic, naturally, though it was almost entirely concealed by her dress. The three surrounding her were the only ones who could see the brown tips of several beautifully carved toes poking out of one of her sandals and beyond the hem.

"Whom have you deputed," she asked, her big cat slinking against her, "for later?"

Kyo rattled off the names he and the other two had settled on.

"Good," she said, and gave them the hour and prearranged location; they all knew these details already, but she repeated them anyway for confirmation. "Prepare."

"I'll get on it," said Kyo.

The trio bowed and she made to leave.

"You do that," she heard Arania say to the other two just as she was about to walk off. "I'll walk with you into camp, Natsuki, if you don't mind the company. May I?"

Natsuki lifted an eyebrow at the request but nodded anyway.

"Where's Zidek?" Arania asked once they were off, referring to the hulking Otomeian who had been serving as Natsuki's attendant and "body-carrier" for the past weeks. "Why didn't he come with you today?"

"He is on an errand," the polemarch answered. "What is yours?"

"The new senior legate," Arania said instantly.

"You wish to speak with her?"

"Of her."

Natsuki nodded.

"There are some worries among the others," the fair-haired woman expanded. "We've not had a lot of time with her, and no real battles yet, so there are still more questions than answers. She seems to be fine so far, but you would know her better than we do. How does she compare to the previous senior legate?"

She glanced at the younger woman's feet as the latter frowned at the query. She slowed her steps another half-beat after confirming Natsuki's pace, bringing her eyes back up quickly.

"Imprecise," the cool voice was telling her. "There were two previous senior legates, and comparisons can be made on too many levels. The walk is not long enough."

"Please excuse me. Compared to Seigo Ushida and on the subject of our treatment."

"Better."

They walked two more steps in silence before Arania realised that the response to her clarification was in fact the answer to the question itself.

"She's Shizuru Fujino's immediate cousin, isn't she?" she said then.

"Mmm."

"They're not very alike."

Natsuki withheld a smile and hummed again.

"They say she's a great womaniser, too."

"Is there a reason you offer me these opinions on the senior legate, Arania?"

Arania released her breath noisily.

"Small talk, Princess Natsuki," she said. "Even all the time you've spent with the Himeans hasn't made you any better at it, I see, if you will excuse the joke."

This time, Natsuki let her smile develop untrammelled.

"Small talk," she said, "is often a size larger than it appears. Come to your point."

The other woman nodded and delivered an apology.

"Is she trustworthy in battle itself, Natsuki?" she asked, abandoning the extensions of the conversation that she had been planning. Natsuki might still be smiling, but Arania did not want to give her any cause to drop that expression. That was one of the interesting things about their Ortygian princess: she was not always opposed to prevarication and could display a near-foreign tolerance for it at times. Yet she was still someone who loved precision, and was best heeded whenever she indicated she wanted it served to her immediately. She was just, yes, and kind too, even, as well as bizarrely compassionate in certain ways; despite that, she could be as pitiless as she was proud. This with her power meant that she would not hesitate to make you bleed if she thought you were making her wait for something just out of insolence. And though Arania had absolutely no intent of being insolent, she knew that the princess was acute enough to sense when a conversation's loops were premeditated, and might just read that as a form of insolence one way or another.

"In the last battles where they used us, we were turned into living bait," she said, turning her head so she could look at the princess as they walked. "We lost many. Numer's wife was one of them." She was referring to the spouse of her dearest friend, a woman who had been a friend as well. "And he was not the only one made a widow, even just from among our ranks. We lost so much, Natsuki, without a need to. We were just used badly, and that was the problem. There's also the return of Princess Alyssa and her new involvement in the war: had we been under her leadership instead, it would be safe to say we'd not have been used as badly as we were. Unlike our infantry comrades, though, we can't go to serve directly under her. We all know the Himeans will keep the horse- *our horse*, in particular-close to them because they want the strongest cavalry to be with their armies and not those of their allies. Can you blame me or any of the others for feeling worried?"

Natsuki nodded, and Arania saw that she was not yet able to wipe away the upturned crumple of her brows at the inner corners, her grief at the losses among her troopers still too thick to be folded away so easily. Yes, she was indeed compassionate, their poor princess. And she too had been used so badly!

"You ask a complex question still," said the polemarch, sadness in her voice. "We are auxiliaries. This means we tend to go last in the rewards and first into the battles. However, we are also valuable auxiliaries, as even the Himeans know now that we are the most valued of the royal military. Furthermore, we-no, *you* are under my command, and I am polemarch of the army as well as *thuh - thuh - the mistress of the Himean commander.*"

Both she and Arania bit on their tongues after the last comment, it being the first time Natsuki had ever avowed this point of her status so frankly with any of her subordinates. Neither looked at the other for a few moments after that as well, choosing to look at the frozen road they trod instead.

"Consider these things," Natsuki concluded. "They are factors in the answer."

Arania chewed on her tongue a little more.

"Yes, they would be normally," she said eventually. "Will they matter to this senior legate?"

"You think her to be unmindful of such things?"

"I think her-compared to the ones before, at least-a little different. I'm not sure how. But isn't she?"

The other huffed a cloud of breath.

"Yes," said Natsuki. "She *is* a little different."

"In a good way or a bad way?"

"Both. Relative to your query, time will tell."

"That's not all that reassuring."

"We are of the Lupine Division. For us, life is never all that reassuring."

Natsuki stopped walking and leaned on her walking stick, the long fingers of her hand folded around its curved end.

"There is my destination," she said, indicating the command tent now only some metres away from them. "You may go. I can walk unattended, though you all refuse to listen when I say it."

"I never intended to make you think that, Polemarch," Arania replied with a sombre face. "I didn't come with you with any ideas of assisting you. I walked with you only so you could assist *me*, and so I could talk to you just now about my and the others' fears."

"Yes, and your fears were very small," the polemarch said, shaking her head at one of her most loyal officers. "You are a bad liar, Arania, and you do not know how to make your talk big enough to be convincing. But I thank you still. Now please leave."

The other woman bowed and did as ordered, though she lingered in her steps enough to see Natsuki finally enter the Himean command tent. Natsuki felt her subordinate's eyes boring into her back as she went but chose not to shoo Arania away again. She understood that



the woman was only suffering from the same worries that afflicted her other troopers, who, though they refused to say it to her face, constantly fretted over whether or not she was truly strong enough to walk about this way without accompaniment again and all other things to do with her general safety. In some ways, she thought, they were as silly as Shizuru herself. There were so many silly people around her-this injury of hers had demonstrated it-but how much she loved them!

Fresh events had cast them to light beyond all possible ignorance, she supposed. Take that recent incident involving the Lupine troopers and some members of Alyssa's infantry army. Before the Princess Alyssa had taken Otanara and the Otomeian foot at Sosia away to the borders, a dispute had arisen between several infantry soldiers and the Lupine cavalry. Apparently, a number of people from different companies of the Otomeian army had been drinking to pass time in their camp. As often happened when soldiers had a drinking party, some careless talk had developed a dispute. This dispute had been a grave one, however, and not the sort to be forgotten once the alcohol had dissipated.

The subject had been the Princess Natsuki's return to the Himean commander's hands. The problem came because liquor had loosened tongues enough for some soldiers to go where most did not, at least not aloud: three of the infantry made salacious and contemptuous remarks on the Princess Natsuki's scandalous record of bed-bounces in recent time, from her hop into the bed of the Red-Eyes then into the late Legate Himemiya's and back into the former's bed again.

When Natsuki found out about this incident, it was much later, well into her recovery already and after Alyssa's departure with the Otomeian foot. She did not suffer as much pain as others might have expected upon learning of the bawdy insinuation that had started the matter, having been aware of that popular suspicion herself. Indeed, she had known it long before and had even predicted it to herself: it was perhaps only natural, she had told her late Himean friend, that she would be suspected of playing whore-mistress to the next woman to share her tent after having so famously done the same for another. Even now it made her smile to

remember how it was Suou who had grieved for her, offering again and again to transfer quarters elsewhere if it would in any way help her reputation. She had declined for two reasons. First, because Suou was someone she liked to have around. Second and more importantly, because the damage had already been done and the proposed activity promised no mitigation. And as for challenging the suspicion in public, what would that do? Merely acknowledge it and possibly even fan the fire.

So Natsuki was calm in her treatment of this suspicion held by some of the auxiliary, especially those who did not know her as well as her troopers did. The problem was that her troopers proved to have less temperance than their politically-astute commander. After challenging the loose-tongued soldiers from Otanara's army to retract their vulgar accusation and being denied, they had demanded satisfaction in the traditional way.

As Otanara had been reported to say after the fallout, it was only indicative of how mind-addled the three infantrymen were that they had not backed down when given the chance. The Lupine Division was the elite of the royal military, and that adjective was applied to its members not because of their lineages or those of their officers. These were people chosen from the outset because they lacked fear in battle and showed more promise than anyone else: and after they entered the division, they were trained still harder than anyone else. It made things worse that this particular collection of them had also been observed to have a bizarre obsession with their commander. Other Lupine Divisions had been loyal too, it was remembered, but not as focused on their captain as this bunch obviously was. Whether the reason for it was their commander's identity, her personality or her skills, no one outside of the group could settle on a firm answer: the simple fact, which everyone did agree on, was that the Lupine Division was made up of suicidally-fearless fanatics with lethal skill sets. One simply did not tempt to argument people of such profiles.

It was no surprise that the challenged soldiers were corpses the day after the quarrel. It was no surprise either that vengeance was a privilege eschewed by the friends of the dead: the combat had taken place under the old laws and the outcome was considered valid by

most. Besides, anyone contesting it would likely only have added to the casualty count, given the temperament of the Lupine Division at that point (their former captain had still been bed-ridden at the time, and they had all been in dangerous moods as a result). Thus three deaths were all it took to settle issue nicely, and none of the Otomeian officers bothered to do anything after hearing of what had happened. This included the Princess Alyssa herself, who was heard to remark that she considered the outcome satisfactory.

For her part, Natsuki reserved her opinions on the incident. Her thoughts on it were many, though, as she considered it to have been her responsibility. It was astounding how many protectors she had, and she knew it was a failing not to have seen them as clearly before. Their presence was something that made her worry more than it set her at ease: when your guardians were the likes of Shizuru Fujino or the members of the Lupine Division, you had to worry greatly about the ramifications of nearly every act. To have so many fearless persons willing to kill for your sake meant that you had to shoulder the fear of someone actually getting killed for you each day, in a result whose chain of causes would likely lead back to you.

Words that Suou had once spoken echoed in her ear when she thought on it: *not my fault, but my responsibility*. For someone who had been deprived by fate of the duty-laden position she should have inherited from her parents, she was still a young woman with far more responsibilities than most would think. She was the Otomeian Polemarch, an adoptive princess of the Royal Kruger House, and ward to several hundred troopers who would insist on protecting her at the cost of their own skins. And, beside all these, she was also now a person who had to deal with two marriage proposals given at nearly the same time and by two rather awesome women. Choosing to accept either one would shake to pieces parts of her world and those of the people around her. Yet choosing to accept neither would likely result in similar tremors.

Growing up as she had, Natsuki had never really thought of marriage as an urgent reality. It was a distant option back then, not a likely one. She had known that she would have to confront it sooner or later, since she knew the king would likely make overtures at

some point to try and absorb her blood and everything that went with it into the Kruger dynasty. But in the grand scheme of things, she had expected this confrontation to come far, far later in her future.

Life could be very interesting that way, she thought wryly. When she had first contemplated the possibility of one day being persuaded to marry one of the king's issue, all she had hoped was that whomever he proposed would be not too embarrassing to her personal standards. She knew that admiration was not generally the basis of such arrangements, but something in her had still rebelled against the idea of taking someone uninspiring for a spouse when the need finally arose. If she had to marry at all, she would rather marry someone worth that commitment. In other words, she had hoped for someone *great*. That was because she herself had her share of this quality and greatness only ever really called out to greatness, of course; however, as she was her own harshest critic, she did not explain it thus and simply attributed that hope to the juvenile side of her person.

Well, she supposed her juvenile side should be satisfied now, at least. Now she had two marriage proposals from two of the greatest persons she had ever known, with one coming from a woman she loved more than should surely be safe for any mortal being. And the other proposal came from a woman she loved too, even if in a different way. Who would have ever imagined such a situation worrisome? Yet it was to her, and greatly so.

Oddly enough, it was the proposal from her lover that she found more surprising. While her cousin's had been a surprise as well, a moment's contemplation had worked quickly to reduce the astonishment. There were definite benefits to Alyssa in it, for one thing. It was not an unattractive arrangement to her either, from a practical perspective. Furthermore, Alyssa was the only one of the king's unmarried children whom she had considered capable of satisfying her standards for a spouse. She had simply never considered the woman in her hopes before because Alyssa had always seemed uninterested in such a union, even when the king had hinted at it jokingly in their presence. Ah, but Alyssa had been playing a game, Natsuki saw now. It was a game she herself understood fully.

That being the case, one could easily see which marriage would be more expedient from a simple view of her aims, which included protecting Shizuru as best she could from the odium their relation might breed. But again: that was from a simple perspective. On the whole, the Princess Natsuki did not favour them.

A more faceted vision, she thought, would reveal that it would not only be disrespectful to her older cousin and painful to herself to agree to the other princess's proposal but also monumentally hurtful to Shizuru. A little hurt Natsuki could have condoned if it meant she could spare Shizuru graver pain later. But to hurt the woman in a way that might be genuinely critical? Impossible. Natsuki would sooner cut off her remaining leg herself, and would not even spare a tear in the doing of it.

This was also why she had revised her decision not to go to Hime if Shizuru asked again. Among the many things she had discovered recently was that she had made that gravest of errors one could make with Shizuru Fujino. That is, she had underestimated the woman. Shizuru would truly dare all to get what she wanted, and she also made no bones any longer about the fact that Natsuki was one of the things she wanted. Want, Natsuki saw now, was different when it was from Shizuru. Perhaps it was due to the woman's ego, perhaps it was due to her compulsion to conquer whatever she set her mind to conquering-but whatever the case, Shizuru tended to need the things she wanted, or perhaps she even only wanted the things she needed. And one of those things was Natsuki.

This understanding made a part of Natsuki happy (though she felt some guilt over that, being her ever-guilty self), as its revelations gave her permission to do at least one thing she truly wanted, should opportunity for it arise again in the future. Even so, she had to think first on the matter of marriage, since she did not think the excuse she had just been given provided for that much as well.

Were her scruples on Shizuru's behalf not present, though, she knew she would have agreed to the proposal so fast she would have choked. What a proposal it had been! Passionate and possessive, a headlong dive into the kind of mind-numbing I-would-dare-all-for-you romance that nearly all girls dreamt of inspiring in their lovers. Listening to that splendid voice profess such adoration for her that

its owner deemed her a necessity for life already, Natsuki had been sent tumbling even deeper into love where she had thought further depth impossible. It had truly frightened her not at all when Shizuru had admitted to her the selfish and strange nature of this amour. Natsuki had spent so much of her life being held on the fringes: an outsider even among her people, a kind of anomaly tolerated and even revered in her community while still being considered an anomaly. Hence, to be encompassed and absorbed by someone she loved so much might even have been something of a relief.

" Ave, Natsuki."

She was in the tent; it was Shizuru's cousin who had just greeted her.

" Ave," she replied, putting her considerations on hold.

"Have a seat over there, please," Shizuma said. "I just need to finish talking to the centurions here."

Again she tilted her head, moving over to the indicated desk and seating herself on the chair drawn up to it. Her pet followed without needing to be told, spreading itself next to her seat and resting its head on her living foot. One of the servants in the room came to offer a drink at this point, but she waved him away. Natsuki waited in silence as was her wont, taking in the sounds all around the room as the officers talked and worked. She took in Shizuma's tone in particular as the woman addressed the centurions at her desk.

It was so, she thought after a while: Shizuma was truly a little different from her cousin.

Shizuma could be a nice person, for one thing, where Shizuru simply was. The senior legate was *charming*, Natsuki thought, but she knew that was different from being nice even if it could look the same. She wondered why: a possibility might be that the woman had been hurt before by being nice and was now wary of it. But that was only one possibility among many, so Natsuki did not place too much stock in that as an answer.

She clearly possessed a sharp intellect too, though Natsuki had not

seen anything from her yet to indicate that she could equal Shizuru's staggeringly colossal one. Also a little bit colder, more obviously withholding of herself than her younger cousin. But not to the point of being haughty with her subordinates, Natsuki could see. She still talked to the centurions with much the same friendly authority her cousin did. That was good. It was smart and Natsuki approved of things that were smart.

In fact, she generally approved of Shizuma. She even liked her. Part of what made Shizuma so easy to like was a matter of reflection, though: even if Natsuki easily differentiated the woman's face from that of her lover, she nonetheless acknowledged the presence of many other little curves and angles of countenance that the two cousins shared. Those similarities, tiny though they were, predisposed her to being instantly warmer with Shizuru's cousin than she naturally would be of others in the early stages of acquaintance. And little though she knew it, this actually helped the Himean live up to the expectations of said predisposition. As Shizuma tended to strike so many people as rakish or haughty from the start, and because her reputation as an inveterate philanderer often preceded her, she regularly ended up hiding the better side of her character from most people from the beginning, being a sensitive enough person to detect disapproving judgements even before they were voiced. Because she sensed nothing of that kind from her cousin's lover, though-and because warmth, no matter how deeply buried, still tended to recognise and respond to warmth-she ended up treating the girl with the kindness many others never had the opportunity to discover.

This outcome benefited Natsuki greatly, considering how much apprehension she had harboured over finally meeting one of Shizuru's relatives-and one Shizuru herself seemed to esteem highly, at that. Arania's concerns earlier had been valid, to some extent. There had been the added worry over how this new senior legate would perform, and whether or not said legate's opinions of Natsuki might have an influence on how her troopers and the rest of the Otomeian auxiliaries were treated. The Himean command was restructuring itself, and with the high likelihood of Shizuru being gone for stretches of time for her own marches and battles, Natsuki needed an ally more than ever. She had an excellent one not too

long ago, but that ally had been lost along with her leg and a part of her heart.

Ah, the accursed leg. Or perhaps it was better to say the accursed person. Natsuki reached out for her pet at the twist of anguish this brought to her belly, hugging the animal's furry head to her knees as she doubled over to find comfort in its purring presence. She still feared the possibility that she was a bringer of misfortune, worried even more now that yet another group of people she had loved had been slain around her. Her fear on this was ever-present, although it was being rocked by some powerful counterarguments at the moment-and ones brought to her by the two women asking for her hand, even.

The more moderate of the counterarguments came from the Princess Alyssa. From her had been the suggestion that there might be no more cause for Natsuki to hold on to her fears of being accursed: Alyssa's suggestion was that Natsuki's leg could have been taken as restitution for some of the past tragedy it had caused the first time it had been broken. That took some of the sting away from its loss too besides proposing to ease Natsuki's worries. If Alyssa was right, there was a possibility that the misfortune the girl feared to have been her companion all these years had finally been excised and could no longer harm those she held dear, severed from her along with that rotten leg that had once led to the deaths of so many.

Natsuki hoped so much for this that it was nearly a fantasy. That she did not classify it as one was because another, more fantastic idea had recently been presented to her-and by the one too for whom she feared most whenever she considered the possibility of being a bringer of misfortune. Shizuru's contention, as well might be expected, was the more radical of the two, an argument so wild and optimistic in Natsuki's eyes that merely to think of it often left her reeling so much she had to sit down.

"I do not deny that in your life you have seen great misfortunes," the woman had said, in a conversation sparked by her notice of Natsuki's worries over her 'unlucky nature'. "I do not belittle these misfortunes or their significance. Yet were you truly as hounded by misfortune as you fear, it seems to me that more of your ventures



would fail. But this is not the case, and many other ventures bearing your involvement have also seen success. In fact, from what I know of your military record alone, especially taken on the merits of *your specific ventures'* outcomes, success has far greater constancy than failure."

Natsuki had been confused, baffled by the direction her lover was taking.

"What is it that you are saying?" she had asked, only to be treated to an answer that would set off a small tremor inside her that would over the years slowly grow, morphing into a full-blown earthquake with time and in its maturity violently collapsing many of the things she had come to believe of herself for so long. But this tectonic shift would happen only much, much later in the future, and at the time Shizuru set it off with her answer, would begin only as a small shudder in her being.

"What if the gravity of the misfortunes you have seen has distracted us from the true common denominator regarding your fortune in them?" Shizuru had told her. "You have seen great trials, my love. I shall be first to admit it. Yet you have seen great triumphs too, and I would say even more frequently. Indeed, that is the point we should heed: that even in the midst of great misfortune, you can and do succeed. You have suffered losses too, of course, some of them unconscionable. Even so, this should not take our eyes away from the fact that more than once, you have managed to evade the most unconscionable of losses, which is the loss of life and all possibility of restitution for or improvement upon past failures. You have lived through the worst of situations, you have survived things many others would not and indeed have not lived through."

"Taking this logically recommends a different interpretation from that you hold," that beloved voice had concluded. "What if the misfortune was in fact borne by those around you, your presence the thing that was incidental? What if your only true misfortune was to have chanced to be around these other, unfortunate people? What if the reason you have survived so much that so many others have not is that your life strand is so strong and so cherished by the Fates that you have long been and are in fact a genuinely fortunate, powerfully lucky being?"

It was so subversive an interpretation of her life that even just to remember it made her heart still in her breast. Even now, her breath hitched. No one but her pet marked it, and the animal was quick to comfort her with a nudge to the belly. Natsuki caught herself, smiling down at the creature as if to reassure it that all was well.

But all was not well, she knew, and the still-nudging cat seemed to know it as well as she did. There were so many things shifting in her world of late, testing her adaptability while testing her iron at the same time. Even the thing she had thought to be most unchanging, her old sin, was being questioned. It was true she did not believe what Shizuru had said. Not yet, not really. But sometimes she thought about the possibility of it and would usually end up so rocked by the mere presence of another option in the reading of her history that she would plunge into deeper guilt than before, augmented by what she thought was her selfish try to grasp at something that could absolve herself. The deaths of her parents and people, the deaths of half of her beloved troopers, the death of a foreigner who had somehow become her dearest friend in the short time they knew each other-these were great sins, she would tell herself, and were surely not so easily absolved. And yet, that small but ever-growing echo of Shizuru's voice often whispered what if, *what if*!

"Well, that's done."

Shizuru's cousin had finished her work and was coming over. Again Natsuki put away her considerations, doing it with the swiftness of one merely opening one door and closing another. The Himean had something in hand and gave it to her. It was a slightly flattened bun, some sort of pastry. She smelled it and caught the scent of cheese and bay. Good scents. She sniffed again, more approvingly.

"*Libum*," Shizuma said, with a flick of the eye at the big cat's head now sniffing too at Natsuki's lap; she had already made her peace with the animal upon being shown how docile it was, but she was not above a cursory glance to check its docility on occasion. "The cooks made some today because I requested it. Try it, do."

Natsuki pinched off a piece of bread and started eating as the other woman ordered someone to bring over warm wine for them both.

"So why are you unattended today?"

Shizuma grinned at the silent look that was her response.

"I'm sorry, is it a sore subject?" she asked.

"No," Natsuki responded after swallowing the food in her mouth. "A common one."

"Very well, I suppose you have had enough of that then. So how are your troopers faring? Are your recruits up to your standards now?"

Another look from the girl.

"Dear me, I am clumsy-tongued today," the senior legate laughed. "Perhaps I should just have started off by asking how you are. How are you today, Natsuki? How do you find the weather? It's quite fine for winter, no?"

The girl chuckled.

"The recruits are better," she said, smiling up at the Himean and seeing the flashes of Shizuru again that predisposed her to better liking this woman. "And I am fine. Thank you for asking. You?"

"Good and good. *And* good, thank you for asking too. I do feel my nose a bit tweaked of late, though."

"You have, um, trouble?"

"I have, in a manner of speaking. Though some of the people in this room will likely tell me it's common enough in the army to be discounted as that," she said with a small grin at the two persons hunkered over a document at the nearest desk, both of whom returned her smile. "Fortunately, I can make the argument that I'm green enough a legate to pursue the matter yet. I think some of the junior purveyors of supplies are getting a bit heavy-handed with the bills, you see."

"Exaggeration?" Natsuki asked.

"I believe so. Now to be fair, I cannot complain that the quality of the

materials is embarrassing, so my officers have told me. However, I *would* insist that I can complain about these prices."

She chatted cheerfully with the girl over the issue, letting the other officers in the room get a word in every now and then and laughing at their jokes over what she should do with the purveyors whose bills she was questioning. No one but she and Natsuki understood that they were just passing time now, waiting for the signal to come for them to leave.

Near the time the senior legate's staff retired, the signal arrived. One of the Lupine Division's officers stood at the entrance. He exchanged looks with his Polemarch.

"An hour," Natsuki told Shizuma, who told the others to go after another turn of the glass, ordering the most senior tribune to be in charge. She and Natsuki left the tent.

"Let's go to my place first so that I can change." Shizuma paused to regard the girl, who looked up at her with large eyes that were rimmed with blackness. "You'd best show me how to do that to my eyes too."

They went and outfitted Shizuma accordingly, with Natsuki and her personal servant praising the Himean several times for her appearance in the Lupine uniform (which praise Shizuma received with great suspicion, given that those lauding her wore grins far too wide for her comfort) and then headed for the site of their purpose. As what was about to take place was clandestine and was unknown to anyone in the Himean camp save several of the Lupine troopers—the same ones who had helped to arrange it in the first place—and Natsuki and Shizuma themselves, the location was unassuming: the last in a row of heavy tents used for storage, so far back behind the other tents that people almost never even got to see it from outside. It had been cleared out of its contents surreptitiously and more fitting furnishings had replaced the sacks, crates, and barrels that had once been in it. The Otomeian polemarch and Himean senior legate were escorted into it by the trooper who had been leading them, and the two regarded the two large and handsomely-carved chairs that had been provided.

It was the polemarch who found a complaint. She turned to the troopers present and demanded that a pedestal or some other means of elevation be used to raise the seat she was going to be occupying, also stipulating that the distance between it and the other seat be increased by-she was very precise about it, as they knew she would be even before she spoke-two-thirds of a metre.

"My, my," Shizuma said after seeing what the girl had ordered of her soldiers in that gentle yet guttural language of theirs. "I confess I had not expected you to be so conscious of appearances, girl."

Natsuki regarded the senior legate levelly.

"I am not," she said. "But they are necessary sometimes, so your cousin said."

Two of her troopers stepped up to help her ascend the two steps up the wooden dais on which they had hurriedly put her chair. She seated herself gingerly and put her walking staff across her knees, resting both hands on the arms of the seat and seeming to be pleased.

"Is this particular appearance necessary today?" Shizuma asked, not at all surprised that the girl looked good on a throne. Indeed, the Otomeian looked as though she belonged on it. It was another sense in which she was a perfect match for her cousin, Shizuma supposed: that was another woman who looked as though she belonged on a throne, and whose demeanour only strengthened that opinion, unfortunately enough in her case.

"Yes," the girl said.

A few seconds of silence went by before Shizuma saw that she would have to ask it.

"Why?" she voiced out.

"To Mentulaeans, my people are, um... alien. Not truly unknown. But before this war, we did not often cross paths."

"And this resolves that how?"

"By presenting an image more familiar," the girl responded. "I have read-I hear such displays, they are normal to them. I try to make it easier for them to... hmm... to understand my position with this. Also, they know now because of the war the appearance of my people."

"You're concerned they shall doubt your identity because you're not the usual blonde and blue-eyed Otomeian they've come to expect by now?"

"Mm-hm. Also, I am not very warrior-like to see," Natsuki admitted. "My arms are thin still. I cannot even walk without my stick. This is not what people who expect display think to see of a polemarch."

She smiled lightly all of a sudden, as though she were remembering something that inspired fondness: her next words told Shizuma she probably had been.

"Shizuru, she can avoid the display sometimes because she alone is already a display. But I, as I am now? I seem feeble, I look weak."

"Looks can be deceiving," Shizuma murmured, a little moved by the self-critique; she knew how much physical strength mattered to the girl's people, who had a happy ability to produce hulking exemplars of it. How *did* they see this waif who was their polemarch besides being their princess? It was fortunate that her face at least made up for the deficiencies of her body: it was thin too, yes, but you still could not look at it without believing her related to either gods or kings.

"Still," the beautiful, feeble being was saying, "I must make the concession."

She then proceeded to pick at her dress, trying to make sure it was arranged properly over her knees. Shizuma smiled reassuringly once she was finished.

"At any rate, you look perfect for the part now," she said. "Though this must be the first time I've yet heard of a concession being the sort that gains one the elevation of a throne."

The girl on the throne tried not to smile.

"It is an irony, yes," she told Shizuma. "You do not appreciate it?"

"Oh, I do. More than most other tools of rhetoric, in fact."

"I worry you will not, um, appreciate what I ask next."

"What is it?"

"I ask of you not to disrupt once we begin," Natsuki said, smiling lightly and with apology in an effort to keep the Himean's hackles from rising: she did not know Shizuma well enough yet to know whether or not the woman would take umbrage at this, so she was worried. It only made it worse that the woman was her lover's cousin, as Natsuki wagered that the tremendous pride that often reared its head in Shizuru was something that ran in the family. She really would rather not butt heads with it.

"It is I they seek, our nation and not yours they wish to speak with," she continued, watching the shifting green patina on the golden eyes for a spark of danger. "I ask you to respect this, only, and not disrupt me. You may have your own time for - for interrogation after, I promise it. I shall yield her to you. But only after I have done. I ask only this, please."

To her relief, Shizuma nodded without rancour.

"Of course," the senior legate said, noting the girl's fingers as they relaxed from their tight grip on her walking cane. The girl understood Himeans fairly well, then; what a pity she did not yet understand that Shizuma was one of the better ones, who would not consider acquiescence to so reasonable a request as begging their pride. Even so, it was understandable. She could not fault the girl for having been anxious.

"Thank you," the polemarch breathed, before asking: "There is - is there anything you would ask me to say? To ask?"

Shizuma grinned.

"Why?" she said. "Would you actually ask or say it?"

"I will consider," the girl said earnestly and with charming honesty.

"No, I think I would rather let you handle this as you wish. As you say, I have time enough later for my own interrogation."

Natsuki sighed.

"So what time will they get here?" Shizuma asked.

Natsuki called in one of the troopers at the entryway and conferred with him.

"They are here," she said after the brief exchange. "My men wait only for my word."

"Speak it to them. Oh, wait first. What of your staff? You need not get up for this interview, anyway, so do you want me to take it for now?"

"No, I wish not to hide it. And my wooden foot is seen from this height, so it matters not if the staff is too. Also, if she gets angry and leaps at me, I will use it to poke her eye."

"Right, of course. Do not give the word yet, please."

"Why?"

"I need to laugh at what you said first."

Afterwards, when Shizuma's laughter had finally drained, the troopers brought into the room the person they had fetched outside camp and had been keeping hidden. This person walked in and stood in front of the chair indicated to have been provided for her, waiting for permission from the presence on the miniature throne before seating herself. She displayed remarkable composure when the big black cat prowled out from behind the throne and curled up at its mistress's feet, but she did look warily at the third person in the room: the very fair Otomeian who stood behind and beside the polemarch's throne.

The polemarch suddenly lifted the hem of her dress and showed off one of her legs.



"I am a cripple," she said in a low, memorable voice and in Himean. "I know you asked for only us to meet, Baroness Horyma of the Mentulae. But you see my situation. My attendant is for my safety."

The baroness smiled, recovering from the tiny shock the wooden leg had caused.

"I am sad to see you distrust me so much even before we start negotiation-this saddens me indeed," she responded, switching to Greek in the latter part of the sentence for the sake of showing the Otomeian princess that she knew that language. It was an extreme rarity among her own people, and it was part of the reason Horyma had been chosen for this parley: the Otomeians were known to prefer Greek to Himean, and the polemarch seemed to confirm that when she shifted to the Hellenic tongue as well, speaking more smoothly than she had in the other language.

"It was on account of your fellows that I am now void of symmetry," she said. "My precaution is justified, I think."

The Mentulaean bowed her head to the revelation.

"I've no doubt the polemarch has made my fellows pay for their offence," she responded.

"Not yet."

Horyma looked up.

"That limb once cost an entire people," the very young, very haughty-looking wisp on the throne said gently. "The same price may be applied to its loss one day."

The enigmatic remark confused Horyma, who lost some of the smooth confidence in her smile afterwards. She bowed her head again and took the two seconds that afforded her to school her expression once more.

"Just so, Polemarch," she said. "My purpose here is in fact to see if the price for that and this war may not be negotiated to something more preferable as well as beneficial. Not just for our people but for yours too."

The slightest cock of the head encouraged her to continue.

"If this war proceeds as it is, your side will suffer losses that may turn the aforementioned price of one people into two," she said with a carefully rueful smile. "Our king, His Majesty Obsidian of the Mentulaeen Empire, has sworn to call on every resource at his disposal to exact reprisal on the invaders. The king's resources are vast: they are worth an empire. For now, it is the Himans who gain his ire and whom he regards his bitterest foes in the matter of securing his dominion. The Otomeians, your own brave people, may yet gain his favour. And he is most eager to give it, if terms can be met here."

She paused, but the polemarch said nothing. Horyma tried to read the girl for a moment but caught nothing from the beautiful eyes- which were unmistakeably green, not the blue she had grown to expect from Otomeians by this point in the war. Actually, many things about the polemarch defied the stereotype and would have caused alarm had she not been warned by the Otomeian barons to whom she had sent messengers and who had helped her organise this parley. The big cat was only one of the things they had warned her about, although it had also been arranged as her surety that she addressed the polemarch of Otomeia and no one else: the polemarch, they had informed her, was the owner of this exotic beast. No one but the polemarch would dare keep it around without a leash.

The rest of the warnings had been on the polemarch herself and her appearance, and Horyma saw that the barons had been right to give her information on those things in advance. The polemarch was thin enough to be called frail and had very dark, very black hair that betrayed no highlights under the torches' illumination, as opposed to her powerfully-built and universally blond subordinates. She had a goddess's face, however. The Polemarch-Princess Natsuki of Otomeia was extremely beautiful, if sickly-looking, but Horyma admitted the latter could be partly an exaggeration of the dim lighting and the black cosmetic applied to the polemarch's eyelids.

That said, she doubted it an exaggeration to call the polemarch very young. The Otomeian looked as though she had yet to step into her twentieth year, and that had been another surprise. Despite that, the

polemarch conducted herself like someone who had more experience at these matters than her form suggested, showing only the faintest touches of wariness and curiosity in her face and nothing more. She was reserved and languid and as perfect in composure as the royal tutors often wished several of the king's children to be when they were deep in their cups and lamenting to the other members of court how difficult their pupils were. Well, the king's offspring were a spoiled, bratty lot. Something Horyma suspected for some reason that the Otomeian Polemarch never was.

"If you join with us and forsake the Himeans, the king will share the spoils of the war with your people," she went on. "Indeed, he offers more than that. He will send valuable treasures to be offered to the ruler of the Otomeians-with a special portion set aside only for the polemarch, of course, as thanks for brokering so beneficial an agreement between our peoples. As for the spoils from the Himeans, he offers land from the current Himean provinces. Sosia, for instance, may become your people's property."

"Sosia," was the whisper. "Not Argus?"

Horyma put on her most apologetic smile.

"The king has long desired a port province opening into the Himean Sea. But perhaps an arrangement for Otomeian usage of the port could be drawn up. Management of the port must be ours, however."

" *Must be ?*" came the soft voice, questioning the words.

"The king would prefer it to be so, although perhaps later talks may persuade him to reconsider his preferences to some extent. The king is a most reasonable man when applied to with the right sort of persuasion," Horyma lied, pleased at least that the Otomeian was showing interest in the idea. Again she paused, and again the polemarch stayed silent. She was beginning to see the foreignness in the young woman's conduct: were this parley taking place in the Mentulaean Court, she would be suffering interruptions and threatening remarks aplenty every few statements. The Mentulaean nobles were impatient and hot-headed, and it was not uncommon for them to interrupt subordinates and messengers to throw up an

often-unnecessary question or warning. Of course, they were also prone to interrupting subordinates and messengers to have them thrown the way of the executioner's axe, so questions and warnings were often generally regarded as welcome by comparison.

"As I mentioned earlier, His Majesty would also lavish gifts on allies," she said. "Wealth, jewels, gold-the fruits of our land to be presented to your sovereign in formal deputations expressing the king's gratitude. Special emphasis will be placed on the role the polemarch has played in facilitating this beneficial relationship between our nations, as I said earlier. In fact, the king will offer the polemarch special status as an honorary baroness of the Mentulaean Court, and grant her lands from within the empire too in keeping with that honour."

"The Himeans are a rapacious race," she followed, working to close her proposition. "Their greed ensures that not even allies are safe. We have heard that they have proven this before, with several of their allies in the past. Those were cheated out of their spoils of the wars in which they fought and the Himeans even forced them to pay tributes like land and wealth eventually, as though they were conquered peoples and not allied ones. One day their hungry gaze will turn even to your wealth and the wealth of your people. They will demand tithes and taxes as though you were theirs to milk and enslave. Already they attempt to enslave you to work for a war you did not even start! Even now, Esteemed Polemarch, you should already see their self-importance and insufferable arrogance."

"It is so," came the unexpected interjection. "Their arrogance can be insufferable."

Horyma noted that the polemarch's attendant-another goddess's face!-smiled at that.

"Then join with us," Horyma pressed, taking heart from the remark. "Forsake the Himeans and aid us in pushing them out of these lands. With our combined strength, Polemarch, we can take back the North and end their arrogance once and for all. We can drive out these intruders and foreign elements and regain the ascendancy of our peoples over this region."

She had said her piece and knew it was now the other's turn to talk. So she held her mouth shut again, this time with more expectation of the polemarch actually speaking to her.

"So," the dark-haired girl on the throne said, "you ask us to inform the Himeans that we no longer wish to be allied to them and then shift our support to you?"

Youth had to betray itself one way or another, Horyma thought. Her smile widened, took on the sickly sweet taint it had when she was forced to fawn on some privileged aristocrat above her in Court but not in intelligence.

"Actually, we would prefer you to support us secretly, Polemarch," she replied. "We feel it to be wiser."

The girl on the throne smiled sweetly back.

"I see now. You ask us to make an arrangement with you in secret?" she queried. "And ask us to break the one we have with them in like fashion?"

"That is so."

The polemarch's smile turned into a smirk.

"That only tells me you consider betrayal of a friend a trifling thing, Baroness Horyma," she said. "This counsels against the friendship you offer."

To be tricked by one so obviously younger than her did not sit well with Horyma, and it showed on her face for an instant.

"Not when ours would be a firmer friendship, Polemarch," she responded, recovering with the speed only a true courtier had. "We have a firmer, more lasting base for our alliance if only because its foundation would be a stronger cause: that of securing the integrity of the North. The Himeans do not belong here, unlike us. They are strangers who have come to intrude on our ways and colonise lands that were never really theirs to begin with, wresting them from local peoples who have lived here for ages before their own ships sailed to the shores of Argus. They are outsiders, in other words. If we, the

true northern peoples, come together, we can repel these intruding foreigners from the north and take back what is rightfully our own. We can-

"Baroness," interrupted her auditor, raising a hand with the palm out. "I have heard enough. I have an answer."

Horyma quieted, hoping anxiously that the Otomeian would reward her with a positive response. The polemarch dashed Horyma's hopes to the ground with her next words, however.

"You ask us to make common cause with you," said the polemarch, whose face was suddenly looking haughtier by the second. "But all I have seen and heard advises me we have nothing in common."

"On the contrary, Polema-

"Am I finished, Baroness?" the polemarch demanded.

Horyma supposed she was not, and delivered an apology hastily.

"You hold to no oaths," the Otomeian continued, eyes narrowed; it was clear that the interruption had annoyed her. "You cleave to no promises. And your king is a man who once threatened to murder an enemy commander while under sacred terms of parley... then ran off chastised after the one he scolded him as one does a mere brat. This is the man who promises us so much? How does one trust promises from so ignoble a personage? You appear not to know us, Baroness. We Otomeians place not our faith in those who trade in the language of perfidy. Or the actions of cowardice."

Horyma swallowed at the scathing words, losing her smile.

"You do me a disservice by insulting my people and my liege so, Princess," she said stiffly.

"As you do me one by thinking me willing to play traitor." A look of frosty contempt followed the remark. "As well as to think my people capable of the same cowardly disloyalty that is becoming the mark of yours."

"I would have a care, Polemarch," Horyma warned. "You may find

yourself regretting those words very soon. The tide is about to turn, and it will swallow the Himean side whole. You do not have to be among those drowned, but you will be if you fail to take advantage of this opportunity you are currently squandering."

"The quality of Mentulæan threats still fails to impress."

"That may change in the future when you have seen some of them realised. Please reconsider! I beg of you, for all our sakes, so that we may have fewer casualties in this war."

"I doubt that claim. I think the rebelling tribes of your empire's northern frontier would as well."

"Barbarians, nothing more! They are not on par with our peoples, Princess, and deserved every chastisement we gave them."

"For fighting chains you forced around their necks? Are they not also peoples of the north?"

"They are, in a way. But not peoples of the Mentulæan-or Otomeian-calibre."

"So you claim that some peoples are better than others."

"Of course. Just as a Mentulæan will always be a better friend than a Himean."

"Just as a Mentulæan will always be better than an Otomeian in your eyes, I know. Even my wooden leg itches. No part of me inclines to trusting you."

"Princess, please thi-!"

"Enough! You have my answer."

Horyma had been drawing up straighter and straighter in her chair throughout this exchange, and now she regarded the Otomeian noble with similarly rising suspicion, a prickly fear lifting the fine hairs on the back of her neck. It was time to make a retreat, before this apparently unpredictable princess got any ideas of doing something to her.

"Is there nothing at all that may make you reconsider your decision?" she asked. "Can nothing be said or done that would prompt you to think twice on the value of what I am offering?"

"Nothing."

"Not even ownership of Argus and partial ownership and management of its rich ports, perhaps?"

"We are not a seagoing people," the girl sniffed. "What do we care for Argus?"

Time to retreat indeed. Horyma bowed her head in defeat.

"Then, if such is truly your final answer, I shall take my leave now, Polemarch," she said, preparing to escape.

"You shall stay."

The hairs on Horyma's neck shot up like spikes.

"The princess has more to say?" she asked guardedly, anxiety boiling in her stomach.

"No," the polemarch told her. "But you do."

The suggestion was clear. Horyma looked around them. There was still only the other Otomeian, the beautiful whitish-blond one. She supposed the others were all outside, though, and waiting for her.

"The king will mark my absence," she protested.

"That is good. It shall give him our answer to his proposal."

Then the girl said something in her tongue, which Horyma naturally did not understand. It could have been a name, for all she knew. But it was more likely a command, for five of the black-garbed soldiers that had brought her here materialised in the room immediately afterwards.

The polemarch had turned to the soldier who had attended her throughout the interview: the beautiful, snowy-fair one.



"You wish to ask something?" she asked this soldier in the Himean tongue.

"My questioning can come later," the woman replied.

"Where shall we take her?"

"I've had a place prepared; I've some legionaries waiting outside for it already. I daresay she should be quite comfortable."

The brief exchange and the smirk of the snowy-haired "attendant" gave the baroness to understand the trick: that woman was not an attendant and most definitely not Otomeian.

"You accuse me of perfidy but practise it yourself, Polemarch," she said. "Are you even truly the polemarch? And this woman is what, a Himean?"

"I am the polemarch, yes," the girl replied. "As to her being Himean, I did not say otherwise."

"You said she was your attendant."

"Did she not attend me?"

Horyma snorted with annoyance.

"Now you take me captive," she accused, not even bothering to shrug off the hand one of her captors had put on her shoulder. "You insult our king while claiming that rules of honour are paramount. How can abduction of an envoy in a parley be honourable?"

The camouflaged Himean had stepped closer and was about to snap something to her at this; however, the woman was stayed by the Otomeian polemarch's hand brushing her arm.

The polemarch thus made the reply to Horyma's accusation, the steadiness of her voice chilling the captive not even because it sounded consciously cold; rather, it was that it was so strangely unexcited in the midst of the excitement that Horyma knew her abduction was. This awful girl, the baroness thought, had veins of ice.

"This is not parley, Baroness," the princess said. "You came to us not with a white flag but with black words. You sought us not in the day but in the night. You are not an envoy of peace but... but one of treachery. Do not speak of insult; you have insulted us more than we have you. To an Otomeian, honour is everything. Your offer has presumed that we have none."

The baroness apprehended it now: this had been a futile attempt from the beginning. The polemarch and the silver-haired Himean, whoever she was, had met with her tonight only to effect capture. Indignant and enraged at having been so roundly deceived by a people making war with her own, she stripped off her courtly composure and adopted a snarl that revealed all the serpentine malice she often kept hidden for the sake of political cunning and survival.

"I see how it is!" she said. "This was a trick from the beginning. This meeting was a farce."

"As was your offer. You would have turned on us at the first opportunity." The large eyes narrowed. "You think me a fool, Baroness. Had your proposal been genuine, you would also have offered a marriage of alliance between one of your royals and one of ours. It is possible with me, even. But you had no intent of staying tied to us after the war, so you included no such proposition."

"If that is what you want, I can arrange for it to happen!"

"No, thank you, I would not deign to marry a Mentulaean. Nor would any of my cousins, I think."

"You, Polemarch, are a treacherous *cunnus*," Horyma spat, frustrated beyond belief.

"And your mother mated with a weasel."

After a moment where it seemed even the seething captive paused to consider the odd retort, Horyma drew herself up again and recovered her awful glare, dropping her voice to convey what she had to say in the most menacing tones possible.

"This is the height of barbarity," she started. "And one day, I predict even very soon, you will have cause to repine at your actions, Polemarch. You may take me captive now, but you-"

She was unable to continue, having been gagged by one of the soldiers at Natsuki's command. The girl looked over the now-silenced captive with what was obviously puzzlement written all over her young face.

"The defeated make speeches only in theatre," she said with a note of instruction, as if trying to explain to the woman something of which the latter must not have been aware. "This is not theatre."

At her behest, the baroness was finally taken away, all thunder and muffled mutters as her guards directed her. The party left two women behind, one of whom watched them go with tears of mirth in her eyes.

The chuckling woman stepped in front of the polemarch's chair.

"A weasel?" she asked laughingly, now speaking in Greek as well.

"She insulted me," explained Natsuki, looking both hurt and dignified.

"So she did. I admit that the Hellenic one is not a great language for insults. Still, you do not curse often, I take it."

Shizuma held out a hand to help the girl up just as more troopers entered the room and bowed to them.

"If they're here to assist you to your tent, do send them away," she proposed. "I can serve as your attendant for a while longer and shall bring you and your pet safely to your lodgings myself later. For now, I invite you to come and have a nice hot dinner with me-and before you protest, I already had the cooks prepare some dishes from the list my dearest, silliest cousin gave me detailing the things you like to eat best. Consider it a special dinner to celebrate tonight. I daresay we deserve it!"

Natsuki agreed.

"Now then, it went well, I think," Shizuma said once the troopers had left, bringing the chairs with them as well as the dismantled dais. She held out her arm and asked the girl to take it so that they could walk together. Shizuki padded next to her owner, brushing against the girl's leg every few steps or so. "Though you said this was not theatre earlier, you must surely admit it had a touch of the theatrical about it. That aside, what do you think of how this went?"

"Yes, it was not bad," Natsuki said. "Above all, it is good she came to see me."

"Well, that is what I meant. Because of their attempt at wooing your people over, we now have a possible source of valuable information in our hands. I'm quite sure we can manage to get more from her."

But Natsuki shook her dark head.

"It is good," she said, "that she agreed to come to me in particular, is what I intended to say. It gives us perhaps more, hmm, valuable information than we can get from her by interrogation."

"How so?"

"All the people in this camp and our army know I am your cousin's mistress," the girl said in her lovely, measured Attic. "If the Mentulaeans approach me, it signifies they have no agents among us. One would not consciously choose the enemy's mistress as the party to tempt into treachery."

Shizuma's steps slowed and she looked down at the girl on her arm, astonished.

"Were you not my cousin's mistress, Natsuki, I would now strive to make you mine," she told her.

"But I *am* your cousin's mistress," Natsuki responded after a cough, a nearby torch showing the blush on her cheeks. "And as I said, it is fortunate that all know it."

Shizuma smiled and looked up again.

"Yes," she said. "You are probably right about that."



## Chapter 63

*Tardy apologies to those who sent private messages for not replying, and my thanks to all those who sent greetings for the holidays. I have been unwell, as usual, but am now recovering quite nicely.*

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### **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Sagittarii** (L.) - quite obviously, "archers".

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### **Inter Nos II: Inde Ira et Lacrimae**

*par ethnewinter*

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Shizuru saw her mistress again on the ninth day of April, when she and a troop of riders cobbled together from members of the Ninth and its Otomeian cavalry contingent rode into the Himean headquarters near the river. Her first thought upon riding in with their escorts—they were accompanied by auxiliary scouts they had encountered in the last leg of the journey—was that all long-term base camps ended up looking like each other, regardless of location. Himean armies were always prepared to make a familiar home in a foreign land on campaign, and nowhere did it show so much as in their long-term base camps, which often turned into small towns in their own right.

It all began with the essential square layout, scaled up to allow for the presence of more than the normal number of legions and their supplies. You had proper stone houses replacing the usual leather tents, sturdy buildings intended for the officers' comfort during long campaigns. You had thicker-than-usual walls topped with a multitude of towers and battlements for added protection against

sieges. You had too the constant motion all healthy towns did, the people loading and unloading wagons in every open space, the incessant calls of slavers and purveyors, the warnings of riders weaving through the obstacles, and of course the coos of the camp prostitutes, who plied their trade by the gates. Seeing a male one trying to send a salacious invitation to her bareheaded Otomeian companions, Shizuru grinned hugely under her scarf. The lad would fare better targeting her people instead.

Her troop rode into the open courtyard of the camp, yelling for assistance with their mounts. These were not the horses they had used at the start of their journey: those had been exhausted long before and had been traded for fresh beasts at the outpost where they met their escorts. In a bid to arrive at their destination earlier, the riders had used the new horses even more ruthlessly than the previous ones, covering what should have taken at least two days of already hard riding in one. The animals they rode to camp were thus steaming with heat, trembling viciously from their heroic effort; all could see swift care was needed if they were not to become martyrs.

Shizuru dismounted with the rest, stepping aside when helping hands reached for her horse. Since she was so much taller than the rest of the Himeans in the group and since they all wore plain riding gear, they mistook her as an Otomeian first and paid her no mind, the first officers to arrive on the scene actually demanding of the other (clearly shorter and Himean) riders who was in charge. Shizuru pulled off her scarf at that, prompting cries of surprise and a scurry of people. She accepted a wineskin from one of the first to reach her.

"Jupiter, General, it's good to see your face around these parts!" he said, saluting. The man was one of her old centurions. "We got no messages of your approach though, if you sent any."

She wiped her lips with a thumb and handed back the wineskin.

"I sent none," she said. "Had that message been intercepted, we would have had to fight our way through the forces of Dis to get here."

She smiled at the others, waving a hand to indicate

acknowledgement of their salutes so they could drop them.

"I left Nakamura-han in charge of the Ninth and the other southwest legions-all's well on the Southwest Frontier, lads, so no worries," she said, slapping the centurion on his back. "About time I got all of you to work too, however, since I see you're all getting fat from laziness. Aren't you popping out of your cuirass yet, Araragi-han?"

There was a chorus of laughter and good-natured jeering at the centurion, who bared his teeth happily.

"Fancy myself about to pop out of it soon, General, so a decent workout'd be welcome, by god!" he said, patting his belly. "The husband would complain faster than fire if I came back chubbier than our pigs-might even send me back to the army until you whip me into shape!"

"I shall do my best to spare you from that fate, Centurion. The senior legate?"

"She rode out about an hour earlier, General. Went to do a survey o' the roadwork."

"When is she expected back?"

"Should be any minute now, General, but we can send word."

"Good. And the Otomeian Polemarch?"

Another centurion answered this time, another of her old boys.

"In the other camp, General," he said, pushing past some other soldiers to get nearer. "Want us to fetch her?"

"If you knew the lady in question, Horikawa-han, you would know that one does not presume to send just anyone to fetch her," Shizuru said, winking at him. "No, get me a fresh horse. That one shall die if it goes another step, poor animal, and I'd not impose on it any longer."

The order was seen to with the speed its giver merited: Shizuru was seated on a new horse mere seconds after her demand.



"I shall ride over there myself," she told them after ensuring there were people going to take care of the riders who had come with her. "Even a princess should not be too insulted if a commander is the one to fetch her, don't you think?"

"I think she'd be right flattered by it, General," one grinned. "We'll send for the senior legate."

"Simply inform her that I am here. We can find each other later."

She rode out of the crowd and the camp again and took the track towards the river. The bridge was not far and she a moment to inspect it. She saw with approval that the abutments had already been reinforced and made sturdier: that was good, since the river would be engorged soon by the fullness of spring. The ordnances too were suitably menacing, seemingly aimed her way once she stood on the bridge itself. The latter were seated on the battlements of the other, slightly smaller camp across the river, which was her destination.

When she entered that camp, she knew at once that no riders had managed to go ahead yet to inform people here of her arrival: her entry broke the banality of the bustle near the gates. There was a stir when the first person to recognise her pointed her out and many of the people who approached her wore astonishment on their faces.

"The Polemarch?" she called, smiling broadly to let the people around her know not to worry over her sudden appearance: she did not want them interpreting it as portent of some disaster. Several voices answered her question, informing her that their polemarch-most of the inhabitants of this camp were Otomeian-had already retired to her lodgings. These were situated at the centre of this camp, just as Shizuru knew her own quarters would be waiting for her at the centre of the other.

She was not surprised by that parallelism: or not that much, she thought. Still, it was an interesting point, as it revealed the authority her girl held among the Otomeians now that she was polemarch. She held the distinction of being their first polemarch, even, and that alone would keep her name living forever in their political history.

Fitting, in Shizuru's estimation. Her girl deserved no less.

Suddenly she thought of the woman who had created the title and position, the woman who was at once ally and rival. This woman was the force responsible for clearing the riverine Mentulaean territories and outposts near their base camp, playing a pivotal role in assuring the base camp's safety. This area of operation meant that the woman had to be staying nearby even now, if not in one of the twinned riverside camps themselves. Her lips thinned at the idea; Alyssa had surely been exploiting this easy access to Natsuki throughout the past months, probably trying to work on the girl to consider her suit instead of Shizuru's own proposal. Granted, Natsuki had promised that she was not considering the other princess's offer of marriage to her, but that did little to sweeten the sourness in Shizuru's mouth. Shizuru grudged Alyssa any time spent with her girl because she saw it as time stolen from her.

She rode straight down the road. Even though it ended up being occupied mostly by auxiliaries, the camp had still been built by Himean surveyors and architects, and with the explicit purpose of looking like a heavily fortified Himean base. Thus the layout followed the classic Himean one, and the commander's-or in this case, Polemarch's-quarters and other officers' houses were found in the innermost part of the square. The area holding the Polemarch's house, also known as the praetorium in Himean terminology, served as the central point where two main roads of the camp met: the *via principalis* connecting the gates of east and west, and the *via praetoria* connecting the gates of north and south. As these roads were perpendicular to each other, the praetorium in effect was the heart of a crucifix, accessible in a straight line from whichever gate one happened to use upon entering the camp.

Shizuru jumped off her horse once almost at her destination, ignoring the spatters of dirt this left on her calves. She led her horse forward the rest of the way and handed its reins to a servant when one materialised. He had chanced upon her while coming out of the very house she was paying a visit to, a bucket full of scrolls dropping from his grasp in surprise.

She rescued the scrolls from the muddy ground for him and handed them over as well: he bowed nearly to his waist in gratitude, knowing

as well as she did that his mistress would not have taken kindly to it had the books been ruined.

"Inside?" she mouthed, holding a finger beside her nose. The slave-who would know his mistress's lover anywhere-shut his mouth upon seeing what she meant to do, staying all thoughts of addressing her with her title. His mistress had the ears of a hunting owl, and he might ruin the surprise. He smiled back shyly instead and nodded at the army's commander.

She mouthed another word when he looked up again: Alone?

A negative answer.

"Servants or someone else?" she whispered.

"One servant," he whispered back.

Shizuru pointed to her horse as indication that she wanted him to see to the animal. She slipped into the house as quietly as she could after that, hoping to catch her lover off-guard. As it turned out, she was fortunate enough to enter the house while the girl's back was turned to the door. Even so, she ended up squandering the opportunity for her prank the moment she registered the more consequential of the things that filled her vision.

The Polemarch of the Otomeians was on her feet, her figure straight and unbroken.

"And I thought I was the one giving you a surprise," Shizuru breathed.

There was an inhalation and a crash. The sound of earthenware skittering over the floor prefaced an oath; Shizuru ran up in unison with a servant who issued from another doorway inside the house, and both of them crouched at the stunned woman's feet. Both went instinctively to the same thing, but the servant ceded that duty to her mistress's lover after recognising her. Instead, she busied herself with picking away the scattered fragments of pottery while Shizuru checked to see that the shattered cup had not harmed the polemarch's form. It took but a few moments to reassure herself that

there were no wounds on the girl's foot or leg, and she got up again, taking the Otomeian's hand and pressing it in remorse.

"Forgive me, Natsuki," she said, her brow knotted in self-censure. "It was juvenile to try to startle you that way. Are you hurt? Did it hit you?"

The hand she was holding escaped and flew to her face. It made contact with her cheek and stayed there.

"You are *here*," the Otomeian whispered.

"You are *standing*," the Himean countered.

They enjoyed looking at each other for a moment, each clearly taking pleasure in that simple evaluation; the third woman in the room had swept into a cloth all the cup's fragments big enough to be picked up by then, and she slid out of the room under the mannerly pretext of their disposal. Once she had gone, Shizuru picked up her lover to heave onto a table.

"Still weigh like a bag of feathers, little bird?" she teased, setting the Otomeian on the table's edge. "Perch there for a bit and let me take a peek at this contraption, please. I take it this is the final design?"

She pushed Natsuki's dress above the knees and admired the prosthesis attached to the Otomeian's left leg. It did not take long for her eyes to come to a conclusion: the artisans who crafted it had done superb work. The upper part of the prosthesis was a leather buckle that fastened over the girl's knee and thigh. This buckle was what held on a wooden leg that she guessed to have a hollow at the top, for Natsuki's stump disappeared partly into it. It was the polished shaft of the leg that drew one's attention, though, so anyone else would probably have instantly dismissed the genius of the mechanics for the genius of the aesthetics. As it was, she took her time to admire the practical intelligence behind the object before moving on to the effort expended on its presentation.

That effort had been considerable, she saw instantly. The grain of the wooden shaft was evanescent, a marbled pattern of remarkable delicacy, and the colour was of such lightness that it did not present

as stark a contrast to Natsuki's remaining leg as she had initially feared. Whoever had performed the carving had possessed good knowledge of human anatomy too: the form had been given so much attention that the faint depression where the calf muscle split down the middle had been shaped as well, a subtle detail that surprised her. Below the taper of the ankle was another joint, one to which the false foot had been attached. This was just as realistic as the leg, five perfect toes carved lovingly into the end, and Shizuru guessed that the makers of the device had actually used the toes of Natsuki's remaining foot as a reversed model because of the symmetry when she compared the wooden to the living one.

"A final design, no," Natsuki eventually said, her eyes still blinking widely at her lover as if unable to cast off her initial astonishment at the latter's presence. And indeed, she reached out to brush the older woman again with the lightest of fingers, like one obsessed with proving something to be tangible.

"It is possible improvements may be made on it in the future," she murmured. "So, a final design, no... A working design, yes."

Shizuru chuckled, feeling the wooden foot with growing admiration; the artisans had even bothered to articulate the metatarsus where the bones rose under the skin.

"I missed that awful seriousness of yours, Natsuki," she told her. "How does it do then, this working design?"

"It works," Natsuki said.

"I also missed that humour."

"You said I was serious."

"Yes, but you are also complicated."

Shizuru ran a hand next over the leather around the knee, feeling over its edge and reaching the thick bandages around the Otomeian's thigh. She could feel fingers doing their own inspection of her shoulders, palming their trim muscle over her riding cloak.

"The bandages are quite tight," she observed. "Are they

comfortable?"

"Yes."

"Must they be so tight?"

"The *medicus* says I must keep them tight to avoid, umm, chafing."

"I see. Did he say anything else?"

"That it was good, the leg."

"He was right. I am pleased with it."

"Also, I am to change these-" Natsuki pointed to the bandages running from thigh to knee "-often for clean ones. He says it will avoid itches and other problems."

"Yes, that makes sense. I always believed a lot of ailments affecting the skin were rooted in unwholesome hygiene. Illness delights in grime, and may even reside primarily in it."

The hand on her shoulder reached for her face once more: this time, it caressed her chin. She looked up to see familiar green eyes inspecting her curiously, that old cat's look in them.

"Shizuru," her lover said, giving her the smile that always made her breath catch. "You are white again."

The Otomeian pushed Shizuru's hair away. Days of hard riding had turned Shizuru's more rebellious locks downright disloyal, however, and the dust-stiffened curls resisted her. More than a few wisps licked at the Himean's face despite her best efforts and, after repositioning her hands several times and still failing to tame Shizuru's mane, the younger woman ended up just blowing at them, to Shizuru's amusement.

Natsuki headed off any more laughter with a kiss, licking Shizuru's lips afterwards as if to wet them for her. Her tongue was soft, but it stripped both salt and sand from the surface. She did it again tenderly, and it was Shizuru who quailed out of shame for her unwashed state.

" *Mea vita*, I do not want you to have to taste all the dirt in which my journey has bemired me," she said half-heartedly, barely able to get the words out because Natsuki's tongue kept licking at her.

"Silly," the younger woman responded. "You forgot."

"Forgot?"

"The balm." Another lick. "Your poor lips, Shizuru!"

And then Shizuru remembered: she had indeed forgotten to pack some of the balm Natsuki had given her for her journey. The young woman had stuffed two small jars of it into her pack when they had parted in Argus, but it had slipped Shizuru's mind to bring some for her ride from Asterion to the riverside base. As a result, the last remnants of the winter wind had left tiny cracks on her lips, which was partly why she took to covering her face with a scarf in the last leg of their travels.

"I did forget, fool tha-"

"Shhh."

She quieted, resigning herself with guilty pleasure to the sensation of Natsuki's tongue cleaning her lips. It was marvellous how delicate Natsuki could be even in such a thing, she thought, for the touches of that soft muscle held all the girl's typical accuracy, never going over her lips' edges or slipping too far between them. At first, anyway.

"I should probably see Shizuma first," Shizuru protested when the animal grooming began to develop into something else. She knew her body was speaking its disagreement with her statement loudly, but she also knew that she had gone too long without her lover to be satisfied with mere kisses or licks-or with a single instant of blind relief, for that matter. Her cousin would end up waiting tonight and all of the morrow for her if she did not stop this quickly enough. And she had to bathe too, good heavens! She was surprised Natsuki could even bear to kiss her given the state she was in, dusted in the dirt one tended to pick up on long journeys without roadside inns or proper shelter. One could only do so much with a rag and river

water. Yes, it was only right to cleanse herself before doing anything intimate. It was also only proper to confer with Shizuma first. Now if only this beautiful girl would stop trying to make her forget about all these accursed proprieties, her life would perhaps follow her intended order.

"Natsuki, pardon me, I smell of my journey-"

"You smell of horses," was the response, followed by another knee-wrecking kiss. Shizuru's hands scrabbled for the table for support when Natsuki tickled her ear with a finger, doing it with enough sloth to mimic a tongue's cruelty. "You are still ticklish here, Shizuru?"

She chuckled softly as Shizuru shuddered, and the low sound of her amusement pressed the claws of desire deeper into the Himean's gut.

"I should really see my cousin first, as would be the proper order of things," Shizuru gasped again when allowed to breathe. The other woman ignored this and proceeded to turn her knees into jelly once more, only pausing to mutter a retort when Shizuru repeated the protest through gritted teeth.

"If I said that to you, Shizuru, you would make the threat to kill my cousin," the Otomeian pointed out.

Shizuru's shoulders shook with laughter, distracted by the statement.

"What? You really do think me a hasty hothead, don't you?" she said.

"You are."

"I have a temper, I admit. Do you not, yourself?"

"It is so," Natsuki frowned. "But I would not threaten to kill your cousin!"

"I never said anything about killing her: you were the one who phrased it so. Besides, the most I would do is maim yours."



"That is very temperate, yes."

"'Very' is never paired with 'temperate', *mea vita*. They are at odds with each other."

"Like your words and your hands."

Her fingers were covering Natsuki's breasts. When she had slipped the shoulders of the dress down Natsuki's arms she had no idea, but she was suddenly all too aware of when she had last seen this body-or this chest, at least-bared in invitation to her.

"I hate not being able to see you for so long," she confessed with a frown, suddenly remembering all the nights of longing she had been forced to endure during her time away from her girl. Her hands stayed on the Otomeian's breasts as she talked, and she revelled in the sounds she plucked out whenever she tested a petal-soft tip. "It does not feel right to be away from you when I have only just found you again. All the more as I always feel so restless nowadays. I hate the feeling."

"Restless?" Natsuki echoed, her own hands splayed out on Shizuru's stomach, over her tunic. She caressed the Himean's belly that way, feeling for the familiar grooves of the muscles where they divided. "All right, Shizuru?"

"Oh I am. Do not worry, it is merely restlessness, probably due to everything I realise I have still to do. And I suppose it is only this war."

"It goes well."

"It does. But it shall keep going for quite a while yet."

"No matter. You will win."

"You mean we will win, Natsuki."

"No. You are the general. To no one else will the victory belong as much as to you."

She regarded the girl with great affection, unable to stop her eyes

from roaming that dear face hungrily. One of her palms rested on yet more familiar territory, finding the bare arch of the small of the other's back.

"I have seen some of the Mentulaean country over the past months while we were apart, you know, and have finally experienced its size," she said conversationally while feeling the other's skin, running rough palms over it and enjoying the feminine sound of pleasure that elicited. "Not that I was surprised by its breadth, having studied their land on our maps long before. But it is still different, seeing something on a map and traversing it yourself."

Natsuki nodded.

"Size is not felt by the eye," she offered.

"Precisely. This is an enormous country, my love. What I have seen of it is not even an eighth of the whole, in fact. What I have already seen of its armies and fortresses are not the ones we are going to be fighting, for that matter. Those were reserves and un-militarised towns, little more."

Natsuki had succeeded in undoing her cloak. The Otomeian dropped it to the floor and started her own exploration atop the riding tunic, hands slipping over the fabric and mapping the body she had been missing. Shizuru kept talking.

"I am not worried about the outcome of this war, *meum mel*, for there is no doubt that we shall win. But how long before that and how many stupid, unnecessary sacrifices shall be made before the enemy realises that? Will they force me to annihilate them instead of conquering them? Will they realise the inevitability of Hime's victory quickly enough for me not to have to battle Senate for a second command? I doubt it. I doubt five years shall be enough to make an empire of this size lie down."

She smiled when the girl put an ear against her breast, unable to find the heart to give another warning on the grubbiness of her apparel.

"I was sleeping a few nights ago under the sky and looking at the

stars," she said instead. "Romantic as it sounds, I saw in them all of a sudden the many lights I shall have to battle for the next years, perhaps the next decade even, just to achieve what I must. And my gravest enemies are not Mentulaeans. I may have left Hime with an army in my command, but I also left it a city of people ready to stab me in the back."

"I will kill them first," Natsuki uttered, jerking upwards abruptly. Shizuru smiled at the promise, thumbing the huge black pearl dangling between the girl's breasts. How right she had been to give her a black one! It stood out so well against her paleness, and it was unusual enough to be unique. It was a physical metaphor for the girl and her perfection, a huge and flawlessly spherical droplet of mystery and iridescence, the whole of it bounded in smoke.

"I meant it figuratively," she told her.

"I was literal."

"And I believe my foes would be wise to fear such a threat from you. Thank the gods you need not do anything of the sort, however. As it is, all you need do is be near. All my worries are insignificant with your strength beside me."

Who ever thought Natsuki's lips mute, she asked herself in their embrace. They were often speechless, perhaps, but far from unspeaking. Indeed, these were lips that produced the best kind of rhetoric: they spoke replies that one's whole body fell into, soft but articulate responses that persuaded beyond reason and logic.

She was in the middle of surrendering to their seduction when it was cut short, disrupted by the creak of the door as someone opened it and breezed in, shutting the door again efficiently upon entry. There was no slam with the final movement, but the click of the door falling into place was sharp and interruptive, as was the cut-off where the intruder's voice died in the middle of pronouncing the polemarch's name.

"Natsu-"

The intruder shifted backwards gawkily, too startled by what she had

walked into to look away. It did not take a great deal to surprise this intruder, granted, but it did take a great deal to fluster her-and the sight of her cousin with hands up someone's skirt, the intruder thought, certainly did the job.

She cleared her throat and faked a recovery that was not really there yet.

"My apologies," she said, managing a saturnine expression only through monumental effort. "I was looking for Natsuki so I could inform her of your sudden arrival, Shizuru, but I suppose I should have expected you to find her even faster than I would. Still, I had expected you to restrain yourself enough to wash off the grime of your travels before canoodling with the poor girl."

Shizuru rolled her eyes and adjusted her position to better hide said girl, who had burrowed into the cave of her arms and chest upon the senior legate's entrance.

"You are the one who walked into someone's quarters unannounced-you have a bad habit of doing that, by the way-so do not lecture me on restraint, Shizuma. But yes, I was just about to get a bath anyway."

"With what, her tongue?"

"Ribald jokes at the smallest opportunity. That demonstrates grave lack of restraint. As I was saying, I was about to call for a bath to prepare for our meeting. Can you give me half an hour? We can talk in my quarters. I assume Hermias has seen to them in my absence in the other camp."

"Your pretty little Greek is efficient as ever, yes," Shizuma said, folding her arms and trying to look Shizuru's way without including in her view what showed of the polemarch's naked torso, much of which was still visible despite Shizuru's shielding arms. "I'll go and inform him now, so do not bother sending a messenger yourself. Unless you've some special instructions for him?"

"No, thank you. Simply tell him to prepare for our meeting."

"Very well."

She turned around and reached for the door-handle.

"Make it an hour instead, Shizuru," she said in parting. "We can talk over dinner that way. Do remember though, cousin, that it is bad manners to make someone wait, even if the reason for tardiness is a beautiful woman without clothing."

After which shot she left the pair to deal with their embarrassment. One clearly had to deal with more than the other, however, and as soon as Shizuma left she pushed Shizuru away with a groan.

"Do not worry about it, Natsuki," Shizuru said, watching the girl pull up her dress. "My cousin has seen far more explicit things in her time, some even orgiastic. Shizuma is no blushing conservative to be scared away by the sight of two lovers in embrace."

Natsuki cast her the sort of look that tempted her to feel her face in case tentacles had sprouted from it.

"I am a princess of Otomeia," the girl gasped.

Shizuru nodded slowly at that, which seemed to spur Natsuki onto another similarly obvious pronouncement.

"She is the senior legate, you are the commander of this army!"

Again she said it in a way that signified that it mattered. Shizuru held back a sigh and supposed it did matter—at least to the girl's prudish nature. She herself had already set aside her embarrassment from earlier. That was her nature, just as it was Natsuki's to dwell on every minor (in Shizuru's opinion) guilt. Besides, the Himean had also anticipated Natsuki's reaction, turning her attention away from her own sense of propriety and focusing it instead on protecting the girl from this very Otomeian sense of shame.

"Better she than someone else, you might consider," she tried. "Shizuma is my cousin. She would be your cousin too were you my wife already. Think of it that way. At least it was family and not some stranger or ranker who burst upon us."

Again the look. She actually felt her face this time, but of course found no tentacles there.

"You think that improves it?" the Otomeian said, aghast. "Had it been my cousin-!"

She broke off there, seemingly too horrified by the thought to voice the hypothesis. For her part, Shizuru grinned. She did not find the thought unattractive, especially considering her rivalry with said cousin, and now put both hands on the girl's thighs.

"Think she would throw an apple at us?" she asked.

Natsuki's look was glacial.

"How is it you can jest at this, Shizuru?" she growled.

"How is it you cannot?" Shizuru retorted gamely, prompting the girl to shake her head in ruefulness. The Otomeian had apparently given up on trying to make the Himean understand the shame, for her next words were spoken in her people's language instead.

"This is because your nature is one governed by humour," she groaned, "and mine by gravity."

Shizuru regarded the girl in silence then, barely able to suppress her smile as she watched the Otomeian all but chew her fingernails. She made a decision then for the sake of jolting Natsuki from her worries: she chose to pull out a surprise she had originally intended to reveal later. Well, she supposed the timing did not much matter. What mattered was the reaction.

"That is exactly why we are a good match, you know," she said, using the same language the girl had spoken. "Surely you can appreciate what we provide each other that way."

Natsuki was arrested and her jaw actually hung open.

"You know my tongue," she whispered later, still in Otomeian.

"And you know mine," Shizuru returned, also in Otomeian.

"You know my tongue!" Natsuki repeated, holding the older woman's neck in both hands. It was clear she had no intention of letting her get away without getting answers to this fresh mystery first and Shizuru submitted gleefully to this captivity. "Shizuru, how is it you know my tongue?"

"I studied it. I have been studying it for months now, in fact," Shizuru revealed, pleased by her success at diverting the girl. "Even when I was marching with the Ninth and Thirteenth over the Calydonian Alps, I was always talking to an officer who knew how to speak it."

She tilted her head at her lover, who was still regarding her with wonder.

"How do you like it?" she asked.

"It pleases me," the Otomeian answered, cheeks a lovely pink. "Buh-buh-beyond words!"

"Good. I learned it primarily to please you, after all. No doubt you can improve my vocabulary in it, which is still quite limited."

"Yes. Yes, I will."

"I shall look forward to that, then. But for now I should probably see to my bath so I can meet my cousin. The sooner I get that over with, the sooner we can talk to each other at length privately, no?"

The Otomeian exhaled at the reminder, eyes still bright from this new discovery.

"Yes," she said. "First a bath. Wait, Shizuru. Oh, and please?"

She dipped her chin and eyes as if to indicate herself. The Himean understood and lifted her off the table. She picked up the cane on the floor too, which the Otomeian had dropped earlier in surprise. Natsuki took it and went to the door to summon the slave who had been gone to wait politely outside during their reunion.

"You shall bring water for the commander's bath," she said to the woman. "Find hot water. She must be finished in under an hour, so either you shall find it soon or not at all. If the latter, cool water shall

do, but you shall bring more braziers here to warm the room."

"It will be done, Princess. We're to use your bath?"

"Yes."

"It will be done."

"You shall also send two riders for clothes for the commander from the other camp. Ask to see Hermias or Aella."

"It will be done."

"You may go."

She said all of this to the woman in her language, of course, and the listening Shizuru translated it eagerly for all that it was merely everyday conversation between a *domina* and her slave. It was fascinating to finally be able to assign clear meaning to the once-foreign utterances her girl made. She had spent so long treating them as part of the incomprehensible mystique of the Otomeian that to now be able to understand them felt like an invasion of someone's power, akin to forcing a magician to reveal the secrets behind the magic words. Unlike with magicians, though, this was no disappointing revelation. Her girl did not need simulated mystery to radiate true strength.

The slave called others into the room from the doorway and Natsuki continued with her instructions. Meanwhile, something furry brushed against Shizuru's legs. She bent over and saw that her lover's pet was under the table. It had been curled up in one of the couches against the wall earlier, but she had not noticed it then because it was in a shadow.

"There you are, Shizuki," she murmured, crouching to pet the animal. She did it slowly in case it might be alarmed, but it sniffed at her face without suspicion; she was gratified, amazed that the animal always managed to remember her. "Have you been guarding your mistress for me? What a good little kitten you are."

"It is because you say such things that your cousin thinks you mad sometimes," Natsuki said, amusement running through her voice;



she had finished giving her orders. "Shizuki is not a kitten."

"Perhaps not to others," Shizuru replied. "But to me, she shall always be the little kitten you used to pop into your saddlebag."

"Much time has passed. She... no, all of us have grown since."

"True. We have grown old enough to think of marriage since then, wouldn't you say?"

A roll of low laughter. It was even more powerfully affecting than Shizuru remembered, and it made the hair rise all over her arms.

"Shizuru, really," Natsuki sighed once she had finished laughing. She walked off to a corner of the room, the sound of her steps uneven because the near-silent fall of the right was punctuated by two solid sounds from the left: one from the leg and one from the cane. She returned with a cup, which she filled with water.

"Thank you," Shizuru said upon being offered the drink, downing it in a series of gulps. Riding was always thirsty work, all the more so when it was the sort of riding she had just done. She watched Natsuki watching her from the corner of one eye as she drank and said after she was done: "So you were installed in what would presumably be the commander's quarters in this camp, hmm?"

"I am the Polemarch of the Otomeians, General."

Shizuru smirked at the girl's taunt.

"So why are your house's furnishings Himean, Polemarch of Otomeia?" she asked. "I expected you to fill this place with your low tables and floor pillows."

"Most of these, your cousin had sent over." A squint. "I could not refuse."

"Pushed them on you, did she?"

"No. I was grateful. She chose them with care." Natsuki looked around the room, the expression in her eyes oddly critical. Shizuru understood it with her next words. "I thought too, once you

returned... it would be more comfortable for you so."

"It was thoughtful of you, and I do approve. You do realise, though, that you are acting as lady of the house-of my house, more to the point?"

"I thought this was my house?" Natsuki smirked.

"Of course. But this is my army."

The Otomeian angled her head to one side to let Shizuru kiss her cheek more easily.

"They say patience is a virtue one must learn for marriage," she said, humming into the touch; Shizuru caught her by the slim column of her waist. "For a happy one, at least."

"Are you saying I am impatient?" Shizuru asked, dragging her lips to the edge of an eyebrow.

"I am saying I ask for more time," Natsuki responded, ducking her head to avoid the last kiss: her servants were coming out of the bedroom. These bowed to the two women and said they were going to check on the water.

Natsuki reached for her lover's hand. She led the Himean into the other room, the one where the servants had been working. It was the bedroom, and a spacious one too. There was sufficient space to put an open study in one corner, along with several shelves stuffed with scrolls and wax tablets. Shizuru could see a map spread out on the desk. The actual sleeping area was to the other end of the room and there Shizuru saw the signs again of the girl's culture asserting itself, dense furs and Otomeian rugs being concentrated in that space.

The girl led her neither to the sleeping area nor the study, guiding her past the latter and to a table and two couches at one end of the room. There was an open door there and Shizuru glimpsed what was in the third room of Natsuki's house. Inside that room were more braziers and the copper-coloured tub she was going to be using.

"Do you have your own cistern?" she asked. The girl should have one installed in that room if she was right in thinking that the Himean army's builders had been the ones to construct the dwelling. "Were they able to dig a proper latrine with a drain down the river?"

"Yes. Yes."

"Good. I assume that means they managed to do the same for my house, then."

Natsuki bade her take a couch.

"There is bread and fruit here," she said, pointing to the table. "If you are hungry now."

Shizuru thanked her and declined. There was a knock from the door.

"Princess, we have the water," the servant from before said, entering.

Natsuki slid her eyes to the tub. The servant called to the others in response, directing them to the tub in the other room so they could start filling it. Meanwhile, their mistress slipped off the silver cuffs that adorned both her wrists. Shizuru watched with interest, thinking at first that the girl meant to join her in the bath, but deciding it was not that when Natsuki did not bother removing her other jewellery: the band of metal locked around an upper arm, for instance or the black pearl necklace. Instead, the Otomeian fetched a ribbon for herself from somewhere and used that to tie up her hair, the black sweep of it reduced to a tail that hung almost to the small of her back. Shizuru's hands itched to grab it and pull the girl to her again with that leash.

"Kavine," Natsuki said, so quietly that Shizuru marvelled that the servant being called even heard her: the splash of water being poured into the tub had all but covered the sound.

Kavine approached her princess.

"One of the amphorae in the other room. The wine I bought-you remember?"

"Yes, Princess. Should I bring some?"

"Yes. An ewer of it with a goblet."

Kavine went off to do as bid, and Natsuki sat beside Shizuru again, the two of them holding hands placidly. It was at this time that the Himean remembered the precious little piece she had in her purse, a treasure she had found in one of the Mentulaean towns she had sacked and which she had brought back for Natsuki.

"No, it is not amber," she said when the girl asked. "Misleading, is it not? That comb is actually made from the shell of an animal-a turtle of the great seas, harvested for ages by the peoples of coastal Africa and the waters beyond. It is very highly prized indeed, and would fetch a small fortune back in Hime. I would not be surprised if that piece passed through Argus before ending up in the hands of some Mentulaeans. It has travelled far inland."

Natsuki held up the ornately carved comb and admired the acanthus patterns, putting it between herself and a lamp so she could see the faintly darker densities of it in the glow of the light.

"This must have been a handsome turtle," she deduced, speaking her language. "I wish I could see one as it must have been in life."

Once informed that the tub was nearly full, she put it carefully on the table and got up once more to inspect the bath. She found it satisfactory now, it seemed, for she sent the slaves out. Before they left, though, she had one of them pour the fetched wine for Shizuru. When they had left, she called the Himean to come into the washing room too and asked her to sit on one of the stools by the tub. She asked the older woman to take the one with a fur rug by it.

It was clear by this time that she intended to bathe Shizuru herself. Once the Himean was on the indicated stool, she followed and knelt on the rug, using it to cushion her knees; she then divested the seated woman of her shoes. She set these to one side and peeled off the socks as well before going on to the clothes, asking Shizuru to lift one arm or get up whenever necessary. Once the older woman was entirely naked, she took the basin of oil and started smoothing it onto Shizuru's skin with her hands, working it in with sufficient

pressure to give the muscles underneath a massage.

Shizuru said nothing during this time, choosing to bask instead in the Otomeian's care. The wine she had brought in to drink while being bathed was superb. The braziers in the room were doing their job as well, and though she was without an inch of clothing and evening had set in, she felt nicely warm and comfy.

Once the massage was done, Natsuki put away the oil and started to work on her with the strigil. It was at this point that there was a knock from the bedroom door. It was followed by Kavine entering and saying that the general's head servant was outside: she had come back with the riders sent to fetch clothes from the other camp. The woman herself entered the room after Natsuki spoke the order to do so.

"Aella, how was the ride?" an oil-slick Shizuru said while grinning at her typically severe-looking servant. "Do Otomeian mounts agree with you?"

"We found little on which to argue, Domina." The woman approached and stood a respectful distance before the two, a cloth-wrapped bundle in her arms. "Can I help you or the Dominilla in any way?"

"I assume those are my clothes?"

"Yes, Domina, and a fresh pair of slippers and socks."

"Then you have already done your work. Leave them over there, please. Hermias is seeing to my quarters, I take it?"

"We kept it ready for you and open to the Dominilla at all times, Domina."

"Then you may return to the other camp for now, Aella. As you can see, I am in the Dominilla's very capable hands," Shizuru returned, smirking at Natsuki's colour. Even the girl's pass with the strigil faltered then, and she had to scrape the same area on one arm again.

Aella was nodding: "Very well, Domina. Have you any instructions

for dinner?"

"No, you can surprise me. Considering what I have been eating on the road the past week, I shall be ecstatic even with just a well-seasoned porridge and some proper bacon."

"We shall surely do better than that, Domina."

"Then I am very eager to sit down to dinner."

Aella excused herself.

"Now then," Shizuru said some time later, Natsuki still working at her with the strigil. "I know you enjoy your silence, Natsuki, but do talk to me, please. I missed your voice."

Her lover glanced at her, smiling.

"I missed yours," said the Otomeian.

"Then let us talk, by god. My cousin would be put out if we started in on the military topics without her, but I think she would not complain too much if we covered only the basics, not the actual movements. That way, we do not bore each other later too with repetition of what we have already told each other in private."

"You never bore, Shizuru."

"*Ecastor*, I missed your voice indeed! Go on, keep talking!"

Natsuki's laugh slipped out and she listened to it delightedly.

"You know already, I think," said the Otomeian, "of the southward shift in their armies in the centre."

"Of course. It was my intention."

"Yes," said Natsuki. "Shizuma, she will tell you more. But for now, it is enough to say that the army that was at Lasandre left to move south a week ago."

It was Shizuru's laugh that now slipped out: Natsuki was on point

with her, as usual. Lasandre was the nearest large city close to the river that had yet to be taken by their boundary forces, and unlike the cities Shizuru had been razing thus far in the south, it was one of the true fortresses of the Mentulaeen Empire. It would take effort and time to force its gates open, but that did not dent Shizuru's confidence in her eventual conquest of it in the least. And once they had Lasandre, they would have a serious foothold in the centre already, a place from which to launch assaults on nearby cities-including the enemy capital, Gorgo.

Besides that, taking Lasandre was also intended to be a demonstration. It would tell the Mentulaeans that even their best forts, their great citadels, could not keep a Fujino out when she wanted in.

"They say it is on a great fortress, one with true walls," Natsuki told her. "They mean by this that the Mentulaeans have fortresses that are not great or that do not have true walls?"

"Yes," Shizuru confirmed. "Those were the ones I saw, *meum mel*."

"In their Southern Frontier?"

Shizuru nodded and Natsuki asked her to describe them, demanding to know what fortresses without "true walls" were like.

"Wooden," Shizuru explained. "The large towns of their south were similar to our camps, and most of them had walls made of wood. This ties in with what Yamada-han told me-and which our new allies in the Southern Frontier confirmed to me when I did some digging-which is that the Mentulaeans are not known for their quarrymen. The few quarries in operation here are further to their west and north, I believe. Here and in the south, stone is generally a precious commodity to them. Hence the predominant use of timber."

"But not of oak."

"No, not of oak," Shizuru agreed. She lifted her arm when Natsuki requested it. "I suppose it would be too much to hope that they all get done in by a bit of mushroom-picking around their oaks in the summer."

Natsuki had finished with the strigil. She invited Shizuru to enter the tub and afterwards asked what she had meant.

"The death cap, *mea vita*," came the explanation. "A lethal mushroom that tends to grow at the base of oaks. I shall show it to you once that you may know and mark it. It looks benign but its reality cannot be further from its looks. Himeans have been wary of it ever since it was first discovered to mimic the appearance of some of edible mushrooms in our country. No doubt it is seen here as well-be you warned not to pick just any mushroom you see, especially ones at the foot of an oak."

Natsuki promised that she would not and said she would like to see such a dangerous mushroom when opportunity afforded it. It was something worth learning, she said.

"But Shizuru, I learned something," she added. "It is of their druids, their faith. The Mentulaeans' faith."

"What of it?"

"Their druids teach that they have what we call spirits. Human spirits. That they live on after death, as my people believe."

"Ah, yes."

"But to them, they live on by returning to this world as - as - hmm - as other lives."

"Yes, I know." Shizuru pulled up the information she had stored away in her mind on the subject. "They assert that the souls of their people who die return in other bodies, living out new lives by having their spirits recycled on this plane as the spirits animating newborn infants."

"Yes, it is so."

A lock of blackness slipped from the tail Natsuki had made of her mane: Shizuru whipped her hand free of moisture and slipped the stray lock back in place behind the girl's ear.

"This interests you, Natsuki?" she asked, fingering the earlobe she



could not resist touching.

Natsuki said, obliquely, "Your cousin said to me before, Shizuru, that I do not appreciate one of the most powerful of your - your abilities."

Shizuru smiled. She especially enjoyed the roundabout approach when it was Natsuki who took it.

"What ability was she referring to, so that I may teach you to appreciate it?" she joked.

"She already taught me," Natsuki responded archly, eyebrows high. "Your ability to hold the soldiers' feet, Shizuru. To give them courage enough to stand, is what I intend to say."

"Now I see. You are referring to my legions never taking flight."

"Yes."

"And Shizuma said you do not appreciate it because?"

"Because of my people, my faith," Natsuki said, already starting to link their topic to the previous one. "My people believe in the immortality of the spirit, Shizuru, but only for those who die with honour. You know it. You remember, your speech before? When first you came to our citadel?"

"Of course."

The girl moved to the opposite end of the tub first so that she could access Shizuru's feet. She plunged her hands into the water and started scrubbing them to loosen all possible oils and dead skin left.

"So you knew even then that we are not a people for whom, hmm, flight is normal," she said while doing this. "We do not flee easily in battle because - because it is not a true option for us."

"I see," Shizuru said. "And Shizuma thinks you do not appreciate my ability to hold the men where they are because of that? Was she right?"

Natsuki ducked her head, looking guilty.

"A little, I think," she said. "But I appreciate it now. And I thought then of some things. Of how - how yours is a culture betrayed by rituals of religion. I remember something you showed me, on the maps of your..." She paused and dug around for the word before finally producing it with a triumphant tone: "Your *Forum*."

"What was it?" Shizuru asked, now truly intrigued. It was always fascinating for her to see the discoveries the girl's mind unearthed and the intelligence that worked behind that unbelievable face. Who would ever think such a face hiding such a mind, after all? "What of the maps of it that I showed you?"

"I remembered a temple you showed to me," Natsuki answered. "You called it *Jupiter Stator*. The temple of the god who stays those who would flee in battle. I wondered at it."

"Because you yourselves have no such temple or god for that purpose?"

"No. It was because I could not see anything in your military culture to explain the - the need for such a god." She sighed, squinted darkly at the water of the bath. "I thought it was possible that I had... insufficient data, yes, on your military history. That I was perhaps missing something. Then Shizuma explained how much more often your soldiers ran away from battle with other commanders, so I saw what I was missing."

"They do not run away all that often even with other generals, to be sure," the Himean defended. "Himean soldiers are not utter cowards, just so it is clear, Natsuki."

"I did not say so," Natsuki said, her black brows lifting. "But you see what I saw."

"I do, yes."

"So I was thinking on that and how religion could show - could touch on a military," she said. "In your case, you are a religion in a way, I think. You yourself are your own priest... you, um, you promote a kind of immortality for those who follow you."

Shizuru asked her what kind of immortality it was, in her opinion.

"The immortality of those whose glory lives past their death. And then I thought too of how one difference in a similar idea could - could change, I think, a culture."

"Ahh!" Shizuru breathed a loud exhale of realisation as she saw what Natsuki was trying to say. "So you think the Mentulae flee so quickly in battle because of the way their religion phrases immortality?"

Natsuki nodded eagerly. She kept moving up her lover's body, scrubbing at it under the water as they talked.

"The Mentulaeans' immortality is not like ours," she said. "For us Otomeians, for our souls to live on, we must live and die honourably. And we do not return to this world-we go instead to the better one, the one where all the honourable dead already live their reward."

"Whereas the Mentulaeans require no such honour to be reborn and are compelled to return here," Shizuru said. "I see what you mean, Natsuki. Even a person who loves life and would welcome a second chance at it would prefer the guarantee of a life of reward and immortality to another run on this imperfect world. The second chance at life that beckons to a Mentulaean through the possibility of escaping death in battle is a far more immediate reward and temptation than the alternative their faith poses to them."

"Yes. You think this is why they flee so quickly too?" Natsuki asked.

"Perhaps. I believe it certainly informs their decisions in battle, yes. Although I would also like to think they flee simply because they see that it is useless to fight me."

Natsuki splashed some water at her light-heartedly.

"Always a peacock," she said, although her voice was affectionate as she said it.

"And always a brat," Shizuru returned, nuzzling the hand stroking her jaw. "Well, I am a tatterdemalion peacock today, *meum mel*. It is up to you to restore my plumage to its former glory."

Natsuki's eyes slid to her almost furtively: "You never lose glory, Shizuru. Your hair... is longer."

"Yes, I suppose I should get this mop cut again."

"No. It is beautiful."

"That may be," she chuckled. "But it is also harder to maintain, love."

"I will maintain for you."

"And what, hold it out of my eyes in every battle?" came the laughing reply.

Natsuki allowed that it was important to consider the practicality of the fringe's length indeed and went back to her work. After a while, Shizuru realised that the girl's hand had been washing the side of one breast too long already. She looked up and saw green eyes turned black, little white ears turned a telltale pink.

"I can finish you quickly," she offered with conscious wickedness, thinking she would get the girl to sputter.

"I can do the same," Natsuki responded, to her astonishment. The Otomeian's cheeks were as red as she had expected, but the husky voice was still surprisingly steady, even if it was somewhere around the floor.

"But I do not want that, Shizuru. It..." She smoothed her hand over Shizuru's flank again while thinking of the words she needed. "It has been too long for quickness."

She filled a dipper in water and warned Shizuru to close her eyes. The older woman did so, her head moving from one side to the other as Natsuki scrubbed away at her hair using the oils, which she then washed away with the hot water of the bath. Once finished, the girl took a damp cloth and used that to clean Shizuru's face, neck and ears. She even went as far as to help Shizuru tend to the stubble of hair that had grown on some parts of her body during the journey, during which time she had been obliged to put on hold her usual depilatory rituals.

"You may be even more meticulous than I am," Shizuru told her later after her body was clean and hairless once more. "Thank you for the bath, Natsuki."

Natsuki nodded, busy with the towel.

"I am meticulous because you would want it," she said. "If not, you would find, um, excuse to bathe again this evening, no?"

The Himean did not bother denying it, choosing to smile instead. Natsuki finished towelling her off and ruffled her hair afterwards playfully. She let Shizuru dress herself but insisted on putting on the older woman's socks and footwear for her.

"Where am I to spend tonight?" she asked while doing that.

"With me in my quarters, of course," Shizuru said, amused. "Did that even have to be said?"

"It is... hm... best to be sure."

"Now you have me worried. Do you actually want to spend the night with me or not?"

Natsuki glanced up.

"I had two horses saddled," she admitted.

Shizuru was diverted by the number.

"Two?" she echoed.

Natsuki was on her feet again and now beckoned to her with a tilt of the head.

"Yes," she replied. "Come."

They came out of the building and saw the two horses the Otomeian had mentioned.

"You are riding to the other camp as well?" Shizuru asked, a little confused as she regarded the hulking black horse standing in wait.

"I mean, on your own horse?"

Natsuki looked at her levelly and responded in the affirmative.

"I do not intend to peck at you, but forgive me for asking it. Is that wise, Natsuki?"

"I have been riding for weeks like this."

Shizuru said nothing, merely looking at the horse doubtfully. She might as well have looked at Natsuki that way, however: the girl cast upon her one of those looks she often gave in response, the one that said *I am aware of what you are thinking and it displeases me*. It was a short look, but one punctuated more emphatically by its shortness.

The girl beckoned quickly to a groom after that, and he aided her in getting up the animal so quickly that Shizuru had nary a moment to protest-or to glance at the oddity of the two-horned saddle on the horse. In mere moments, the Otomeian was already perched atop the animal with casual grace, both legs over one of its sides and hidden by her dress.

"Ahh," Shizuru breathed, comprehension dawning. "So someone shall lead the horse for you, *mea vita*?"

She was not unfamiliar with the position the girl had adopted, which she knew the more aristocratic Greeks and Himeans to have used often on promenades or casual rides around the countryside in the old days. It was not as common now, as most aristocrats preferred to don riding gear these days, but some still used it every now and then: it was a position used to show social status and wherewithal, as it permitted them to look coolly aloof and also display their best gowns, dresses and trouser-less formal tunics even while horsed. The only problem with this side-saddle perch, of course, was that you could not control your steed by yourself: that was why she fully expected Natsuki's steed to be led by at least one of the grooms present.

But Natsuki shook her head, holding out a hand so her servant could hand her the cane she had relinquished temporarily to him. She held

it in her left hand and over the side of the horse where her legs were not resting. Then she took the reins herself.

"I ride Niger alone," she said, and seeing Shizuru's eyes widen at the seemingly impossible statement, followed with another. "I have for a month now. Shizuru."

The old way, that use of her name.

"How do you manage it?" Shizuru asked.

"My saddle, it is different. It is... is bespoke."

"I am afraid I don't quite see how that helps you control Niger."

"You will see if we go now."

She looked to Shizuru in her haughty way again, her cane resting across a leg as she channelled her defiance in silence.

*Oh that pride*, Shizuru thought, meeting her stare. At least it told her the girl was genuinely recovering, and not just in body. Even the girl's beauty was tied to her pride in herself, for Natsuki was beautiful in a standoffish, superior fashion, with her relentless aristocrat's features and small but adamant nose. Hers was a face meant for looking down on people, and it sometimes did that even at Shizuru in a way that presented a challenge-as it did now. Though part of Shizuru wanted to take that challenge, she knew and chose not to. Difficult as it was, she had decided that it was better to trust the girl. Natsuki knew her own manège better than anyone else, besides also having a healthier respect for risks nowadays due to the prices she had had to pay for her past daring. If the girl said she knew what she was doing on that horse, she most probably did.

She ignored the mount being offered to her and approached Niger instead, putting a hand on the beast's neck and feeling nothing save the steady power of an animal at ease with itself and the precious burden it carried. It was the burden who was not at ease, however, and Shizuru knew that it was in both their interests to make sure Natsuki was relaxed enough to do whatever she did to ride the animal in this manner.

"I missed seeing this," she said, causing the flashing eyes watching her to soften a little. "You really do belong on a horse, *mea vita*."

The princess's gelid expression melted, leaving behind the more vulnerable girl underneath.

"I plan to survey this area tomorrow, by the way," Shizuru continued. "Would you like to ride with me then? Only if you think you are up to it, of course. I would not compel you to do something you do not want to do."

The other woman accepted the invitation demurely.

"Wonderful," Shizuru grinned. "Now let us ride to the other camp and see my cousin for dinner... although let us not go too quickly, please. I want you to tell me as much about this special saddle of yours as we go, and I think Shizuma would understand if I made her wait a little longer just for that. She knows the power of my curiosity." She frowned upon recalling what her cousin had done to them earlier. "Besides, she deserves it after barging in on us like that, I think-and just when it was becoming enjoyable too! Had she been just a little while later, I daresay we might not even have cared about her coming in and watching. I know I would not have."

Natsuki recovered her glare.

"Sometimes, Shizuru," the girl said to the candid lament, "you are an ass."

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Shizuru did arrive at her quarters more than an hour after the arranged time. Instead of simply walking into the structure as was her right, she chose to have a slave announce her first. Once inside, she took a seat at the table with her cousin and quipped, "See how easy it is?"

"What?" Shizuma said grumpily, knowing the other was not going to repent for making her wait.

"Announcing yourself before entering someone's rooms, like a civilised person."



"These are *your* rooms."

"Indeed, but you were here first and might have been indulging in some private time before I arrived. I would have hated to intrude on that, being the civilised person that I am."

The silver-haired woman regarded Shizuru sourly.

"Lessons on civility from someone who cannot even wait to bathe before pawing at her mistress like some animal?" she muttered.

"Did you hear the lady complain?" Shizuru retorted. "Besides, I should take this opportunity to remind you of all the times I caught you threatening some young woman's virtue."

The senior legate stared at the accusation, silvery eyebrows shooting halfway up her forehead.

"I am sorry, but when did *that* ever happen?" she demanded. "My memory seems to be going because I recall no such thing ever taking place, Shizuru!"

Shizuru smiled brightly at her steward, who had entered the room to pour their wine. She turned back to her cousin with the smile still on her face.

"It did, many times," she said. "I simply never interrupted you during all those delicate moments and took myself away before you could notice. There, Shizuma, is the mark of a civilised human being."

"This is more of your fiction."

"Tsubame Yamanaka, summer of the year Uncle broke his arm, the two of you in that little copse beside the creek in your orchards in Cumae--"

"I knew I would eventually regret babysitting you all those years ago," Shizuma scowled with a blush, cutting off the cheery recital; she remembered that incident, all right! "Damn you, Shizuru, how do you know that? Were you following me?"

"I was merely looking for you at the time so I could ask my beloved

and wise older cousin something. Note that you did not even notice my presence, by the way, since I absented myself instantly."

Shizuma was shaking her head ruefully. "Thoughtful of you."

"I think so. But enough of that reminiscence! We have quite a bit of talking to do, cousin, and evening is already upon us. Let us tell our tales to each other."

The green-gold eyes opened wide, their absurd white lashes fluttering.

"What, without your girl?" Shizuma said. "I admit I expected that you would insist on her presence for this, Shizuru."

"Is this an objection in advance?"

"No." She pointed to a third cup on the table, which Hermias had yet to fill with anything. "I was expecting her for dinner."

Shizuru dismissed her steward for the evening, saying she could manage the rest. He was already slipping unobtrusively away when she answered Shizuma.

"She shall indeed join us," she said. "But she had some errands to do first, so she asked me to go ahead. We ran into an Otomeian officer who requested her presence urgently to settle something or other when we were riding over. Have you seen the saddle she designed, by the way?"

Shizuma said she had.

"A piece of genius, as your girl is. Shocked you though, I wager?"

"Ye gods, yes! I was about ready to order her down from the damned horse. If it had thrown her-"

She broke off at the idea and shuddered, hands clenching in reflex.

"You'd have had the beast cooked on the spot, I'm sure," said her cousin. "It's more secure than you'd think it to be from looking at it, that saddle, though I will grant it seems none too reassuring when

put up on that devilish-large stallion of hers. But it's a clever invention and she uses it well, Shizuru."

"She does that."

Shizuma finished her drink and put down her cup with a 'thock'.

"Now to work," she said, meeting the red eyes squarely. "I should go first. What I have to relate is known to Natsuki already, whereas what you have to relate is not. No doubt she is as eager to hear of your doings as I am, and deserves to be present when you first recount it."

"I cannot agree more. Go on and tell me what has been happening here, cousin."

Shizuma began with the successes of their allies in securing more of the area around this critical part of the river. The Otomeians had launched a series of extremely effective movements that now assured them a relatively free path to several cities and Lasandre.

"You've your girl's cousin to thank for it," she told Shizuru, well knowing her own cousin disliked the woman she was praising: Shizuru had come to talk to her about the Princess Alyssa's pursuit of Natsuki's hand before leaving with the Ninth and Thirteenth on their alpine march. "I allow she's about as sweet to have around as a frozen salt lick. Yet she's done a good job thus far and I daresay even you shan't be able to complain. We've put up a good length of road unmolested, thanks to her and her army."

"Show me tomorrow," said Shizuru, already reaching for more bread. The appetite she had managed to forget in the happiness of seeing Natsuki again had reasserted itself with vehemence, and she discovered that she was ravenous with hunger. Her cousin pushed the breadbasket towards her and also urged her to try some very lightly fried pieces of fish that smelled of butter.

"It's rather a delightful taste, their butter," she said while watching Shizuru fall to the fare with vigour. "I was a sceptic at first. But with a deft hand handling the cooking, I find that butter makes as good an ingredient as olive oil."

"Delicious," Shizuru agreed, tearing another fresh roll. "So I was right to give her back all the auxiliary save the cavalry when she came for them, then."

Shizuma frowned. "Came for them?"

Shizuru explained the circumstances of her last encounter with the Princess Alyssa.

"Can they hold the borders, you think, absent our help?"

The senior legate answered in the affirmative.

"They've all the main passes and crossings in hand already," she told her cousin. "No fear on that, I think. I should note that we've been seeing a number of refugees in the past months, by the way."

"From the enemy?"

"Mostly traders and expatriates from other lands who happened to be in old Obsidian's territories at the wrong time. Some Caledonians. Few Arabs, fewer Greeks. Mostly Himeans, actually."

"What did they say?"

"That many of the aristocratic lords of the Empire started exercising policies of low-to-zero-tolerance for foreigners as soon as the war boiled up. Some just ordered eviction of all non-Mentulaean inhabitants of their towns, others were a little more selective about which inhabitants were to be ejected from their fiefdoms. Still more decided to go the bloodier route instead and ordered executions." Her lips were thin as she came out with it: "Of Himeans, mostly."

Shizuru scowled, the fur of her brows rippling.

"And they made public demonstrations of it, undoubtedly," she spoke through her teeth. "There shall be a reckoning for this."

"That too should not be doubted," her cousin replied grimly. "There were not that many refugees, though. Perhaps just an odd hundred or so thus far, all told. I packed them off to Argus under guard of the militia. Governor Sugiura can sift through them herself, since she's a

talent for that sort of thing. And I made sure none remained here, in case there were spies among the lot. I actually snuck a few of your intelligencers among them to pretend they're refugees too. If anyone stands a chance of recognising a spy, it would have to be one."

"You have a mind after my own heart, cousin," Shizuru said feelingly. "Aside from that, I take it that it has been relatively quiet here? You've not had to fight any real engagements?"

"Yes, merely skirmishes. They were mostly from our scouts running into theirs, actually. It appears that your game worked, Shizuru. They ended up shifting nearly all their concern your way when you began your work over in the south, leaving Shohei-san and the others a free route northwest. They were so worried about an attack coming from somewhere between this camp and your army after the shock of your sudden appearance south that they never even noticed him sneak off in the opposite direction."

"When did he leave?"

"Past three weeks ago."

"Then he should have arrived at his destination by now."

The head of silvery hair nodded, and the light of the lamps picked out glints of steel within it.

"They have," Shizuma answered. "I got the letter yesterday."

She looked up when she heard Shizuru's chewing stop entirely; the red eyes were on her, demanding answers to questions that did not need to be voiced.

"No fears, Shizuru," she said. "They tore down all bridges and established base successfully. As far as we can see, separation was achieved."

Shizuru chewed at the food in her mouth furiously again, mindful to keep her mouth shut. Once she had swallowed it, she smiled brilliantly at her senior legate.

"Excellent!" she exclaimed. "So now we have effectively divorced

our Mentulaeen friends at the capital from their friends in the north."

By the latter, she was speaking of Calchis and his army in the Mentulaeen Empire's Northern Frontier, where he had thus far been working to subdue the "rebellious" northern tribes. These were the same tribes to which Natsuki had offered and struck up an alliance recently for Otomeia, secretly sending them funds and resources that could aid their insurgency.

Calchis's army was of import to the Himeans' war plans because it was the nearest army of considerable size besides the one stationed in the capital of Gorgo—in fact, it was one of the three remaining royal armies as well as among the largest of *all* the royal armies, including the ones that had already fallen against the enemy and second only to the king's. That was only in terms of their core forces, of course: the royal armies tended to fluctuate in size depending on which feudal lord reinforced the concerned army and how many troops he added to its core. Either way, Calchis's army was one large in both core and adjuncts. It was thus a major deterrent to any force moving against the Mentulaeen centre as it could respond and arrive quickest should reinforcements be required by the capital's garrison, which was the last of the three core royal armies. Without Calchis, Gorgo's army would have to rely on either sizeable reinforcements coming from far away or small ones from nearby feudal lords assigned or allowed their fiefs nearby.

Naturally, Shizuru preferred to force the latter option, especially as there was a good chance of taking on the feudal support armies one by one through strategy and speed of engagement. For this to be possible, though, the intrusion of an external and large-enough-to-matter reinforcement had to be excluded. Thus the neutralisation of Calchis's army from a present threat into a future one: hoping to block it from early consideration once the traditional campaign season for the enemy arrived, Shizuru had arranged for four of the legions to travel at the end of winter up the River Atinu and towards the River Holmys.

The Holmys was the more northern of the two great rivers of the area, and it ran from the peaks and hills of the Mentulaeen north in an easterly route that eventually brought it to its confluence with the Atinu. Just as the north-to-south course of the Atinu separated the

lands of the Mentulae from Argentum and Hime's northern territories, the west-to-east course of the Holmys separated the Mentulaean Empire's centre from its newly conquered territories in its Northern Frontier.

And now, with four Himean legions sitting practically on top of it, it also separated the capital and its army from its most important ally.

"With spring already starting, they shall not even need to squat there for much longer," Shizuru purred. "The melts should engorge the Holmys with so much water soon, I understand, that it shall become virtually impassable. The Prince Calchis shall have to wait for them to subside in summer or try to find another way to get to the centre."

"Which route shall he take, I wonder."

"If he has half a mind on him, he would take the latter."

"Hmm. Either way, it was a fine stroke," her cousin said lazily but with sincerity. "They were so confident in their strength in the north due to his presence there that it never even occurred to them that we would dare to try and slip an army up there and between them. What worried them more was the possibility of you attacking them from their relatively unguarded southern flank."

"And push them all together into a concentrated huddle of armies in the north? More fool me if I had done that! I expect we shall be having our own problems soon, however. Spring means more of their feudal armies shall start moving again, especially as they should have gotten over their surprise. Those feudal lords in their farther regions-the ones west, I mean-should also have started moving."

Her cousin looked at her.

"Worried?"

Shizuru smirked in response.

"Please," she replied. "If there is anything I am going to do in the next few months, it would be to show the Mentulaeans what fools they were to dare Hime into this war."

"Mm-hm." Shizuma held up a finger and hastily finished the swallow she had been taking just then. "That reminds me of another surprise I have for you."

"What is it?"

"An envoy offering an alliance to the Otomeians in return for their betrayal of us to the Mentulae."

"I'm intrigued."

Shizuma told the story of Baroness Horyma's visit and failed attempt at convincing the Otomeian polemarch to come over to the Mentulaean side, culminating in herself and Shizuru crying with laughter.

"She denied the poor woman an exit speech?" Shizuru asked between guffaws, so overcome with amusement that she had to clear her throat several times to keep herself from choking. "Good heavens, Natsuki certainly knows how to destroy a person completely."

"She said it wasn't theatre," the other responded, wiping at her own eyes. "Although when she loosed that your-mother-mated-with-a-weasel arrow, Shizuru, I just about perished from the theatrical comedy of it all. I tell you, I have never heard anyone insult with such dignity as she had in saying that. Even the poor baroness did not know if it was intended as offence, initially."

"You should hear her when she gets mad at me."

"If she manages to keep you in line, I would indeed like to." She picked up her cup again and realised it was empty. Her cousin pushed the jug on the table towards her. "You've a stack of letters waiting for you over there, as you can see, so I'll not bore you with news from Hime at the moment. You shall be discovering it shortly yourself, after all. The most interesting news from there thus far, which I do think you shall want me to bore you with, is that Takeda Masashi has been brought to the treason courts and is likely to be ruined. Himemiya should have explained in her letter."



"He richly deserves it."

Shizuma looked up and found the other's face sombre again, an unusual vitriol swarming in her eyes.

"That man bred no good for our cause, Shizuma," said the golden-haired woman, frowning. "To say nothing of the part he played in getting my girl's leg cut off and a beloved friend killed."

Shizuma nodded once and slowly.

"She was dear to her too, wasn't she?" she said after a while.

"To whom?"

"Your girl. Natsuki can barely hear mention of poor Suou without her face falling, you know. Besides the look she got when she saw the seal of Himemiya's letter-can't get it out of my mind!"

The anger was gone from Shizuru's eyes all of sudden, though not the sombre intent.

"Did she look," she said, "guilty?"

Shizuma regarded her younger cousin with interest.

"I do not think I would have put it that way before," she said. "But now that you prompt me to it, I feel as though that would be as good a word as any for her expression then. Why is that, however?"

"Because she thinks herself unlucky."

"Is she?"

"I told you of all she has done for me, so as far as I am concerned, quite the opposite."

Shizuma made a low sound in her throat.

"This reminds me of something she said recently. But first, I have to tell you that the Eleventh is here."

"When did it arrive?"

"Around the Ides of March. They brought with them an interesting package both Toshi-san and Miyuki assured me you commissioned from Sosia's craftsmen. I've no idea why you ordered those, by the way. As far as my accounting goes-and I've done it several times, to be sure of it-the legions have enough of those tools as far as their needs for camp-building are concerned. But I suppose you've something going on in that mind of yours again... and I suppose your girl knows what it is too."

"Did she say so?" Shizuru asked with a smile.

"Not so much in that way, no. But when I wondered about it aloud, she said that she felt you were going to try something others would consider unlucky but which would probably cause Fate to knuckle under for you again."

Shizuru's smile developed into a smirk.

"She may be right," she said. "At any rate, what other legions have I here besides the Eleventh?"

"There are two: the Fourth and the Eighth."

"Good. I shall take them out for a stroll soon."

"Lasandre."

"Lasandre. I shall take the Lupine Division with me too, of course," Shizuru expanded. "What cavalry do we have here?"

"Aside from the Lupines, nearly two alae of cataphracti, two alae of skirmishers and another two alae of horsed archers."

"Ah! The last are new."

"They are. Natsuki said she commandeered them under your directive, however."

"Yes, that would be right. Ah, I do not need the cataphracti yet-let us save them for the summer, when the ground is more suited to heavy cavalry engagements. Even their chariot should be having trouble right now, I think. I shall take only the Lupine Division, then. And the

*sagittarii* ."

"Which means you are leaving me here to play babysitter of the base again."

Shizuru heard the note of complaint in her cousin's voice and grinned.

"I am sorry for leaving you to languish here while all this work has been going on around you, then," she said with a distinct lack of apology. "But the centre is always expected to be steady, after all. Everything else revolves around its stability."

"Which nonetheless means it can never be truly glorious, doesn't it?" the other observed shrewdly. "The Senate records tell of victories won on the field by this legate or that, of triumphant marches of impossible daring over massifs in winter... while I what? Win battles of organisation and logistics?"

"Of stability?" Shizuru offered, chuckling.

"I shall say this much for that view of things, at least," drawled the senior legate. "I wager no one in the House would ever have thought to associate me before with stability."

Shizuru was still laughing when the knock preceding Natsuki came, and the two Himeans paused their banter and eating to wait for the girl take her seat. She had evidently decided to go back to fetch her pet or had someone fetch it for her, for the animal was in tow: it snuffed around its master first after she seated herself, then went off to lounge on a couch at the other end of the room after being given a shooing gesture from the Otomeian's hand.

"Cats," said the watching Shizuma, "are the damnedest animals. They hold no loyalty for their masters because they hold no gratitude, believing themselves entitled to everything you do for them. It is unlike a dog, which will thank you with its life ever afterwards for every meal. These things are natural to each species, I think. Yet your girl has managed to make a dog of this cat, Shizuru. It is something I have marvelled at for the past months."

The corners of Natsuki's lips twitched.

"She is entitled too," she said, speaking now in her lovely woman's voice, the voice that was sometimes a shock coming from someone who still looked as though she were still only newly arrived at the peak of adolescence. "But it is right for Shizuki to be so."

They asked her why.

"I denied her death. Thus it is my... hmm... my obligation, I think, to provide for her life. I give to her only what I owe her. Does this not make her loyalty to me even more honourable than a dog's, if it is as you say?"

This time, everyone at the table smiled.

"Perhaps," Shizuma answered. "Would you call yourself a cat or a dog?"

"I am human," the Otomeian replied. "And this makes me less honourable than both, I think."

The two Himeans laughed.

"Her wit's a delight, Shizuru," said the senior legate, turning again to her cousin. "I've had wonderful company here for the past months, at the very least, so don't start feeling too sorry for me yet. We were talking about the cavalry she plans to take with her to Lasandre, Natsuki."

"The Lupine Division and the archers."

"Have you been eavesdropping on us, *mea vita*?" Shizuru said.

"No," Natsuki said while nodding at the victuals the two pushed towards her. "But it would be clear."

"To you, but you see through my mind as though it were your own," Shizuru responded. "Well then, cousin, since Natsuki is already here, should I commence with my tale or have you two anything else to tell me that should go first? I have a great deal to tell and little time left for the telling of it. I have been riding all day and I confess it

is wearing at me. I want to go about this as efficiently as possible now for my bones already ache for the comfort of sleep."

Later that night she showed to her mistress what comforts she truly ached for, her lie to her cousin manifest as soon as they all retired to their beds. She was still catching her breath after the first relief when Natsuki demanded to know when she was leaving the camp again.

Her gaze rolled downwards to the girl on her chest.

"I just got here today, *mea vita*," she said. "At least let me get a night's rest before sending me away."

Natsuki got up and straddled her at the waist. Her lips twitched when she felt the girl's wetness spread and rest brazenly on her skin.

"You want rest?" asked the Otomeian.

"Not right now," she admitted, trying to reach for the tempting wetness between the girl's legs. Natsuki slapped her hand away several times and she whined disconsolately when she realised she would not be allowed to touch it until she gave the girl what she wanted.

"When, Shizuru?"

Shizuru scowled but answered anyway.

"Three days," she said. "Maybe four. But it is not as though I am headed so very far away again."

She reached again for her and was slapped away once more, the girl murmuring something about Himeans.

"How would you know?" Shizuru laughed at her. "Assuming you have only ever had one Himean, you would hardly be able to claim certainty in that remark."

Natsuki rolled her eyes at the thinly-veiled test.

"It is so," she said. "But my Himean is worth a hundred others. In more ways than one."

"Is this the part where you call me hopelessly insatiable?"

"No. It is the part where I offer to... hmm... *serve you* tonight if you listen to me."

Shizuru eyed her with a new expression.

"I never thought I would hear you negotiate with sexual favours, Natsuki," she admitted. "This must be something grave indeed."

"To me, yes."

"I see. Yet your negotiation is faulty, *meum mel*. For if you are to serve me the way I wish you to and in a way that will earn my favour, your mouth shall be too busy to speak anything to which I should listen."

Natsuki thought about that so seriously that the Himean had to bite her lip not to laugh aloud.

"Perhaps I will speak it first," the girl eventually offered, "and then let you think as I serve you."

Shizuru nodded gravely, having taken time to compose herself as the Otomeian considered the dilemma.

"How sly of you," she said. "But very well, please do not let me stop you."

She spread her legs and motioned for the girl to take the position for tending to her. Natsuki got on all fours and crawled backwards. She wrapped hands around Shizuru's hips, her short nails scratching Shizuru's skin to pleasurable effect.

"I may speak?" she said.

"Yes."

"When you go to Lasandre."

"What of it?"

"I wish to go too."

She *was* sly, it seemed, for she spared no pause after Shizuru's eyes widened at the request: after her words, she simply dove forward immediately and pressed a firm kiss between her lover's legs, drawing a choked sound from the older woman. It pulled her own lips, still in contact with the warm flesh, into a wide smile.

She rolled her tongue over Shizuru, seeking the fleshy little bundle of sensation that she knew the Himean liked her to catch between her lips. She found it and started suckling on it as a sleeping child on his thumb. Shizuru's answering groans to this ministrations were soft, but the woman's hands were also hard, pushing Natsuki's head insistently towards its task and holding her in place with a fistful of hair. The Himean enjoyed herself for a few moments first, then yanked Natsuki's head from herself with a growl of self-sacrifice.

"I suppose we had to talk about it sometime," she panted, drinking in the sight of the girl's jaw running wet with her juice.

Natsuki agreed.

"Do you mean you want to leave with me? To see the siege itself on the day it begins?"

"Yes."

"You intend to ride there, I take it?"

"Yes." A beat. "With my troopers. I walk when they walk. The distance is not too great. As - as you said."

Shizuru's eyes narrowed and she breathed heavily through her nose.

"I must think on this," she murmured. "It is something significant that you are asking me, especially when you consider that I asked you to occupy the camp across the river precisely so I could keep you safe and out of the area of engagement. Yet even I must confess I never imagined that a permanent arrangement. I must think on this."

Natsuki nodded mutely, her posture at once sombre and diffident.

"You may go back to your service."

Natsuki obeyed, applying herself to it so fervently in her desperation that Shizuru gasped. The sound only roused her on and she directed all her frustrated power into the present activity. Her fingers dug into the older woman's flanks and locked the white hips in a stranglehold of pleasure, one that she brought to its teeth-gnashing fulfilment mere moments into her effort.

Shizuru threw an arm over her eyes afterwards, feeling a trail of sweat roll from her brow as the beads coalesced. She took her time recovering.

"Well," she said later. "Well done."

The breaths finally stopped tickling her; the weight of Natsuki's head vanished from her thigh. The Otomeian dragged herself up and pressed her lips to Shizuru's stomach. She tested the moisture on it with a tongue and sighed when Shizuru trembled at the contact.

"Naught in the world could be as far from an offence to the senses as you," she whispered in her language, glancing up afterwards to see if Shizuru had caught it. The Himean's gentle smile told her the answer.

"I have not sufficient grasp of your tongue yet to match such poetry," Shizuru said. "Oh, wait-I believe I actually did have a fairly good grasp on your tongue just now, did I not?"

Natsuki laughed and kissed the heaving plane of her belly again.

"You are vulgar," she accused.

"Says the girl who had her tongue inside me just now."

"I shall call it acculturation," the Otomeian said.

Shizuru closed her eyes and laughed.

"Oh, if only your acculturation would indeed be in that aspect," she said with a lusty final chuckle, admiring the other's naked body openly. "But going back to the topic of your negotiations earlier, are



you certain you want to do that? It shall be a hard march-you know that even when I take my time, it is a hard march."

"I will do it."

"I do not doubt you will try." Again her eyes narrowed, and her lips pulled back from her teeth. "You have me at disadvantage, Natsuki. I should equalise matters before going further."

She dragged Natsuki up and flipped her over, pressing over her after that. Her heat when tested was as wet as before. She did not bother to work on her this time, considering her prepared enough, and simply went inside her immediately. The other hand she put on her belly, feeling the muscles as they strained with the girl's arch. Natsuki's skin under her palm was warm, but the flesh around her was hot.

"I hope we are clear on at least one thing," she said. "I forbid you from joining battle yourself, Natsuki, so do not even bother attempting debate there. Do you understand?"

"I... yes!"

"Do not attempt to trick me or get around this by finding some loophole in what I said either." She dropped her voice even further to make sure the girl understood her seriousness: "Gainsay me on this and you shall rue the day, *mea vita* . I shall not take your insubordination on this matter, let that be clear."

She punctuated the directive with a clench that had Natsuki screaming, whipping her hips back and forth against the hand in her and lashing herself into a whimpering oblivion. Shizuru's drew a silvery track on the white thighs when she retracted, and she smeared the silver over the girl's belly with a smile. Then she lay down so she could gather the shaken form into her arms to comfort it.

"I uh-understand," Natsuki said when she was able. "I did not think to ask. Or try it."

"Then that is good. I was merely warning you from it in advance."

She pressed a kiss to her forehead. "What is it precisely that you were going to negotiate, then?"

The Otomeian pulled away, a speculative look settling over her flushed features as she regarded Shizuru silently. *I am being measured for the strike*, Shizuru thought, entertained, her own eyes roaming the wild black hair where her hands had disarranged it.

"A place in the command. Ah-as I deserve."

Shizuru ignored the stammer graciously.

"I see," she said. "Pray take this not as an insult, but I would like to know the answer to this question. By what reasoning do you claim to merit what you are asking from me?"

Natsuki was nervous; the movements in her long neck showed it.

"By reason of being Polemarch of your auxiliary," the girl said. "Also supreme head of your - your most valued cavalry. My... my standing deserves consideration in issues of command."

"Perhaps. But I must point out that you were given this singular authority absent our participation or consent," Shizuru retorted. "You were also invested with the title of polemarch subsequent to our initial agreement with your nation to aid us in the war. As such, no pledges of obligatory acknowledgement exist for us as regards changes to your particular status, save if you were to be elected the actual monarch of Otomeia, of course."

She chuckled at the girl's obvious consternation in the wake of her words, shaking her head and tutting when Natsuki's first attempt at a reply was prefaced with a miserable stammer.

"Always maintain your composure, my love," she said. "In front of your enemy, be the ice you are so often viewed to be. Granted, I am not truly your enemy and wish never to be. But if you are to be a part of a Himean command council-and not merely as the silent attendant to the commander-you must know how to deal with litigious-minded Himeans resenting your presence and questioning your right to be there. Stand up for it, *mea vita*. Take a moment to

compose yourself if you must. I know you shall have to work against your stammer, but at the very least, demanding pause for your response is better than lunging into ill-conceived words."

It seemed to her that Natsuki had to stop herself from releasing another halting response as she finished-and indeed Natsuki had. It had been on the tip of the girl's tongue to say that she was at disadvantage from the beginning in this test, as there was no one in the world as capable of stripping away her composure as Shizuru. One look at that young goddess's face with its wise red eyes and her tongue shot down her throat. But then she realised that this situation might be to her advantage after all, for if she could maintain composure around Shizuru, she could surely maintain composure around anyone.

She steeled herself to meet again the beautiful eyes adoring her.

"If you refer to... our pledge of aid to Hime as indicated by our monarch when first you came to our citadel for help with Argentum," she began in that deliberate way she had when trying to master her treacherous tongue. "You present an argument that is - is - uh-"

At Shizuru's encouraging nod, she finally found the word: "Specious."

"How so?"

"Because it was a pledge made under circumstances that no longer exist," she replied, gaining confidence. "There have been at least two great changes in the legal scope of what you call 'The Northern Mission'. Tuh-taken with the changes in the composition of your command, I may argue that you yourselves have made grave... hmm... alterations to the circumstances that were in effect when you first solicited our troops. This means, by your logic, that we have even less-no, I mean fewer-fewer reasons to acknowledge you due to all the changes in your and your officers' status since then."

The eyes on her were alight in the way only red eyes could be.

"Shizuma was right," Shizuru murmured, before asking, "I trust you have been delighting my cousin with wit and wit alone of all your

many talents?"

Natsuki laughed, having learned by now that this was one of the older woman's ways of saying she had done something worthy of praise.

"More seriously, though, be warned that people may question you for reasons beneath your own superb logic, Natsuki. They may say that the situation is different since Himeans are the ones commanding the venture, and Otomeians are merely auxiliary-"

"So what goes for one does not for the other?" Natsuki finished for her.

"Precisely. You know how my people are and what sort of logic rules them. Most might even question your presence in the command tent for the simple reason that you are my mistress. When something like that happens, do not even bother trying to reason with them. But above all, my beauty, you should simply insist on your right to be present and do so with the stubborn composure of one who cannot be moved from her intent. Do not flare up, but do not give in either."

Natsuki nodded. "I will keep my temper, Shizuru."

"Good girl."

"This means I may be part of your command council? Where - where I can?"

"Yes."

Natsuki dove into her arms again.

"Thank you, Shizuru," she breathed, actually slumping now against the older woman. "I thank you."

Shizuru caught her, hugging her close with a fierceness that surprised both of them. She explained it with her next words, which rushed out before she could stop herself.

"I know I cannot deny this to you and I shall not deny it," she said. "But damn it all, I wish I could!"

Lips fell warmly on her neck as Natsuki's way of saying she understood, and neither of them said much in the wake of her unguarded declaration. It was enough for both to share the echo of it in silence.

When the time did come for speaking again, it was Shizuru who spoke first.

"Well, that conversation woke me up."

She disengaged herself from Natsuki after that and got up, though not without kissing her lover on the brow first. She found her slippers beside the bed but scorned to don her robe: she simply walked out of the bedroom naked.

When she came back, she had a scroll in one hand.

"Chikane's letter," she said, waving it at Natsuki. "I shall read it first of all the mail waiting for me. Gods know it should hold more worth than the rest."

She got back in bed and pulled up some of the pillows to the top, setting up a place where she could rest her back comfortably. She sat on the side next to an end-table, on which was a lamp, and thus unfurled the fat scroll in her hand beside its light. After a while of reading it, she saw Natsuki looking closely at her from the periphery of her vision.

"What is it?" she asked, without removing her eyes from her reading.

Natsuki shook her head.

"Come here."

The Otomeian complied with alacrity, rolling her head to rest on Shizuru's bare thigh and placing a hand over the older woman's knee. Shizuru put a hand on the dark head in response, stroking it much as the girl would stroke her pet cat's when it was seeking attention. It calmed Natsuki as much as it did that animal, and the girl was near-asleep already when Shizuru made an odd sound that broke the silence between them again.

Natsuki twisted about to look at her lover.

"Shizuru?" she said, wondering what had happened for Shizuru to produce that noise. "Hmm?"

Shizuru's eyes were still on the letter, skipping from left to right even more quickly now. It was as if she was consumed by an overpowering desire to read the rest of the thick scroll's contents as swiftly as possible.

"You may want to give thought again to my proposal, *meum mel*," she said during her furious reading. "Even more thought than you may already have."

"Why?"

Still she kept reading. She did reply after a pause, however.

"Because Suou-chan's sister is offering to adopt you under her family."

## Chapter 64

*As ever, thanks to all those still reading and who are kind enough to share their opinions in a review. My apologies too for not responding to most of you-my health goes through some deuced low valleys sometimes, to the point where it is difficult just to take a breath. You may well imagine that even typing something can be exhausting then.*

*Today, however, is a good day. I hope it is for all of you too.*

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### ***Inter Nos II: Inde Ira et Lacrimae***

*par ethnewinter*

---

She woke to the blare of the horns calling for the daily formation, the brassy sound succeeded by the duller beat of the march. It was a siren song to her despite its uninspired rhythm, and she felt her whole being thrum a refrain.

There was sweat on her skin; it was thin, an irritant. Atop it was something thicker, even more irritating, and she found that the blanket had draped over her again. It was suffocating her with heat and her teeth flashed as she flung it away.

It was all the signal the shape hiding in the corner needed.

It lunged for her with all the swiftness of its kind. She did not bother evading it and pushed both palms outwards instead, in the manner of people trying to hold back a thing that could not really be held back. The result was a rude landing for the assailant, but it still managed to land on the bed. She put an arm around it and clicked her tongue in reproach. She knew it was excited but that was still not reason enough to try to crush her in the morning.

She supposed the poor thing had grown hungry while waiting.

This was her second time to wake, which meant it was the beast's as well. Their first waking had been when her lover arose. She had been told to go back to bed by the woman then and had acceded, guided into the sheets by a gentle voice and her own bleary mind. She was grateful for the luxury of a longer slumber, especially when waking meant facing another torrid summer day of the lowlands. Yet she felt as though she had sinned as well by that evasion. Who slept in when the commander herself woke up earlier than usual? Today was expected to be an important day too!

Unless the Mentulae marched more slowly than usual, of course. And that was something they could only achieve if they took to using their chins to crawl.

She gave her pet a kiss on the nose and suffered the forceful cheek rub the animal gave in return. Then she rolled to the other side of the bed and felt for the stand on which she kept her cane and leg. Her hand touched her cane first and discovered that something was wrapped around the shaft.

A tactile exploration conducted by the fingers, descriptors clicking away like abacus beads. Pliable and thin, but not precisely fragile; the texture a whisper. Parchment, most likely, and probably a letter.

She found the blanket again and called for a light, knowing that at least one of the three servants outside-she counted three centres of resonance beyond the leather wall-was there to answer just such a demand. One materialised with a lamp, asking if she would prefer lamplight alone or if the window flaps should be drawn up. It being that she was naked (not her fault, she always went to bed clothed even if someone else contrived to negate that nightly), she opted for the former and the servant lit more lamps for her, including the one at the bedside.

She found the letter under the illumination and read it.

*Do not leave the tent absent the scarf and hat, or you will sting again on places other than your face. I told Hermias to make sure you eat more than a roll for breakfast. I know how you are.*



*Have a good morning, mea regina. Then find me and make mine better.*

Only a Himean would pause to write such a message before going off to a siege, she was sure. It was enough to make her shake her head even while admiring the regularity of the letterforms on the parchment. Who else too but a Himean could be bothered to think about the beauty of his hand in a quick missive? Sometimes, she really had to sigh ( *smile* ) at her lover's ridiculousness ( *romance* ).

Time to start moving if she was to make anyone else's day better later on. Her daily routine was to bathe, and put on her foot and leg after her clothes. A servant came in to help her with this as usual. Natsuki knew she could get through her schedule alone, but it always took too long without help... besides taking so much effort that it tired her more than even she cared to admit. That was hardly the way one started a good morning, so she decided to just embrace the necessity and work with the solution.

She used Kavine, as she had the day before. If there was anyone on her staff who was loyal unto death, she would say it would be this woman, but even then she felt embarrassed when she let the woman bathe her, as she knew there was no hiding her rear and thighs. To her relief, Kavine ignored the sight, only humming the song she always did when bathing her princess; Natsuki thought the woman seemed a little too nonchalant this time, but neither aired suspicions nor forbade the tune. She knew that paranoid ears were not always good interpreters and she would not accuse someone so faithful merely on the basis of her own shame.

After her ablutions were over, she got on with the rest of her tasks. She fed her pet with fresh meat, broke her fast as enjoined-she ate a roll and a half-and even managed a conversation with her grooms on the horses' health. Usually this would be a short exchange, as Otomeian horses were hardy and their grooms the most dependable on campaign. It was a longer dialogue this time, however, because there were two things this time that were different from other campaigns: the first was the land and the second the heat scorching it into a cinder.

The land they stood on was no longer the lush riverine one they had

occupied in the past months. The army had marched from the River Atinu to Lasandre Citadel on spring's first breath, putting up a road on the way so as to make travel easier from and to Base Camp afterwards. As they were building a proper road on an existing path, the work was faster than usual, so all expectations were for their schedule to work out. The intention was to begin investment of Lasandre on the last legs of spring, as this would make the more gruelling parts of the big job-setting up for the siege and confrontation-easier on everyone as they would be conducted in moderate instead of intense heat.

The plan was thwarted when spring in the empire's heartlands proved a curt visitor. It was an ever-warming period that rushed so swiftly into summer that the latter season burst upon them even before the rivers had been properly flooded from the melts. The escalation of temperature was thus an uncomfortable one, and not very welcoming to an invader.

The Himeans weathered it quite well, though. Such climes were not entirely unknown to them, for most of Fuuka was subject to similarly sweltering summers. Hime itself often saw summer temperatures that made it possible to cook an egg on the sidewalk, and the national fashion was the short tunic, which showed off their nicely browned legs.

But their auxiliaries were a people who did cooking indoors and wore thick trousers and full skirts. To the Otomeians, the Mentulaean climate was as much a foe as it was foreign. Formerly unflappable, the blonde giants suddenly took to carrying fans with them, flapping away during every opportunity they could grab. Not that breezes were scarce where they were, on the Mentulaean steppes; indeed, they rolled helter-skelter over the wide plains. But they were coarse winds, unfriendly ones, burdened with heat and dust. They hit your face with a slap, and it was a slap from a hand full of calluses.

The weather was actually special, in a way. Some of the local informants confessed to finding it a hotter summer than was normal for the empire-and not just from a political perspective. Even when told this, however, the auxiliaries of the Fujino Army were little inclined to pardoning the land. They had already made up their

minds, that it was as much a land of wretched seasons as it was one of wretched soldiers. It was no wonder the Mentulaeans were such cowards, they would say, since people used to such battlefields would logically be eager for opportunities to run off it. It was no wonder that the Mentulaean commanders were so paltry, since the heat of their homelands must have long baked to ashes whatever minds they used to house under their sparse thatches (the Mentulae kept their hair short, like the Himeans, although they also grew beards). In the same way was it found no wonder that the Mentulaeans lacked engineers in their armies, since it would be pointless to try to divert streams in a place where the sun probably dried them up in minutes. How many things were suddenly found devoid of wonder! Save for the actual heat, at any rate.

That the panting, sweating Otomeians had taken to blaming the climate for every negative trait in their enemy was because they were unwilling to show their own. They were a people who preferred to maintain a stoic ability to deal with all rigours in front of others-and no matter how much time they had spent with their allies by now, the Himeans were still *others*. So, unable to carp the way others would, the Otomeians settled for casting blame on the weather for everything that seemed weak or wrong in the foe instead of acknowledging that it could possibly bring out something weak or wrong in them.

It was why, when the grooms told their polemarch that the heat was also the reason the Mentulaean horses were diminutive, she took the remark with the look of someone who had expected it.

"The horses probably die before they get a chance to get big enough, Princess," one said with confidence, hair pulled tightly up in a knot on his head: it was too hot to wear down, so most of the Otomeians had taken to pulling up their tresses. "Like Jahey says, they'd just keel right over once summer rolls in."

"Surprised any of them can even take the heat!"

"Like he says, Princess. Surprising."

"Damned if the bigger ones don't go faster!"

"Like he says, Princess. The bigger ones."

When asked what she thought, she said she was inclined to say it was like he said.

She then wondered aloud if it was because larger animals had more hide upon them. By which, she said, she meant that they had a larger surface with which to absorb the light and warmth of the day. Smaller things absorbed and retained less heat, so larger ones would be more likely to perish from overheating.

So much did she observe to the grooms, who listened earnestly to her ideas. She owned one of the most esteemed horse breeding concerns in the nation, which made her a valuable authority on equine matters. When they said afterwards that hers was a most creditable theory, the valuable authority told them they would likely perish faster than her in these lands then, which had both (much bigger) men laughing. As soon as her steed was saddled, however, the polemarch ended the conversation with them without ceremony and quickly prepared to leave.

As usual, her personal guard attempted to tag along, even going so far as to prepare his own steed.

She took one look and said no to him, although she did eye his horse rather more kindly.

"But what if you-"

"No."

"But there might-"

"No."

"Princess, be-"

"Zidek, you tire me."

The titanic Zidek fidgeted, shifting from one boat-like foot to the other. He looked like the largest child that had ever been scolded, thought Natsuki, sighing quietly to herself.

"I always ride far from the field," she said, knowing this particular child was especially concerned for her safety as well as especially sensitive. "Am I a child, you children, that you worry if I ride alone?"

She glanced to the side as if remembering something.

"It is nuh-not a condition that endures overlong nowadays, besides that," she added morosely. Seeing the confusion on his face, she clicked her tongue at the woman fixing a waterskin to her saddle.

"The princess means that she never gets to ride alone now," Kavine said to Zidek. "Not for long, anyway, given that one of you oafs always manages to follow her with an excuse."

He had the grace to look apologetic, it being the first time he had ever heard their princess complain of it.

"We don't mean that it should gall you, Princess," he said lamely, and received a look that asked if she had ever accused them otherwise. Wisely he resigned himself: "What should I do while you ride?"

"Discover a hobby." A pause, then a thoughtful squint. "Get a wife."

He grinned at Kavine's poorly-concealed laughter and helped the princess up her mount. He did the job with ease, practically lifting her onto the horse with one hand. She was tiny, their polemarch, even if she was also great.

"Your horse, Zidek," said the great little girl looking at him with green eyes. "From Baron Tharren's?"

"Yes, Princess-a reward after battle. How did you know?"

"It has the look. Handsome." She smiled. "But not young."

"No, he's quite as long in the tooth as I am now, the old boy."

He found the princess eyeing him with scepticism.

"I see no grey hairs," she said.

"Horses don't show age as we do, Princess."

As both of them knew she had been speaking of him and not the horse, her response to this was drier than the wind.

"You are an idiot."

"The princess's sword," said Kavine, who was now busy with a satchel of edibles. There were two hard cheeses in it, along with a small loaf of bread and some dried meat and fruit. It was all food the princess liked to eat, although they knew she would touch none of the items: she had an annoying habit of forgetting about food even when it sat next to her hand. Thank goodness the Himean commander made a point of forcing her to eat more whenever they sat together at the table! The princess's poor staff were ever worrying about keeping her fed, wondering how to tear her away from those rolls of paper and parchment she preferred to consume when the commander was not watching. Books, of all things! Who could possibly live on them alone? They knew no one who could, yet their princess seemed eager to try it.

Zidek waited for the satchel to be secured first before he handed over the requested weapon. It was the princess's Himean sword, a long and thin blade that he admired very much. It had been given to her by someone important, according to the others, and that was why she insisted on having it with her wherever she went. It did not matter if there would be occasion to use it or not, which was allegedly a demonstration of the regard she had held for the giver. Privately, however, Zidek felt that she simply wanted to keep it with her because it was so beautiful. If he had a sword like that he would bring it everywhere too, just to let others know he owned such a treasure.

But then again, he allowed, their princess had never been the type to show off her wealth.

"The hat today, Princess?" asked Kavine, looking at the headpiece the princess had in hand.

"No." She handed it over. "Tie this to the saddle."

"As you wish. You will wear the scarf?"

"Yes."

The hat joined the sword and other things strapped to the saddle; Kavine handed over the scarf for her princess's head. The cloth went over Natsuki's scalp, over her nose and her mouth, and the loose tags of it draped around her shoulders. It left bare only her eyes and the neatly gathered tail of her mane. The resulting enclosure was a touch stifling, but Natsuki refused the alternative: she thought the hat looked ridiculous, with its dangling chinstraps and gigantic straw brim. She only tied that other headgear to her saddle in deference to her lover's wishes that she bring it. It was true that it might be more comfortable than the scarf were she not concerned about airborne sand and her mount's speed, but as these *were* things to be taken into account, she could justify the scarf. There was also her dignity to consider, and as far as that was concerned, the scarf won by a mile.

Even though Shizuru had burst into laughter upon first sight of her with it, side-saddle on a horse and dangling a cane with one hand.

*You look like a mad Arab, my love.*

She was too aware of the many oddities of her appearance on horseback now to have felt the least bit insulted. People still stared when they saw her side-saddle perch, even more when she had her pet cat in tow. She had left Shizuki in the tent and under her servants' eyes this time, however, as she preferred to keep the big cat out of the sun. Its fur trapped heat-like her own hair-and she could not countenance the thought of having it perish right under her watch. She would have left it in Base Camp, where she thought it would be more comfortable, had it not been for Shizuru's insistence on it coming with them for now. She seemed to think Natsuki safer when the animal was around, although Natsuki pointed out that it was not a dog and might not think to attack anyone assaulting her.

"Even so, you never know," Shizuru had persisted. "Beasts often comprehend more than we think they do. I would not be surprised to see her leap to your defence were she to sense some danger to you."

Her black stallion too she left in the stables. The horse she used in the daytime was younger, but still one of her favoured mounts: one so favoured, in fact, that the appreciation for it extended far beyond Natsuki herself. No fewer than thirteen other nobles had made offers to purchase the animal when it had yet been a foal. Even the king, upon finally seeing the filly, had remarked that it was as well for the princess that he no longer rode much at his age or he might have offered to buy the animal himself-which would have been an offer the princess could not have turned down. As it was, no one had prevailed upon the princess to part with the creature, whose unique coat it was that had many an Otomeian in raptures. Properly a cremello, the filly had a metallic gloss to her fur that gave it the look of electrum with less gold than silver. She had pale hooves below spun-metal pasterns, a pink skin under her fantastic hair, and eyes blue as an Otomeian's on a bright winter day.

Natsuki thought Aurea the only possible name.

Aurea was Natsuki's pride and joy in a different way from how Niger-and when he had still been hers, Albinus-was that. Whereas Niger was a representative of the classic Otomeian horse at its best, enormous in every aspect and almost physically overpowering by sheer presence, Aurea was a freak, even if she was a breathtaking one. She was the first of her coat any of them had ever seen, for one thing. Other cremellos there were, yes, but none with coats of that metallic shine. Even her conformation was deviant from the typical stock. While she was nearly as tall as Niger, her head was slimmer and less robust, her neck and legs longer-looking and more gracile. She was all lines and leanness, delicate but deep-chested, and certainly more suitable for parade than for war. And how many of Otomeia's noble warlords wanted to parade her!

But Aurea was one of Natsuki's special pleasures, one of the few things she permitted herself to own in true selfishness. In her ownership of Aurea was an absence of guilt, of considerations of sharing or social obligation. Shizuru had guessed at it after recovering from her own first encounter with the animal, teasing that Natsuki had been holding out on her after all.

Aware of the jest but slightly embarrassed, Natsuki had replied that Shizuru was at liberty to return Albinus if she found him



unsatisfactory.

"Are you saying you would replace him with a more satisfactory animal to carry me if I did?" Shizuru had answered, glancing pointedly at Aurea.

"Could be," Natsuki had countered, glancing pointedly at Zidek.

Shizuru had decided that Albinus was more than satisfactory after all.

The polemarch held in Aurea while she was yet in the camp, but urged the horse to go faster once they made it out of the gates. The sentries barked salutes to her when she passed, even though she carried no officer's insignia. Everyone in camp knew that filly on sight and the strange rider perched on it as though it were a bench instead of a moving animal.

The rider clove to the hills as she had told Zidek, every now and then even running into one of the army lookouts. Her track was an uneven one since she stuck not to the shorter paths but to the shadiest ones. Even if she was fully geared to stop the sun's touch, she knew better than to think that was enough to stop the heat. Besides, like all other Otomeians, she was a conscientious user of horses: Aurea was not proof to sunburn, even if the filly could weather ambient heat much better than her heavier and darker stallion.

The besieged citadel she kept on her right, deliberately driving first for the ground she knew the Himean officers would not occupy. She knew Shizuru would forgive her if she put off their greetings for the morn, especially if she explained her reason. She merely wanted to see the field from a different perspective before she went to share her lover's; her spectatorship, she believed, would be much more interesting for the difference.

She heard her pursuer before she saw him, and slowed Aurea's pace to a walk.

"Polemarch," said her chaser, pulling roughly at the scarf around his head. "May I accompa-"

A sharp tug halted both his words and her steed, which blew through its nose.

"If you cannot spare the chaperonage, you shall spare the lies." She turned her head to address the man looking sheepishly at her, a wince evident in his eyes. "You ask, but you shall follow me regardless of my response. We both know your fellows sent you to be my lookout."

"But I, uh... but I was actually sent to you to convey the reports of the day, Princess!"

Green eyes rolled all the way to the grass.

"The day," she said, "has only just begun."

"But today may be the day-"

She cut him off with a loud snap of the teeth, her chin lifting, head thrown back. Her neck was so long that the scarf over her shoulders could not obscure the pose, which reminded the alarmed Arichnos of a horse about to rear.

"*May be*," said the princess, "is not a thing to report at the start of the day. A May Be is not a report but a phrase for those in command."

She danced her horse before his, a minor dust storm roiling about her steed. For a moment he did not know whether she would gallop away or have her filly kick his in the face.

Yet her voice was controlled when again she spoke, no shout hidden in its tones.

"Tell me now, Arichnos, you paragon of report-givers, do you really think May Be's are things to which a polemarch would be ignorant?"

Her glare, he thought, was withering him faster than the sun.

"I don't - I suppose, I guess not, Polemarch," he stuttered out. "I guess a polemarch wouldn't be ignorant of them, at least I think so. I mean, I don't know much about polemarchs, so I don't rightly know

the answer. I mean, I'm sorry to say you're the only polemarch I've ever known, Princess Natsuki, so I guess I could... be wrong."

She gave him one of the looks with which he was familiar: a glimmering one that he never had been able to parse into understanding yet had often encountered from her.

"Report," she eventually said, her voice low but rather softer than before. He blew out a sigh of relief at the change and launched into recitation.

As Arichnos delivered the day's reports-which had not changed from yesterday's, as she had suspected-Natsuki paused to drain the laughter that had nearly bubbled out at his bumbling, wondering which of her officers had sent Arichnos for her daily escort. Most of them shared her opinion of him, which was that the man was a good fighter and a well-meaning person. Unfortunately, they also all thought said well-meaning person an intellectual lightweight. It was a nice coincidence, everyone agreed, that he also had the sort of manner that made him more amusement than annoyance. A bearable sort of fool with his uses, which was probably the best kind of fool there was.

She busied herself with scanning Lasandre as he babbled on- *truly a fool*, anyone else would have simply noted which things were unchanged and moved on to whatever was new-and eyed the troop positions, looking longest at the shady tents under which some of the troops were resting. These unorthodox battlefield structures had been installed by the commander as a solution to the summer sun, a means of making the soldiers more comfortable and keeping them fresher for longer on the field. There were also non-combatants and donkey trains bringing water to the soldiers and their steeds, and these supply trails ran constantly, like tells for invisible roadways on the plain.

Natsuki knew that the unconventional shade and water provisions had initially provoked debate among the Himean officers, some of whom thought the troops were being unnecessarily babied. Not that the debate was held within the hearing of high command! Whatever dissenting opinions there were about the general's orders were expressed far away from her ears-although not quite far enough

from the Otomeian polemarch's sensitive ones for her to fail to detect them.

Natsuki had not bothered telling her lover about the disagreement since she thought it inconsequential; she thought all the dissenters would change their tune once the siege started. And in this she was right: the carping officers reversed directions after the true work got underway. There were still some who would prate noisily of having soldiered in worse heat with no such provisions, constantly telling the men they were epically lucky to be soldiering in such comfort by comparison-but she thought that to be expected, the natural braggadocio of one soldier to another.

She said little on the topic herself to her own troops, but knew that the arguably bigger beneficiaries were her people. Even though most of the Otomeians currently in the Fujino Army were from the lowland provinces of the realm, there were still a fair number of the citadel-dwellers present, particularly in the cavalry contingents. This meant that a good portion of the horse was made up of people chafing constantly from the heat, and who thus needed all the water and shade they could get, at least if they were to function as the commander was expecting.

It was also why the auxiliaries were supplied with white scarves for their heads and adjured to keep on full sleeves and trouser legs. This was to prevent them baking blisters into their white skins during the day. To the Himean commander's relief, most of the northerners demonstrated a happy ability to brown after the reddening phase. There were some unlucky exceptions, however. Several merely found themselves with itchy hides that peeled off into skin that was first pinkish, then even whiter than before. These were the most vigilant about their dress when going out of their tents by day, as the army doctors had warned of permanent scarring if they did not keep themselves covered or in the shade.

Natsuki was part of this group, and it was a constant source of anxiety for the commander herself.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, I told you to bring your hat!" she would groan each time she saw the princess return to the tent without the object on head or in hand. "Every time you go out was what the

*medicus* said. Gods know I love you, *mea vita*, but you are tempting the paddle."

Natsuki would roll her eyes in a way that made no secret of her weariness on the subject.

"You are paranoid beyond the telling of it," she would say, speaking her language because Shizuru had. "Ten minutes spent and eight metres away."

"I care not how long or far-the *medicus* insisted. Your lovely skin!"

"Is fine. You see it?"

"Yet another thing! I should not even be able to see the skin of your arms if you come from outside. Even your arms can burn, Natsuki, so roll down those sleeves."

Another roll of the eyes, whereupon the other's sensuous mouth would twist ruefully.

"Stop being so mulish, please, and do as I say... or one of these days, I shall throw you over my knee. You've yet to feel a true sunburn, Princess, and it would pain you more than a spanking. Do you really want to end up as a roast when you come back to me?"

"I am roasting now," an embarrassed Natsuki would mutter, profoundly glad that no one else in the tent either spoke her tongue or understood it.

The cataphracts had also been shifted into lighter cavalry gear for the moment, both horses and humans made to shed their metal shells. The heavy lances and swords, they retained. As Natsuki pointed out to the commander when asked if she thought this wise, it would in fact be easier for them to manoeuvre those now that they were working with less weight on their bodies. The heat would be no obstacle to it, she argued, given all the other precautions taken to ensure the heavy cavalry stayed cool. Besides which, she said, the cataphracts were not like the Lupine Division. They were trained all their lives to use the heavy lances and swords and those weapons alone. Forcing them to use full-on light cavalry or even archery gear,

according to their polemarch, would likely result in them being wasted anyway despite the modifications made to their armour.

The Lupine Division had its own concessions to make, even though it was one of the lightly armoured units. While the leather trappings of their costume were retained, the Polemarch gave the order for the division's members to switch to light uniforms and put the dark ones in storage.

"Black is hot," she said succinctly, tapping her own pate.

Since they were a key cavalry unit and also used for more than one purpose, Shizuru decided that she wanted the Lupine Division easily distinguishable from the other white-uniformed troopers from a distance. This had been easier when they had been black-clothed, as they were the only ones so-uniformed among the horse. After some discussion, it was decided that they would also be provided with striped scarves instead of the standard plain ones. Natsuki could see her old unit easily even from a distance, the blue striping of their headscarves clear in the day.

There was the thud of missiles from the catapultae hitting the wall.

She redirected her attention there, drawn to the sound. It came sporadically, interrupted by intervals of parade and verbal harassment for the defenders atop the battlements. Not far off was more activity, visible to all on the field: a catapult's throw from Lasandre, the base of a siege tower was rising.

There was a lot to look on in this field, but the sound made up more of it than the sights for the polemarch. The imprecations thrown from one side to the other, the incessant yells and hammering, the low roll of rocks and rubble each time another stone was hurled at the citadel-these joined with Arichnos's droning report in a symphony of battle that formed a logical familiarity to her ears. And although there was no distinct sound to it yet, she could hear the other instrument already playing: *a May Be is coming* .

Eventually one part of the melody petered away. Her companion's memorised reports were drained and his recital ground to a halt.

Not that his mouth did the same.

"The battle we want aside, I don't see why we don't take the city already," he sighed with obvious puzzlement, eliciting from her a sigh of obvious restraint. The polemarch deigned to reply even so, perhaps due to some vestiges of her old captainship: she never had been able to resist plucking out military ignorance in her troopers whenever opportunity presented it.

Even if it did present a little more often in some.

"If the city were taken, there would be no battle. If the battle happens, the city will be taken."

His look reminded her of a friend's old hunting dog: the folds in his brow and cock of his head inquisitive and constantly perplexed by the world, his attitude earnest if comically ignorant.

How fortunate was Arichnos! She happened to like old hunting dogs.

"But we *can* take it without the battle can't we?" he answered, worrying his original bone. "Why don't they just bombard it day and night until one of those walls falls? The Himeans brought so many of their siege engines with them! It will take a while given the thickness of the walls, I suppose, but it would still be possible."

She smiled, but at the horizon and not at him. There was already a cloud of dust thicker than the other clouds of dust in the distance to the south, and that could mean only one thing. Today *was* the day after all.

"They do not break the city because they do not want to break it," she said patiently. "What they want is to have it."

She needed only to cast her mind back to a conversation with her lover for proof of this. They had still been in Shizuma's camp then and were discussing the strategy at Lasandre when she had asked it: would Shizuru offer terms to the inhabitants of the citadel before attacking them, to give them a chance to surrender?

"Of course," had been the other's answer. "Have I not offered that to all the cities and towns thus far?"

Natsuki had avowed the possible foolishness of her question.

"The terms shall be the same as the ones I offered the others, naturally," the other had gone on. "They get leniency and protection if they surrender within one hour."

To this she had replied with a sceptical lift of the eyebrow. Lasandre was unlike the other towns Shizuru had taken thus far in that it was built to withstand sieges, one of the relatively few stone citadels of the empire and one of the great fortresses of the Mentulæan heartlands. Its walls were thick enough to withstand sustained battery for days, and they were tall enough not to be scaled by quickly-built ramps. Collapsing Lasandre's walls-whether they were physical or mental-was not something done in an hour's time.

Something Shizuru had already known, judging by the woman's smirk.

"You do not want them to surrender," she had concluded.

"I do not. At least not within the first hour."

"I see."

"Do you really?"

And she had, with nothing but perfect clarity. Were the people of Lasandre to surrender to the stated terms, Shizuru would be compelled to stand by her promise of offering them peaceful settlements, Extended Rights citizenships, retention of their homes and present lands. This meant that Lasandre would stay populated by most of its original inhabitants, as indeed surrendered towns such as Asterion were.

This was in fact what Shizuru wanted for most of the empire. She had long been a believer in the aspect of conquest that presented as conversion. It was something that would be problematic were it to be applied to Lasandre's case, however, since Shizuru wanted that citadel as a linchpin location for the central offensive. The more Mentulæans stayed in Lasandre, the more potential traitors would be compromising its integrity as a Himean-owned fort-and given that



the Mentulaeans of the central regions identified their loyalties firmly with the empire, that was not something Shizuru had any intention of risking.

Better to take all Lasandre captive and sell it to slavery, apparently.

"You can be ruthless," had been Natsuki's verdict.

Shizuru had agreed.

"In fact, I often am," the woman had laughed. "Somehow, I do not think that disillusion or disappoints you in any way."

And she was right, as she often-almost frustratingly, always impressively-was. Natsuki knew she had never expected Shizuru to display anything else where her schemes were concerned, and she knew Shizuru well enough too to know that this was a woman nearly always scheming. Given the excellence of her schemes, however, why should that be disappointing? Rather, she even thought it worthy of praise. Even the Princess Alyssa, who begrudged the Himean a lot of things, had admitted to some admiration of that particular ability.

"I find her unpleasant because she's the sort it would behoove me to distrust," the other princess had stated during a private conversation. "It's not just because of our dispute over you, Natsuki, let that be clear. She's very sly, this foreigner of yours, even brilliantly so. The sort of devil who would outwit a fox in its hole."

The two Otomeian nobles had been having lunch, the elder having come over to the Fujino camp to call on the polemarch. The army heading to Lasandre had made camp near Alyssa's own, and so it was only to be expected that the elder princess would pay the younger a visit at the time. She had sent a rider ahead of her to inform Natsuki of it-and also to make sure the army's commander knew of her impending arrival.

When Shizuru was told of the planned meeting, she had been nothing but gracious. She had even encouraged the polemarch to make the most of it by inviting her suitor to "a cordial lunch". The cousins would not have much time to spend after all, she had noted,

as the march would resume the day after that. Who knew when they would see each other again and have space for this sort of encounter?

Even Natsuki had been surprised enough by this magnanimity to take her lover to task. Upon asking, she had been met with a smirk and a reminder: they would be having lunch in Shizuru's camp, within her quarters and surrounded by her people. Most importantly of all, perhaps, they would do it with her express permission.

To those with the upper hand, Natsuki inferred afterwards, magnanimity came at a lower price.

"She is... political," had been Natsuki's uncomfortable response after Alyssa's accurate observation. "It would be necessary."

Alyssa's expression had been flat enough to balance a marble without it rolling.

"That *is* what they say," the woman had eventually answered. "I feel compelled to point out that your new status as Polemarch of the Otomeians does increase your political interests as well, though-as we've seen in recent diplomatic events to do with the Corosians and Benii, am I right?"

Natsuki had been intrigued by the choice of topic. The tribes Alyssa had named were the largest ones among the many occupying the new, northernmost Mentulaeen territories: these were the rebellious peoples in the lands beyond the northern banks of the Holmys. They were also among the ones she had offered an alliance and aid in their own conflict with the empire, in order to make trouble for the enemy.

"You disapprove?" she had asked her cousin, who doubtless already knew all the details of that venture.

"No. Allying ourselves with the enemies of our enemies is only good sense." She had quirked her yellow eyebrows at Natsuki, her blue eyes gleaming. "As far as I'm concerned, for *any* political being."

"I am political, then. Am I also sly?"

"You are many things, Princess Natsuki."

"It is not an answer, Princess Alyssa."

"No, but I had not intended to be. *Are you sly?* Smart, yes. Clever, yes. Strategic, certainly. But sly, unfortunately or fortunately enough, no, I incline to doubting it."

Natsuki's brow had knitted, although not in offence at the verdict.

"May I know by what leverage you achieve that slant?" she had asked, prompting a chuckle.

"Oh, enough to make the inclination steep. For example, were you actually sly, you would have agreed to my proposal to be betrothed for the future already."

Natsuki had been surprised, but had chosen to say nothing.

"You see, had you been sly, you would have seen that it's in your interests to agree to my offer and extract a promise from me on it. Then you would have had me on a string while also enjoying the fish on the other line."

Again Natsuki had chosen to say nothing.

"Think of the neatness of it. You would not have needed to honour the betrothal later on then, if indeed your foreign lover proved constant-unlikely as that may be. And if your foreigner proved inconstant after all, why, you would still have me waiting for you and ready to see our betrothal through. In other words, by agreeing to my proposal yet not actually marrying me, you would have had the excellent security of always having at least one of two influential lovers to choose from at the end, no matter what should happen in the future."

Looking into the unspeaking girl's face, Alyssa had scoffed: "Come now, Princess Natsuki, of course it would have been the slyer-in fact, more political-thing to do! You can hardly claim it to be unjust or less than savoury since you claimed your lover to be the sly type herself. Shall you now claim political natures to be distasteful?"

It had always fascinated her, Natsuki had thought then, how much some people could make out of nothing.

"Nuh-nuh-now it is you who is sly, Princess Alyssa," she had responded, speaking gently but with the barest rumble of accusation. "You try to convince me to the choice you prefer by... by suggesting all consequences shall only be of my choosing in such a situation. Buh-but we know I have not the power to restrict *fate* so."

"Why, are you not mistress of yours?"

Natsuki's response had been given with all the dignity in her being.

"I am a cripple and an orphan."

Alyssa had been obliged to concede defeat.

"I thank you for the offer, cousin," Natsuki had continued. "It warms my heart. I - I speak no falsehood."

"Mm, you never do, which proves my point on your slyness or lack of it."

"But my answer remains the same."

"Of course it does, for god's sake!" The older woman had chuckled deep in her throat at the younger's befuddlement, her expression lightening and her face transformed by it. "Your foreigner is still yours and yours alone, is she not? Until that changes, I doubt your answer will as well, little cousin. You take my words too seriously when I was only teasing you."

"Not *testing*, Princess Alyssa?"

The other had laughed aloud.

"Perhaps a little of that too," Alyssa had admitted. "Who says one's words always have but one purpose? But then, Princess, that would be the thing to remember. You and your foreigner are not the only ones who can be political."

Of that there was no doubt. Even if she was not *sly*, the Princess

Natsuki was nevertheless truly political: sufficiently so to see the trait in other beings. She was political enough, for instance, to grasp exactly what Alyssa had meant by the slyness of agreeing to her proposal even before the elder princess expanded on the argument. She was political enough, in fact, to go beyond understanding those with whom she had grown up, political enough to grasp the slippery slyness of activities from others operating in different arenas of power... as she did, for example, in Chikane Himemiya's enormous personal-and enormously political-gift in offering to adopt her.

Now *there* was a topic worth dwelling on and turning about in mental acrobatics! It had certainly exercised her and Shizuru's minds that way of late. It was such a shock for both of them. Even Shizuru had said it, and whatever shocked Shizuru could knock out anyone else's teeth-and if Shizuru was involved in the shock, possibly their jaw.

"No, I had no expectations, no inkling of it," her golden lover had professed, her lovely eyes larger than normal and bleeding astonishment. "None whatsoever, I swear. I had not even dreamt of asking her such a thing, Natsuki, for indeed one cannot easily ask for a gift like this one. And most certainly not of a Himemiya!"

Natsuki had done little more than nod then, being too winded by the offer to say anything herself.

"Ye gods," Shizuru had continued, putting a hand to her brow as if blinded-perhaps she had been, Natsuki thought, in a way. "I have known her since youth but even now she surprises me. Oh, I am shocked beyond all measure, but I could kiss the madwoman!"

That had loosened Natsuki's tongue.

"Then," she had uttered, "you wish me to accept it?"

The look she received had been conflicted.

"What I wish is immaterial. I still adjure you to do only as you like, and Chikane herself cautions the same. You should make your own decision on the matter."

"I shall. Still I ask."

"Well, Chikane offers no small thing, *meum mel*," Shizuru had responded, sketching out a smile that was at once vulnerable in its trust and full of hope. "It is not a gift I can easily refuse, and the gift I cannot refuse is rare indeed. Chikane, through adoption of the kind she offers, can give you things I never could, not least of which would be the sort of protection in a Himean society that even marriage to me-perhaps even *especially* marriage to me-could not grant."

And then Shizuru had proceeded to explain to her what had long been a possible problem in their marriage plans. For them to get married in a way that would be recognised by Himean Law, Natsuki had to acquire either one form of the Extended Rights or the full citizenship. Shizuru's status meant the latter option was the only acceptable one, and the older woman had already drawn up the papers for it, in fact. She had yet to file those papers, however, because of a little hitch that kept staying her hand: the way the Himean citizenship was granted.

Ever canny, the first Himeans to offer or grant the citizenship to outsiders had been ones in the mould of the typical senator. They gave it away purportedly for reasons to do with honour-as when thanking eminent allies of noble birth for considerable services rendered in battle-or reasons to do with money-as with wealthy-enough foreigners willing to pay an exorbitant fee in exchange. *Purportedly*. The true motivations, as Shizuru had explained, were unsurprisingly political. In truth, the Himeans only began awarding, selling, or giving the citizenship to gain clients.

A large clientele was one of the best forms of political leverage, and making new citizens one of the best ways of expanding it. Because the citizenship was for life, it was also a cliental contract for life. And if the client happened to marry a Himean or had a spouse who was also given an appropriate citizenship, their children would be Himean too-as well as clients of their parents' patron. The grace of being born as Himean citizens, after all, was only theirs thanks to him. The same went for the children of the original client's children. It was the cliental relationship that could theoretically run on into perpetuity.

It was also not the kind of relationship you wanted to have with someone you wanted to marry.

One could not possibly have one's spouse in a position where she appeared as one's client. It made it all too easy for critics to paint her as bought property. If you were your own wife's patron, what was to say your marriage to her had not been the price she paid for the boon of the citizenship? Or even worse, what was to say it had not been more order than exchange, the demand of a master exercising his will and whims over a slave with whom he had grown obsessed to the point of lunacy?

Natsuki saw instantly the invidious suggestions that could be made there, in such a cliental relation as she and her lover would be having. She knew then that this was something the Himean had been worrying about for some time-and kept from her too, yes, but she did not blame the woman for it. It was a hard thing to explain to someone you wished to take to wife, and when that someone had not yet agreed to your proposal, it was even harder to say it.

So she could see why Shizuru had near-sagged with relief at her friend's proposition. Chikane Himemiya's scheme would save Natsuki the odium of being client to her (possible) wife, yet would still ensure for her the full citizenship. The adoption would make her a daughter of the Himemiya and no daughter of a Himemiya was *ever* under cliental obligation to another.

Not even to a Fujino who was also a Hanazono through her mother's side.

"It would also be wonderful social protection, since it adds Chikane's weight to mine," Shizuru had emphasised. "Any insults cast at you would be ones against both my family and Chikane's. I told you before that Chikane's family would be one of the few that could rival mine in terms of prestige and that was no exaggeration; ask anyone here about the founding of our nation and he will mention the Himemiya name in the story."

"I credit it."

"Then you can credit what a worthy offer it is."

Natsuki had squinted: "But I... I am sorry to ask this."

"Ask away and do not be sorry."

"Thank you. It is that, um, is not your friend-is not Chikane Himemiya the one with the wife your peers call unworthy?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Then forgive me, Shizuru, but I must say it. Would it not be easy for them to ridicule the relation anyway, as further proof of her being... being, um..."

Shizuru had grinned. "Insane?"

"Mm."

"Jupiter, I love your mind. But to answer that, yes, there are likely many who will say it of her as well as of me. Well, they say it already of many of us old patrician families, so I daresay neither of us will care much at that accusation. Besides, the critique you just predicted would still be an insult easier to weather than the one painting you as my slave-client. The latter is simply, well, insupportable! I could not have it said of my wife, Natsuki, that she married me only at sword-point or under the slave's leash. It goes against all dignity and decency."

Natsuki had been unable to resist a smirk.

"I will remember to say this next you try to coerce me into agreement when we are abed, Shizuru."

"As it is, I fear my parameters for dignity and decency yet accept that, *meum mel*," Shizuru had smiled back somewhat naughtily, looking suddenly like a girl again. It did not last, however, as she had slipped quickly back into her more womanly, mature mien:

"Really, Natsuki, what Chikane offers to us is a splendid thing. Not only would it spare you the shameful cast to your character-and mine, of course-that I just mentioned, but it would also make it harder to insult you to your face. Chikane's reprisal for offences to her family is something people would not take lightly. Granted, she



says that she would immediately transfer to me her familial authority over you-which is a legal authority in our world, by the way-once we are married. Even after that, though, you would hold the Himemiya clan's public loyalty afterwards, whether the other members of Chikane's family like it or not. Once you are formally adopted by their family head-that is Chikane herself-they have no choice but to consider you one of them, to esteem and protect, at least in front of the world. Oh, wonderful! It would be such a neat point too, you know: since you would then be my dearest friend's daughter, the ties between Chikane and myself would be even firmer than they already are. Why, the two of us would become legal immediate family! A good joining of lineages and leverage, if I were to be politically self-concerned about it."

Natsuki had listened intently to her lover's impassioned speech, sorting through the tumble of information until she managed to make an orderly thing of the mess in her head. Then she saw why Shizuru was so excited, so pleased and wishful of accepting the offering. It was, as the woman said, not a gift one could easily refuse.

Yet she herself was not yet beyond the notion of refusing it.

Her hesitations were not out of any redirected reluctance about taking the citizenship. While Otomeia was influenced by many of the same aspects of Hellenic culture that had also influenced Hime, a rigid and exclusive concept of citizenship was not one of them. For if one was born and bred an Otomeian and identified so, one was an Otomeian. No census was needed, no bureaucratic stamp or seal required. A Himean citizenship would not stop making Princess Natsuki an Otomeian, just as it would not expel the Ortygian blood animating her body. Legalities, for all their power, did not change realities of this type. At least not from the Otomeian point of view.

So it was no trouble to the Princess Natsuki to think of gaining a citizenship from Hime. She could own it without being rendered any less Otomeian in most useful senses, whether in her people's eyes or her own. No, what troubled her about this new decision was something else: it was actually none other than the person making the offer herself.

The consular Himemiya Major was an intimidating personality in

Natsuki's life, even if they had never actually seen each other nor even communicated to each other in any way. Yet the woman's hand touched Natsuki in many ways. She was the person who had contrived to send Shizuru back to the North, the former senior consul and a prominent senator of Shizuru's nation. She was Shizuru's most beloved friend, the one Shizuru trusted with everything she did. She was also the elder sister of Suou Himemiya, a friend Natsuki had never expected to get or lose as she had. And perhaps it was the last identification that made it hardest to swallow the offer Chikane presented.

Suou Himemiya was a landmark in Natsuki's history. This was saying something when you had a history as landmark-laden as she did. Suou was even a landmark Natsuki visited every day, for not a day passed that Natsuki did not grieve not being able to see that face one last time before they burned it. Poor, blonde, beautiful Suou! It seemed almost impossible to think of someone that handsome being thrown to the flames and the kindling, reduced to a heap of dust that she had never even seen in the aftermath.

Had someone who had known her all her life been allowed to reflect on it, they might have concluded that this was perhaps what affected her so much about it, aside from actual affection for the deceased. All Natsuki's deaths-the ones of those significant enough in her life to be counted-had been followed by a body, from the corpses of her parents atop her to those of her troopers on the field. There was always a body to gather up after the event, a talisman of farewell and mourning. Not so with Suou. All Natsuki had found, upon waking from the stupor of sickness and loss, had been other people's voices telling her the woman was gone. No bodies, no bones; no ashes even to sift. It was almost as if Suou had dematerialised in death and somehow turned into air.

It was more disappearance than death in a way, an event that occurred almost entirely out of Natsuki's presence. She had not been there to protect or stand by her friend's side when she died and she had not been there to see the body fall to ash on the pyre. It underscored to Natsuki's eyes how far she had failed the woman that Suou had simply evanesced into inexistence without her noticing. Yet there was more to her sin than neglect. She also

agonised perpetually over whether or not her ill fortune had gotten that wonderful woman killed, just as it had been her ill fortune that had gotten her family slaughtered. It was just a possibility, one thought amidst the grief. But considering that possibility, that single chance, how could she even begin to accept what Suou's sister was proposing?

There were other nuances to the issue, ones that were no less important and certainly no less complex. Marriage was an affair of intricacies, at least for people of her and her lover's lives and standing. Consider the King of the Otomeians' reaction to such a proposal, since it would undoubtedly ruin a critical part of his plans. Oh, Natsuki was no fool: she knew she was being used as a toy on a string, was just being dangled in front of the powerful, *political* lion from the south to keep it happy. She knew the king's intention was to keep that big cat batting away interestedly at her and thus retain some hold on it. What would he say if he knew what that lion was planning, which was to spirit away the whole toy, with every one of its strings?

Consider too how to resolve the matter of her properties: would Himean citizenship subject her finances to review or compel them to disclose her wealth to the Himean government, one that Shizuru herself avowed to be ever on the lookout for those with more rather than less? Money could be as much a hindrance as it could be a help, and when you had as much money as she did, it could be monumental in either form. She did not mind giving her fortune to the enterprises of the woman she loved, but she would be damned if the hard-won wealth of her forebears ended up being appropriated by another nation on a matter of law. Were Shizuru queen of Hime and here she shook her head again at the wrong that Shizuru was not—it would be different, for whatever was the wealth of the state would then be Shizuru's as well. But as it was not so, Natsuki had no intention of ceding to a foreign government a single talent of the money of her ancestors.

Even more worrying than the issue of her wealth, however, was that of welding herself to yet another foreign family. Consider also how adoption would tie her to a clan made up of strangers, a clan of whom she had only ever met one representative. Granted, she had

loved that representative with all her heart, but even so: that woman was not the one offering to adopt her, offering to become even if only legally-and was anything ever *only* legal for these people?-her mother by law in that city across the sea. It might have been a gift, but it was also a prospect that was immensely frightening.

"This one's not frightening though, is it?"

Arichnos's voice pulled her from her thoughts again. She followed his gaze and saw the thing she had spied from farther away earlier, the source of the dust column on the horizon.

"Are they ever?" she asked for reply.

"I meant in size, Cap-Polemarch."

"Even then."

"Well, that's right enough. They all look weaklings on the field to me-always did, no matter the size of their armies."

She nodded.

"Still bigger than two of the Himean legions, though. I guess they never make them smaller than that? They've an obsession with being bigger, don't they, though? Probably to make up for the fact that they'll always come up short," he suddenly cackled, his laugh so sharp it startled his horse. In the absence of any echoing laughter, he turned to look at the polemarch.

Her smile was faint but decidedly lenient.

"Ah, male humour, yes?" she asked him.

"Er... yes, Princess."

"Very good."

She paused to consider the multiple meanings of the jest, wondering if the comedian was actually aware of all of them. Either way, it was a better jibe than she would have expected from him, and she thought it deserved repetition of the compliment.

"Yes, very good."

As she delivered the compliment so seriously, however, Arichnos took that to mean she was being sarcastic. He clamped his mouth shut a little sulkily then, berating himself for that failure of judgement: he should have known better than to try out one of those Himean jokes on the princess. Princesses were of a different level from his, and this one was sometimes of a different world!

As for the princess, she spared the jest no more thought since she was busy watching the game unfold. It took some more time, but eventually the Mentulaeen army coming in from the south was near enough. It finally sat down to see what the Himean army was up to.

A tableau of potentials for a moment; the mass stalled tentatively and seethed. Natsuki could practically taste the sweat salting their lips, seasoning the opportunity presented to them.

She knew then that she had chosen a good perch, for it let her know what they could see. There was a citadel invested by an army only two legions strong but boasting a good array of siege machinery. There was a siege tower rising, a path already cleared partway for it. There were open tents housing the besiegers, a good number of whom seemed to be lounging under the shelters. And then there were the siege operators, who were handling most of the aggressive activity.

She saw that it was tempting. Of course, she also knew what they could not see, and it was what soured the temptation for her taste. But that was only from her privileged perspective: the enemy saw things differently. To the Mentulaeans watching the investment, it was the sort of situation that required snappy sense and initiative. Any moment now the Himeans carrying out the siege would decide the newly-arrived enemy was more important than the one they were bullying, and then they would tumble out of their shady enclosures completely geared for a skirmish, would face those lines of artillery the other way, would be perfectly prepared, would be ready...

Suddenly the mass from the south started shuffling, its lines reordering with urgency.

The fox had decided to leap into the hole with the devil after all.

Shizuru's devilry aside, Natsuki thought the fox would leap anyway even could it see what she did. And even had it not, the devil would likely have pursued it. Either way, things would still have developed to the conclusion already taking shape. Everything she saw said this ending was inevitable, at least as far as probabilities could go.

Arichnos had been right earlier in deeming the enemy army only a decent-sized one: the Mentulaean group they faced today was not the size of the bigger armies they had already encountered. This was since it was only a regional defence army and had originally been stationed in Lasandre Citadel. When armies were made for the express purpose of defending a fortress-and one as sturdy as Lasandre, at that-they were sized accordingly, with fewer numbers than would be necessary absent a proper bastion. Overly large armies actually choked fortresses, the best of which could be defended by just a few men.

So this army now looking down the plain was a modestly sized one by the enemy's standards, packed with a decent number of foot but hardly any horse. No machines either, as it had never been intended to go into Himean territory and start invading. To the Himeans and their stalwart allies, not a bad prospect to face on the field.

There was also the mettle of the commander to consider-and it was often what decided everything. From the moment the troops at Lasandre abandoned the citadel, the enemy's commander had proven himself unworthy. They had supposedly moved southward to head off any enemies there that might think of attacking the capital by launching a northward offensive. Stupidity, in her thinking. Keeping Lasandre was more important than blocking incursions from the south now that that frontier had been infiltrated-she would have insisted on it were she part of the Mentulaean command. Any threats originating from the south would have met other obstacles when moving north, especially with the number of Mentulaean forts and loyal towns in the central region. Whereas most of the towns east of Lasandre and facing the river had already been cleared or seized by the Otomeian raiding forces. Lasandre's defenders would have done the empire more good to stand their ground.

It took just a short while before the clash started. The besiegers abandoned their assaults in favour of meeting the attacking enemy, and the battle was joined. It was a predictable fight, in a way, as the Mentulaeen line extended beyond the Himean one when they met face-to-face. It was an obvious result of the disparity of numbers and an attempt at outflanking the smaller party.

*Tactically moribund.* The polemarch's green eyes were disdainful at this. *It is so predictable it enervates the spectator.*

But predictable strategies sometimes worked, that much she had to concede. Would this one have worked without the cavalry now issuing from behind Lasandre's northern wall, the four alae of horse Shizuru had held in reserve and concealed by the citadel's own bulk? She did not think so. The cavalry was the shock here, but the killing blow had been struck much earlier, as she saw it.

It had been the hours of baking heat under which the Mentulaeans had marched, the failure to take a moment to rest and water themselves in their haste not to squander what seemed a fine opportunity. They knew the Himean base camp was not that far away, naturally, and had feared the onset of more of the enemy before they could strike at the more manageable force before their eyes. And in their eagerness to get a bite in before the whole beast appeared, they had leapt into a battle with only half their breath, half their strength.

She sighed in subdued satisfaction at the events playing out, her restraint wasted in light of the uproar: the noise from the fighting, cries of horror from the Mentulaeans perched atop the battlements of Lasandre, shouts of exultation from the Himeans also watching, and howls even from her attendant, who played his horse in a few whirls beside hers. Her own mount merely nickered to the wind, seemingly unexcited by the impending victory.

"A great triumph," Arichnos said happily once the rout progressed to its final stage. His nose was beaded with sweat, for they had been on the hill for a while and the sun was approaching its zenith. The tree giving them shade could not also shield them from the heat of the very air. "What a fight, Princess Natsuki! Look at them run!"

"It seems," she said, "all we do."

"Oh, I'd love to be down there lopping one of those weak heads off. Whoosh goes the blade!"

Her head did not move, but her eyes slid coolly his way.

"You wish you had been there?" she asked him.

"Oh, yes!" He stopped, caught himself for some reason he could not explain. "Oh, but it's something to see it from here too, Polemarch. I usually just see things from in there, I mean. Not like this. Here you see everything. When I'm in there I can only see the enemy in front of me, and I've no idea what's going on with my mates. I don't really think about them then. I mean, it's not that I don't care about them, but it's hard to think of anything else then."

She nodded and touched Aurea in the flank with her cane. The filly moved to the direction she wanted and Arichnos followed, still whooping down at the field.

It was a pitiful battle, concluded Natsuki, even while conscious of the efficiency that had won it. She could not help but feel slightly irritated with the display of so much cowardice, especially considered it was paired with such overinflated confidence. It was not just that the foe had been worried that a chance for victory would pass. It was also that they had believed it to be an opening that all but assured triumph. Why else would so cowardly a lot attempt to take initiative?

Now Lasandre would be bereft of an army, which would be a severe wound to its morale. Then would come the news that it had been cut off too from Prince Calchis's forces, that that prince's army was now separated from them by the overflowing Holmys and a Himean army on top of it. And then the final blow: that even the defenders of the capital would be unable to come to their aid, the enemy armies of the south inching ever closer and constituting a greater threat than the one holding Lasandre under siege. Put those things together and add the constant battery outside the walls. It would not be long now before Lasandre gave up the ghost, opened its gates and cried mercy.



"And if they do not?" she had asked, drawing a tiny smirk from her lover during their private discussion of the strategy. "What if they are not disheartened enough for it?"

"You think it likely?"

"No. I think it... hm, *distantly* possible."

"Even then we shall carry on. Every fortress breaks, sooner or later: all it takes is persistence and demoralisation. The artillery and soldiers shall continue their harassment. All the heralds I have with me now shall do the same. And I shall throw every carcass I can find into Lasandre with the catapultae if I must, at least if they do not surrender after learning they can rely on no more armies to defend them. Mentulaean, bovine, canine, avian-it matters not what the animal, as long as it is dead and starting to rot. If I run out I shall even start dipping into the captive pool and just slaughter the weakest, or those least likely to get good prices at the auctioneer's. Just a few hours in this heat shall make a ripe little missile of each freshly-butchered carcass. I might even cake them with horse and mule dung before throwing them in. How many stinking corpses will it take, you think, before they either come down with illness from the bouquet or fling open their gates in desperation?"

Shizuru's smile had been tranquil, which told Natsuki she had every intention of making good on this sinister tactic. It told Natsuki too that the woman was actually waiting to see her reaction.

"This is... a terrible design," Natsuki had whispered.

"Does this mean you disapprove of it?"

"No. I would not have thought of it. But I do not disapprove, as it increases the distance of the possibility."

"As would my earlier promise of terms with them had they surrendered within the first hour," had been Shizuru's response. "A pity it would have already expired by that time. How quickly things do spoil in the summer sun!"

Yes, Lasandre was holding on borrowed time. Yet she thought it had

never needed to fall into such dire straits, at least had someone with a decent mind actually been directing the Mentulaean defences. She rather doubted it, especially when she thought about the Mentulaean south.

It was a grave error for them, in her opinion, to have left the south unguarded. The Himean armies should never have been allowed entry there, had the empire's defence force been doing its job properly. It was a case of internal politics distorting strategic perceptions. The empire might long have viewed the south as its weak link, but probably never realised how that perception had turned the frontier into a military weakness as well. By making no effort to build loyalty in that region, it had created an area of towns-not great towns, but towns nonetheless-and peoples all too easy to convert for a magnanimous invader, which meant any fighting in that territory would be against them from the beginning. The centre, from which they had tried to keep out the enemy, was by contrast peppered with loyal peoples and cities, which meant it should ideally have been the first and main area of engagement.

What sad foes they did make. Their commanders put in jeopardy even the exact cities they were supposed to defend. In so large an empire, were there truly no great military minds? For thus far nothing impressed Natsuki about the commanders they had fielded. But then, it would be difficult for a commander to impress her now. Any foe would have to be both excellent and fortunate to present a challenge to her Shizuru.

She caught herself at the possessive expression, then felt conflicted about the catch. Shizuru *was* hers, was she not? The woman spared no pains in telling her so, and was certainly not shy about owning her back. Even so, Natsuki could not quite bring herself to think of owning Shizuru as she owned Aurea; she still did it cautiously, with nagging insecurity, because she did not fully dare.

Sometimes she wondered if that hesitation was a sign that she had no right to accept Shizuru's offer of marriage.

The sun wrenched her from that thought, for it had finally caught up with them: the shortest path from their position to the Himean command's lookout was entirely devoid of shade. Her hand came up

to her face to check her scarf. She coaxed Aurea to a dash, and Arichnos did the same with his steed.

Time enough to worry on such things later, she told herself, ignoring the hot pain the gallop set off again in her hurting bottom. Time now to hurry instead, lest her silly lover start chafing. The woman would be in a good mood due to the success of her latest scheme, but she would be none too pleased anyway if made to wait too long to share that victory. By now she would already be wondering where Natsuki had been, if the polemarch had been staying cool and away from the day. But that was the way Shizuru could be about the things for which she cared. It was easy to see how the same woman who spared time to lecture her lover on not bringing her hat would also be the commander who made provisions to keep soldiers well-watered and in the shade.

And the same commander already making plans to sell an entire city into slavery.

They were close now, enough to be seen by the officers sweating out the day on the little hill. The commander-who seemed to be starting to brown again-looked over the two riders approaching, her eyes warming when they set on the polemarch. A hot wind took her words to Natsuki, just barely textured by the dust in the air.

"What did I say? When I say the day will only get better, you should all learn to believe me."

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When Prince Calchis of the Mentulaean Empire learned of the army sitting on the Holmys and blocking his way, he called a council of his officers and advisors that very moment. It was important that they return to the centre quickly, he said to them, at least if the centre was to be saved.

"It's obvious to me that they want to isolate us here for as long as they can," he announced to his staff, his eyes scouting the same map all of them were studying. "I'm not about to make it too easy for them by just playing meekly into their plans."

"Can't we push a crossing upriver, far from their camp?" One of his barons pointed to the uppermost bridge on the stretch of the Holmys they were eyeing. "I doubt they've torn that one down, since they just got here. What do the scouts say?"

"I wouldn't cross that thing even if it were still up," the prince scowled. "From what I've heard of these foreigners on the march, they'd be on us before half the army got across. They might even shell down the bridge while we're still on it. And you can forget any other plan that involves crossing the river. Even at its narrowest part, that water will be too wide and deep."

Another baron sighed. "The waters of spring are finally here."

"Right. There's only one choice."

A collective grimace as the same baron said it: "The long route."

"The long route," the prince affirmed, his hoarse voice making it seem especially grating. "As I said, we've no choice but this one. We'll have to go the long way up, into the hilly parts at the base of the range-" He pointed to the triangular jags on the map that represented one of the mountain belts in the north. "Then we negotiate the way west, and towards the Ruviccan Forest. Then it's down we go, turning around as we go south and back to the centre."

There were rumbles and other wordless responses to this, but the real response was in their looks, which were apprehensive and guarded. His own swarthy face managed to darken even more at their poorly concealed distaste for the plan, even though he understood the origin of the apprehension.

Their planned route was one perilously near the mountains and one that involved passing partway through a sacred forest; the Mentulae were not a people who conducted wars in either terrain. After generations of its armies being formed into the sort of large, perfect-for-flatland masses that feudal warlords had used in the days of upheaval, the empire no longer bothered training soldiers to negotiate terrain other than the plains.

Armies now met on open land. Rugged ranges and mountains had

become the province of uncivilised folk, whether warlike or timid. And forests? Forests were fine, but they were not meant for an army's passage. Forests were sacred things and full of the living oaks they revered in their faith. How fast could one go in a forest when one was constantly trying not to call down the wrath of the gods by harming the sacred trees with a careless tread?

"I've already dispatched Hiempnos to arrange guides and find the best path for us through the Ruviccan," Calchis told them, knowing they were already worrying about it. "If anyone can find a path that can take an army through those trees, it would be the local druids."

"I agree and it's good sense. But for an army as large as ours, My Prince? The Ruviccan isn't a forest traditionally walked by great crowds or cavalcades. The best path they find may still be so narrow we'll take forever to traverse it."

"Which is why we're leaving as soon as we can, so get the men started on packing. We've no choice, so get over it."

"And the tribes of this place?"

"Fuck the tribes of this place," the prince growled, his look silencing the one who had asked it. "We've wasted enough time on these northern barbarians. And for all the good we've done, it's been a waste! We've burned all the fields and seized all the granaries here, so they should've begun to thin out from starvation by now. Yet they keep coming. Either they've grain hidden in holds where we can't find it or someone's feeding them under our noses. My money's on the Himeans. They're the sort of canny wretches who'd do it, aren't they?"

"It could be the Otomeians too," someone suggested.

"More northern barbarians!" a baroness sneered.

Calchis rolled a big shoulder and looked grim.

"Either way, let them keep doing it-they'll be wasting their grain on these savages once we leave," he said. "I'm not letting them divert me any longer. The Northern Frontier is no longer a concern, and

now that we've destroyed the tribes' grain stocks and fields, whoever's feeding them may end up expending even more resources to keep them happy. Better if they run out of resources doing it, especially when we're not here to care about these rebels anymore. What's vital now is to get ourselves out of this corner they think they've trapped us in."

"So our goal is Gorgo?" the baroness who had been sneering asked, mind immediately going to the empire's capital.

But the prince shook his head.

"Our goal is Vedio," he stated, picking out another important citadel instead. "First we focus on getting through the Ruviccan and then on getting to Vedio. But by the time that happens, I think they'll have taken over a good part of the centre, possibly even Gorgo. Vedio's the smarter option since it's northwest of the centre. They won't even be anywhere near it by the time we get there, which gives us the opportunity to take stock of the situation and resupply ourselves before meeting them."

He scowled at their alarm, wishing they would stop acting as though losing Gorgo would be losing the war: "It can't be helped. They got the jump on us and are probably already sieging one critical citadel or other in the centre by now. Or they could be sitting quietly at the borders, still waiting for their own reinforcements to give them the numbers they need. We don't know-and we won't know anything if we stay here instead of moving on."

Someone muttered that given how things were going, it was highly likely that the enemy had already begun laying siege to the citadels instead of vegetating by the borders, as his other option suggested.

"I think so too. Else why cut us off from the centre? If we're lucky they'll devote their resources to some particularly strong cities and waste some time on that. I don't put my faith in luck, though, so we'll see what the situation is when we get to Vedio. Forget about Gorgo for now. It's a single place when we have a whole empire to think about."

There was an extended moment of silence following his words. The

notion of abandoning the capital-even if only a notion-did not come easily to them. The geographically centralised concept of power had been ingrained in the nobles so firmly that they had difficulty conceiving of an empire absent its supposed heart. They were mostly personalities and aristocrats of the centre too, which meant that they had added interest in preserving the safety of that part of the empire: most of them had homes in it, as well as business holdings and feudal properties in the region.

Calchis accepted that self-interested reason for their alarm, but he did take issue with the other. The central region was undeniably important, but as far as he was concerned, it was nevertheless not The Empire. It was an important part, but still only a part. Calchis knew this in his bones, knew that the heart of an empire could be moved without killing off the rest. Even if he did not make it to Gorgo in time to save it, that would be fine: Gorgo was just one more citadel if one viewed it dispassionately. It was just stone and marble and wood and inhabitants. It could be broken down and built up, surrendered and retaken. It could die and its people, the Court, the King, and himself could still survive.

And so would the empire.

"Ah, and if we go a little further there, we could join forces with the king," someone observed all of a sudden, drawing a chorus of eager Ohs and Ahs. The king had wintered with his court and personal army to the northwest, not too far from Vedio. "He might even have moved back to the centre by now, in which case we've nothing to worry about!"

"No doubt," the king's son said flatly, exchanging a look with one of his favourites and confidantes. The look said what both of them thought, which was that they very much doubted the king would move from his cushy palace until their side established a better position. The man was, as Calchis's sister had once whispered to him, a bully after classic tradition, the type who would enter a scene only if given sufficient supporters to assure forceful dominance. He was also a great opportunist, which meant he would wait for others to do most of the work before walking in at the last moment and claiming the credit. More likely the man was waiting for Calchis himself and the others to do something about the east and centre,

would come riding in to look the hero after they had done the work, would blame failure on them if the capital was indeed taken.

Calchis knew the measure of his father better than his father did his, and knew well the failings of the great king of the Mentulae. The man was no genius of war, for example, even if most people thought him to be. He was a great fighter and thus cut a warlike figure, but the worth of a commander was hardly proven by hand-to-hand combat. More like the king had cunning enough to surround himself with people who actually had the talent he lacked, and then demonstrated further cunning by getting rid of them after they did their jobs.

That was another thing in which the king actually excelled: guardianship of his throne. He brooked no threats to this position and would throttle his favourite child with bare hands to secure the kingship. It was why he would not yet join his army with Calchis's, because he was wary of the younger man's ability. It would not do to show himself the weaker commander in front of the barons, which would happen if they were in the same council. Better to let the younger man sort through the intricacies and then to magically appear and resolve the situation once it was simple enough for him to figure out by himself. Never mind that it would actually be better for their side were they to join forces, as they could repel the invaders by sheer force that way: the king would not abide it, would see too many dangers to him in that strategy.

No, Calchis had few hopes of the king taking initiative. What he had hopes for were actually the feudal lords of the deep west. These were among the greatest of the king's subjects, powerful barons and baronial states whose support had been critical to the empire's very inception. In fact, it had been to them that his father had gone for a first wife, as a means of securing support for his claim to the throne.

It was a story well-known by all the great lords and ladies of the Mentulae. The young Obsidian had headed to the stronghold of the most powerful of all the western baronial families, the House of Firens, which at the time had been governed by the Baron Entei. This was a man widely acknowledged to be one of the more remarkable Firensian lords, and that only added to the union's lustre for the young Obsidian.



The remarkable younger man had brought the remarkable older man wagons of gold coin and treasure, purloined from his father's vaults. This the young man had used to court the Firensii, along with the promise of further fortunes. Even more power too could be theirs, he had said, with so stout a friend as he ruling the empire. And for the ultimate enticement, the young man had asked them what they would say to having a king who was part-Firensii eventually ascend the imperial throne.

The nobles of Firens had taken a look at the confident, impressively-muscled young buck promising them the crown and decided that they liked the buck's odds. Thus did Azula, the Baron Entei's daughter, become wedded to King Obsidian, born Artai of the Empire. It was a promising start for that ambitious young man, who found gaining support for his cadre much easier in the west thereafter. And why would it not be easier? He had a wife serving as living proof of the Firensii backing him, and many other lords thought the Firensii bets worth backing.

The Firensian gamble seemed to produce results in short order. It was not long after the marriage that the young buck became king, and it seemed that it would not be long either before an heir with Firensian blood would be born. After an entire year of the new queen in the new king's bed with no news of children, no one worried much. But after another year went by in the same manner, followed by yet another year of such silence, talk started to get around, especially with Obsidian's illegitimate brats littering the empire's brothels.

Azula's infertility was not the cause of Obsidian's second marriage, which was to Calchis and Faris's mother. He would have married again even had Azula borne him an heir, after all, the tradition for royal polygamy being long established. But his first wife's barrenness was nonetheless the cause of her falling from his favour. It was such that when he departed the capital for his winter palace in the year of Shizuru Fujino's invasion, he did so with a retinue that did not include his first wife and queen.

Instead, Azula was left to lord it over the capital. An honour, outsiders might have thought, but actually a hollow one. The king had taken with him all those he valued in court and castle.

Technically too, the real overseer of the capital in the king's absence was the commander of its occupying army-who was one of the king's old generals and favoured courtiers, and not lonely, barren Azula.

Azula's sterility and fall from Obsidian's grace presented a serious problem for the plans of her father, the Baron Entei. Had he possessed a second, fecund daughter and had the king not had other wives yet, he might have offered a second Firensian queen to the king as replacement. But of second daughters he had none, just as of subordinate wives the king had already accrued many. So it was Azula the king had to keep.

The king would never truly dispose of Azula, though, if only for the simple reasons that she was a daughter of Firens and had been instrumental in his ascent to the throne. Still, she had already become little more than a relic, a symbol of a time long past, when he had still needed the support of others to gain the title of king. But support had become less important ever since he laid his stranglehold on the crown, and even though Firens and its daughter were still useful, they did not have to be coddled and courted any longer.

Things changed, every halfway-decent courtier of the king knew. What many did not know in the court, however, was the precise mettle of Queen Azula's father. The Baron Entei might never have attended the king's court-the Firensii were particularly averse to paying homage even to the kings they supported that way-but he had an inborn cunning that made him perfect for it. People had thought him remarkable for his handsome looks in his youth, his skill at commanding armies in his maturity, and his wise counsel once he joined the league of greyhairs, but his daughter knew that what was truly remarkable about her father was something few people properly perceived. What separated the Baron Entei from most other lords was a shocking political flexibility very well disguised in his stiff old warlord's costume.

The Baron of Firens had originally planned to raise the clan fortunes by attaching them to the empire's ruler, hoping to eventually have Firensian blood dominate the Court and the dynasty of the present. But in the wake of his daughter's embarrassment and an increased

perception of the king's arrogance in his dealings with them, he had been moving gradually away from ideas of allying the family to the ruling line. The recent losses of the empire to the Himeans had only further exacerbated his growing aversion to the dynasty of the Artais-as well as to all the rival ones, as he found them so attenuated of bloodline and power that they had the strength of paper dolls. Alliance to the empire's rulers, it was becoming extremely clear to him, was not where the future of the clan was. Which led to the question: why should he continue to expend Firensian resources just to heed the whims of an emperor who did not esteem them?

So by the time Shizuru had been heading for her cousin's camp, even news of the increasing havoc wrought by the Himeans in the south had no power to move Firens into action. Even as the other lords of the deep west debated whether or not the king's charge for them to see to their lands included recovering those taken by the invaders in the southern provinces, Entei was advocating patience and forbearance instead.

"It's better to watch and wait here," he argued strongly when invited to council. "Our lands are more valuable than those towns they've seized. What is the south but scrubland, a place for minor aristocrats of no substance or breeding? Even the reports of their army's size are doubtless exaggerated. Why would they need large armies to take over such places as are there? Why do you think that paltry army they had holed up in Trogum all this time wouldn't leave the place? Too scared to come out of their holes, too aware we'd eat them up on our plains. If they want to, let them come here-we'd chew through them in an instant. Otherwise, leave them be to their shabby pickings! We've better lands to tend in our place and other enemies to consider. What of the Nervii?"

These were the peoples of the lands abutting theirs, the outer territories of the Kingdom of Nervia. The empire held an uneasy truce with this realm-one of the youngest of the royal wives was actually Nervian-but the Nervii had trouble with their own feudal warlords and secessionist aristocracy. It was not uncommon for a spate of internecine warfare to break out between the Nervian warlords, especially when relations broke down between two of the

clans. More often than not, the fighting would spill over the border, especially as the Nervian lords liked to jockey for advantage by expanding territories east-right into Mentulaean lands.

To be sure, these border areas had long been a source of dispute. Were they really the Nervian Far East or the Mentulaean Deep West? The settlement struck by Obsidian's ancestors had seemed to settle the quarrel, but that was only as far as the western Mentulaean lords and Nervian rulers were concerned. The Nervii near the border were actually unhappy with the terms agreed upon by their distantly-located rulers. They made this clear practically every generation thereafter, where at least one would make a serious sally of reclamation.

This tied into the esteem and respect accorded the Mentulaean lords of the west. They had so long policed the boundary keeping out the Nervii that their import to the empire's security was undeniable. The many generations of conflict and guardedness had made of them genuine warlords with permanent armies, ones toughened out of necessity. Anyone hoping to win and keep the Mentulaean throne would do well to court such strong supporters and gain their fealty.

But fealty went both ways, thought the Baron Entei. The king had made promises he could not keep, and the House of Firens no longer enjoyed his favour. The first gifts of added lands and titles had not been followed with more, and there were no longer any overtures to keep the most powerful house of the west happy, the assumption seeming to be that it was now forever in the king's camp. The young buck of before had re-evaluated his priorities and decided that there was no more need to keep Firens well-fed; their support was simply no longer a critical part of his plans because he had achieved what it was that he wanted. What did he care that Firens had not achieved what *it* wanted? He was the king of an empire and the uncontested ruler of his realm, no longer dependent on the powers of his baronial backers. If anything, he was the one now backing barons where needed. And in the last rewards and reallocations of western fiefdoms following executions, Firens had not seen much of his backing.

The Baron Entei had marked it, and later on the baron remembered.

"You can run off south if you really think the king will thank you for it," Entei told the other lords when the first tremors radiated from the south. "I doubt it. Take my advice and wait to see what happens first, or you'll just waste your energy. You'll see what I've been saying, which is that you shouldn't bother with those smooth-shaven foreigners yet. Remember that the south doesn't matter, whereas the west does."

The other barons reluctantly did as he urged, placing their faith in the counsel of one they had only ever known to be wise in words and war-making. Even as they bided their time, however, many of them were already chewing their nails over fear that Entei had lost it, that they were all missing out on a critical opportunity. What if the Himeans were a worse enemy than the Nervii? What if the king viewed their failure to act as less a decision of wisdom than one of negligence? Yet still Entei counselled patience, even after it was discovered that the army supposed to be in guard of the Southern Frontier had been taken captive entirely, even after an entire string of southern towns was reported burned down to their very foundations. And the barons chewed and chewed until all that was left of their nails was the quick.

Eventually, weeks of stewing came to a head. Several of the lesser lords of the west called a council that excluded Firens from the guest list.

"We've decided to take our armies up and fight the enemy," the deputed speaker of the coalition said. "Firens may be the most prominent of the old houses, but it's obviously lost its teeth! It's high time some of us did what's long needed doing and drove the enemy out of the Southern Frontier."

An attendee of the meeting, a baron of one of the great houses, scowled under his beard: he was no partisan of Firens in this matter-nor indeed in much of anything-but it would not do for one of his status to follow the lesser lords so easily.

"There's no love lost between me and Entei," he said, speaking in a low rumble. "But even I have to agree with him when he says we shouldn't worry so much over that frontier. Even if the Himeans take it, what is that to us? It's a weak place we don't much need, and

Entei's right at least in saying that the lands we do need are right here. They need to be defended against Nervian opportunism, which just might bloom again now that they see us facing another enemy."

"That's why we're leaving a complement each of our own forces here," another of the council's orchestrators answered. "That way, there's a defensive force available in case of emergency for our lands. It's not going to be too big, of course, especially if none of you see fit to fill it out a little with some of your own-but that's calculated in the risk we're taking, since the Nervii haven't launched a major incursion on us in decades. Just little skirmishes every now and then with some raiders on the outskirts. The Himeans, on the other hand, are looking set to invade us seriously. That means we need to concentrate forces on them instead of on the lighter enemy."

"Lovaris is exactly right," said another council orchestrator, eyes gleaming. "We don't disagree with you when you say that the south is little more than a butt, but it's still part of the empire and it's connected to the rest of the body, isn't it?"

"You're saying," said another of the great lords, "that the butt's still close to the cunt and they might rape us."

"I'm saying it's still close to the arsehole- *and* they might rape us," the woman replied, as laughter ran around the table. The mood lightened then and some of the scowls went away, the air palpably softer than before. Nearly everyone knew the source of the tension, which was the same one that had given the earlier baron his pause: even if the vast majority of barons and baronesses were in agreement with the council, some of them nevertheless resented that it had been representatives of the lesser houses to call them to it. The great houses always took the lead-else why call them "great"?

Lovaris addressed that now with his honest plea.

"The simple fact is that we can't fight them off by ourselves, however," he said. "We don't have a big enough force even all together, we're all just minor lords with small fiefdoms and personal armies. We called this meeting to ask of you, the greater houses, to give us a fighting chance. We'll need you for your experience as well

as your men. If we pool our resources, we shall have the equivalent of a royal army. Nay, even better! No royal army has ever had the stiffness of spine our warriors do, because no royal army has had to deal with the constant fighting we've had to do with the accursed Nervii. We can beat back the enemy and reclaim the south by ourselves. No need for the royal armies to step in, which means no need for someone else to take the credit. And the king would doubtless reward us for our gumption later on."

"That's something to consider," a listening baroness said slowly. "He also couldn't fault us for inaction then."

"Indeed!" Lovaris said heartily. "It's all well and good for the Baron Entei to stay inert in this sort of situation, but I fear none of the rest of us have a daughter married to the king."

Another crack of laughter filled the room, swifter to come than before.

"By Dann, you have me convinced," said the baron who had protested the plan previously. "Though I still say we should do Firens the courtesy of asking again first. He's still one of us, little though I like the man, and besides, he's one of the biggest armies in the west as well. His numbers will as good as secure a victory."

"He'll just say no again," someone protested.

"Yes, but we'll have made sure of it."

"Baron Rothar is right," said Lovaris, smiling at the author of the suggestion. "I admit I too think Entei will decline once more, but that's his prerogative. It's proper for us to ask, and we look better for it later. That way, when the king calls upon us for an accounting, we can cite it to show we didn't exclude Firens out of spite. And then... well... whatever happens to Firens afterwards we can't be blamed for it, can we?"

"My thoughts exactly!" Rothar beamed.

And so the warlords of the west set out for the south, which none of them really cared about but felt obliged to defend from the enemy.

The Baron Entei, along with just a handful of other holdouts, did not go with them or lend them armies. Nevertheless, the collective number was enough: all told, the western lords put together an army of twenty-nine thousand to head south, leaving another eight thousand-all cavalry, to make movement easier between fiefs-to stay home and guard their lands. The force that went to fight the Himeans was led by the council of barons and lords working together, with supreme command given to the Baron Rothar of Vomaes upon unanimous agreement.

Their destination was Massae, a medium-sized town of little consequence to the empire from a certain political perspective. There were no great aristocrats holding lands near Massae, no noteworthy vaults or unique resources within or near it. Massae's significance was entirely strategic and owed to local topography: it sat in the region bounded by two small rivers that ran between the western and southern frontiers as well as the shortest pass from those territories to the central lands of the empire. The land around Massae was therefore a wet area that was not only good for growing crops but which also represented one of the best routes from the deep west and into the southern and central provinces.

Unfortunately for the Mentulae, their enemy was aware of that.

Not long after Shizuru Fujino reached base near the Atinu, her legate Kenji Nakamura left the newly-allied city of Asterion with the Sixth, the Thirteenth, and the Ninth. The Fifth legion, which had originally been at the city with them, had gone with Keigo Kurauchi for the conveyance of captives across the border.

"They shall then double back after their errand and have the Fourteenth with them," the general had told her ginger-haired legate. "They shall join you in Massae, where you need to establish base and prepare to meet the far western armies if any of them decide to uproot themselves and head south or even my way, once I get started on Lasandre."

"Do we expect them to do that?"

"Yes, or, at the very least, to try to join forces with the centre. The lords of the west are not tyros when it comes to defensive battle due



to their histories, I hear, so they might have the sense to try that much before we fracture the imperial defence further."

"Which means they will likely have the sense to join forces with each other as well," Kenji said, worrying his lip. "How many are we looking at, General?"

"Our agents say they could be as large as the larger royal armies if taken all together, so that means we shall see anywhere from the high thirties to forty, forty-five. But those are old estimates, they agree, so it might be lower or higher. I incline to higher-always better to expect worse, after all."

"Forty, forty-five."

" *If* they all come in one mass."

"You think they won't, Fujino-san?"

"Their lands would be in too precarious a position, what with their Nervian foes watching developments from across the border. Would you leave your lands unguarded just to fight an enemy some distance away if you knew another enemy to be already peeking over the fence?"

"I'd leave a good lot of watchdogs if I had to go somewhere, that's true."

"Yes, so no fear of them bringing the totality of their forces. Then there is also the fact that the west is actually an agglomeration of multiple landlords with personal armies. Some may choose to stay, some to go. Even if a good number of them do come en masse, you should still be able to hold until the Fourteenth and Fifth arrive."

He could not resist a grimace: "Hard going, though, only three legions against forty."

"Yes," she told him, her eyes dancing. "But not impossible. If it truly becomes necessary, the Fourteenth and Fifth can send for reinforcements from me. I should be a little closer to your position by that time, as I expect to be in Lasandre by then. It can be done, Kenji-han! You and I both know it, so do not fret so much. You may

end up dealing with only one small feudal army at a time, even, if you are lucky. Not that you should plan for that, by the way."

"I know-always better to expect worse."

"Precisely."

When Kenji arrived at the alluvial plains surrounding Massae, he immediately seized the town and its properties, along with the harvest they had brought in. Off came every piece of building wood and stone in the town and its vicinity, and up it all went to create a strong camp for the Himeans. It did not matter whether he had to deprive bleating goat or babe of a roof to do it: he was expecting worse, and worse meant something as large as forty.

"I honestly can't decide sometimes if I love or hate her for it," he told his fellow redhead in the command tent, the primipilus of the Ninth. "Who else tells you not to fret, then tells you to expect the worst and gives you a number that big? Forty-thousand, I tell you! We'd be better off sending for reinforcements already, if it does turn out like that."

The primipilus laughed at him, her longish eyeteeth showing.

"Got the wind up, old boy?" she teased.

"Who wouldn't, thinking of facing so many with only three legions?"

"The Ninth alone's worth forty," she sneered. "But she's right-I doubt we'll be facing anything that high from them, at least not in one swoop, so don't get your tunic all bunched up yet. She obviously doesn't, else she'd have waited for the Fifth and Fourteenth to return before making us travel up here. Whatever comes for us will be less than forty, you'll see, and whatever the damn number is, we'll deal with it."

"I never said we wouldn't, Nao-san," he said, cocking a smile playfully her way.

So when not forty but some twenty-odd thousand Mentulaean soldiers were sighted by the lookouts watching the westward passes, Kenji dealt with it without too much complaint. He very much

doubted they could win a pitched battle, but he was going to be fighting defensively, on terrain he had already prepared and gotten to know well in the weeks of waiting there. He also had two more legions coming in soon, not too far away based on the date of the rider they sent ahead. All told, he did not think his position too worthy of whining, as it was no Argentum just yet.

"For which I'm terribly glad!" he said to the primipilus surveying the coming enemy from beside him; both were in a tower, which gave them a good view of the mass that was obviously taking its time in arriving. "I've none of that Fujino blood in me, to go into an untenable position and come out somehow winning everything."

"Ahh, you've your own piss and vinegar in you, Legate," she said with almost surprising generosity. "Don't get too modest on me now."

"You don't need to stiffen my spine with praise, Yuuki-san-although I do appreciate it." He looked out at their foe and frowned at all the metal winking in the sun. "This doesn't look too hard after all, especially since we have reinforcements coming in. They don't have any siege with them either, but that's normal when you're not looking to break cities but defend them."

"Wouldn't give a shit about siege even if it were here. Wouldn't do much good on this soft soil." She pointed to the tiny pool of horsemen in the sea of curve-bladed spears. "Damned surprised they don't have more of those, though. What do you think?"

"Yes, it's odd for a people who value cavalry."

"Maybe they're just in the back and we don't see them."

"Maybe."

But by the time the mass was completely visible and had started setting up a camp already, no more horse had appeared. It was clear that they were facing an army of footmen, just like themselves.

"Good odds," one of the tribunes declared in council that evening.

"We'll hold here easy, even if the Fifth and Fourteenth don't get here

this week."

Kenji voiced agreement.

"That would be ideal, anyway," he admitted. "I don't want to give them the battle they want, not yet at any rate. Make that clear to the men, please-I want no pitched fights here! It has to be a battle of our choosing, and it would be smarter to fight them once the Fifth and Fourteenth stiffen our ranks. Still, we'll have to meet them if they try to storm our fort, because god knows there are enough of them to actually stand a chance of breaking through if they come at us all at once."

"We'll just push them back if it comes to that."

"Good. Tell the men to stay in gear and have weapons and shields at the ready."

His general had warned him that these would be among the most warlike of their foes, and they proved it by attacking the very day after their arrival. The legions met them in front of the camp and pushed them off, but not without difficulty. Not only was the enemy far more numerous but it was also of a different mettle from the Mentulaeans they had fought thus far: tougher and more assured of itself, harder to cow on the field. The Mentulaeans too had their own problems, as they found the Himeans too smart to meet them in pitched battle on the open field and also found the defence structures and strategies of the foreigners too alien and effective to overcome easily. It was a stalemate, and one that repeated over the next few days until it had become nearly a routine.

On the seventh day, however, the reinforcements arrived that would tip the balance. They arrived right in the middle of another contest for the camp, which was being fought by over two-thirds of the Mentulaeans and all of the Himeans, and their arrival threw one party of the fight into a brief but awful moment of consternation.

The side that faltered was the Himean.

It was hard not to falter, their commander thought, jaw almost locked into a clench even as his officers rallied the men into recovery. For

there, it was, like a swarm of doom come to reap them, another mass of Mentulaeen arms that looked to be perhaps half the size of the first-which meant another ten or fifteen to add to the thousands they already faced. It rolled closer and closer at a steady pace, obviously in no hurry because it was already clear who had the far ascendancy now, and he could see on its flank a contingent of actual cavalry.

"Jupiter and all the gods," the tribune at his side uttered, dabbing at his forehead with his cloak.

"What I wouldn't give to have them on our side now," was Kenji's hoarse response.

What they were seeing was actually the forces of the western Mentulaeen lords who had stayed back and out of the first coalition, coming in with apparently changed minds and every intent of helping repulse the invaders. This apparition had shocked not only the Himeans, in fact, but even the Mentulaeans themselves, whose leaders gawped at the coming army from their position near their camp.

"Entei," the supreme commander of the first Mentulaeen army said, identifying the banners of the group leading the force pouring in. Even the tone of surprise could not mask his stiffness at seeing his old rival. "What in the world is he doing here?"

Lovaris brought up his horse beside him.

"Why, they've changed their minds, it appears!" he crowed brightly. "This is wonderful, Baron Rothar. Now we truly have the numbers to crush anything."

Rothar grunted unenthusiastically, torn between two attitudes. He knew it was indeed a considerable improvement to their strength to have the armies from the initial holdouts joining them-especially Entei's, as Firens had the largest feudal army in the west-but he also knew they had not been doing too badly even without this new addition, and felt a little cheated out of the credit. For Entei would doubtless have to be given a post of high command too to keep him happy and secure his army for the entirety of the venture, and would

thereby evade the odium they had predicted for him due to his earlier refusal to join their army. The king would have punished him, perhaps even executed him for it-and now the man would probably end up getting accolades for defending the realm instead. How tidy it would have been, had the old fool only stayed in his cobwebby castle!

"Considerate of them to show up after we've done seven days of work already," he snipped to the other barons, some of whom appeared to share his feelings. "The fools should've just come with us from the beginning if they were planning on changing their minds eventually."

"Come now, barons and baronesses," Lovaris urged, smiling pleasantly at them. "It's true we're seven days of work ahead of them. But we'll also be seven days of work less if we have them with us, as we'll be twice as strong and capable of twice as much. We'll have this camp down today with this many men! Right now, it's winning our battles and the war that matters, not who went willingly first and who changed their minds later. And as for that, that can always come to light later, can't it, if we can get people to whisper to the king afterwards who went willingly and who begrudged help?"

Rothar finally unbent enough to smile a little, his teeth showing for the briefest instant under his grizzled beard.

"You've a good mind on you, Lovaris," he said, for he liked the young man. "What you say's right again and does your House proud."

Lovaris smiled back, but rather more expansively and enduringly than the baron had.

"Here they come now," he said, shielding his eyes from the sun to better see the band of cavalry and nobles riding towards them. "We can use that cavalry too, since we left all of ours back home. Come, let's meet them!"

Off most of the Mentulaean command went, leaving only a few minor personalities to tend to the fight still going on. Rothar, Lovaris, and all the major nobles of the army galloped towards the coming

cavalry, at the head of which several could already see Baron Entei, distinguished by his perfectly white hair and beard.

Rothar was first to speak.

"Entei!" he roared, even before they were close enough to properly look into each other's faces. "A surprise to see you here!"

The Baron Entei's response was given once they were near enough to speak without shouting.

"Perhaps for you," he said coolly. "Not to Lovaris."

Before either Rothar or any of the other barons of the west could question what he meant by that, they were cut down by the cavalymen. Some of the barons and baronesses travelling with Entei even joined the ambush, unsheathing their swords and attacking the unsuspecting lords. Only Lovaris and his three comrades—all minor aristocrats, all responsible for forming the coalition—survived.

"I expected the old sod to go harder than that, given how difficult he was when alive," Entei remarked to his allies after the carnage was finished. He moved his horse around to get a better look at the corpse, but the gelding went the wrong way and stepped on the skull, crushing it. "Ah, Rothar, how soft you turned out to be!"

"He wasn't too happy to see that you'd come out of your inertia," Lovaris told him, busy with a handkerchief. The trooper who had cut down Rothar had hacked the baron right over both jugular and carotid, and the arterial spray had caught Lovaris on one side of his face. "It was clear he'd been hoping for you to fall from the king's graces because of it."

"Firens fell out of the king's favour a long time ago, and vice versa."

"I suppose he never imagined we'd actually do something like this. None of them did, poor bastards."

"Suffering from remorse?"

"No, just pitying them." Lovaris finished wiping off the blood around

his lips. "Some of them really did want to protect the empire, you know. Harkon over there joined so eagerly."

"Misfortune happens even to the brave or the noble. Besides, you're the richer for their bad luck, young man."

Lovaris grinned and showed that Rothar's blood had gotten to his teeth.

"I admit I thought you were jesting when first you approached me asking how I felt about the state of my House and the empire," he confessed readily. "And then I thought you were setting me up for treason, which was why I hesitated initially. But I'm glad you let me be part of this scheme, Baron Entei. My House is now richer, as you say-I assume you seized the cavalry they left?"

"All the guardsmen we left in the west are now retainers from our Houses. You will have the fiefs abutting yours directly, as promised." Entei pointed a finger downwards at two more bodies on the earth. "I don't think they'll complain."

"Excellent!"

"The same goes for your comrades here. You are all now greater instead of lesser lords." He looked up and at the Mentulæan camp, which was in uproar at the massacre they had just witnessed. "We should move on before those hens up there stop squawking. Are your forces ready?"

His younger conspirators responded affirmatively.

"We separated our men from theirs last night after we got your message," said Lovaris, pointing to a group standing on the right side of the camp, all armed and ready for battle. It was also in formation, in contrast to the rest of the panicking, confused reserve of the late Rothar's army. "We're just waiting for yours now."

"Let's finish this."

Lovaris's forces joined the newly arrived horde. This new army overran the camp of the old one and started killing the soldiers that had not been committed to the battle outside the Himean camp-



which suddenly started to go entirely the defenders' way once the betrayal of the Mentulae happened. It was horrific to the Mentulaeans, for obvious reasons, but it was almost equally so to their foes. The Himeans had not seen the slaughter of the Mentulaean army's command, so they knew nothing that could explain the enemy's own reinforcements turning upon it with a vengeance. All they saw was the second Mentulaean army ripping through the first one's camp and that second army's cavalry flanking the forces they themselves were fighting against. One moment they had been certain that they had no hope, the next they were seeing the enemy warring with itself.

" *Edepol* !" Kenji was gasping, as flabbergasted as the rest of the officers watching the phenomenon. " *Edepol* !"

"But-are those Mentulaean?"

"They look it, don't they? What else could they be? *Edepol* !"

One of the tribunes riding in from the fray galloped up to him.

"Nakamura-san," the woman said, her eyes wide with fright. "What should we do now?"

Kenji gulped air, fighting to rip his own eyes away from the insanity taking place.

"What do you mean what should we do?" he cried. "We keep fighting! We keep at it! *Edepol*, asking me what we should do-as though we could do anything else! Next thing I know you'll be asking me what's going on when I'd like to know the bloody answer myself!"

## Chapter 65

*Greetings to everyone. I very much hope everyone has a pleasant winter this year.*

*Et on the subject of winter, I wonder who among you have seen "Frozen" already. Because I toured the Elsanna ship recently and may now be manning one of the capstans. Mais non, non, je ne regrette rien~*

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### Vocabulaire:

1. **Ala** (s.), **alae** (pl.) - a cavalry unit. For this story, every ala shall be equal to 500 horsemen.

2. **Corona graminea** (L.) - also **corona obsidionalis** ; the rarest and greatest of all Roman military awards. Only the actual army and its non-senatorial officers (the centurions) could award it to a person, and they awarded it only if the recipient had saved, by his personal efforts, the lives of an entire legion or the whole army itself. It was thus the only crown that could be awarded by the soldiers to their general upon their own determination. The recorded Roman recipients of this award were so few that they could be counted with just both hands.

3. **Cataphracti** (pl.) - a cataphract is a type of heavy cavalry, a fully armoured man on a fully armoured horse. It is basically a "shock unit".

4. **Contubernalis** (L.) - a cadet; typically, the first military exposure of the upper-class family members of Rome would be in this position.

5. **"Depth" in army formations** - this is in case anyone has trouble understanding the military term. In armies, "width" (sometimes "length", depending on the perspective) typically indicates the number of columns and "depth" the number of rows, at least if one

looks at the force from the front. Take this representation of an army, for example:

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Let us assume this army of x's is facing the three exclamation marks. If each "x" is a soldier, the army would be then be 4 men (or columns of them) wide and 2 men (or rows of them) deep.

6. **dies caniculares** (L.) - The Dog Days of summer were from July to August in Ancient Rome, at least when the calendar was in step with the seasons. Sirius, the Dog Star, appeared in the sky around this time and the heat would drive many Romans out of the city and to cooler provinces.

7. **iugerum** (L., pl. **iugera**) - a Roman unit of measurement for area, specifically for farmland; one iugerum would be a little over 2,500 sq.m.

8. **Manumission** (Eng.) - the freeing of a slave. Manumission was fairly common for Roman slaves, who typically gained it either by fulfilling the specified years of service in their contract, by being granted it as a gift from their masters, or by saving sufficient money from their wages to buy their own freedom. Note that slaves can actually continue to work for their masters after manumission: they simply do so as hired freedmen, but everything else stays much the same.

9. **pilum** (s.), **pila** (pl.) - (L.) a heavy standard-issue Roman javelin. It could be a fearsome headache for enemies because it tended to pierce deeply even into heavy shields, which made the shield difficult to handle afterwards since the pilum would be stuck in it.

10. **rosea rura** (L.) - the fertile lands outside of Reate, or modern-day Rieti. This was where they bred the best mules in Italy.

11. **"Servi poenae poenas dabunt."** (L.) - "Servi poenae" is an anachronism, of course, but I doubt anyone really minds here. There were many types of slavery in Ancient Rome. "Servi poenae", or in some translations, "penal slaves", entered their type of slavery as penalty due to some transgression of law on their parts. Loosely

*translated, the sentence reads "the penal slaves will pay the price", referring to the doubled punishment the persons referred to in the text are about to receive. They will enter slavery as the penalty for being conquered by the enemy, then must also pay an additional penalty (presumably for their attempt at a last-ditch stand) of entering the worst kind of bondage possible.*

**12. *Strigil - or strigilis* (L.) , a bathing implement used for scraping off oil and dead skin.**

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## ***Inter Nos II: Inde Ira et Lacrimae***

*par ethnewinter*

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Shizuru wasted no time when she received the missive from Kenji Nakamura. She dashed off an answering letter, sent another requesting that her cousin come to the conquered Lasandre, and sped up the work of converting the former Mentulaeen citadel into a serviceable army base from which to deploy her own troops.

"Which is quite easy, as an army was quartered here not long ago," Shizuru told her cousin when the woman arrived, the Fourth legion and cavalry in tow. "Besides the petty one that gave us that sad little drama when we entered, I mean. And to think no one gave them applause for their pains; someone should have told them that what they were doing was not theatre."

Natsuki's laughter filled the background as Shizuma requested an explanation.

"There was a small core of diehards in the city-loyalists, that is, to the realm," Shizuru said. "The group was headed by some local aristocrats, even. They were vehemently against the idea of opening the city to us, and certainly did not change their minds even after the fact had already been accomplished. They were so against the idea of surrender that they decided to try and hold out in one of the towers on the walls."

"I take it you assaulted the diehards' tower, then."

"Why would I?" Shizuru asked. "I posted guards outside the tower's entrance and let them do as they wished. They could have had an orgy up there for all I cared."

"And did they?"

"I doubt it," the other grinned. "The cretins went up there with little forethought. They stocked up on weapons and got themselves up in some of the most stifling armour you ever saw a Mentulaean don in this heat, but somehow neglected to bring food or water with them. Barely two days of summer up in that spire and they came down with tongues touching their navels."

Her cousin sighed at the sorry tale.

"Poor devils," was the older patrician's verdict. "They surely imagined rather a more glorious end to their protest. And perhaps they would have had it, had they only had the fortitude to end their lives themselves instead of surrendering! The thirst might have weakened them too much for that thought, though. Animal misery has that power."

"Misery is right," sniffed Shizuru, unimpressed.

"Ah now, Shizuru, at least allow that they had some courage, standing up to the inevitable. As to their end, I doubt even they predicted it. They probably thought you would tear down the tower and they would in that doom like fallen patriots. What person moved to his actions by a blaze of honour ever imagines defeat from water instead of blood?"

But the other Himean was dismissive, more interested in the princess passing her couch.

"More flicker than blaze, I should think," said Shizuru while tugging at her lover's dress; she wanted Natsuki to sit on the couch with her instead of returning to the third one around the table. "Besides, I am not overly enamoured of arguments based on honour nowadays. I find that the word 'honour' is very often used to disguise folly now

because some think it a universal justification. People are allowed to overlook the logical when honour supposedly demands something less reasonable. Even had those idiots brought supplies with them, what would they have achieved by holing up in that spire? Nothing, at least not in the grand scheme of things. Lasandre would still be a fallen city and, eventually, I would still win this war."

"You mean Hime would win this war," her cousin teased.

"I am acting as Hime's representative here, so naturally I meant that," Shizuru said dryly. "And there is the difference, Shizuma. The honour I have of performing my duties for my country shall be recorded as significant to its history. It is honour that everyone else shall acknowledge. Think of the results alone when this war is over. I shall have expanded Hime's territories by a whole empire's worth. Surely one can consider that honourable, sufficient to ennoble a whole family for generations. Whereas those idiots' supposed honour of standing up to me shall not even make it to the official records, so pathetic was the attempt. Honour! Sometimes, I think that people only quote the word to justify some self-satisfying stupidity."

The other Himean lingered over the drink she was taking and when she looked up from it, her gaze turned not to her cousin.

But the green eyes were on Shizuru, and they held nothing but adoration.

"Maybe you're right," Shizuma sighed, finally. "What happened to the diehards then?"

"In with the rest of the captives," was the response. "Surely you did not think I killed them?"

"Heavens, and give them the satisfaction!?"

"Exactly, so they are more or less unharmed." A beat. "Still, I am thinking of arranging for the members of that idiotic cabal to be sold especially to slavers selling to Sicily or the Spains. Gods know people of such mean sense cannot do much good as slaves elsewhere."

Which meant, a wide-eyed Shizuma thought, that they had given her cousin no petty irritation with their "sad little drama" after all. Such a fate as Shizuru was arranging for the Diehards of the Tower (for so did the senior legate think of them now) could be nothing but a punishment: Sicily and the Spains were full of the toughest slave owners in all the provinces of Hime.

Sicilian slaves worked vast tracts of agricultural land without cessation and under harsh guard. This was because the great landowners of Sicilia had practically militarised their operations after the servile wars in years past. The slaves of the Iberian Peninsula had it even worse. These worked the famous Spanish mines-mines of which Shizuru was one of the biggest landowners, and which constituted a big chunk of her vast inheritance.

Mines were among the most profitable of investments, and that was helped by the fact that they ran on unpaid labour. As a result, mine slaves faced the greatest drudgery of all those sold into bondage; none of them entered the status of his own accord. His lot was a stark contrast to those of slaves who not only got paid for their jobs but also sometimes entered slavery of their own will-slaves like Shizuru's charmingly epicene steward, for example.

Hermias hailed from one of Greece's many rural pastures, all too aware that his potential was wasted in the idyllic backwater he called home. Even as a youth, he had yearned to live elsewhere, ideally somewhere that *mattered*. He transferred to Athens once he came of age and had been happy at first. But after a year the appeal palled: he found even the seat of Hellenic culture wanting.

The problem with Hellenic culture, he decided, was that its time had come and gone. Athens was no longer the navel of the world. Another place mattered more now and had become the centre of culture and power. Athens would always have a special place in his heart, with its unapologetic intellectualism and fragile ideals and all its beautiful boys endowed with the sweetest arses. But it had already passed the sceptre to Hime and Hime reigned supreme.

That was how Hermias had decided that life would be better in slavery-but only the right kind of slavery, of course, and only slavery to a Himean senator. His regime of self-improvement was brutal,

covering oenology, fashion, bookkeeping, and a dozen other subjects for household management. The goal was to appeal to a rich and aristocratic Himean seeking a Greek housekeeper, and while he knew his face and form would already go a long way to making him a more presentable option, he did not care to hedge his bets on physical appeal alone. He wanted to work for a household of means, class, and influence. So he had to strive to be the best of all the other ambitious men and women putting themselves forward on that auction block.

He knew what he was going into the moment he sold himself into bondage. He could expect to be treated well, especially due to his talents and the price they put on him. He would never worry about lacking food, or shelter, or even care, for his master would see to everything as though he were a true part of the family. And as he was educated, capable, and pleasing to look at, he could expect a position that would give him power over the rest of the household slaves along with very good wages. Eventually he could even expect to be manumitted and made a Himean freedman, bearing his master's family name to show to whom he owed liberty and his vote.

A mine slave, by contrast, expected none of these things. He could receive the whip from his overseers at any time, and had only the barest of necessities to stay alive. He spent most of his hours underground and the dark would ruin his eyesight forever. When he got ill no one sent for a doctor and he would only be made to work until it became truly impossible for him to rise. And that was the end for a mine slave, for he had no manumission to aspire to after his labours. He worked, he suffered, and when he could suffer no more, he died.

So Shizuru's intentions with the Diehards of the Tower were brutal enough to merit interpretation as punishment-for Shizuma knew her cousin and knew that despite the younger woman's ruthlessness, she was nonetheless someone who would not sentence people to such lifestyles absent reason. Shizuru was not someone who took pleasure in cruelty for its own sake, but she could take pleasure in vengeance.

Shizuma wondered what it was that had irked her cousin about them.



She doubted it was the perversion of "honour" that had done it. Could it have been that Shizuru had wanted that particular tower earlier than they had allowed? But that seemed unlikely even to her. Indeed, most of the things that immediately came to mind seemed unlikely answers for such a riddle. What in the world could those poor people have done to merit this response?

Whatever it was, she decided, it had sealed their fates. *Servi poenae poenas dabunt.*

"On the topic of slaves," she said, "I presume you want the prisoners sent as soon as possible to the Atinu Camp, Shizuru?"

"Yes. I want some auxiliary infantry to escort them. Have one of the tribunes handle it, Cousin."

The other nodded and said, "There are a lot of them."

"True, so best put them to work."

"No, not the tribunes," said the senior legate. "The prisoners."

Shizuru gave a smile that said that was both natural and obvious.

"I did take a city," she reminded.

But Shizuma needed no reminder of that, just as she needed no reminder of the fact that not all generals seized and sold whole populations of cities on conquest: most especially not, it had to be said, when the cities were taken by surrender. More common to take only the fighting fit to reduce enemy forces, or perhaps to take only one sex so as to temporarily stunt population growth. It was not condemnable to do what Shizuru was doing with Lasandre-and indeed she would not question her cousin on it even if she personally felt it to be so-yet it left an impression on her, this great arrest and enslavement of a whole city's people after it had opened its gates in peaceful submission.

Shizuru had stripped Lasandre and its surroundings completely bare of inhabitants, sorting them into lots of men, women, and children. Those with illness were slain to prevent disease spreading and burned in a special pit. Babies and children were permitted to stay

with the women, although it was doubtful that these would live during the exodus. Supplies for the captives were worked out down to the last metre of rope for their bonds, and even their rations were dispensed with the sparing attitude of military urgency.

Even though those rations were ones their captors had only seized from them.

It was a memorably cold and businesslike operation, and the senior legate saw it conducted by a person she had always thought among the most humane and sympathetic of their kind. Which her cousin still was, every part of her insisted, despite the lack of hesitation the woman had showed in treating a whole city of people as meat to be sold.

*The interesting thing about her, she thought, looking at her cousin with wondering eyes, is that she can do things like this without ever seeing a contradiction between it and her compassion. One might say it is the Himean way, as we're a pragmatic people and not much given to the philosophical idealism of the Greeks. But Shizuru applies it to extremes. Absolutely ruthless one moment and shockingly humane the next, whichever serves the primary cause of her life best in a situation. The only centre or consistency she seems compelled to live by is ambition. Everything else serves it, I am beginning to think.*

But then her eyes strayed to the girl occupying the couch with her cousin, sitting upright with Shizuru's bare feet on her lap.

*Except that particular thing, I suppose-although I've yet to see what that thing is exactly. Is that girl a slave to her ambition or mistress of it?*

"Yes, we should pass the captives off to the slavers already," she said to her commander and cousin. "That way we shan't have to keep feeding them with our supplies. When are the auxiliary troops you ordered up here expected?"

Shizuru looked to her mistress.

"The foreriders-" A sudden stop. "Is this the word, Shizuru? The

advance group of scouts?"

"Yes, of the vanguard, *meum mel*. "

"They shall arrive in perhaps three weeks. The rest, I would increase the time by three. Maybe even by four."

The silver-haired Shizuma looked to her cousin with a question.

"I believe she means to triple or quadruple the time before arrival," Shizuru offered.

"Were they so far away?" the senior legate frowned. "I had thought them to be well on their way some time ago, and I have to say I'd not have thought Otomeians to be slugs on the march."

It was Natsuki who answered, although it was Shizuru who had been addressed.

"All those thoughts are correct," said the one dark-haired woman in the room. "But they are incomplete. The bulk of the army is made of footmen, unlike the foreriders. They march in this lowland summer when they- we are people of the snows. Thuh-thawing us does not improve our speed, Legate. It melts our sinews instead."

The more golden of the blondes listening picked up her goblet and hid a smile behind it.

"Of course, forgive me for failing to think of it," Shizuma said to the rebuke. She was not a whit discomposed as she turned back to her cousin. "Nothing for it but to wait, then. We should start working out the cart schedules for the prisoners' conveyance, though. Or maybe we could get more carts? I wish we had more oxen."

But Shizuru disagreed.

"Mules are better for this if we can find sufficient carts to match them," said the army veteran expertly, having dealt with both animals for years-even once, in her youth, from the intimate perspective of a *contubernalis* tasked with overseeing a legion's animals.

That experience had been intended as a penalty for the young patrician, who found herself constantly stepping over and around herbivore dung in the course of the assignment. The irony of it was that she had just been awarded a *corona graminea* right before it. She won the decoration in a battle gone awry, mustering a legion and countermanding her general's strategy. Her only goal had been to save as many as she could in the growing debacle. And in the end she did not only that but even turned the tide of the battle, saving both the army and the day.

Yet she very nearly got prosecuted for her pains.

Disobedience was a bad enough offence, but she made it worse by being a mere cadet. It would have been scandalous enough had she been a minor officer but Shizuru had occupied no position of authority at all when she led the soldiers in that battle. How could she have held an office at her age then? That the legionaries had even followed so young a person had been considered incredible-but as the years would show, it was only the first demonstration of her power over the people marching under the standards.

It was these same men and women whose love and gratitude later saved her, she who was also their saviour. They shielded her from the rancour she gained from her general and superiors in that battle. She had upstaged these leaders in a painful way and in front of thousands of soldiers. A *contubernalis*, of all people! A *contubernalis* did not command, and often did not even fight. He acted as a minor secretary and merely attended a superior officer. Yet this one had gone so far above her station that she had usurped the *imperium* of every officer above her. It was as though she had looked upon that battle and decided to take over with a shrug, saying, *I might as well do it because no one else is capable enough.*

She should have been brought to trial. As the army had just given her the rarest military decoration of Hime, however, the embittered senators could not have prosecuted the young woman-all the more as they knew that to do so would have brought down a true mutiny of the soldiers on their hands. Ah, but they could still hate. What did it matter that she had saved their skins as well? Gratitude ran short where envy ran long. Hence they strove instead to make the rest of her campaign miserable in various ways, including by assigning her

to inglorious duties like that of managing the legion's beasts of burden.

Although the irrepressible youth had then turned the tables on them by diving into that duty as seriously as if it had been an army command. And then putting it to good use in her later campaigns, when she began to restructure the way her armies worked to turn them into the speedy machines she favoured as a general.

"I learned a great deal about the two animals when I was a *contubernalis*," she smiled to her cousin, who found little to smile about in her own remembrance of that time. Shizuma had been near-mad with worry back then, and had even rounded up their most powerful relatives and friends to see what could be done in case of a trial. She would be damned, she had sworn, if she allowed her favourite cousin to be condemned so soon after the girl had lost both parents. And even those of their circle most aghast at Shizuru's arrogance had pledged all their resources to save her.

But that was all before they learned of the *corona graminea* .

"The mules will do better because there is sufficient grass yet to keep them going," Shizuru was lecturing, "and the distance is actually manageable. They will not only move faster but weather heat better too. They should make good time without fuss."

"I see," Shizuma said. "I confess I always wondered which animal was superior."

"Oh, it always depends. Mules in this case. Change a few conditions, however, and the answer might be oxen. Either way, better one of them than horses for this sort of work."

"I know that, at least! Lucky for you-though not for the Treasury-I nearly bought out the breeders of the *rosea rura* to supply your campaign with the best mules possible. They cost more, but no Himean general of any sense would do with anything less." The senior legate stopped, screwed her eyes up as if a thought had suddenly occurred to her. "I say, I wonder what sort of mules one can get off those devilish large horses of the Otomeians. What would the progeny of a donkey and one of the Otomeian mares look

like, you think?"

Shizuma turned to the Otomeian princess for an answer, but such was the affront on that woman's face that she found herself apologising without knowledge of her insult.

"I think she dislikes the match," their general said with a giggle. "Is that it, *meum mel*?"

The Polemarch of Otomeia was held fast by the ferocity of her indignation. She could not even manage a word of response.

"I think she really dislikes it," Shizuma's cousin whispered.

"A donkey!" said the polemarch, provoked to speech at last. "A donkey for my horses!"

"See?" Shizuru went on. "An unwelcome proposal, it seems."

"It is puh-profanity, not a proposal!" Natsuki hurled out.

Her lover made an effort to swallow the laughter.

"We must remember that she too is an aristocrat, Shizuma," the general said to her cousin, who was bemused by the foreigner's passion on the subject. "And her horses are in a sense as aristocratic as she is, if I understand her culture and how they treat these animals. Natsuki is also especially invested in this, as she has business in horse breeding. What you just suggested might have been equivalent to-oh, I don't know-I suppose imagine how Hikaru Senou or even the more prudish snobs among the Himemiya must have felt when they heard of Chikane-chan's choice of wife."

Even as the fascinated Shizuma digested that, she realised that a better analogy would have been to compare it to how those snobs would feel upon learning of her cousin's own (desired) choice of wife. Even though Himeko Himemiya had been part of the classless Head Count before Chikane wedded her, she had still been a born and bred Himean. The Princess Natsuki, despite her nobility, was by contrast a total outsider.

The idea had not been to mate a superb horse with a common one:

it had been to mate a horse with a different animal.

*But it is hardly as though she can be expected to point that out to the girl's face*, Shizuma allowed, saying instead: "I suppose, but Chikane and Himeko cannot actually produce offspring, which would be the purpose of the match the case of the beasts. I do take the point, though, so I will ask Natsuki to excuse me. It was an idle thought by an ignoramus on equine breeding. Pray do not think too badly of me for it, for I've little education on the matter and could not even begin to compare to you there."

Natsuki subsided into a blush at the apology, sincere as the Himean had made it sound. Satisfied, Shizuma addressed her cousin again.

"I'm to stay here and command the ones left behind as garrison, then? I expect you've plans to head somewhere again shortly, which would explain why you want me here."

"Yes," said her cousin, peeking out again from behind the goblet. "I want you to take charge of this area, as I intend to move further afield soon. Put a cohort of the Fourth in the Atinu camp, as that should be enough. Keep the rest with you and coordinate with the other legates to subdue this area. The Carsini, Shizuma. I want them put down. These people give the empire many of her soldiers in the centre, I take it, and they are deathly loyal to the king. I hear he used to live with them when he was younger."

She paused to sip at her drink and continued: "Unfortunately, they are spread out over a huge territory nearby with several forts and lords to continue recruiting and rallying them. I want them neutralised but my attentions need to be elsewhere."

"Very well. Where do you go?"

"It depends on what I learn in the next few days-soon after I speak with the Baron of Firens."

"That would be the Mentulaean heading the deputation requesting to meet with you."

"Just so. He should be headed here now, along with a coterie of

other defecting aristocrats of the empire." She set her goblet back on the table and said, with every appearance of adding something inconsequential, "I instructed Kenji-han to have them escorted here on horseback with a handpicked group of crack legionaries from the Ninth. Handpicked by me, by the way."

It was Natsuki's muffled "Oh!" that alerted the senior legate to the presence of something more to what Shizuru had said. She looked to her cousin's inamorata for an answer, but that young woman was already looking at the commander.

"*Shizuru*," was all the Otomeian said, saying it in a way that said she was hugely tickled.

"Yes, I did forget to mention that to you earlier, Natsuki, did I not?" was the woman's response. She favoured the polemarch with a flirtatious wink before turning back to her cousin. "I am certain she has already guessed it, so there is no point in explaining to her what I mean, at least. Now tell me, Shizuma, have you ever met the chief primipilus of the Ninth?"

The senior legate said that she had not yet had the pleasure.

"Saltier than the pork we keep in the supply barrels," Shizuru outlined, sounding proud. "The woman's tongue curdles milk in the bowl. Ask Miyuki-han if I lie about that when you see her."

Shizuma's brow pleaded: "Why not Natsuki here, since I assume they have already met?"

But Shizuru laughed.

"Do you understand half of the vulgarities Yuuki-han says, my love? Be honest," she asked Natsuki, who scowled at the challenge.

"How am I to answer?" the Otomeian replied. "If I know half of them, I shall think that half to be the whole, no?"

The other two were caught off guard by this logic and burst into laughter.

"You have me there, I admit," Shizuru said. "Now back to the



centurion. She is Sulpician in origin, absolutely steadfast once you gain her esteem, and as red of eye as she is of hair. And I think I do not exaggerate when I say her hair is some of the reddest I have ever seen, no, *mea vita* ?"

The Otomeian's head bobbed with fervour. Shizuma remembered that the Otomeians saw none of this hair colour themselves, so she supposed it had left a profound impression on the girl.

"She also heads the Ninth's torture and intelligence detachment," Shizuru went on. "Wonderfully effective. She would not hesitate to drive shards and splinters under your nails if she thought it would help you share a secret. I believe she even once carved letters into someone's gums, although I cannot be sure of it because it was only related to me afterwards by someone else."

While the two cousins had a number of things in common, equanimity to torture was not one of them. Shizuma shuddered whereas Shizuru smiled-and both looked perfectly patrician.

"Resourceful woman," Shizuma said colourlessly, trying to cast the image of bleeding nails and gums from her mind's eye. She succeeded when she realised what her cousin was hinting at and what the polemarch had already deduced. "I see. You told Nakamura to have the Mentulaean deputation shepherded here by that centurion?"

"And a few other not-dissimilar legionaries, yes."

"You're not planning interrogation under torture of those poor people, I hope?"

Shizuru was puzzled by the suggestion.

"Why would I?" she demanded. "Do you think me a savage?"

"I'm not certain what I think of you sometimes, truth be told," the other said with a headshake. "Still, gods protect that poor deputation. I take it they shall have none-too-comfy a journey."

"But an efficient and secure one," Shizuru responded. "I want no tricks played on us here, and that means keeping those barons and

baronesses isolated from others until I talk to them. It also means keeping them alive, which is again related to isolating them from others who might recognise them and see the betrayal. The people I selected stick at nothing to see my orders carried out, and it is why I chose them. It is hardly torture, Shizuma, to keep a close watch on the enemy's defectors. My legionaries shall ensure security, you shall see. Not one of those Mentulaeans will be able to relieve himself in a bush without Yuuki-han or another of my men trimming it to keep a close watch."

"What delightful vulgarities you do spout sometimes, *little* cousin."

"No better than the ones you surely speak to your paramours in bed," the other shot back, eyebrow up. "Still, there it is. No clandestine connivances or shadowing possible for the defectors! They can talk amongst themselves but will never be given an opportunity to meet other Mentulaeans or locals on the way. I want them here as fast as possible, and Yuuki-han shall see to that. Even if it means she has to wear their rears down to leather, she shall keep them on horseback and travelling as long as she can without actually harming them. Provided I get them here alive and capable of talking, I think I shall not lose sleep over their little inconveniences."

Which meant that Shizuru suffered no pricks of conscience when the deputation finally straggled in, looking as though they had been dragged behind their steeds instead of riding on them. In fact, the senior legate murmured to the Otomeian polemarch, their commander even looked delighted by the bedraggled appearances of the defecting Mentulaeans-who all behaved somewhat as though they were walking on the deck of a pitching boat after dismount.

This dizzy and dishevelled delegation was ushered into the commander's working premises in Lasandre. For this Shizuru had chosen one of the better buildings in the city, a domicile that had belonged to one of Lasandre's foremost citizens. It was not in fact the best in the sense of being the most luxurious or even the largest of the options available, but it was nonetheless the one she found most suitable for her requirements. It was very near the city centre, it was accessible via the main roads from the gates, it had two floors with a separate entrance for the upper one, and it had the luxury of a

working latrine. The cooler ground floor she appropriated for her personal use and converted a large bedroom in the brighter first floor into her council room. It was in this room that she sat the Mentulaeans as well as several of her officers.

"Before we begin," she said to the Mentulaeans, "would any of you like some cool water?"

All of them accepted.

"The summers have always been worse here," said the obvious leader of the group afterwards, a man with a mass of white hair and the vitality of an old warlord not yet grown frail. He was the only one to have managed to exchange short introductions with Shizuru earlier so he just addressed her casually. "In this part of the empire, that is to say. Just another reason I'm not too fond of it."

"The region, Baron Entei?" Shizuru asked with a smile. "Or the empire?"

Entei smiled back and revealed that his teeth, though large and finely-formed, were heavily yellowed. As his tousled hair and beard were very white, his smile appeared a literally jaundiced one.

"The region," he said. "I have other, deeper reasons for disliking the empire, General Fujino. As do my fellows."

She invited him to introduce the others.

"The Baron Delior of House Epixes," he began, indicating a sandy-haired man with the physique of a bull. Brawny and thick-necked, head receding into heavy shoulders: it led to an impression of him being shorter than he truly was. He was the kind of animal that people tended to think less intelligent than he could be in truth. Whether or not the square-jawed Delior was more or less intelligent than his looks, though, was something that Shizuru could not yet tell.

"His daughter is betrothed to my brother's only son, and his mother was my mother's cousin. His fiefs abut mine, so the two of us are responsible for the strip of land from Irisorum to Pharuces."

"Opposite which, across the border, would be the most powerful of

the borderside Nervian fiefdoms," Shizuru explained for him. "I take the point on your Houses' importance to the region, Baron. Please continue."

The others looked surprised, but not Entei. A woman capable of doing what she had with the Southern Frontier and of climbing over a massif in winter to do it could only be very irresponsible or very thorough.

"And here we have the Baroness Athain of House Hallon." This next personality was a wiry woman with dark hair slashed with grey. Her look was one of weathered severity-the sort you carved out of wood. "The Baroness was one of the first members of our coalition. Her fiefs also abut mine."

The general's smile widened ever so slightly.

"And finally, the Baron Orgestes of House Garrida," Entei finished, indicating the last man. This was a smoothly bald character with a trim beard and a well-lined face; Shizuru thought him to be the eldest of the deputation by his looks, although not necessarily because he looked creaky already. He and Entei were in fact not that far from each other in age, but the gentler and more refined-looking Orgestes had less of the other man's martial vigour. His was the face of the seasoned counsellor: so placid it was nearly blank, Yet in that countenance was the ability to reflect whatever a ruler wanted to see in other eyes.

"He was a courtier of Obsidian's father," Entei was saying, still speaking of the Baron Orgestes. "And for some time, he was a high member of Obsidian's court as well. That was until he decided to retire to his fiefs."

"And do his fiefs also abut yours?" Shizuru asked with a touch of impishness.

Entei gave his golden smile again.

"No," he said.

Shizuru welcomed all of them heartily to the conference. Next she

went through her own introductions, although hers were less specifically informative.

"I am General Shizuru Fujino, proconsul and governor-general of the Septentrian Province of Hime, which shall be the name for these lands once I have annexed them for People and Senate," she said with such glib nonchalance that it caused blinks among her guests. Defectors though they might be, they were also still ruling nobles of the realm she had just condemned to conquest with such certainty. "The persons around us are all part of my army and staff. Excuse me if I skip a complete introduction for now, as you shall have ample opportunity to meet the ones you should meet later if all goes well. And if all does not go well, then at least we shall not have wasted time."

She smiled briefly at their glances to each other.

"Not that I intend to keep you in the dark about the identities of all the people here, though," she continued. "For now, let it be noted that at my right is my cousin and senior legate. That means the immediate second-in-command in our army. At my left is a high officer of our allies the Otomeians, their appointed polemarch."

This time, the disconcertment was so obvious among the foreigners that Shizuru was obliged to inquire if there was a problem.

"Forgive our confusion," said the one female in the Mentulaeen delegation. She had a far softer voice and manner than her looks allowed. "What we know of Otomeia and its people isn't much, I do admit, but the, uh, poh-lay...?"

"Polemarch, Baroness Athain. Their auxiliary's high commander and representative in our councils. Also personally titled Princess Natsuki of the Otomeians."

"Ah, princess, yes," said Athain, latching onto the more familiar term. She directed a brief glance to the polemarch, whose face showed only curiosity at their interest. "As I said, we don't know much of Otomeia, all told. Even so, we do know some things one might consider of essence. And I must say, the princess doesn't look like any Otomeian we have ever seen."

"Yes, she likely does not," Shizuru said cheerfully. "Perhaps you should all consider yourselves fortunate to have the privilege of seeing her."

The senior legate grinned.

"I have already learned of what transpired at Massae and, as you explained them to my legate there, what events led to this," Shizuru continued, ploughing on before the foreigners could say any more. "I must say, though... a cool, if not frigid scheme, Baron Entei, to so use and spend people who were also your countrymen."

"So it must appear to some," Entei answered easily. "But correct me if I'm wrong-I remember that your nation has had its wars with neighbours too. Fuukans, I think, against Himeans?"

"The civil wars, yes. Countryman against countryman. But not people from the same nation."

"And there you have it, General," said Entei, a gleam in his eyes. "You call us people of a single nation, you call us all Mentulaeans. Why, the capital too insists we call ourselves that. But we're not actually all Mentulaeans at heart."

"No?"

"No, at the core of it. To many of us, we're still Firensian, or Vomaesian, or members of some old tribe or other. Well, we were separate tribes before the empire, after all. The king claims us to be one nation as if his claim were all it took to make it a reality. What we really need-the leadership it truly takes for such a task-has not been provided. In its place we've had only wishful thinking and naïve politics. There are too many unsettled grievances against each other, too many feuds that remain."

He gave her his yellowed smile.

"You see, there's the truth behind our great empire," he continued. "We're really just an agglomeration of petty nations held together by the thinnest tissue. No doubt you know some of this, General, since you seem the type to study her enemy until she's ferreted out as

many potential weaknesses as possible."

"That is a kind view of me," she said to him, noncommittal.

"It's a weakness I'm sure you already know about. The empire's leaders-we all of us-have a dozen conflicts among us, and they've remained to this day. Why? Because our kings have never really learned to settle them. Or should I say they've never bothered? All they do is promise rewards and benefits for both parties if they set aside the grievances momentarily, hoping they'll be forgotten with their causes over time. I ask you, do enemies set aside their enmity simply because they forget the reason they began fighting in the first place?"

"Unlikely," Shizuru agreed.

"Our rulers failed to live up to their promised rewards as well," he said. "Our rulers are fickle and forgetful about their own promises. A great deal of the problem has been that they have little talent for dividing their attentions. They turn instantly to the idea of expanding their empire when they have to solidify it first. And contrary to what many simple advisors would have some believe, going after a common enemy doesn't always get rid of the enemies in your midst!"

Shizuru's smile had not budged yet: "Pity you were not there to counsel him on that, then, before he started sending armies over the border."

"I wasn't, no-I never could stand the pandering in court," the man admitted. "But I tell you honestly, General Fujino, that when the king first proposed the idea of expanding to the lands east of the Atinu boundary, I had my supporters in his court counsel against it as far as they could without losing their lives."

He noted her eyebrows go up with satisfaction.

"Because you believed there were more important things to do for the empire?" she enquired.

"Yes, and because I never cared to make enemies of your people,"

he said, prompting some looks among the others on her side of the table. "I know what you Himeans are like, General Fujino, far though our nations may have been from each other. I know no distance would keep you from getting to all those you think your enemies once they've stung you to action. It doesn't always happen the first time, nor even in the first decade, but your people don't stick at a first time or period of years-you keep trying even if it takes you a century to do it."

He gave his counterpart across the table an unreadable look.

"I know," he said, "about the tale of Carthage."

"Ah," was Shizuru's response.

"That was just one part of the concern," he went on, a line appearing between his white brows. "As I said, internal stresses were working inside the empire. The king ignored them and based his policies solely on conquest and expansion, which meant that even the lords of the west-our houses, which have long been the empire's bulwark against our closest true enemies-were ignored in favour of Houses that had armies and men to spare for his campaigns abroad. Well, of course they could spare them. They weren't doing anything for the empire's protection, unlike us. Yet they received rewards regularly and we didn't."

He stopped to take a drink from his cup again and found it empty. Shizuru pushed her untouched one across the table.

"Thank you," he said after using her offering. "It's more consideration than our so-called king often shows us, I'm sad to say."

"As you were telling me," she said gently.

"Yes," he agreed. "Well, we who had long been at the service of the empire's defence received little consideration from him. Why not? We had little choice but to do our tasks, as we ourselves would be in the path of the Nervii were they to break through. Still, it was a bitter turn to be consciously and constantly ignored by the king in his favours and rewards. The king-the kings, as I count his father before



him-have been perpetually prejudiced in favour of certain Houses and peoples too. Again, why shouldn't they be? They have their own 'true people' too. It's after the old tribe and House of the ruling dynasty, by the way, that we take the name 'Mentulae'. Did you know that?"

Shizuru nodded.

"I don't say that kingship over the different clans is impossible. Unification, I mean. Had I thought that, I would never have married my daughter to Obsidian," Entei revealed to the circle of auditors listening raptly to his dialogue-if it could be called that-with the Himean commander. "It was a leap of faith I took then, when the king asked for her hand in marriage. But it's a leap of faith that has ceased to be of benefit. You'll know this from what I told your legate already. It was obvious to me that there could be no future in staying with the realm."

"And you believe one to be in Hime?"

"I believe Hime is the future."

The general said nothing for some moments, as if waiting to see if he had anything else left to say. When it was clear he had no more, she made the smallest of movements in her chair, like someone quietly testing her spine after a long period of stillness.

"Everything you have said is interesting. But what do you want me to do, exactly?" she asked Entei.

Entei's lips twitched under his snowy beard. He had read her earlier as the sort of person who would negotiate with delicacy and more than a bit of roundabout talk; even now he thought he had not read her wrong. Her evasive responses thus far had been proof of it. So was this one deviant response now to be read as something other than it appeared?

"What do we want you to do, General?" he echoed, trying to buy himself time to reassess her.

The look in her extraordinary eyes said she knew what he was

doing.

"That was what I asked," she said. "Do be frank about it, please. You may even be crude if you like. It is too hot today for us to waste everyone's time by batting eyelashes sweetly at each other."

His mouth fell open for the briefest moment.

"Very well, General," he said once he recovered, actually giving out a chuckle. "I'll come to the point."

He looked her straight in the eyes for what he had to say, knowing letting them roam would be a weakness before this creature.

"I want a kingship," he said. "I will be king of the western provinces of the realm, with an expansion of the boundaries of those provinces. You Himeans can keep the majority of the realm if you want it. However, I want the west."

A smile. "Plus a little more."

"Plus a little more, but it's a little that you can easily afford. And for every part you give us, you have less to worry about administratively. I'll do what you want me to do in the rest-~~fight~~ Obsidian, garrison citadels you take, whatever you need as long as you let me do what I want in what will be my lands. You can also request a tribute, auxiliaries, whatever, as long as you stand behind me when I declare myself king. And I want a promise of you standing behind me too in case my enemies attack. I think you call people like me clients?"

"Client-king in your case, yes."

"That's it. Any thoughts yet?"

"Perhaps a bit of surprise." She quirked a brow at him. "I thought you would ask for the whole instead of just a part. Why not request to be high king of the entirety instead, since you do believe that the whole can be united under the right leadership? You might have tried to convince me to it by pointing out the advantages of just replacing the head of the realm instead of carving it up into new territories."

The baron's eyes swept what showed of her above the table again, as if taking her in one more time.

"General Fujino, please," he said. "I'm not fool enough to think Hime would send in someone *like you* if they didn't want to grab as much as they could of this place."

She looked very amused by that.

"So these-" She swept the rest of the deputation with her gaze. "Would they be your high council?"

"The core of it, yes."

"They submit to the terms of the contract between us, then, as shall all those part of your coalition. Is this guaranteed? All of you would offer me your forces for this alliance?"

"Yes, and whatever else you may need that we can give. Local intelligence, grain, fresh animals if we can supply them. We'll also hold the west-the lands you let us have-against your enemies and ours, reducing your worries."

"The usual offerings."

It was an indifferent answer.

"You want something else," Entei said almost accusingly, eyes guarded.

"I want something *more* ." She then surprised everyone in the room by declaring, "It is very likely that you shall pay through the nose for this alliance and support you seek, Baron Entei, and I do not pretend otherwise. I am waging a war and I will use every resource I can to win, even if it means I have to use it ferociously. Besides everything you have offered, I am likely going to ask a great deal more of you yet. It is up to you to decide whether or not you are willing to supply what I want. But trust me when I say I shall ask for nothing that you cannot actually give."

Entei ignored the murmurs of his companions and kept his eyes on the beautiful woman across the table.

"It's interesting that you would ask me to trust you, General Fujino," he said softly. "Especially when you've made no gestures yet that would give us cause to do that. Unlike us, by the way, considering what we did at Massae."

"True," she concurred without concern. "But you did that because you seek an alliance with us. We do not seek an alliance with you."

At the patent flash of alarm in all their eyes-even in the thus-far composed Entei's-she halted their fears with a quick amendment.

"We do not seek one, but we may take one," she told them. "Quite a difference between the two, My Lady and Lords. Choose to fulfil my requests and the alliance may happen. Choose otherwise and it shall not. The choice is yours."

"You sound," said the grey-haired Orgestes, "as though you care not which way that choice goes, General Fujino."

"I do," she said smoothly. "Pardon me if I gave you the impression that I did not. Let it be clear that I do care. However, it should be clear as well that I care less than would be preferable for your bargaining position. You see, there is another truth I shall not conceal from you, because you can see it too if you open your eyes. The achievement of our goals is not dependent on your support... whereas the achievement of your goals is, in fact, largely dependent on ours. We both know this, so I daresay it is folly to act as though in ignorance of it. Do you think King Obsidian would take kindly to your secession? It is rather too late to change your mind about rebellion now, given what you did and whom you slew at Massae. Remember too that rulers always fear the enemies closer to home. I rather fancy Obsidian would wage war on you first if I were to pack up and pull out my legions from this land."

"And sacrifice all you have gained from your victories thus far?" gasped Athain.

"If it gained me the whole prize later, why would I think twice about returning a piece for a time? Besides, I would not go unrewarded, mind you. I have already stripped several of your armies and towns of booty, besides capturing a good number of people to sell to

slavers. I shall be retreating with a tidy profit to offset my costs already as well as pay for my return once you and Obsidian have battered each other into military insignificance."

She was still speaking and smiling in that tender way, which was what made the delegation so uncomfortable all of a sudden. They were not used to people who spoke like that, who required no great gestures or passions to express power. She was powerful: they were not blind to that, despite the youth that was plain on her face. Yet she strove constantly to wrap her strength in silk, as if dulling the gleam of her own steel.

"If indeed Obsidian went after you," she said, "I predict you would war so viciously with each other that the victor would have a Pyrrhic victory on his hands."

At their expressions, she explained, "Pardon me. Something in the manner of what happened to King Pyrrhus of Epirus when he warred with us two hundred years ago. He won battles against us that led to him losing so many of his men that he could not replace them for later encounters. Hime could refill the voids left in her ranks by those battles, however, and so eventually we won the war."

"I see," said old Baron Orgestes slowly, spellbound. "A victory at so dear a cost that it spells defeat in the long run."

"Precisely. So if I did leave you and Obsidian to your internecine war, whichever side turned out the victor would be greatly reduced in strength. It would be but a simple thing for me to move back in with my legions and subdue whoever remains."

"Then," said Entei, "why not just do that? Why not egg us on to declare ourselves seceded without your help and let Obsidian come after us as you said?"

Shizuru sighed and held out her hands as if to say the answer was obvious.

"You are not stupid enough for it," she said.

"And what makes you say that?"

"You came over to the winning side, did you not?"

A moment of silence, after which the tense members of the delegation finally unbent enough to smile.

"Besides, I am not stupid enough to do that either if there is an alternative," she said. "I am not the sort of mindless invader who would prefer to denude a land this large of all its people when I could convert some instead. Especially when the possible converts would be ones I can rely on to guard the land's flanks in the future, as you pointed out earlier. I see your worth! So I admit I would prefer that we be friends, my dear nobles of the Mentulae."

The baron said nothing for a moment.

"You would prefer it," he said. "But you don't... pine after it, I think one could say."

A laugh spilled from the beautiful mouth.

"One could say that," she said merrily. "If you take the route that turns us into enemies, I shall not shed a single tear over it, to be honest. Why should I, when it would likely work out for me too, eventually? In the end, the outcome of this meeting shall be your choice. I shall not insult you by trying actual coercion. As I said earlier, you approached me, not the other way around, so I shall not barter with you like some huckster eager for a sale."

The deputation thought this over for some seconds.

"Very well," Entei finally ruled. "It's hard to deny what you say, General Fujino-and that's why you can say you shall not coerce us, isn't it? You know you have no need to, as the situation itself is coercive in your favour. There *is* one thing I would like to amend in your words just now, however."

"What is it?"

"You referred to us as Mentulaean nobles. As we are building what is in effect a new kingdom, we wish to build a new nation as well. Please refer to us as Firensians from now on. All of my fellows agreed on this prior to this conference."

Shizuru nodded with clear approval.

"A wise idea, Baron," she said. "Indeed, should you not be titled 'king' instead, by now? Do you not wish to claim that new status yet?"

"I've not had the opportunity for a proper coronation."

Orgestes interrupted.

"Forgive me, My Lord," said the old man, his wise eyes suddenly bright and young. "It's true you've not had a coronation ceremony yet, but it's no obstacle. All the coalition swore allegiance to you and has also sworn support of your kingship already. That is formal acknowledgement of your kingship given circumstances, sufficient in lieu of the coronation ceremony to render to you kingly status in this negotiation with General Fujino. This is a rebellion in a time of war, after all-formalities are different in such times. I imagine it would also be more convenient to the General if you were to acknowledge your own kingship now instead of waiting for ceremony to claim what the rest of us have already legitimised."

Shizuru nodded to this. Entei looked to the rest of his companions, then back to her.

"I am King of Firens."

"King Entei of Firens, then," Shizuru agreed. "I must ask something before I even contemplate agreeing to this, and mind that you tell me the truth, please. If I find out you have given me a lie, you and your new nation shall not survive unscathed."

It was strange, Entei would reflect ever after, that he had known some of the most verbally vicious warlords and kings in his time, both among the Mentulae and his enemies among the Nervians. Yet he thought he had never felt-not *heard*, for there was nothing in either her tone or diction to merit that word-as much menace in a warning as he did from the song-voiced and smiling Himean that day. It seemed to him as though her deliberate omission of details or power infused her threat with a malice unmatched by the loudest alarum. Was what she had left out so unspeakable it had to be

censored from its own suggestion?

"Lies will have out eventually," he told her. "I don't give a lie when I know it's one I will have to give and uphold continuously, since I know that can't be done forever."

"Oh, you are a wise king!" she said with complete absence of sarcasm. "Here is the query. Were there any Himean citizens recently in your lands or in any of the western lands belonging to this alliance?"

He exhaled quietly, the snowy hairs of his beard stirring with the breath. He had known she would ask this, so it was a relief to finally get it out.

"I found none in mine," he said, "and I very much doubt any of the others found Himeans living in their lands either. Ours are rough lands and too dangerous for tourism or foreign traders. Your people have never really ventured far enough west to reach our lands."

"None in mine either," said Delior.

One by one the delegation disavowed the presence of Himean citizens in their fiefs.

"If I may?" the old baron Orgestes said, and upon getting a nod from Entei, went on to explain: "I expect you are concerned about our possible execution of Himean citizens, General Fujino, but we had no such displays in the west. The first reason, as stated by my fellows and my king, is that there was no opportunity for it. From our understanding, you took many of the Southern Frontier's towns of note already. Did you get reports of Himean executions when you were there?"

Shizuru denied it.

"Most of the few Himeans would have fled even before the war really broke out," he said. "There were stirrings even before Argentum-your battle at Argentum, I mean, with Prince Artaxi."

"And the second reason?"



"The second reason is that we were already thinking of defection even before Prince Hiempnos crossed the border. Even had we found Himeans in our provinces around the time war broke out, we would not have been stupid enough to destroy our chances of an alliance with your people."

This time, the Himeans around the table were the ones to sport startled expressions.

"If indeed you were contemplating alliance with us as early as that," the senior legate spoke up, her eyes flashing golden in the daylight, "why did you come to us only now?"

"Because we weren't strong enough," was Entei's response. "Not at the time. We had to look for supporters among the other western lords first, build a more stable position, find an opportunity such as Massae to prove our dedication to this relationship, *and* somehow do all of this while protecting ourselves from detection by those loyal to the king. It wasn't easy for us. You've been separated from us by the king's loyal territories and his forces all this time. I couldn't even risk sending a courier to you before this, there having been too many armies and warlords capable of waylaying couriers until now—who was to say they wouldn't have intercepted even a secret message and alerted Obsidian to our coup prematurely?"

The two women on the opposite side of the table shared a look.

"Very well," ruled the Himean commander. "Let us now clarify the contract conditions in brief. You propose to become a client king of Hime, with all the duties and privileges that status carries?"

"Yes."

"You agree to enter an alliance with me that places your troops as well as your person and powers at my disposal whenever I require it?"

"Yes."

"You agree to remodel your laws in such a way that they are commensurate with the law of the Province of Septentria, in order to

keep the peace better between our respective areas of governance?"

"What will be the laws of Septentria?" he asked.

"In brief, those of Hime." Her eyes flashed. "We may inspect them later. But for now, a good example of what I mean would be a prohibition against human sacrifice."

"Ah!" He should have known she would light on that practice. Well, it little mattered to him: he was no partisan of druids and thought little of using a dying man's twitches to tell the way battles would go. Only the mettle of a general, the quality of his troops, and fortune could do that. "Done, no human sacrifice."

"You agree to submit to our methods and decisions in division of spoils and territories?" she said, adding before any of them could offer the quail, "Naturally, there shall be a special provision here concerning the exception, which is the allocation of the western territories to you and your barons. I shall not touch a single *iugerum* of land belonging to your fiefs. Nor shall I tamper with the lands you have recently claimed for yourselves following the events at Massae."

She glanced at Entei, then at the Baroness Athain: "I note that there was an enormous spur of territory previously belonging to the Lords of Vomaes separating what you now claim are your fiefs, for instance. I take it House Vomaes was one of those eradicated at Massae?"

Entei shook his head with a small smile.

"Your intelligence on us is remarkable," he told her.

"I think you shall find what I have to say next even more demonstrative of that," she said in return. "I confess I knew who your daughter was even before you mentioned her marriage to the king—or should I say King Obsidian for specificity, since you claim kingship as well? In any case, I was aware not just of her status but also of the rumour that she was left high and dry in the capital by her husband, who chose to winter and, it seems, summer elsewhere.

When did you last hear from her?"

"Before I set these events in motion," he said. "She was indeed left in the capital, which is bereft of Obsidian and his court."

"You summoned her from it, I expect, in preparation for your defection?"

He shook his head, although not as an answer to the query.

"I wish I had your sources!" he declared, drawing a self-deprecating smile from her.

"Not at all-that was merely a guess. Unless you wished your daughter ill, you would hardly have left her in Gorgo to suffer the fate meant for you after Massae. Where is she now?"

He hesitated just long enough to prompt her to add, "There is no danger to your daughter's life here, but to be sure, I do not need you to specify exactly where. Simply give me a general idea of whether she is in the central regions, in the east, the north, and so on."

"The central region," he said then, drawing a satisfied sigh from her. "Not that far away from us even now, but deeply hidden. Our intention had been to fetch her with some horsemen after the battle-although that has had to wait, obviously, as your legate has seen fit to hold down all our cavalry and commanders until our conference was concluded. He gave us no choice since we wanted a meeting arranged with you straightaway." A pause. "I had been hoping to ask you to permit us to fetch her directly after this meeting, before news of Massae finally reaches these regions."

"I shall have to refuse that request, I fear, but wait and hear me out first, please." She sat back in her chair and gave him another of her warm smiles. "You are a man of great ambition and political dexterity, My Lord Firens. I doubt you would have left your interests in the capital in the sole custody of your daughter."

He took the implied question and answered.

"My daughter Azula has her supporters in Gorgo, yes," he said. "Although all of those publicly known to support her have departed

the city too and are with her in hiding."

Shizuru made a soft clucking noise.

"So they were left behind too; you *have* fallen from Obsidian's favour," she said.

"I have," he agreed. "Little wonder I came to you."

"Indeed. What I have to ask is actually the next condition for my acceptance of the alliance. How quickly can you return your daughter and supporters to the capital?"

The Mentulaeans stared at her, even Entei.

"Return her to Gorgo?" the Baroness Athain echoed dumbly. "You do not mean that *now*, General?"

"Why, is it impossible already?" Shizuru asked, glancing at her. "As you said earlier, news of Massae has not yet reached this place. The only reason it reached me was that my legate sent a messenger as soon as he could. I applaud your care, by the way-you must have killed every one of the other westerners in that battle to have prevented news from being spread by survivors. Well, my men helped, I am certain. The Ninth has a particular taste for falling on those who show their backs in battle."

She seemed to shift slightly in her seat: she was crossing her legs.

"At any rate, your concern must be with the unlikelihood of her returning to the capital based on her cover story. What pretext did you use to get her out?"

Entei cleared his throat to draw the Himean commander's attention again.

"No, it's not impossible to return her to Gorgo, I think," he allowed. "But I do think it will be a little tricky. We asked her and her supporters to withdraw to the west for safety, you see. Let the rest of the city's governing nobles think it was paranoia on my part and all that."

"Did they attempt to hold her back?"

"You think it a slim pretext?"

"Not at all. If I were in a position where my enemy would be someone such as myself, I daresay paranoia would be more akin to wise caution in the end."

He grinned at the twinkle in her eye.

"I believe you," he said. "But no, to answer your question. They didn't hold her back. If the king withdraws to his northwest quarters with the court for an extended period during war, why would they blame the queen he left behind for doing the same? Besides, they wouldn't go leaderless without her. The one really given authority over the capital is the leader of its defending army."

"I see."

She sent for a map of the empire's central region and had it spread on the table.

"Which way would she presumably-I mean as far as the capital knows-which route would she presumably take to get from there to Firens?"

Entei traced the route for Shizuru with his finger.

"Then I suggest you send her a letter saying this," Shizuru said to him. "Tell her to retrace her steps immediately and reinstall herself and her companions in the capital. Once she has, have her spread word that the messenger they sent ahead as scout found the western lords already gathering at Massae. Not strictly an untruth, so hardly unbelievable intelligence."

Entei nodded, still waiting for the real excuse that would let his daughter return to the capital without suspicion.

"And then," Shizuru continued, "I want her to say too that while travelling, they had word of a Himean army coming from Lasandre and marching the road to Berentum, which we all know leads eventually to Gorgo. Tell them they heard it from fleeing survivors

whose homes were destroyed by the invaders. She promptly turned around and headed back to Gorgo to warn its army of the coming foe."

Now everyone around the table was staring at her.

"The road to Berentum, General?" Orgestes said.

"Yes. There is an army not too far from there too, right? Nysias, I think. Is it still there?"

He wondered again from where she was getting information and told her as much as he knew from his own sources.

"The last I heard-it was a month past, General-yes, so I cannot speak for it now."

"I see. Now we come to the most important of my requests, the reason I am asking her to reinstall herself in the capital in the first place."

"What is it?"

"I need her to persuade the commander of the army at Gorgo to head to Berentum as well. Have her convince them that they should stop us from getting nearer the capital, that is, and head out to meet us instead of awaiting us where they are."

Entei blinked.

"What you ask is easy enough, but I just need to give out a caution, General," he said. "In case you do meet them at or around Berentum, you should be aware that place is a wide plain like this one, with even fewer hills. It will be the kind of ground Mentulaeans, especially those of the centre, know best how to fight on. Without insult to your abilities, a full royal army is different from the sort of force you defeated to get Lasandre."

"I trust it to be," she said with provocative sangfroid. "Then you have to add the forces near the capital too, like the ones at Nysias, which could reinforce the Gorgo army as it marches. Large, no?"

"Very. Then you should think too of the Prince Calchis's army up north, which could be heading here as we talk."

"No, that one shall not be a problem for the moment," she said, befuddling all of them; they did not know that she had shut off the central lands from that army for the moment. "Nor shall the one at Nysias be a problem if your daughter tells the capital too that she sent for it to be brought up to Berentum, presumably to help halt the Himean advance there."

Entei caught the light in her eye and guessed at it.

"But she will not have sent any messages to Nysias, in fact?" he volunteered.

"Oh, she will! But they shall be ones demanding that the army there be moved post-haste to Rissetium."

Entei's eyes danced, his companions' laughter in his ears.

"Rissetium is in the opposite direction," he said.

"It is that. Do you think your daughter can manage it?"

"Azula isn't without influence yet-or cunning, for that matter," he said.

"That gladdens me," Shizuru said, and meant it. "So we can rule out the Nysian forces too for this battle, most likely. Still, not bad odds for Gorgo's commander. Do you know the commander?"

He eyed her with mock-suspicion before answering: "*Do you ?*"

She laughed and said she did not, inviting him to enlighten her on his superior knowledge here.

"And here I was beginning to think you knew everything about us already," he said. "Baron Terrigos. The king's half-brother-a bastard of Obsidian's father, really. The former king got him off some servant woman in the palace, so his lineage isn't remarkable on one side. The title he now holds was a gift from Obsidian, to whom he is most loyal. Not a politician, but a soldier. He's a veteran of war and one of

Obsidian's better generals. The king's man to the death too."

"Which is why he was left in charge of the army at the capital, naturally," Shizuru said, directing a grin to her own cousin. "No doubt it is why he did not leave one of his sons instead. A bastard brother who cannot inherit the throne and whose claim to power is dependent on his favour. Not all that different from our own senators in their machinations, is it? Although blood ties are actually strengths in our case, as opposed to dangers."

The senior legate smirked.

"Unless you happen to be rich enough to be worth murdering for an inheritance," she said.

As Shizuru's fortune happened to be worth murdering for many inheritances, she raised an eyebrow askance at this.

"Very well," she said to the delegation, clapping both hands together in apparent contentment. "Let us wrap this up, then. As regards your daughter, I need her to act as soon as possible. She should not find her task hard if this Terrigos is as experienced a general as you say and if she still has some modicum of power in the city."

"I'll send her the message this very day."

"Excellent. Next, return to your troops in Massae and collect them for a trip to Resselium."

"Resselium." A pause. "I see."

"I am glad you do. After you take it and eliminate the Nysian army, wait for more instructions at that location. Do these things and I say yes to the alliance and your uncontested kingship over the west."

There was a simultaneous straightening among the Mentulaeans-or Firensians, as they now dubbed themselves.

"Very well, General, I've no objection to the terms," said Entei. "But if I may ask a question, do you truly plan to head to Berentum and engage them?"



"I thought I said as much."

"Don't you want our forces to join you for it instead of bothering with the army from Nysias?"

"Even if I did, it would be a vain hope." Shizuru lifted an eyebrow, the one he saw was cut in half by a fine scar. "I have no intention of waiting for you to bring in your forces from Massae, you see. Doing so might lead to squandering opportunity. Your daughter's strongest argument for persuading the Baron Terrigos to meet us at Berentum would be the relative security of Massae and the area nearby, at least based on her claim of the western lords rallying their armies there. Terrigos would only have one direction left to look to for threats then. The longer we wait to do this, the bigger are the chances of a survivor from Massae or some random onlooker delivering the news of your defection, in which case Terrigos will then have two directions to look to for enemies. He would not budge from his encampment if that were to be the case."

She checked the water clock on a desk against the wall and smiled a dismissal at her guests.

"We shall talk more afterwards. For now, please do enjoy our hospitality. We have prepared food and quarters for you and you need only ask us for something if you require it to make your stay more comfortable. I believe you have been riding very hard the past days-" A sideways glance at her cousin, who was smiling unabashedly. "-so we shall provide all we can to help you have a restful night later."

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A restful night would be a vain hope for people in their position, the newly-minted Firensians noted when free of foreign surveillance.

"How can one rest with everything we have to think on?" groaned the Baroness Athain to her similarly wakeful comrades. They were in the capacious dining room of the house they had been given. They were not there to dine: they had just come from a dinner feast the Himeans had put together hastily in their honour. But digestion did not come with sleepiness for any of them tonight.

"A plot to draw a royal army to Berentum," Athain continued. "An assignment to occupy Ressetium. A promise to send over a portion of our harvest straightaway. A gamble of a battle, if I'm to understand her intentions for Terrigos aright. That youngster wasn't kidding when she said we'd pay a lot for this alliance. And the sum of it's hard to swallow!"

"Fortunately, you can't say the same of their cuisine," said the Baron Delior. "That stuff they served was right tolerable."

"You certainly ate a lot."

"If you mean I was unworried enough to fall to my meal with relish, yes, you're right." His eyes lit with pleasure as he recalled their dinner, licking his chops voluptuously. Such wonderfully roasted pork! How had they managed to impart that delightfully subtle sweetness to it? "Seriously, though, Athain, did you expect anything else? To be honest, I thought she might ask for even more when we were just on the way here. I'd say she drove a decent bargain today, at least for someone in her superior position."

"So you think," Athain said, "that we're not being asked to pay through the nose *and* on speculation?"

"I think we're paying things we can afford to pay yet," said the sandy-haired man, who was in fact more intelligent than his neckless, bullish appearance suggested. He had kept quiet during the actual conference out of respect for his betters, for he was the youngest of the lot. But now they were away from prying eyes and he was in a mood to chat, being much excited by all that had just transpired on this mission of great import.

"I don't see why you're so put out, to be honest," he said. "We don't have much to worry about since she was right in saying we've no choice but to submit to her demands. There's no more thinking that needs to be done on that score, so it shouldn't keep you up later. Although-yes, I'm unashamed to admit something will still keep *me* up tonight! I blame it on our new allies' faces."

"What do you mean?" the baroness asked.

It was the Baron Orgestes who answered for the younger man.

"You mean," he said, "because the Himean command was full of lookers."

"That it was," Delior whistled, slapping his meaty thighs. " *Weren't* they, though?"

Both Orgestes and Athain agreed without reservation, having been as impressed by it as their comrade. Who dropped an elbow heavily onto the table and propped up his chin dreamily on one hand. It was an airy pose incongruous with his bovine looks, but many things about Delior were inconsistent with his appearance.

"Stunning!" he breathed. "Absolutely stunning! And the colours on those women! I mean the three on the other side of the table earlier, specifically. I didn't expect them at all."

"I don't think any of us expected them either-particularly the general," interrupted their king, finally surfacing from his preoccupation with some meditation. "Especially because she's the general."

"How do you work that out?"

"Army leaders are always described with heroic good looks in the stories. Legends inflate the appeal of the victorious just as they fill out the gaps in them. In reality, we know it's otherwise, don't we? Most great leaders aren't beautiful people. They often have something that makes them eye-catching or impressive to look at, yes, but they don't actually draw people to them with their looks. They're a very far cry from the way actors would make them seem when they're resurrected in plays later. Do you remember that one production we saw in Comus ages ago, Orgestes, the one where the old king was played by that gorgeous buck the women all fancied?"

Old Orgestes roared with laughter, tears actually springing to his eyes.

"And the old queen reared up in her seat and demanded to know why her husband suddenly looked so much better after his death,"

he explained to the other two.

Entei was laughing as well.

"That's what I mean," he replied. "But what we saw earlier was something straight out of the play, wasn't it? I don't think any actor could ever fill in for her shoes later when they begin doing tributes to her-she's so beautiful even thespians will struggle to match it." He paused and looked thoughtful. "She was so good-looking, in fact, that I even forgot about her youth as we talked. I could see it the entire time, yet it was only afterwards that it even became something worth noting. It's hard to explain why that relates to her good looks, but I felt that it did."

"I propose," said Orgestes, "that it may have been because her looks were more of the divine quality than the human. And we know the divine is ageless."

The other three looked at him, Entei smiling broadly.

"You've the most eloquence of us all, as usual," he said to his old friend. "Yes, that's what it was, I suspect. And her eyes..."

They waited, but he left the sentence hanging.

"Don't they remind you of that brat of the king's?" Delior finally burst out. "The one they say is a smart one? I don't like him."

"Prince Nagi?" said Orgestes, who had met that prince on more than one occasion-and who had no liking to lay on the prince's altar either; that son of the king's, he suspected, was very hard to like, never mind love. "Not really. Prince Nagi's are a very pale pink and a little blind-looking. The General Fujino's are much more vivid. And I should think her eyes never look blind, if you know what I mean."

"Either way, a memorable woman," said Delior, drawing an emphatic hum of agreement from Athain. "So very tall too, and what a figure! The other woman, the one she said was her cousin, was another interesting character. Such hair on that head! I thought at first she was like Prince Nagi, but she wasn't at all. Not as colourless, somehow. And her face was as ravishing as the general's."

"I actually preferred," Entei said quietly, "the face of the general's mistress."

The others were stunned into silence.

"Who?" Delior demanded when he recovered. "What do you mean her mistress? Well, I suppose I should have known she'd swing that way."

"She's an army general," Athain said to him. "Of course she'd swing that way."

"That's true. Still, who's the mistress?"

Entei smiled at them from under his beard and tapped the table with a finger: "She's the other face in the trio of lookers from earlier, obviously."

They continued to stare at him.

"The Otomeian princess?" Orgestes whispered.

"Oh!" said Delior with a snap of the fingers. "I was about to get to her! That terribly austere girl with the raven hair."

"So she's Fujino's mistress?" Athain asked their king.

"I think so," said Entei.

"But how would you know that?" the baroness said. "No one said anything earlier."

"If you look closely enough, you won't need to listen," was his response. "I'm not sure of it yet, but I think a few enquiries tomorrow will tell you that I'm right. That young woman is in bed with the general."

"Intrigue already!" said Delior with an animated laugh. "I admit I prefer women who are quicker to smile, but there's something to be said for beauties of that Otomeian's type as well-if she's indeed Otomeian."

Orgestes grinned naughtily at his comrade again: he found the younger man's verve for the topic amusing.

"That type?" he asked.

"Yes," Delior said with authority. "There's a unique refinement that can come with that sort of austerity, my dear fellow."

Athain frowned up at the rafters: "What was her title again, poley-what?"

Entei blew through his nose to get their attention.

"I wonder that none of you catch on to it yet," he said, looking very wry. "There is a point to me bringing up her likely mistress." At their blank looks, he said slowly: "It might turn out useful if indeed the Otomeian is General Fujino's mistress. Or should I say, if indeed *an* Otomeian is General Fujino's mistress."

It was Delior who voiced the answer first.

"Oh, I see!" he said. "It means she wouldn't scorn to take a foreign lover."

"So I hope," said the older man.

"Does that mean you hope to slip her a new mistress from within our ranks?"

Entei tipped his head to the side as if to say it was a thought.

"Not to be negative," said Athain in her mild voice, "but I don't think that's very easily done. She doesn't seem the type to take on just any beautiful woman presented to her, the general, and besides... well... we all saw that Otomeian, didn't we?"

"I know," Entei said ruefully. "Even if General Fujino were the type, we'd have a lot of looking to do to get someone of that calibre, you mean. Even then, short of getting a professional seductress, who can really compel someone to be attracted to them?"

Athain looked helpless.

"I know," Entei said again. "It's not even as though we know she'd take someone in the unlikely event we find someone comparable. It was just a thought. Given that Hime-which means that woman, at the moment-is going to be our new master, it seems wise to pursue every avenue that could give us leverage in our dealings with her. Even something as ridiculous as trying to see if we could slip her a second mistress is justified, given how much of our future she holds in her hands."

He gave the other three a look they all knew. It was the same look he had worn when first he had come to them with his plans of betrayal.

"I still stand by this being the right decision," he said. "I don't even feel worried about whatever battle she's planning against Terrigos, though I see some of you are. This *is* a right decision! But even right decisions come with dangers, and we all knew that coming here."

The others sobered at the reminder. It was a colossal shift in life that they had just brokered and sealed over food and drink earlier. Even if it was now an inevitable choice for survival, it was nevertheless an act that would eradicate some of the realities of the present. One of which would be their indifference to the edicts and desires of a foreign nation.

To be sure, their old masters had subjected them to sometimes foreign rules as well: orders whose origins were bound to faraway places like the capital, or to social and dynastic battles that did not really involve western life all that deeply. But these rulers had still been nearer than the Himeans. They were also rulers who had been more obsessed with themselves than their subjects, which meant that aside from levies of food, tax, and manpower, their policy had been to leave western society and culture alone as long as its politics went their way.

Himeans were different.

Everyone knew Himeans made for different masters because they meddled into parts of life most other masters would not touch. They seeded colonies in new places and were famous for making "little Himes" out of their provinces; their culture and ways of life spread

through lands almost like an infection. And while they could coexist peacefully with other peoples, they made sure it was under their own terms.

They Himean way was to excise whatever it found noxious for whatever reason. Take human sacrifice, in the Mentulaean case. It did not matter whether or not it affected them-for no Himeans had ever been used for ritual sacrifice by the empire's religious leaders. For that matter, no Himean immediately expected such a fate for himself. All that mattered was that Himeans took interest in it, so Himeans meddled. And Himeans took interest in everything.

No surprise that the druids of the realm were united in opposing their presence. Himeans demanded too many concessions that would touch upon the old ways. Himeans also brought an entirely new religion to the land, invaded the spiritual territories of their old gods with their southern ones. They were even unapologetically political in their approach to religion, their faith's curators being senators and sometimes generals. All of this made them a colossal danger to any native creed.

The druidic opposition to the invaders would have counted for more in the old days. But the druids' faction had already lost a great deal of its old ascendancy, which had seen them consulted for every matter of state in the past. Now, they were mostly just sops to those who cared for ritual: the kings' tightening grips on power had weakened their force.

They were not completely dismissible even so. Factions remained loyal to them and the old traditions, factions Entei himself had turned away from and even slain at Massae. It had not been very difficult for him to do this, as he was not a religious man. The druids were custodians of the realm's spiritual health, true, but he did not think that meant they had a right to decide matters best left to those who better understood governance. For a nation's spirit-or a man's-was the air bit of it, the part that soared and flew free. What had that bit to do with the fleshly part labouring on and besmirched by the earth?

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Shizuru chose her path as always with a mind towards avoiding



deception. She who wielded it so often herself was perpetually wary of others turning the same tool on her, which explained the route she made the army march as they moved nearer the enemy capital.

The Berentum road was one that traversed mostly countryside. It yielded few items of topographical interest to break up a wide and flat landscape. There were no mountains, few rivers, barely any large woods or vales near the path. It meant that Shizuru had few platforms to use to her advantage if they were attacked, but the enemy in turn had few nooks to use in laying an ambush.

The Fujino Army had set off from Lasandre as soon as the Firensians confirmed reception of their message by Entei's daughter. The senior legate took over Lasandre upon Shizuru's exit, and waited there for two of the legions coming from the River Holmys.

The army by the Holmys was returning because it had already achieved its purpose, preventing the Mentulae in the Northern Frontier from crossing the river while it had been fordable. But this late in summer, that great river did the job all on its own, engorged as it was with the melts finally trickling into its headwaters near the northern mountains. So the legions by the Holmys were finally able to pull out, half going with the legate Ushida to Shizuma's position. The other half were commanded by the legate Shohei, headed into the heart of the empire and towards the general. She very much doubted they would reach her or Berentum in time to help against Terrigos, but she did not feel that she needed them to win so it did not worry her.

She was confident as ever even though she carried only two legions: ten thousand foot, all told. But she also brought with her a larger number of horse than she had used for any battle in the war thus far, thanks to the new cavalry regiments sent in by the Otomeians. Those doughty allies had been mustering with enthusiasm, stung to it by the recent Mentulaean incursions across the border and ever nearer their lands. So it was with pleasure that their polemarch had presented her lover with several new cavalry regiments, all made up of battle-hardened Northern giants on their horses.

The Lupine Division was larger than before at two alae, although over half were still considered recruits by its original members. As for the horsed archers, these had swelled due to Shizuru's explicit request: she now had four alae of these to deploy. The cataphracts made up another two alae, and the light horse three more. The Fujino Army thus carried five thousand and five hundred horse on its march to Berentum.

So many horses might have been hard to feed during such a hot summer had they been elsewhere. But this part of the empire was horse territory, much of it spread or spotted with good grazing watered by small streams and underground tributaries. So Shizuru's progress was not too difficult as she marched towards Terrigos and Berentum, whichever came first.

They ignored nearly every settlement they passed, detouring or stopping only when they found opportunity to seize supplies. None of the small guard forces in the cities they passed accosted them, for the imposing size of the cavalry contingent deterred all comers. Again it worked in Shizuru's favour that she passed through horse territory-for many of the peoples here considered cavalry warriors far superior to infantry ones. In their eyes, only one of the royal armies could possibly have offered resistance to the enormous complement of cavalry travelling with her.

The Fujino Army thus slithered to its destination unimpeded, well aware the enemy was nearer the target and probably reaching it even as they strove to cover the distance. And indeed, the enemy was already sitting on the plains of Berentum when Shizuru's scouts sighted it and were sighted in return.

Straightaway Shizuru knew this would be a different battle from that the foe had thus far offered: Terrigos had not only deployed heavy scout numbers to watch for the Himeans but had kept his troops battle-ready as well. As soon as news of the Himean army's proximity reached him, he sent the order to mobilise. It seemed he had no intention of waiting for the reinforcements he believed coming in from Nysias, nor of letting the enemy settle down first. Aggressive, but not foolish.

It was fortunately still early in the morning, so the Himeans had not

been marching long for the day. Shizuru sent orders out for a shift to defensive marching position. She rode out with the rest of command towards elevated terrain so that they could better see their foe. A gently rising hill was the best they could do, so it took some time before they could appreciate the enemy in its entirety.

It yielded some surprises.

"I don't understand," said one of her legates. "Are they missing most of their chariot or am I blind?"

"No, you see what we all do," Shizuru said, squinting into the distance herself. It was very bright, for the sun was not far from its zenith, and its glint off thousands of armour-clad soldiers was painful to regard steadily. "They have fewer chariot than we expected, unless they are holding some in reserve out of sight. What do the scouts say? They should be hard to hide on these flatlands."

But the scouts only reported what they saw, which was far fewer chariot than had been expected. For their new ally, the King of Firens, had himself warned to expect chariots with the royal armies. He could not have known the number of royal chariots that prior battles had already destroyed. Most of the empire's chariot was in fact gone: that there were none to fill the void was because the king had not yet levied to replace them.

The paucity of chariots still did not represent too great an advantage for the Himeans. Shizuru had worried little about those given the strength of her own cavalry units. Even from a distance, she could see that her cavalry bested the enemy's-a significant difference from the pattern thus far in the war, where her numbers had been constantly lower than the foe's.

Shizuru's estimate from afar was that the foe had a little over half the horse she carried. It was a good estimate: Terrigos had only seven alae to her eleven if the chariot were excluded. However, while she had only a thousand heavy cavalry-the Otomeian cataphracti-the enemy had a thousand and five hundred. The rest of Terrigos's horse was light cavalry, four alae to her three. The chariot added only a little over one ala to the Mentulaeen numbers, so sparse was its attendance.

The infantry was where the Mentulaean figures soared far above the Himean again. Terrigos had twenty-three thousand foot with him, over twice the number in Shizuru's two legions. It was clear she would need to use her superior horse to protect the outnumbered foot in the battle, which was why she had them assume a defensive line from the outset. The heavy infantry formed the main force, the lighter cavalry units protecting their flanks. And leading the way were the cataphracti, like a battering-ram-cum-shield in front of the line.

But the Baron Terrigos was apparently wary of the foe's horse too, and wary of the many strategies that would allow that cavalry superiority to bring about his foot's envelopment. So he deployed his army in much the same formation, with the heavy cavalry spread out over the front and the light cavalry defending the wings.

One look at the enemy's formation and Shizuru dashed off new orders. One legate, Toshi, stared at her in surprise upon hearing her radical changes in positions.

"But General," he cried, "what you want will change the whole plan!"

"Why, yes, *it would*," she said, giving him such a look that he clamped his mouth shut.

The beauty of imposing discipline on soldiers in the drill field, Shizuru had once told her lover, was that it made for an army capable of order even when subjected to sudden command changes. Her troops proved it as the new orders went out, the Himean line reforming along a slightly longer front and losing the cavalry on its flanks. She kept the cataphracti in front of the foot but had the rest of the horse ride ahead now as the new leading force.

"I've a mind for a cavalry battle," she told her mistress before leaving the young woman with some of the other officers. She had ordered the polemarch to stay on the hill with the stationary command, explaining that she herself needed to be nearer the troops in this particular battle: she was, after all, playing it by ear.

"This is my first time to command your horse, Polemarch," she smiled. "I promise to do it justice."

"Triumph and return," was the other woman's response, acquiescing to her demand for a 'kiss of courage'. "Anything else would be unjust."

And though the Otomeian's voice trembled faintly on the last word, Shizuru was kind enough to pretend ignorance.

She rode out to actually join the leading forces, intending to direct as much of this cavalry sally as she could herself. First she had all the free cavalry-which meant all but the cataphracti-charge towards the enemy line. But she had it bear gradually to its left as it galloped, intending to hit the foe's right flank. Behind the charge, the cataphracti and Himean infantry trundled on, a steadily approaching threat to the near-matching rows of the enemy's main force.

But the Mentulaean commander was no fool: he saw the danger as it developed. His cavalry was smaller and he had even been obliged to split it in half just to protect his line from pincer strategies. Or he had split it *almost* in half, as he had reinforced the two alae on his left flank with the ala of chariots.

So the weaker of his two cavalry flanks was the chariotless right. As compensation, he deepened the infantry wing on that side. Hence he had a fairly solid force that he could trust to resist encircling strategies by the numerous Himean horse.

But now what he was seeing said that the Himean commander would not bother splitting her horse for reserve or complex manoeuvre: they were going to slam into one of his sides en masse instead, in a belligerently dedicated attempt to crush one of his flanks.

As with everything else in warfare, the move was a wager. But given the disparity in cavalry numbers, it was a good wager for the Himeans to make. So Terrigos had to respond with a countering wager of his own to prevent theirs paying off.

The choices ticked off in his head with their benefits and drawbacks. Old army veteran that he was, it took him only a second to decide. The amount of information he actually processed, though, was more than might have been expected from that time.

If he moved his heavy cavalry to reinforce the imperilled right, he would be exposing his whole infantry line to the incoming foe. Not least to the imposing cataphracts in front of the enemy foot and which could try to make a dash at him.

If he did nothing and braved the assault by simply preparing the men for the attack, that swarm of Himean horse would still hammer into his right flank with shocking strength. They could annihilate half his light cavalry in one blow and devastate the exposed foot on that side before it could rally again. What was to prevent the panic from spreading all the way to the left at such a blow then?

If he detached all the cavalry and chariot from his flanks to engage theirs in a floating battle, he would spare his foot damage since it was large enough to meet theirs by itself without worry. But then that would mean almost certain annihilation for the light cavalry, which was outnumbered two-to-one. Unless the enemy horse was miraculously delayed in its assault too, his horse would not even be able to present a force of two-to-one against theirs upon contact. The cavalry from the left would still have to cross the entire length of the line to get there, so it would have to straggle into the fray long after the right had already joined battle. Add the fact that having his horse fight as a floating force would deprive it of infantry support. If his light cavalry perished, he would not be able to protect the infantry with just the heavy cavalry... so the outcome of this option would still end up being a stage for envelopment.

His final decision was of sufficient flexibility to show his skill as a military leader. He tore off his left flank's horse to rededicate to the right, which he kept where it was.

In order not to impede his centre's progress or make the transferring horse from the left vulnerable to attack, he made it go behind his lines instead of before them. Thus it sped safely and swiftly behind the Mentulaean army's rear, its purpose to aid its fellows on the right from the impending blow.

It was this move that led to the most incredible series of tactical responses he had ever seen spontaneously formed in a battle.

Shizuru was leading the horse herself, as she had promised her

mistress before joining the fray. As soon as she saw the enemy's defensive manoeuvre, she slowed the cavalry to change orders yet again.

"Princess Alyssa, take command of this group," she yelled, splitting her horse into halves even as the enemy strove to recombine its own. "Turn around and cross behind our lines-the way his did. I want you to head for his left. I shall keep heading for his right."

Alyssa tossed her golden head.

"I understand," she said. "You want me to attack his left flank now that it has no cavalry to protect it."

"No, in fact."

She threw out the rest of her instructions in shouts to the Otomeians, who listened to the foreigner in amazement. Many of them already knew her mettle as a commander but had not honestly expected her to be capable of leading cavalry as well. Once she had delivered her orders to them, those selected to go with Alyssa peeled away. This left the general with half of the horse she had been leading before. She had kept the Lupine Division for herself, of course, and used it now to spearhead her new assault.

"We still ride to the enemy's right," she directed. "And then we ride a little further!"

She resumed the charge and swung their direction wide-so wide, in fact, that it soon became clear she had no intention of engaging the horse on Terrigos's right flank at all.

She was trying to go beyond it instead.

"Damn it," said the watching Terrigos, worrying his lip as he saw the way the two halves of her horse were going. "They *are* going for envelopment!"

Again he showed he was not the sort of commander who was paralysed whenever an enemy sally threatened his plans. He ordered his right wing to extend, stretching out so that the horse trying to pass it would not be able to reach the end before being

compelled into engagement. Even his heavy cavalry fronting that side joined the extension, the front line presenting a still orderly-if more stretched-out-formation to the Himean advance.

The movements were so efficiently done that Terrigos barked out a laugh of triumph, knowing for certain that he had thwarted his foe's attempt. The enemy horse would not pass his right flank and would be forced to fight his own horse there now. And because it had split itself in its bid at a pincer manoeuvre, he now had less of the enemy horse to fight... while at the same time having more of his own horse to defend the right flank since the cavalry coming from the left had arrived.

And then, just as it seemed the two cavalry forces would finally clash, the enemy commander threw Terrigos another shock.

She changed direction again and swung her horse inwards. Instead of an outwards diagonal chasing the extending flank, the Himean horse drew a harsh slash into the stretching Mentulaean line, piercing it with the surprise of an arrow altering target midflight.

The Mentulaean horse was hard-put to follow, try though it did to go after the turn once it realised what was happening. For one thing it was still in the middle of riding in the opposite direction, redeploying as ordered to avoid being outflanked. For another the recently-arrived horse from the left were also still finding their places amidst the rapid changes of formation. So Shizuru's lightning charge into the Mentulaean line was uncontested by the cavalry forces she had originally set out to face-and the unprepared foot and heavy cavalry she actually met fared badly against the unexpected attack.

Shizuru's horse hacked into the foe's right wing and it flapped brokenly in the aftermath. Terrigos's cavalry leaders were quick, however, and their retort along with the depth of the Mentulaean foot on the right spared that part of that army from complete separation.

Until the other half of the Himean horse materialised, anyway.

Shizuru had sent these to the Mentulaean left earlier, but not to attack the temptingly unprotected left flank. Rather, she used the absence of enemy cavalry on that side to afford them an easy



passage past that flank and around the enemy. They had been riding around and behind the Mentulaeen army, in effect, as Shizuru's half of the horse had been threatening it from the front. Not too long after her own hack into the Mentulaeen line, it was able to follow the last part of her orders: it turned suddenly inwards as well and drove into the enemy foot, instinctively going for the same point she had attacked but from behind instead.

And even as the Mentulaeen force floundered from the second blow, its crippled right wing finally snapping off, its front found itself dealing with a new source of pressure: the Himean *pila*.

While the cavalry faceoff at the Mentulaeen flank had been taking place, the two armies' main forces had been getting closer to each other. The cataphracti had been leaving the Himean front slowly the entire time, gradually trundling away from it during the advance. That was because it had been shifting into squadron formation directly opposite the now-horseless Mentulaeen left flank. To which it then rode at its heavy and steady pace, its officers drawn to that weakness like moths to a flame.

Of course, this had left the Himean legionaries open and vulnerable to a charge from Terrigos's remaining horse-which were perhaps the Mentulae's only hope at that point. If Terrigos could ride down the Himean foot with this heavy cavalry first, he could save what remained of the infantry by having it follow in the heavy cavalry's wake. The right flank and part of the wing on that side were nigh-hopeless now and he knew they were in too much disarray to save. So he had to get the still-intact left and centre away from the enemy horse, which was steadily outflanking him. He could do it if his heavy cavalry broke the Himean foot-which would also be demolished in the process.

He ordered the heavy cavalry to charge.

As Shizuru would explain to her mistress after the battle, Terrigos had a miscalculation in this strategy. While heavy cavalry could indeed overpower infantry on plains like the one they fought on, it was significantly harder to do so when the infantry concerned was prepared for the attack. There were ten thousand legionaries in the Himean army that day. Each of those legionaries was equipped with

two *pila* . That meant that the remaining three alae of Mentulaean horse-one thousand five hundred armoured horsemen-had to suffer nearly twenty thousand javelins as they charged.

Now a Himean *pilum* was none too intimidating a weapon if one focused only on the size of its head: tiny and pyramidal, a thumb-sized arrowtip attached to a fragile-looking shank. Mentulaean javelins were more fearsome-looking, had larger and longer tips with sharp edges.

But like most heavy javelins, a *pilum* was in fact capable of going through shields and armour. Indeed, it had remarkable piercing power, as its small and dart-like head offered a smaller point and less resistance. It was why *pila* were used to soften up enemy ranks before the legionaries waded in with their swords. *Pila* would not cause devastation if the enemy was very heavily armoured, but they still did enough good to make them standard issue for Himean legions.

That they did more than good in the Fujino Army's case that day was due to Terrigos's own orders.

Heavy cavalry typically did not accelerate: it plodded along easily and relied on sheer strength and sturdiness. In a bid to cover the last few metres between the enemy and himself, however, Terrigos had his heavy cavalry accelerate towards the now open Himean front. It should have delivered a frightful shock to the Himean legionaries, had it worked. But the Mentulaean heavy cavalry's speed combined with the speed of the *pila* thrown to meet them saw the Himean javelins doing more damage than usual: it was like the intensified damage a man caused by lunging in to meet a punch.

Far more of the heavy cavalry fell in that charge than either side had expected. The cavalry's charge had also made it harder for them to keep up their shields-which often became impossible to wield properly once there were several *pila* bristling on it. So what should have been an overwhelming charge into enemy ranks turned into a debacle for the Mentulaean horse.

And now the Himean horse was redeploying again, archers circling the Mentulaean foot in harassment. There was nothing left for the

Mentulaeans but to fight, and fight on until there was a victor.

The outcome had been clear the moment the Mentulaean heavy cavalry went down, Terrigos told Shizuru later after being seized by her Otomeians. The two commanders actually met each other during the melee and nearly exchanged blows. That they had not was due to several of the Lupine troopers forcibly getting between them and slashing the enemy general's steed to death. One even struck the animal so powerfully on its nose that he stove in the bone and crumpled its face. The maimed beast fell and so did its rider, who was then captured and borne away.

In the aftermath, Shizuru managed to reflect on this and realised she had been watched over on purpose: whether by outright command of their polemarch or instinctual understanding of that Otomeian's wishes she knew not. Either way she was pleased with her allies' dedication as well as their performance all throughout the battle. And they lifted their bloody swords and scythes to her to signal an equal approbation once the battle was decided, voices raised with the legions to celebrate their commander.

They won the battle only through her dynamic and inspired method of command, so much did all the officers know. Even the Princess Alyssa, looking upon her countrymen roaring in worship of a foreign general. She was one of the few who were silent, and perhaps the only one silent out of reasons other than awe. Not that she felt no awe for her cousin's lover, whose responsive leadership during the battle had impressed even her. The woman was inspired by the very gods of war, so much was certain. But Alyssa still felt uncomfortable being dazzled by someone else's achievements, and her discomfort was what kept her tongue in check.

As for the nucleus of all this praise, she was riding past the men and searching for someone in particular. She found that someone coming to meet her with some officers as they came down from their hill to share in the victory.

She pulled her steed into a vicious stop and leapt off it to bear down on the woman she had been seeking. Cheeks flushed and hot, happy beyond caring, she dragged the Otomeian off her mount and crushed the girl's lips to hers, wasting no time in breaking them

apart with her tongue and her teeth.

The Princess Natsuki, dumbfounded, barely even put up a fight in her shock.

This was something new for both of them. Although they were free enough of brief affections in public, this was something they had never shown others before: it was a kiss of the sort Shizuru gave only when no other could see, the sort of kiss that they shared only behind the modesty of closed doors. Several officers thus stared at the display with stunned expressions, but the soldiers, drunk on their own elation and the victory, threw up a cheer at the sight. When it was finished they returned to their own celebrations and the task of stripping the dead.

Their commander did not let go of her lover once it was over and the officers had moved away to give them their privacy. Her hand still held onto the dark tail of hair after the kiss, her lips pressed against the heat of her lover's excitement and shame.

"Find Hermias," she whispered urgently. "Settle our quarters. I want a bath in two hours. Maybe less."

"But - but I must see to the auxiliary too, Shizuru."

"And dinner. I want it set when I get back, and you there. You see to it."

"But I-"

"Others will do that. Now do as I say."

"But I must-"

"*Delegate, Polemarch!*" Shizuru told her, sounding as though she would bite the other's cheek. The soldiers around them were still roaring at each other happily, and only Natsuki could hear the harshness of her words. "Put that authority to good use! I'm your general and I am telling you I want my quarters settled. I want you in those quarters when I return. Do that or Jupiter help me I shall have you wherever I find you later, Princess, even if it has to be in front of your cousin! Now go and get to it."

She pulled away from the red-faced woman and left her with a final glare: "Two hours, my tent!"

And when she showed up in her tent, two hours later as stated, she found a place in perfect order as well as a beautiful woman ready to box her in the ear.

She made a point of ignoring the Otomeian's homicidal glower, however, and simply walked past her.

"So you *can* follow orders," was what she said as she bent over a basin, there for her to wash her hands and face. "I was beginning to wonder if you were the only insubordinate Otomeian in my camp, my love."

Raising an eyebrow at the other's purple expression, she said, "It's all right, I told the servants to go away. You may scream at me if you like."

"Your love!" the other exploded, so angry that her whole body shook. "Huh-huh-how can you?"

Shizuru started stripping off her clothes, seemingly unaffected by the tempest she had roused. She had already divested herself of her armour in the command tent with the other officers, so she was clad only in the tunic and breeches all of them wore under the metal and leather. Her boots were already off, having been doffed upon entry to the tent. She shed all her clothing until she was naked and stalked to a table with various soldierly effects.

"Angry with me, are you?" she said to her lover. "Well, I congratulate you for at least holding it in until we were alone. Very thoughtful, *meum mel*, very politic. At least I know now that your pride does not outstrip your wisdom."

Natsuki was suddenly on her feet, fingers white on her cane.

"You-you should not speak to me as you have!" the girl spat out. "Yuh-huh-how could you, Shizuru?!"

Finally finding what she wanted, Shizuru took it from the table. She advanced upon her mistress with the thing in one hand and Natsuki

attempted to retreat in response. But Shizuru caught her by the sleeve of her dress and slipped the knife at her collar and under the garment. Down came the knife until the dress was rent, all the way to the hem of the skirt. After which it seemed only natural to push the ruined cloth in a heap to the floor.

"The truth is that I can speak to you as I did earlier, even though I usually do not," she said with a look that stopped the Otomeian's protest at such rude treatment. She threw the knife away, not even looking to see where it would land. "You were being difficult earlier, *mea vita*, and I all I wanted was to revel in my victory with you . Instead, you kept coming up with reasons not to do what I asked. Technically, I was not asking, however. You seem to forget I am still your commander. That means I can speak to you any way I wish."

She lifted the nude girl and dropped her onto the bed so that she bounced.

"I can do to you anything I want."

She undid the straps on the girl's leg and threw the prosthetic to the floor.

"The question is, what can *you* do about it?" she asked, smirking at her furious lover.

Natsuki reached up and revenged herself with her mouth.

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"Was it necessary," Shizuru moaned that night, "to bite and claw at me like that? Some of these shall sting later, Natsuki, I am certain of it!"

She peered at the upraised tracks on her arms, knowing the ones on her back were worse. She reached around to feel them and inspected her fingers, relieved that they did not come back with blood. But it still stung terribly and she could feel the bruise on her shoulder where the girl had bitten her.

Out came another complaint: "The battle gives me nary a scratch yet I go to my bed and nearly get torn to ribbons."

The other tried to get up but only managed to flop to one side. Shizuru glanced at her and smirked in triumph, perhaps a little childishly.

"You deserved it for being unkind," the prone girl finally muttered.

"You thought me kind enough when I was inside you."

She threw an arm up to block the pillow in advance.

"Oh, come," she said when the girl finally gave up trying to batter her to death. "It was mostly in play, love, surely you knew that. I was only playing, *mea vita* !"

The Otomeian dropped her head to the bed again and shut her eyes. The tears from earlier were still in them, and they rolled off the sides of her face. Shizuru watched them dribble onto the sheets, remembering how tears had dribbled out of another part of the girl earlier before she even touched her.

*She would protest*, she thought then, *even at the indignities that set her on fire.*

"Shizuru," Natsuki said, sounding confused and curious. "You play at being so *harsh* ?"

"Well, a part of it was fuelled by an honest feeling, I admit. We had not slept together in a while," Shizuru confessed. "I was getting frustrated, I suppose the word would be for it."

Natsuki's eyes shot open again.

"Was it on purpose?" she asked. "That we did not-on the march?"

"Of course it was on purpose," Shizuru scowled, disbelieving. "I hardly wanted to tire you out so much in the nights that you would find it impossible to march by daylight. So grant me some credit, please."

Natsuki scowled back.

"You did not even want me to come," she accused. "You tried to

make me go back. Tuh-to the Atinu camp."

"I know," was the reply. "But I was obviously unsuccessful in my attempt to keep you back there. It was not as though I could have done anything else but keep you healthy enough to manage the march once we began."

She looked to the end of the bed where her feet lay and realised she had not even removed her socks when they began. One was still on- and gods knew where the other was by now. She sat up to remove the remaining sock.

"I am very glad you are here now, of course," she said to her mistress. "But I still do think I was right to have insisted you stay back, at least for your safety." A quiet laugh. "Much good my insistence did, though."

"Hahh... you can do what you like to me, you claimed?" Natsuki taunted, curling up around the pillow she had used as a weapon moments ago. "A false claim now, no? What do you call it-a 'bluff'?"

"Remind me again how you persuaded me to let you come along, Princess?" Shizuru sighed.

The retort came as she dropped her sock to the floor.

"I thought you wanted to forget."

*Why would I want that*, Shizuru wondered. She would rather remember the smile that had been on Natsuki's mouth when she had ordered the girl back to the Atinu camp instead of joining the march to Berentum. She had told Natsuki it was not a point up for negotiation. It had been worth remembering, that unique amazement and dismay, when the girl had responded by asking suggestively if Shizuru still wished to marry her.

"I cannot believe," Shizuru said now, "that I was coerced in such a manner. By you, of all people! I should have you tried in the Extortion Courts of Hime."

"If you ever please me enough to get me to Hime."



Shizuru looked over her shoulder.

"Careful with the cheek, Princess," she warned, "or I might please you enough to shock even the people sleeping three tents away."

Natsuki hissed that she was a shameless woman.

"You like it." A chuckle. "Besides, if the ones two tents away did not complain earlier, why should those further off?"

She got up and went to fetch herself some water. She was already heading back with a refilled cup when the girl sat up suddenly and grasped at the stump of her leg.

"What is it?" she demanded, splashing the water in her haste to return. "What happened?"

Natsuki was still holding onto her stump, but her expression was not the one Shizuru expected. The look on her face was not of pain or discomfort, but one of amusement.

Shizuru knelt beside her.

"An itch," came Natsuki's voice.

"An itch?"

"Yes." The eyes she turned to Shizuru were still filled with peculiar laughter. "I did not tell you before when first it happened, Shizuru. I thought I - oh, I thought it a dream! But I see now it is no dream. Or it is a dream of my flesh, not myself."

"What, Natsuki?" Shizuru asked, endeavouring make sense of what was being revealed to her. "What happened? I do not understand."

"My foot," the other said. "It itched. As just now."

She finally released her stump and even laughed.

"The foot that is gone," she said for clarification.

Shizuru looked at her and then at the stump, as though seeking the

foot that itched but was not. She saw nothing, of course, but a faint shiver did run up her spine for an instant. It terminated in a crawling feeling around her jaw.

"You mean," she said slowly, trying to establish exactly what Natsuki was saying, "that you felt an itch in the foot that is no longer there?"

"Yes," the other grinned. "I am sure I do not imagine it, Shizuru. I think I do not. I was not even thinking of that foot when it happened. But I felt it! It was so strong an itch." She shook her head wonderingly at her own body's strangeness. "Did you see? I tried to scratch it before I remembered there was nothing to scratch."

Shizuru said nothing, wary of the phenomenon. Could Natsuki *have* been imagining things? And if she had been, what of it? Was this a premonition of something else? On and on the questions went, piling up within her so quickly that she could barely keep the concern from showing on her face-and indeed, the girl she was facing saw them and tried to put a stop to her fears with a laugh.

"My general should not be so fearful," the Otomeian said in good humour, her lithe hands cupping Shizuru's face. "It was an itch, Shizuru, not a pain. I know my body-it is not a bad thing. Only, I think, it is a memory."

"A memory, Natsuki?"

"Of a time when I had still my foot," she explained. "I think my body remembers... and sometimes forgets that it is no longer here. It is only a memory. It cannot hurt my body."

"I suppose not." *But can it not hurt your spirit?*

"Still," Natsuki said with a smirk, "I know you will worry until I tell the doctors of it, so I will tell them tomorrow. I do not think it is anything bad. I feel nothing in it that is bad. But I will tell them for you."

Shizuru eyed her with great tenderness, wondering at the amount of strength a single ( *spare and crippled* ) body could possess. Who else but Natsuki could laugh so easily at a reminder of this sort, a teasing remembrance of the time when she had been whole enough

to run rings around even the best of her warriors? For Natsuki's laugh had been genuine: she who knew the girl's laughs like no other had seen that. She had heard it in the laugh, which held none of the bitterness of those still unable to accept a new reality.

Such strength in that laugh. A laugh like the one she had given when those cretins had insulted her from the tower in Lasandre.

She grit her teeth at the reminder of that incident, herself furious over it even if her lover was not. It had been at noon of that first day in Lasandre, noon of the first day the diehards spent in their tower. Shizuru and some of her officers had come to give instructions to the sentries assigned to the location. Eventually Natsuki had come too, to see what was going on.

Upon arriving, however, the polemarch had been obliged to find a seat so as to remove and replace her wooden leg. She had struggled while walking over to the location, and when she removed it they saw that one of its straps had been damaged. It had not seemed to trouble the girl a whit to have to remove the false limb in public-her focus had been more on figuring out why it seemed to feel more and more uncomfortable each step-and she had even managed a jest to Shizuru and her officers present that at least it had not popped off on the way and horrified onlookers. Not that any of the onlookers at the place had acted remotely horrified with what happened. Everyone present had behaved very graciously... with the exception of the Mentulaeans looking down on the scene.

Such had been the popular feeling then that Shizuru was not the only one livid when the Diehards yelled to "send the cripple up" and claim their tower.

"Shizuru. Shizuru!" Natsuki's voice wrenched her from the memory. "You must stop worrying."

"Who said I was worrying? I was simply being quiet."

"You are quiet when you worry." The Otomeian shook her head. "Worrying so much, it is not marriageable."

The tease worked: Shizuru was diverted.

"Marry me and I shall prove you wrong," she said.

"Marrying you *would* prove me wrong."

"And would you rather be right than happy?"

Natsuki's laugh soared out and Shizuru's heart lightened again.

"That is terrible logic," Natsuki scolded. "You should be ashamed."

She pressed her lips softly to Shizuru's cheek and asked if they should not bathe yet. Shizuru responded by slipping an arm under her lover's thighs, the other behind her back. They moved to the bath that had been set out for them much earlier, now no longer steaming but still warm. Both of them had performed minor ablutions like washing their faces and hands after leaving the battlefield, but that did not suffice for a true bath, which Shizuru always insisted on them giving each other when given opportunity.

"Yet," the ever-practical Natsuki said while being settled on a stool by the tub, "our baths would be quicker if our servants helped."

Shizuru aped horror.

"You want me to rush through an opportunity to molest you under pretence of innocence?" she said. "What a fool idea!"

"*You* are a fool idea," Natsuki snapped, cheeks pinking. "But, Shizuru..."

She was silent long enough to compel Shizuru to prompt her to continue.

"I am going to speak... hmm... seriously about something, but it will be in hypothesis," the Otomeian eventually said. Her noble brow was marred with a line, though not one of displeasure: whatever she had to say, Shizuru decided, probably meant a great deal to her. "I do not say anything for certain in what I say next, is what I mean, but it is something I wish tuh-tuh-to consider."

"Go on," Shizuru said easily, already smoothing oil over her lover's skin.

"I was thinking."

She could not resist: "You do that often."

"Of what would happen if we married," Natsuki clarified.

Shizuru hummed and smiled.

"If we marry," Natsuki continued. "Wuh-where would we live?"

"That depends on myriad circumstances," Shizuru answered, wondering what had brought this on and what it meant. Even if the girl said not to take it as confirmation of anything, it still meant something that she wished to discuss it. "If I still have a mandate here then we shall have to live here during that time, for instance. And exactly where here shall depend on the state of my province, the empire by then."

"Where would we live permanently, is what I meant."

Shizuru stopped in the act of rubbing oil over the girl's shoulders.

"Well, I thought it would have been obvious," she said. "Since I also already have a house there, why not Hime? Were you expecting something else?"

"No." A beat. "No, not *no* . But not yes either."

Now Shizuru frowned. "Why, what could be the alternative? Surely not Otomeia?"

Natsuki smiled at this.

"*Surely not*," she mimicked in good humour. "I would not force Otomeia on you, Shizuru."

"Then what is the alternative you were considering? For I would hate to force Hime on you, Natsuki."

Natsuki took her time thinking on how to phrase it. As she did, Shizuru started working on her with the strigil.

"It is only a possibility to - to explore," the Otomeian eventually said. "I do think you should live in your city. It is needed for your politics. I know this. But what perhaps if I stayed out of the city?"

"And thus keep yourself out of the public eye as much as possible?" Shizuru guessed. She sobered all of a sudden as a thought came to her. "Tell me honestly, my love. Do you fear it?"

Natsuki appeared torn.

"Not for me," she admitted painfully. "I am not-Shizuru, I do not say this again to vex you. I am only thinking on the best - the best way, perhaps, or execution for what you desire. If we are married, I mean, it is something to think on, no?"

"I understand," the other replied. "But if we were to live apart, it might worsen rather than improve matters. For it would make you appear a kept mistress more than a wife, do you not think so? And I already told you how I feel about that. Besides, if indeed you consented to be adopted by my best friend, I think she might have something to say as well about you portraying such an image by your absence. For why bother having adopted you then?"

Natsuki's brows lifted as she saw the sense of the rebuttal.

"Besides, it would be too much trouble, Natsuki," Shizuru said frankly. "I do not want to have to travel out of the city each time I wish to see my wife. What if I wish to dine with you immediately after a long day of senatorial work? Talk with you? Lay with you? Shall I have to restrain myself to taking you only to places in the country if I wish to spend time with you in public? For that would be idea, would it not: to hide you away from a public that might include my opponents back home?"

There was a brief silence as Natsuki thought on her words.

"Now you say this," the Otomeian eventually admitted. "Now... I see that my idea, it is silly."

"Quite silly, I am afraid. I have no intention of marrying a woman whose beauty would be the toast of the city only to hide her away in

some provincial fortress. No, I would rather parade her until my opponents are green with envy. And I would make whoever is not jealous of me jealous *of her* by taking her to the Porticus Margaritaria and buying her enough jewels and silks to sink a ship."

The dark-haired woman was laughing at this comical plan.

"I hope," she said, "that the next thing you do will not be to buy her a ship."

"Well, if she asked it of me..." Shizuru said, laughing too. "Seriously, though, I would like to live in Hime. Both of us, not just me. Is there an objection you have against it that is not motivated by thoughts of protecting me? Because I would understand if so, I know it shall not be easy."

"Shh, I know this too," Natsuki said, cutting her off with a kiss. "Also, Shizuru, it is not as though I do not wish to live in Hime."

And then she added, smirking: "And if I were married, I would not enjoy having to travel so far to see my wife too."

Shizuru grinned and handed her the strigil for her turn.

"I do like the idea of leaving the city every now and then, though," she admitted. "Gods know we Himeans who can afford it often do to escape its less appealing traits. I already have two country villas I use often in provinces near the city, but I daresay I can purchase more if you find a particular part of the country appealing. Or have something built. Yes, I think construction of a new villa would be better. I want you to have a decision in it. I want something partly of my wife's imagining, a new palace not just made for her but wished into being from her dreams, no matter how lofty..."

Natsuki murmured teasingly that she should probably rethink her proposal now, given how quickly future expenses for their union were mounting.

"I'm no beggar," Shizuru shrugged, enjoying the exercise in planning her married life too much to be diverted so easily. "Yes, I like the idea. A new villa as soon as we return to Fuuka and find a suitable

location. Cumae, probably, though I already have one there. Well, it should make for a fine holiday retreat for us, so I daresay we should look along the coastlines if you enjoy a view of the seas. Somewhere cool for the summers. I've no intention of letting you spend a single day of *dies caniculares* in the city, after all."

Natsuki asked if it meant the same thing as it did in the Greek.

"Yes, so it means you shall never celebrate the day of your birth in Hime, *meum mel*. The heat of August is such in Hime that it would kill you. And if we see one of those unfortunate years when it not only swelters but also rains, I would keep you out of the city even to the winter-for I swear there is no more disease-laden air in Hime than that we have during the summer rains. Even I am quick to escape the city at such times. Pater always insisted on it, in fact. He was even more fearful of it than Mater because his own brother's career was destroyed by that one disease-"

She stopped abruptly, realising what she had almost described. The malady that had ended her uncle's career as a promising military man had left him alive in exchange for a shrivelled limb. In others it was the arm it sometimes wasted, but in him it had been the leg. He had surfaced from that mysterious and all-too-common summer sickness a cripple, not unlike Natsuki.

"What was the disease?" Natsuki's low voice asked.

Shizuru glossed over it.

"Let us simply say something unfortunate, especially where his career was concerned," she said. "Anyway, it is just one of the many diseases that rampage through Hime in the wet summers. I would hate to expose you to them. You are not from our land either. The city's doctors always say people from vastly differing climes are often those most vulnerable to a land's native blights."

"Mm, foreigners are often worst-struck by native disease," Natsuki agreed, to her surprise. "What? We have visitors to our lands too."

Shizuru smiled.



"The wise men and women say it is because foreigners have not had enough time to build a resistance to our diseases," she said. "The way people new to the bow hurt their fingers because their skin is not thick enough yet."

"That is a good way to see it," Natsuki replied, still working diligently with the strigil. "My cousin, she has a different view. She says it is the land's prejudice against things alien to it."

Shizuru was sardonic. "What a kind view your cousin does take. This is Alyssa, yes?"

"Yes."

"No doubt she hopes the land will show its prejudice against me next I visit your country."

Natsuki defended her relative: "My cousin is not so mean of attitude."

"No, she is downright charitable," Shizuru said. "At least, sufficiently so to ascribe her own prejudices to the land, anyway."

The younger woman's sigh was telling.

"She does not wish you such ill, Shizuru, I am sure," she said.

"Even if you told her I asked you to marry me and you are considering it?"

That got the Otomeian to stop.

"Then..." she started with reluctance. "But one could understand then, in a way. It is the, um, situation." She leaned forward and said with sudden eagerness, "But what were you saying before? About - about Cumae, I think. I think you have said this place before to me."

Shizuru watched her, amused. She knew very well it was the other woman's poor attempt to change the subject. As she felt very charitable after this day of victories both in the battlefield and in bed, though, she let her lover get away with it and returned to their earlier topic.

"I did," she said. "I remember I told you about my villa in Cumae before. Cumae has some of the most expensive land in Fuuka nowadays since it is the most popular of the prestigious seaside resorts. Of course, I do think it would be wise to get a villa somewhere else-somewhere up and coming-so that we can have a good investment. Some places are going to be turning into the next Cumae soon, and I would like to get something in them before the prices climb."

Natsuki agreed, being someone of sound business sense herself.

"I was thinking of looking into Baiae," Shizuru said. "Right now it is mostly occupied by fishery concerns-excellent oysters from there, Natsuki, you should taste them-but some people are already beginning to build seaside villas there and I want to be among them. Or we could go for even cheaper places like Capri or Herculaneum, which are beautiful enough to merit the faith in that investment. Whatever the case, you can have whatever type of villa you like then, I promise. And the garden of your dreams too to go with it. I have just the man for the job, a brilliant fellow whose green thumb I set to putting up apple trees in my Himean garden."

Natsuki smiled. "So you like apples too!"

"Hmm? Oh, they are all right. I only had them put up for you."

A hand caught at hers almost convulsively and she met Natsuki's wide eyes, halted.

"What?" Natsuki demanded, seeming astonished by what she had just said. "When?"

Shizuru's brows drew together at the strange reaction.

"Ages ago," she said. "When I went back-when I was recalled by Senate. I had it done as soon as I returned." She laughed suddenly as she recalled something. "The funny thing about it is that I could not even see the results! I had to send Shizuma to see for me since I could not cross the boundaries of the city, being that I still had command of my army. She said it was very handsome, though you shall have to ask her for a more precise description yourself. I had

trees instead of mere saplings planted: we should have fruit in the autumns."

She smiled at Natsuki, who only looked at her again as if finally figuring out a puzzle or some piece of it after long effort. Concerned, she asked if something was wrong or she had done something untoward without knowing it.

But the princess denied it.

"No," she said slowly. "You did nothing wrong, Shizuru. Keep talking, please. About... about these places and building villas."

The Himean stared at her closely for a moment more before finally deciding to let it go. She resumed her bathing and continued her talk, detailing other possibilities for their hypothetical property investment and even suggesting a unique marble found only in a special quarry somewhere in Fuuka.

For herself Natsuki was wondering at the woman before her, who made the plans as easily as if she were pitching them into the world without a care. Yet she knew Shizuru planned in earnest, and not idly. If ever she had doubts about it before, the apple trees in the woman's garden had taken care of that-for the planting of those trees said that Shizuru had meant every word she said even back then, when she had spoken eagerly of wanting Natsuki to come with her to Hime when she had been recalled by their Senate. It said she had wanted it still even after being denied it, even after the separation when her ardour for the idea might have been most likely to cool.

And think of that too: she had wanted even then to house Natsuki properly once it finally happened, not in a separate domicile or province like a mistress. She had planted trees for Natsuki in her garden... and she had planned for "autumns" instead of mere "days".

All of this in earnest, even before she had come back to find Natsuki crippled and eternally changed.

This mattered greatly to Natsuki, especially after a certain

conversation with her fellow princess when they had begun marching towards Berentum. Alyssa had been warning Natsuki of the dangers she could face were she to continue her dalliance with the Himean elsewhere after the war, particularly in a specific elsewhere far south and across the sea.

"I'm sure she asked you to come and visit Hime when the time comes for her to leave," Alyssa had guessed, unaware that the truth was even worse than her suspicion. "I would be careful before I agreed to something like that, Princess, much though I know you hanker to see other lands. Even if she does mean the invitation when she gives it, you don't know what your life will be like if you go there. You won't have any of your countrymen if you need help and you will be completely dependent on a woman who can easily forget her promises once she finds other things to occupy her. And you said it yourself, she's a political creature living in the political heart of her world."

The older Otomeian had shrugged with one shoulder and added: "Or maybe she won't care for the promises she made at all, having declared them only in the heat of the moment. She might be doused into cold sensibility once she returns to her proper place. Who knows where your proper place will be then? Some discreet backwater in a foreign country so she can hide you away along with her shame?"

So undeserved had Natsuki felt the portrayal of her Himean lover that she had been goaded into response, telling her cousin that whatever her lover promised, her lover gave. She was a woman of *honour*, she had insisted, as well as someone kind to those she held dear. But the Princess Alyssa had given a response to that as well, lancing a secret fear festering in Natsuki.

"Yes, the other possibility, which is that she is in fact honourable," Alyssa had agreed. "And, more than that, is indeed kind. Because she knows, just as we all know, Natsuki, that some part of what she did contributed to your loss, she just might follow through on every promise she gives you and more. Because she owes it to you as a woman of honour. But you too are a woman of honour, and can you tell me that being treated like that wouldn't torment your pride?"

*Because she would then feel compelled to offer what she offers to me now for honour*, Natsuki thought, so revolted by the mere idea that her brows underwent a contraction. How painful the idea was now that she admitted it! Why should a missing leg and wounded heart buy her everything the whole had been unable to procure? Why would anyone-even someone like her, even someone who loved and wanted and *needed* as strongly as her-accept that which had come at the cost of pity?

But Shizuru had those apple trees planted even before they met again and Natsuki became pitiful.

She had planned for the two of them to live together in her Hime manor even before she proposed actual marriage.

She had made the promise of "autumns" even before there was a lost leg that could guilt her into it.

This was the woman who was now bearing her out of their bath and dabbing at her with a towel to dry her off, chatting happily about even more promises all the while.

"I will look forward to the apples," Natsuki said, cutting into her lover's chatter. "And autumn."

The Himean was arrested when she realised what the other meant.

"Do you mean-are you *serious*, Natsuki?" she demanded, sounding almost embarrassingly breathless. But there was no embarrassment on her face as she stared at Natsuki with that open face, its heartbreaking planes on the verge of vibrating from some great and held-back joy. "Do you mean what I think you do?"

"I do not say yes to marriage yet," Natsuki cautioned. "I must still think on it, if you will allow me. But I say yes to go with you. When the time comes for you to go, I mean."

Shizuru took a deep breath, held it for a moment, then blurted out, "But you *will* stay for good with me? You do not mean you are simply saying yes to a brief visit to Hime once I do have to leave this place?"

"Yes, if you wish it," Natsuki said, smiling. And then she thought of something and surprised even herself with a laugh as she said it: "But you ask this when it is possible I will say yes to us wedding-and then we have no choice but for me to stay, no, as we do not wish to have wives distant from us?"

Shizuru merely stared, for once in her life absolutely speechless.

## Chapter 66

*Good day again. Two things.*

*First, some sketches. Please delete the spaces after the full stops and replace the X below with C-O-M (absent the hyphens). The sketches are the first two on my profile page:*

ethnewinter. deviantart. X

*Second, an answer for someone who sent me a PM of enquiry: you may pronounce the Latin in any way you like, really. As this is a dead language, I suppose the only persons who shall truly take affront if you mangle it are the dead. However, if you are asking for the pronunciation I myself would use, it is Classical (Roman Republican Era) due to the time period I am most often referencing. Hence, **servi poenae** is roughly "ser-wi-po-eh-nai".*

*The "ai" in the phonetic approximation above is not French: read it as the English word "eye". G and C are always hard, as in "dignity" and "cat", respectively. Read **gerae** ("Nonsense!") as something like "gerai" or "kherai", **iuventa** (youth) as "yoowenta" or "yuwenta", **ensor** (the political office) as "kensor", and **Acerrae** (modern-day Acerra) as "akerai".*

*I mention this here only for those who want to look up a reference on it, naturally. It is hardly necessary if you wish to read the story.*

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### Vocabulaire:

**1. Auspices and augurs, the College of Augurs** - augury was a precise science for the Ancient Romans, who believed that it had to be practised by taking the auspices prior to all momentous events, e.g. before battle or upon a youth's ascent to manhood. The augur would observe the flight, calls, or behaviour of birds and then interpret them according to the precise rules of augury set down by tradition. Auspices were thus essentially rituals for taking omens, to

see if a venture boded ill or good fortune. The **College of Augurs** comprised the state augurs (all of whom were senators) and membership in it was a great distinction.

2. **capite censi** (L.) - or **Head Count** ; the classless but most numerous component of Rome's population. They rarely touched politics-save when some demagogue roused them to threaten the other senators, typically doing so by appealing to issues relating to their hunger (like the subsidised state grain or lack thereof).

3. **Cohort** - an army unit composed of 6 centuries. Legions were subdivided into cohorts and cohorts within the legion were numbered according to prestige. The best cohort of the Eleventh Legion would thus be the First Cohort of the Eleventh, the second-best would be the Second Cohort, and so on.

4. **Consular** - a person who has served in the past as a consul of Rome (recall that the consulate is the highest magistracy possible for one to hold).

5. **Cubit** - ancient unit of measurement: the length starting from the end of the middle finger to the elbow.

6. **Division** (in Senate, relating to the Senate) - only a reminder in case some have forgotten it: the Roman Senate would often put proposals to their peers during sessions, and divisions were held as the means of obtaining decisions on those proposals. The Senate would divide according to their votes on the proposal, with some going to the side voting yes and others going to the side voting no.

7. **Forbidden fire and water** - this essentially means exile, usually phrased by the Ancient Romans as a sentence of being "forbidden fire and water within X kilometres of Rome".

8. **Forum**, or **Forum Romanum** (L.) - a **forum** is technically a space in a Roman town wherein the public may gather; the **Forum Romanum** was the centre of Roman political life, and it held such eminent public structures as the Curia Hostilia (Senate House), the Well of the Comitia, the Temple of Saturn (the Treasury of Rome), and the praetors' tribunals.



9. **frigidarium** (L.) - one of the pools composing the usual progression for a Roman bath: the frigidarium would be the coolest pool of those in which a man could soak.

10. **Head Count** - see note for **capite censi** ( L. ).

11. **Inundation of the Nile** - The Nilus (L.) watered the great agricultural plains of Egypt. Its inundations were taken to be indicative of the fortunes of the pharaoh or the gods' pleasure or displeasure with said ruler. Inundations were measured by the cubit [s.v] : instruments metered in that unit of measurement were used to see how high or low the Nile's waters would reach that year. Pharaohs enjoying good and godly fortune saw inundations whose waters reached the preset marks on the measuring instruments that were named the Cubits of Plenty-this meant the Nile would be sufficiently swelled to irrigate all the farms along its length, ensuring a plentiful harvest. Dry years saw the inundations measured at the Cubits of Death, when the waters would stay so low they would barely irrigate. Hence the name "Cubits of Death", for it meant low harvests and starvation.

12. **Lictors** - public servants in Ancient Rome whose presence I have severely diminished in this story. In the tale, I use them as a small group of public servants whom curule officials (magistrates with imperium) in Hime may summon to enforce a command relating to public order.

13. **maiestas** (L.) - a crime of treason against the Republic, often a crime committed in some military capacity. Arguably, the crime for which Takeda Masashi is charged here might be more appropriately classed as **perduellio** (high treason) given that the military loss was of an entire legion. However, as **perduellio** involves further complications (if one follows the procedure established during the time of Rome's kings) as well as a sentence of death for the period I am referencing, I am classing it as **maiestas** instead. Besides, I imagine Traditionalist power has not waned so far yet in the story that they would allow their old ally to be tried for a crime carrying the capital penalty.

14. **medici** (L.) - "doctors", or the legion's medical personnel

15. **Our Sea - mare nostrum** (L.), the Mediterranean Sea.

16. **ovation** (L.) – a victory parade, like the **triumph** [s.v.]. It was considered less prestigious than the triumph, however, as it was granted for lesser military victories, e.g. victories of the Roman army over enemies not representing other states, victories over slaves, victories over patently weaker foes.

17. **pedarii** (L.) - plural of **pedarius** (L.), the "backbencher" senators, who were less illustrious than their peers and accorded no right to speak in meetings.

18. **praedium et pecunia** (L.) - "property and money"

19. **Porta Esquilina** (L.) - the Esquiline Gate, one of the gates of Ancient Rome.

20. **sesterces** or **sestertii** (pl.), **sestertius** (s.) - a common coin in Ancient Roman times, worth a quarter of a **denarius** (it takes about 6250 denarii to make a talent of silver).

21. **Shades** - or **lemures** (L.); these were the shapeless, discontent, and wandering remains of the unhappy dead; it is faintly similar but still not equivalent to the modern concept of the vengeful soul.

22. **triumph** (L.) - victory parade enjoyed by a commander acclaimed "imperator" by his men after a battle; it took place when the commander and his army returned to Rome and would display the booty of the war as well as the captured enemy commanders.

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## **Inter Nos II: Inde Ira et Lacrimae**

*par ethnewinter*

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The Mentulaean capital of Gorgo was a city surrounded by walls and wetland. As with most other Mentulaean cities of note, it sat on higher ground than its environs. North and east of it were fens watered by the rivers Agrius and Lernia. West and south were

mostly plains. Dense settlements interrupted the western side near the city walls and the homesteads; farms and other out-of-city dwellers spread further out and to the south.

"Which explains, of course, why this would be chosen as the capital by the empire," Shizuru told her legates. "Lovely position. Not too easy to take."

"More like impossible," said Shohei, who had recently rejoined her. He had brought the Tenth and Twelfth legions with him along with the legate Zanki, coming down from their post by the River Holmys. They had caught up with Shizuru at Berentum, where the Eighth and Eleventh had fought the forces of Baron Terrigos. Having the Tenth and Twelfth to help with post-battle duties had afforded everyone a faster cleanup and resumption of their journey: the entire army had reached the Mentulaeen capital just as fall was beginning.

"Fens to that side make it impossible to mount attacks," Shohei observed, his brown face betraying enjoyment of the challenge he was discussing. "Those hills over to the west make battle hard-going too-see how some houses stand twice as tall as the others because of the rises and dips? There's only one side from which to attack-the south-and it wouldn't be a picnic from there either. Look at the way the ground slopes down, then goes up again. Right to the walls!"

Indeed, the earth sloped gradually downwards as it approached the city on the only side from which it might be assaulted, such that there was a natural ditch fronting the walls facing the southern plains. The ascent of the earth on the city side of that ditch was steeper too: to an assaulter, the walls might as well be rising straight from the earth as one faced the city. Later the Himeans would learn that the ground dipped so far in that ditch that Gorgo's walls were twice as high without as they were within.

The older senator, Toshi, took in the daunting topography.

"It's astounding," he said. "I can't figure out how anyone could storm it, much less take it. Thank goodness the Firensians are helping us. Otherwise, this might keep us in a siege for a year!"

Their general laughed at this, winking at the Otomeian riding by her

side.

"Hardly a year," she said, which told her legates she thought little of the challenge they found so impressive.

"How would you do it, Fujino-san?" Toshi asked her eagerly. "A lot of siege engines, I guess?"

"I would not say a lot." She turned her face to the low sun, which was well on its way to dipping under the horizon. "But if you are contemplating a strategy that involves bombarding those walls to rubble, Toshi-han, I would advise that you think again. The lay of the land would make positioning enough *catapultae* for the work very difficult; any you do get close enough and on sufficient platforms to cover the range would be at high risk of retaliation. Besides, I can see from here that the walls are proper stone ones. We are approaching the Empire's quarrying grounds, so the masonry is a definite improvement on that we have seen in many of its other cities. I am sure the mortar is better too. Trying to bring down the walls would be a waste of time."

"But how could one take the city otherwise?"

She was unable to give him an answer as their escort reached them at that moment. None other than the queen of the empire- *former queen*, Shizuru amended quickly-rode out to meet the Himean general's party, accompanied only by some other riders whose clothes proclaimed them to be officials or nobles, not soldiers. Still, Shizuru brought the First Cohort of the Eleventh with them for safety while the others laboured on setting up camp outside, overseen by Zanki.

At first she toyed with the idea of commanding her mistress to stay outside as well-again, to err on the side of safety-but she decided against it upon seeing the deadly arch the polemarch's eyebrows were taking. Thus the party Azula led inside the walls included several daos-toting troopers, since the Princess Natsuki's retinue insisted on her having her own accompaniment. There were also noncombatants with them to see to their masters' needs; it was expected that the officers would commandeer more comfortable quarters than their marching tents in the city.

Shizuru rode with Azula of Firens at the head of the group. The former queen of the Mentulaeans had a great resemblance to her father, Shizuru decided, but also seemed to have replaced his impressive vigour with weariness. Entei of Firens had been old, yes, and both whitened and weathered by it. Yet there had been no mistaking the enduring vitality in the man, the fiery ambition still in his intelligent blue gaze.

Azula's eyes were as blue as her father's and, Shizuru guessed, as intelligent. If her blasé reaction to the polemarch's feline attendant was any indication, she held all her father's coolness as well. But under Azula's coolness Shizuru saw no fire still lurking, only the circumspection of a very resourceful but very weary survivor. For some reason the observer's suspicions fell upon the royal marriage. Was being wife to the Mentulaean Emperor so dampening that it had lowered Azula's fire to a barely-perceived ember?

The introductions were over very swiftly. Azula of Firens clearly disliked dithering.

"Those are my men," she told Shizuru as they rode towards the city, her finger pointing to the figures on the battlements and on either side of the gates. She spoke in the same highly recognisable, very lightly inflected Mentulaean variant of Himean the other Firensian nobles had, and Shizuru found it a simple thing to follow her speech.

"I expect you're eager to retire and we prepared lodgings for you in the castle, naturally. But if you don't mind, we should see the people first so they can acknowledge you as their new masters. I sent word for them to gather in the square outside the castle. Most won't show out of fear. Some are boarding up their windows and cowering in closets as we speak. Still, the nosiest will be sure to turn up because they can't resist, and I had my men assure the locals with the most influence and connections in the city that there was something in it for them if they appeared. Their gossip will take care of spreading the word for us afterwards, whatever it is you may want to say."

"Practical," Shizuru said, her grin showing the meaning was complimentary. "How did you manage it, informing them of the surrender? I was told that support of the king was strong here."

Azula nodded, lines carving beside her mouth as its corners turned downwards slightly.

"Yes, there were dissenters, or there would have been. I took care of them early," she said, throwing the younger woman a look that brought Entei to mind again. "I need to point out that I didn't know if you would defeat Terrigos, General Fujino. I had to act while recognising the possibility that you wouldn't win. In that case, revealing my true position would have made my situation invidious indeed, with an army of loyalists outside the walls and a group of the same in the city with me."

Shizuru asked her to continue.

"I summoned all those loyal to me. I informed them of the pact you and my father struck and they pledged their support to it. They also pledged their men for what I wanted to do with the city. But that still didn't provide enough manpower, as you may imagine how few one can trust in this snakepit. I couldn't use the guards Terrigos left behind either-who was to say they wouldn't betray me? The only guards I could trust were those I kept for personal service, the ones who came with me from Firens."

They were almost clear of the ascending slope leading to the city, and nearly at the gates. Shizuru eyed the dip of the land and tried to estimate the height of the walls from her position.

"So we found mercenaries," the former queen was saying. "We hired only non-locals and those who were still new to the city. This minimised the potential of them having prior allegiances strong enough to cause them to betray us. This meant too that we didn't need to inform them of what was happening-all a mercenary asks for is gold and his orders."

"When did you mobilise them?"

"Once the first of your disguised messengers arrived. First we closed down the city. No one could come in, no one could get out."

"How did you prevent the panic?"

"I told them it was for security."

"And they believed it?" Shizuru asked doubtfully. "I can see how denying entry to a city would be accepted by a populace as a measure of security against invaders. But denying exit is a little less orthodox a measure for that, I think."

Azula's answering smile was grim.

"Live under a tyrant and you learn to stop questioning the authorities." She patted the side of her neck gently at Shizuru's look. "All those lopped heads, General Fujino. Their owners weren't the only ones who suffered a serious downgrade in wits from the beheading."

"I see."

"Going back to the story, I started the arrests after that. All those we captured we did so quietly. Those I thought had a chance of being swayed to our side I conferred with. If they agreed to change allegiances to us I confined them to castle. I still didn't want to take any chances, after all. As for those who refused, I sent them to the dungeons along with all the others of note known to be loyal to the emperor. The dungeons are in the basement of the castle, so you can see them yourself should you wish it."

*Ah, the charm of castle dungeons*, Shizuru thought with dry humour. If the talk about beheadings was not enough to show her how different Mentulaean policies were, the talk about dungeons definitely was. Hime had no true dungeons and did not even have a jail. The best it could offer in this regard were the abandoned stone quarries of the *Lautumiae* or the damp little cell called the *Tullianum*. As neither were guarded or equipped with locks, anyone put in them could get out with just a little persistence. Even when guards were set to watch a prisoner, it was usually only for show: sometimes a prisoner simply walked past them and melted into the crowds of the Forum.

"I hope you have not harmed your captives too grievously," she told Azula, who held her gaze. "Or lopped off any heads just yet."

"I'm not Artaxi," the older woman replied with dignity.

The answer puzzled Shizuru.

"Do you mean the Prince Artaxi?" she asked Azula. "Who besieged Argentum?"

"The one you took captive," the other said in affirmation.

"What has he to do with our conversation?"

This time it was Azula who was puzzled, although slightly less so than Shizuru had been.

"I would have thought one of you would have learned of it by now," she said. "Whether from questioning him or just talking to him. It comes out, you know."

"What does?"

"His degeneracy." The Firensian noblewoman sighed deeply, scornfully. "The Prince Artaxi is by far the most hateful of all my husband's children, at least if we go from his pleasures in life. Nothing gets it up for him as quickly, I'm afraid, as the sight of someone being carved alive then made to eat pieces of his skin. I think he enjoys torture of anyone, although they tell me he enjoys it more when the victims are beautiful. Desecration of physical beauty was a particular obsession of his."

As Shizuru loved beauty, she was immediately revolted.

"No," she admitted. "I had not known that. But then, we are hardly about to indulge him in that sort of activity where he is now being held captive."

Azula's head bobbed.

"Anyway, I meant I'm not degenerate enough to enjoy torture for torture's sake," she told Shizuru. "And killing them would achieve nothing, except make you think me either a fool or someone with something to hide. No, they're yours to do with as you like. Whether you kill or torture them I don't mind. Although I imagine you'd prefer



to torture them."

Shizuru's expression transformed into one of frank amusement.

"Do I seem *that* sort of degenerate?" she asked her host, who laughed as well, but rather more briefly.

"No, excuse me," Azula said. "I meant that you might want to do it to get information from them. It's true they're not the ones who'd know as much as you'd like-all those went with my husband when he left the city. Still, one never knows, does one?"

Shizuru agreed, taking in the city now that they were inside it. A lot of it was familiar enough, she thought to herself. Buildings upon buildings pushing up against each other in chaotic heaps; dirty and lightless alleys leading off from the main street; the smell of smoke and something rotting and the peculiar scent that one only finds in big cities, the scent of cramped but insistently thriving humanity. Yes, this was a capital city-Shizuru could see it. But to see it she had to imagine something first, which was in remarkably sparse attendance.

"The streets are empty," she remarked, which caused Azula to hum.

"As I said, most of them are either cowering behind those very windows or waiting on tenterhooks at the square. All these tenements are occupied, trust me." At that moment, as if to prove it, an open window in one of the buildings was drawn shut by a disembodied hand. "And these streets aren't like this on normal days. In fact, this street's noise is usually enough to deafen someone already hard of hearing."

"Then perhaps I should threaten your captives with exposure to it during my interrogations," Shizuru joked. "I daresay I shall not be resorting to torture, however. I think we have little to learn from them that you yourself could not tell us, given that Obsidian did see fit to leave them behind. And whatever little they do know is probably not important enough to justify torturing them."

She slowed and cast a look behind her as indication that she wanted the polemarch to ride up and beside her again. The officers behind

her exchanged glances at this: they had been noticing how quickly their general got antsy if she knew her mistress was near but invisible.

"From my experience with royal courtiers of the type of monarchy your husband has," Shizuru told the silently watching Azula, "torture would be unnecessary anyway. Tyrants breed cultures of survival, not loyalty."

The tyrant's first wife frowned.

"That may be true of all of them," she said. "Save one."

"Oh?"

"A druid. A high druid, actually. One of those placed here."

"Placed here?" Shizuru echoed.

"To watch me and the rest who remained." Her upper lip thinned and curled in the universal expression of contempt; Shizuru supposed Azula of Firens was not fond of druids, or at least not of *that* one druid. "There are others and I imprisoned them too, but he's the only one worth speaking to if you want to know something. He's the one with the most clout, so he'd probably be privy to more knowledge."

"I see. And you think these druids were assigned- *placed* -here by your husband?"

The other woman laughed for the second time since their acquaintance, and it was a fuller laugh than the first. For a moment Shizuru wondered when Azula had last laughed that way because her weariness seemed to redouble afterwards-as though she were contriving it in order to regain the self she had grown more comfortable with over the years. The laugh had been so real that it seemed to have caused her embarrassment.

"My husband, assign druids?" Azula drawled. "No, he hates them and they hate him. It's his son who enjoys their support. The Prince Calchis."

"The one sent to subdue the rebels up north?"

"The very same. He and his sister, the Princess Faris, were all but raised by the druids. Their mother was a great supporter of the old ways-the druids latched on to that, naturally. Calchis and Faris are none too fond of my husband either, by the way, but they take care not to show they'd love to cut his throat at the first opportunity."

"So much for filial piety. I suppose I should talk to that druid. What is his name?"

"Cirnos. But we're nearly at the square. You can already see the crowd or the fringes of it."

Yes, Shizuru could see it. There must have been a few thousand of them in the square Azula chose for the meeting, and all of them were packed before a tall dais of grey stone. There were more Mentulæan guards around it-she supposed they were Azula's again-and they stuck out because of their armour and their curve-bladed spears poking far above the sea of heads.

"It doesn't have to be too long," Azula explained low-voiced as the crowd cleared a path for them; *So meek*, Shizuru thought, observing the people around them with care. "All you need to do is confirm that the city is yours now and what you plan to do with it... or what you want to tell them you plan to do with it."

"Are you saying this is my opportunity to throw a veil over their eyes if I want to?"

Azula's expression did not falter for an instant.

"The city *is* yours, as I said," she answered. "It doesn't matter to me what you do with it, since its ownership has passed to you."

"Again, so practical!"

"I also sent word out of Terrigos's defeat earlier." A beat. "Were his losses terrible?"

"Yes. It was a battle of annihilation."

"Was Terrigos slain?"

"No, we took him prisoner. I have already sent him to Hime to be held until the day of my *triumph*. He shall be returned to your custody after that, along with all the other army leaders we take captive in this war. Except for the supreme leader, of course, or those who are known to have perpetrated crimes against Himean citizens. The Prince Hanu, for instance, for the murder of Himeans living outside Sosia Citadel. Your husband."

"What happens to them?"

"They walk in my *triumph* too. But we strangle them at the end of it."

"That's good," said the former queen.

What could one say to that?

"If you don't mind, it would help me to know something," Azula said after they had dismounted their steeds and were making ready to ascend the dais facing their breathless, stunned-looking audience. "Do you plan to slaughter the people of the city or take them from their homes? Or do anything else along the same lines? I won't announce it here even if you do."

She said it so expressionlessly that Shizuru and Natsuki looked at each other in bemusement. They stood nearest the woman and were the only ones to hear her whispers.

"No," Shizuru said.

"I see. I don't mind either way but I needed to know it for my speech."

And up she went, leaving the lovers exchanging looks again.

"I had the heralds spread the news earlier," the queen said by way of preliminaries, her voice carrying clear and high through the crowd. The square had fine acoustic properties, which pleased the orator in the listening Shizuru. "I'm telling you myself again now, so no one doubts it. Terrigos lost. The Himeans won. I surrendered the city to them. They promise your safety in exchange. They also promise a partnership with me and the people of Firens that will secure the future of this city after the war. You will learn more soon. For now,

just know this: you're safe. The Himeans are your enemies no longer. Here is the Himean commander."

Shizuru ascended the steps, though not without sending a humorous glance to her officers first: *what an introduction!*

"I thank the Queen Azula for her foreword," she said, directing the full force of her smile to the crowd. It was clearly taken aback by the sight of her, for all the murmuring and movement ceased the instant she joined Azula on the dais. "Everything is as she said. I, Shizuru Fujino, governor and general of the Himean armies in these lands, defeated the Baron Terrigos in battle. None of his army remains and those who lived we have already taken captive. Your city is open to us. But your queen opened it willingly."

"Because of this you will not be looted. None of you shall lose your property or your lives. If you cooperate. If you do not wish to cooperate, you may leave. We shall neither harm nor hinder you if you do this. However, you may not bring your property with you in that case. You may take with you only your life, the clothes on your back, and your dignity."

"Cooperate and we will *not* harm you," she stated. "We will *not* steal from you, and we will *not* rape you. And if you do decide to leave the city, we will *not* molest you. If a soldier transgresses these edicts, you may come to my provost officers to report it-provided you have witnesses and evidence for the accusation. If you have those, we will *not* ignore you."

"Aside from me, your queen shall remain your high authority," she said. "You may carry on with your usual business. You may even do business with us-you will find us exceptional customers, I think. Only mind that those who continue to live here do so under the protection of Hime and Firens. Which means those who stay here owe their allegiance only to Hime and Firens. Those who find that disagreeable need only walk out of those gates. I promise that their heads shall not be lopped off for it, although I can only speak for me and not some loyalist of the king. King Obsidian may harm you if he wishes, as I am sure he has done in the past on a whim; but from me and mine, as long as you act courteously, you are certainly safe."

Fierce murmuring erupted the moment she turned away.

"Want to bet they'll be so busy arguing if you're sincere that the idea of staging a protest will go clear out of their skulls?"

Shizuru turned to her legate.

"Always give people something to think on before they can think up something else, Shohei-han," she told him. "I assume we can enter the castle now, Queen Azula?"

"If you wish." A pause. "I'm no longer queen, however."

"I think you may hold on to the title for a while longer here, as a matter of convenience. The people are more used to you having the title as well. We can settle the issue it more properly later."

Thus they entered the home of the Mentulaeans, a large edifice of heavy design but not unhandsome despite that. Shizuru could see the expense that had gone into it from its size and the precision of the stonework on the façade. It could take a skilled stonemason a day to size, cut, and finish five stones for the sort of work she was seeing; one could only wonder how many such workers had sweated and slaved over just the front of the building. But then, she supposed, the empire's kings might simply have compelled all their vassals to send all the workers needed, exercising the traditional right of imperial rulers to demand unpaid labour and free resources.

Entering the premises, she saw even more evidence of wealth combined with skill. There was an abundance of tiling and gilt and several walls had draperies of heavy gold and purple cloth. The floors too begged appreciation, being done in a lovely red stone.

The pale red stone was very smoothly polished, Shizuru noted, sliding her hobnailed boot gently over it. She was right: the stonemasons here were skilled. She wondered just how well-built the walls were and how well they would take bombardment from heavy artillery.

"Before we go any further," Shizuru said, stopping the party in the enormous hall into which the main entrance opened. "Were any of

the ones you took captive accountants, officials, or guards of the treasury?"

Azula's blue eyes were very cold, it seemed.

"Yes," she said.

"Good. I would like to know where the dungeons as well as the treasure vaults are situated."

Azula beckoned to one of the officials in her entourage: the woman came up, looking apprehensive.

"Benini can guide you," Azula said.

"Ruiko-han," Shizuru called, drawing one of her centurions out of their legionary escort.

The centurion stepped out, saluted, then stared into the middle distance and waited for what the commander had to say.

"Go to the dungeons first and collect the captives who used to work in a capacity related to the treasury or the treasure vaults of the castle. After that, go to the vaults themselves-I assume they are in the castle, Queen Azula? Yes? Good. You heard me, Ruiko-han. Go and secure their contents as well as the captives you will take from the dungeons. Take three centuries with you and await further instructions there."

"General."

The centurion brought her fist to the chest of her mail shirt, then snapped it outwards stiffly with the four fingers extended and held close together-the salute of the Himean army. The Mentulaeans watched it with the curiosity of those seeing an alien ritual.

When the centurion had left with her troops, Shizuru told the remaining legionaries to stay in the entrance hall with the exception of twenty men. These twenty she retained for escort along with the polemarch's imposing troopers.

"You're very suspicious," Obsidian's first wife observed. "I approve."

"Of my escort or my impending inquiries into the castle's treasures?"

"Both."

Azula understood why Shizuru had asked for treasury overseers or managers among the captives: the Himean general wanted to check their knowledge of the vaults' contents against what was actually found there. For all Shizuru knew, Azula could have spirited away for her own half the royal treasures before the Himean army's arrival-and though Shizuru might have promised to respect the people's personal properties, everyone knew that pledge did not extend to the properties of the state.

Thus Shizuru needed witnesses who could tell her if significant amounts were missing from the vaults. And as the witnesses were people Azula had imprisoned, there would be little worry of them getting the idea of falsifying remembrances just to protect the queen.

"We arranged a feast in your honour this evening," said Azula, resuming her walk. "If you attend it, you can meet all the nobles who pledged their willingness to join our shared cause. You can sound them out too and see if you dislike any of them enough to make them captives instead."

Shizuru tamped down her amusement: "Very well. All my officers shall be coming, as well as those of the Otomeians."

Azula inclined her head very regally, though it was a gesture she directed less to Shizuru than to her fellow royal, the princess from Otomeia.

"That's good," she said. "I expect you want to freshen up first and get settled. There's time enough for that. Should we call on you for when the feast begins?"

"Yes. But I want to do something else before that event. Would you have the druid you mentioned-Cirnos, yes?-sent to my rooms in, say, two hours, when we should have finished getting ready? I would like to speak with him as soon as possible, so as to get it out of the way."



They had turned into a long hallway lined with doors on both sides. Azula gestured to it.

"The rooms for you and your officers," she said. "If you need more, we can accommodate you. The best and largest room is the one at the end, on the right, so it's the one I had prepared for your personal use."

"Thank you."

"Another thing, if you don't mind advice about Cirnos?"

"I would welcome it."

Azula moved back a step as Shizuru's eyes fell on hers.

"Cirnos has more influence than he will let on," the queen warned. "He can arrange for a lot of things. I think he could even arrange a meeting between you and the Head Druid, Hiempnos, if you could persuade him to it. But I doubt he will, or if he does, that will be a meeting going nowhere. It doesn't matter what you offer them-the druids would never cooperate with Himeans because they don't want you anywhere in these lands."

"Because they see us as harbingers of apostasy?"

"I don't think we have that last word in our language. What does it mean?"

Shizuru explained.

"Then yes, but it goes further than that," Azula said, moving back again a half-step. "How much do you know about the druids?"

"Probably not enough. Why do you keep stepping away from me?"

A look of apology.

"I'm sorry, General Fujino, but you're very tall. It's hurting my neck to keep my eyes on your face."

Shizuru laughed, as did some of her company.

"Please continue about the druids," she invited the queen, and took a half-step back herself. "Is this better?"

"Yes, thank you. Long before the kings started weakening their influence during the formation of the empire, the druids held remarkable power over these parts. This was especially because they were the sole specialists in many essential crafts and trades. The druids used to serve as the lawyers, the doctors, the historians."

"And the priests," Shizuru said, attentive.

"Of course. So they were among the few links of the disparate peoples of this land back then. Because of their skills and knowledge, they were allowed to move freely about territories. And they were so revered that they could walk out onto a battlefield and cross it without once being hit."

Shizuru adopted the trademark patrician expression of incredulity: she raised an eyebrow.

"No, it's true," said the other woman, smiling a little. "It's very long ago, though, so we've all but forgotten it."

"Except for the druids."

"That goes without saying." Azula sighed and dropped her smile again. "They were clever about it. The reverence accorded them was because they shared their knowledge with no one. They put none of it down in writing and passed it on to each other instead by word of mouth and secret ritual. That wasn't strange, in a way. Our traditions were oral in the old days. Most of the written forms of our languages then were rudimentary, which was one of the big challenges when my husband's ancestors started uniting the tribes- allied tribes couldn't even send each other precise messages through writing."

She took a breath and continued.

"You know, of course, that we adopted your language as a solution to the language differences. It was a logical solution because your people had already been passing through this place for some time-

and your Argus and Sosia Provinces were also already existing by then as important trading spots for those of us venturing east. We'd picked up a lot of your words already. But most importantly, we'd discovered knowledge previously unavailable from texts your people wrote... on farming, on medicine, on warfare and other things. The few Greek texts that found their way north-often through the ports of Argus, by the way-were too concerned with their own culture and poetry to interest us in learning the language. Himean texts, by comparison, were discovered to be about very practical things."

"Greek idealism against Himean practicality," Toshi offered quietly from behind Shizuru. "A popular theme."

Azula agreed.

"Besides, the Greeks never really took to our lands well, so there were few of them here," she continued. "It was your people who travelled more freely and interacted more willingly with us. So it made sense for more people to learn Himean instead, especially as many other peoples in this parts spoke it too-Argentians, Otomeians, travelling merchants, and even Greeks. And over time, enough people learned it to make its adoption as a common language possible. We still speak our dialects, the old tribal languages, you know. But for cross-border talks and everything official we use Himean."

"Go on, this is fascinating," Shizuru invited.

"There's not a lot more to say except the natural conclusion. With a common literacy and the knowledge in texts from your authors spreading, more of our rare non-druid specialists began to write down what they knew and what the druids wouldn't divulge. This meant widespread dissemination of specialist information and learning."

Shizuru nodded as she saw what the woman was saying.

"So the druidic monopoly on knowledge was broken and druidic power crippled," she concluded. "Yes, I see. The druids bear a grudge against us for the part our language played?"

"In a way," Azula responded pensively. "I've always thought they disliked Himeans in particular because of that link to their fall from power. Although of course it might also be that they just find your religion threatening."

"Yet everyone around Our Sea knows we do not impose our gods on those we conquer."

"I doubt that makes a difference to the druids, as they would be the conquered in this possibility. It's a matter of perspective, isn't it?"

Shizuru smiled again, finding herself liking Entei's daughter more and more.

"Does your husband know how keen a mind you have?" she asked, meaning both the compliment and the query. From what she remembered of her brief encounter with Obsidian, his first wife was the subtler-and likely more cunning-of the two of them. Had the emperor appreciated this or been threatened by it?

*Silly question. Look where he left her.*

"My husband doesn't know much about me except the reason I'm a disappointment to him," Azula said with surprising ease. "I'm the only childless wife he's ever married."

"I see."

"I'll leave these slaves outside in the hallway to lead you to the feast," she told the invaders. "You can have them lead you around the castle too if you want to see something else, but I hope all of you will attend the meal. We prepared the finest foods the city has to offer, and slaughtered only the best fowl, hogs, and cattle."

She stopped at the wincing on the Himeans' faces.

"Er... yes, you might not know," said their general. "Himeans do not eat beef, at least not if there is anything else to be had."

Azula's lips parted, forming an O. The slaves and officials behind her exchanged worried looks, at least until one of them regained his presence of mind and hissed at one of the slaves. He ordered her to

run down to the feasting hall and tell the cooks and servants to remove all beef from the menu.

"That's something we never read from your texts, I suppose," Azula admitted, her weary composure returning. "It seemed to me that cattle were so common in your provinces. I thought you ate their meat as well."

"Not at all, or not if we can help it. They have other uses. Tallow and leather are only two of them."

"And milk, I suppose?"

"Only if there are no goats around," Shizuru said, with a sideways glance at Natsuki. The Otomeian returned it with a longer look of her own. "We prefer goat's milk. And even then only for cheese and other dairy products. It is a rare Himean who drinks milk happily."

"I see." A pause. "Are there any other foods you would find odious?"

"Why, what else have you served?"

"Various fowl-I can't be sure of all of their names, but I can send a slave to ask. Hen and pheasant, certainly. Pigeon. Pork too. Some venison. Fresh fish from the rivers-nothing too exotic."

"It sounds well enough. I'm sure we all look forward to it."

Azula bowed, which meant her retinue did the same, and swiftly walked away. That left Shizuru and her officers to choose rooms for themselves.

"Set aside one room for Zanki-han too," she reminded some of the tribunes before entering the room marked for her use with Natsuki. The polemarch's troopers were already in it and doing a thorough search of the place, looking out of the windows and opening closets. Some even ran their palms over the walls to see if these had doors skilfully concealed. When one of the troopers started sniffing the bed's pillows and squeezing them, Shizuru arched an eyebrow at Natsuki.

"Poisons and snakes," the polemarch said, prompting shivers

among the slaves waiting for the inspection to finish. Shizuru shook her head.

"That would be imaginative," she said. "Why do you even check for that, Natsuki? Do not tell me it is a fashion for assassins in Otomeia."

"No. Still, one learns of such things. And remembers."

One of the troopers, a lanky blonde who reminded Shizuru of Alyssa, called the polemarch and nodded. Natsuki nodded back, but also inclined her head in a beckoning movement.

The other Otomeian approached. Shizuru saw that an ear was deformed: the missing flesh seemed to have been cut away, based on the scarring.

"They said there would be a feast," Natsuki told the woman in her nation's language. "Do as arranged in this case."

"Right," the other answered. "I'm leaving Cantel and Ivander to stay with Zidek."

The moment the troopers left it was the noncombatants' turn. Several were immediately directed to get a washing tub from the Mentulaeans outside and to find water while others worked on making the place more habitable for the general's purposes.

Meanwhile, Shizuru surveyed the space. There was more gilt and red stone flooring, and an elaborate gold statue occupied a prominent position on a wooden table that dominated a corner. It was a statue of a hunter bearing a slain stag on his back, and it reminded Shizuru that the Mentulaeans had originally been a hunting people living near their sacred forests. Many of them had since switched over to city living, but she knew that they still tended to choose cities with woody areas nearby. Indeed this was the case with Gorgo, where woods commenced on the other side of a stream on the westward plain.

She turned around to better take in the room. More scenes involving forests and hunters ran riot on one of the walls, the spaces between

figures packed with the elaborate whorls and knots Mentulaeans favoured. The whorls and knots on the edges of the mural, supposed to be its border, were picked out in real gold.

"So this is the Mentulaeans' taste," she said. "What do you think, *mea vita*?"

"Garish."

Shizuru stifled a chuckle and waggled her eyebrows at her head servant. Aella's prim lips quirked up at the edges.

"Damned with one word," she said. "This shows us what we can look forward to in terms of booty, though. This is rich territory we approach, Natsuki, so perhaps we should forgive them a little ostentation. We are approaching the gold and silver sources of the empire, the mines up in the mountains to the north. Some of the mines are said to be so rich that my sources tell me they could be worked for a century and not run out of the valuable ore. Even some of the rivers nearby carry away some of the gold near their headwaters. I hear many Mentulaeans make a living out of panning the rivers for precious metals."

To her bafflement, Natsuki was chuckling.

"What did I say?" she asked.

The Otomeian gave her a naughty grin.

"Nothing," Natsuki said. "Only that you plan to own those mines when the war is done."

Her answering laugh was so loud some of the servants started.

"What?" she said, grinning hugely. "Did I really say that?"

"In so many words," said Natsuki, lowering herself to what would be their bed and smoothing a hand on the blanket. Her pet, finally let off its leash, decided to investigate its new environment and make a few of the slaves anxious with its snooping.

Then she spoke in Otomeian, quietly: "I feel strange here."

Shizuru looked up from a deeper inspection of the art on the wall:  
"Why is that?"

Natsuki appeared to consider it. Since the return of cloudy days she had begun to wear dresses that left her arms bare again. Shizuru thought her limbs were very white and slender, their stark leanness all the more elegant against the profusion of shapes and colours in the room.

"This is their capital," the princess said. "The war is not near done, no, Shizuru?"

"Indeed." A sigh. "It will continue for as long as there are significant elements in this land that resist Hime."

"Yet we are to sleep in their palace. In their capital. It is a strange thing."

"Yes, it is a bit odd if you think about it. But none of us predicted that we would have the Firensians as allies-they gave us the means to achieve this."

There was an increase of noise by the door: the slaves sent to fetch a tub had obtained one. The polemarch insisted on it being scrubbed with oil first, then water was fetched so they could bathe. They had servants help them this time, so as to finish everything faster, and when they were done both of them shone.

"There are few things as renewing as having a bath," Shizuru told her lover while belting her tunic. She waved Aella away when the woman offered to do it. "Although I still do prefer to take my baths at a more leisurely pace, and with only one particular person helping me."

This time, the eyebrow that climbed belonged to Natsuki.

The Otomeian's eyebrow had not even begun to drop when knocking sounded on the door. A voice said that the druid had arrived. Shizuru made a remark on his impeccable timing and asked him to come in while giving Aella leave to exit.

"Greetings to you, General Fujino," said the druid when he entered,



and Shizuru could not help but smile.

The chief of the captured druids was not at all what she had expected. She had thought he would be old and of the desiccated type she had observed most druids to be. He turned out to be neither.

Cirnos was still young, sufficiently so to retain all his curly, pepper-sprinkled hair. His eyes bore only faint wrinkles at the corners, and they were such wrinkles as one got by smiling. His expression was open or gave an impression of being so, and there was such a lack of misgiving in his face that one would have thought him about to be interviewed by a dear friend instead of an enemy.

But all these things were as nothing compared to his most remarkable trait. Cirnos the Druid took up a great deal of space. He was not grotesquely fat the way some overfed, half-catatonic wretches were who had nothing to do all day but attend to their meals and no exercise to delight in save that of their jaws. Which ground, ground, ground an unending supply of both sweets and savouries, all to be resolved as added stuffing for the dimpled and pendulous flab of their bellies and breasts.

Cirnos was not of that ilk because he was not flabby-looking or even heavily dimpled. Indeed, he was extraordinarily smooth-for the aspect he presented was that of a sphere, with all his evenly distributed flesh. His fat did not wiggle or waggle as he moved: it presented the most titillating little tremor instead, its ponderous inner mass held in place by taut white skin.

Shizuru glanced sideways to see what her lover thought of him and regretted it. The polemarch looked very much as if she wanted to produce a pin to prick the walking and talking sphere on its side. There was a terrible instant where she thought she would laugh at the image, but Cirnos spoke before that.

"You're so much younger than I thought you'd be," he said, obviously as fascinated by her looks as she was by his-thought for rather different reasons. "And so much more beautiful."

"You flatter me. You are rather younger than I thought you would be,

yourself."

"But not," he smiled, "beautiful."

His attention transferred to the other woman. At first his smile was the same appreciative one it had been for Shizuru, but that changed when he saw the black shadow crouched behind the second woman's chair.

"This is the Polemarch of Otomeia," Shizuru explained. "The Princess Natsuki."

"Polemarch?" He had averted his eyes from the Otomeian now and seemed to make a point of trying not to look her way. "This is a foreign word to me. It sounds Greek."

"The origin of the title is. It stands for High Commander, to make it simple," Shizuru answered.

"Commander? It's not a religious title?"

Shizuru was bemused. "Why, did you expect it to be?"

It was his turned to look bemused.

"I-excuse me, I had thought it would be," he said, with a quick glance at the Otomeian.

Who fixed her sphinx gaze on him, Shizuru thought, in a perfect mirror of her now-awake cat's: unaccusing yet suspecting everything, glassy yet alive, unreadable, unmerciful, as real as it was part of the mist.

*Ah, I see .*

"You believe in the spirits of the trees," she said to him. "Of the sacredness of the great forests and the tall oaks. Do you believe in the spirits of fauna as well, and of the powers a select few have to commune with them?"

She could feel Natsuki's dawning comprehension even as the man answered.

"We do," he said. "We have some mystics among us and some with the talents you mention. But they are few and far between. Most of us are skilled at interpreting the acts of animals and not at inducing them."

"As in augury," Shizuru responded. "I hold religious office myself, Cirnos. I am part of the College of Augurs and thus am one of those empowered to take the auspices prior to formal undertakings of the Republic-studying the flights of birds and their patterns to interpret the will of the gods."

"Yes, I understand. It's not unlike what we do."

"Actually, it is, in at least one way. You sacrifice humans for it and we do not."

A flash of misgiving crossed his face: it sat ill on that round, amiable countenance.

"I was told you would be against that," he said.

"By whom?"

"Everyone who knows anything about Hime."

"Did everyone who knows anything about Hime tell you why?"

"No, they didn't. Why does the issue of human sacrifice matter to any of you? We use no free men for it, only prisoners or slaves. We don't torture them before it, even. Many other religions practise it besides our own-and even your people have turned to it in the past, I think."

"You speak the critical words. *In the past*." Shizuru crossed her legs slowly. "We gave it up when we learned better, as did most of the other religions you may be speaking of, at least the civilised ones. No cultured peoples or civilisations now practise human sacrifice around Our Sea."

"But it's *your* notion of civilisation, *your* description of it!"

"True, it is," Shizuru agreed. "But I argue that it is an infinitely better

civilisation than the one a culture of human sacrifice brings. Our gods and our dealings with them reflect our attitude and dignity as a people, Cirnos. Any god that asks for human sacrifice routinely is *not* saying that human blood is more worthwhile than the blood of a goat, or an ox, or a sheep. That god is saying, instead, that human blood is as disposable as the blood of a goat, an ox, or a sheep- which I note you also sacrifice to your gods occasionally."

"Yes, but only for lesser rituals, in exchange for lesser boons."

"All the same to me." Her eyes flashed briefly. "Taking lives in war and on the battlefield is one thing. The circumstances render the activity understandable. But to use human life as a currency for bartering with gods outside of warfare promotes a culture of individual homicides justified by religion! The world is changing, Cirnos. And one of the changes shall be that human sacrifice shall be firmly outlawed in the future, all around Our Sea."

Cirnos opened his mouth, then underwent a peculiar expression that told her he had revised what he originally meant to say.

"It may be so in *your* world, General," he said. "But this isn't your world yet. The empire won't be so quick to succumb to your authority, I think you will discover. We have champions among us to fight you still, and the heart of the empire continues to beat. As it will continue to beat long after your people have left these lands and your nation has withered away."

Shizuru grinned at him.

"You've a taste for poetic drama," she said, though not mockingly. "Since you brought it up, though, tell me about the Heart of the Empire, Cirnos, and what he promised you or what you promised him. Or was your alliance one born purely out of shared ideology? No, I doubt it. Sane people are always motivated by self-interest and you seem sane enough to me. Only madmen can be impelled purely by ideology."

His confusion was almost convincing, she thought, though a glimpse of Natsuki told her the polemarch was very far from being convinced. But then, she felt that the girl had eyed the man with

suspicion from the very beginning. She wondered if it was due to his physical appearance. Otomeians prized martial ability and health so much that they tended to look askance the less-than-fit-more so the round than the thin. What was that she had overheard one of them say, one of the troopers in camp? That flesh waxed fat on cowardice and opportunism?

"I'm sorry, I don't follow what you mean," Cirnos said obsequiously.

"I am sure you follow very well," Shizuru responded. "Tell me about the Prince Calchis and why the druids support him. Is it simply because he was raised by your chief?"

Her knowledge of the name and that detail unnerved the round man for just an instant before he composed himself again.

"It's true he has ties with the druids that way, yes," he said. "But we also support him because the gods are with him."

"What makes you believe so?"

"Various signs, not too different from those you probably follow when studying the flight of birds. Indications that they wished us to cast our lot with him. We saw them ever since he was young, so that's why we've taken care of him. It pleased our gods for us to do it."

"So the fact that he is one of the elder princes of the empire as well as one whose mother was a pious follower of your faith did not factor into it?"

"You try to make us sound conniving, General, but we did only as the gods willed."

As this reference to 'the will of the gods' was the sort of thing Shizuru hated people using whenever they wanted to shroud their motives, her smile swiftly turned ironic.

"And what do the gods will for him, then?"

"To take the throne and restore the glory of the empire."

"Which I take to mean that you also expect him to restore the glory of druidic influence."

"You may take it to mean anything you like, General Fujino."

"What of the king, then? This seems to say that you think he had an adverse effect on the empire."

Cirnos's lips pursed for a moment.

"The king isn't the wisest of men," he said. "It's said by some that he had been wiser before he was crowned, but that his brains began to harden the longer he sat on the throne. Who knows why? Maybe it was the strain. Or maybe it was the gods' will again."

Shizuru's eyes narrowed as she tried to make sense of what he was saying.

"Forgive me," she said. "What do you mean... his brains began to harden? Is this a disease?"

Cirnos drew himself up, pleased at the opportunity to school her in something.

"Those of us who focus on the healing arts say that one of the causes of foolishness in men is a hardening of the fluids or mucosa in the brain. A man's mind is at its best when these fluids flow freely, as they act like lubricants for the thinking process. For some reason or other, some men's brains either lack these fluids or see them ossifying."

Shizuru's brows lifted at him.

"Intriguing theory," she said, and then, turning to Natsuki: "What do you think of it, Polemarch?"

The polemarch's scepticism came through her eyes even before the words passed her lips.

"I have opened the skulls of many fools," the princess said. Her voice was haughty, direly authoritative. Shizuru realised with surprise that this was how her lover spoke when she deemed herself

acting in a political capacity.

"Many of them poured the contents so that I could see," the polemarch continued. "I saw that each one had brains as wet as wiser men's."

After a beat she added: "I have also opened the skulls of many wise men."

The druid seemed amazed to hear the princess confess to such acts: he took his time replying.

"Yes, it would seem that way," he said in a friendly tone. "But it's an illusion. The brains liquefy upon exposure to the air."

The Otomeian's dark brows crumpled.

"So do men all become wiser when their brains are exposed to the air?" she demanded.

"Well, no, since they would be--"

"Stop. I know." Her tone was still calm but withering. "It was what is called 'sarcasm'. I think your explanation is convenient, but your premise is unproven. I remain in disbelief."

Shizuru's barely-suppressed chuckle drew the slack-mouthed Cirnos's attention again.

"Excuse me. The polemarch is... a little difficult to persuade," she told the man, who tore his eyes away from the Otomeian with difficulty. She could not blame him for that: she had been compelled to wrestle with herself too just to look away from her mistress, whose lips she had wanted to kiss into submission after all those haughty utterances. The superior little monster!

"We may be straying from the point, however. I think we come near the time for the dinner feast, so let us get to it straightaway, with no more detours."

She folded her hands gently over her lap and looked at him.

"I am told you have your share of authority, Cironos, among the druids. This tells me you might have some influence too on the prince. What would you say if I asked you to invite him to a formal meeting, he and all his supporters, that we might see if we could find a way to treat with each other? I am opposed to his father the king continuing to be king, but that is reasonable. The man *did* try to invade our provinces. The prince I may not look upon so harshly. If I understand you aright, he shares my opposition-he may not want his father the king continuing to be king as well. Does that not provide ample grounds for a conference between us?"

"I hope you won't think ill of me saying so, General," Cironos replied in a smooth voice. "But considering other circumstances, that may also provide ample grounds for suspicion between us."

"Even if we provided a guarantee of no hostilities for the duration of the conference?"

"Even then, as that guarantee would have to be taken purely on faith."

"I would have thought a druid would think a little better of things that hinge on faith. Come now, Cironos, we are hardly savages to murder dinner guests at the table."

As this was in fact something that had been done several times by the Mentulaean emperors, Cironos bit his tongue and said nothing.

"Surely it would be better for the empire and all its peoples were peace established more quickly?" Shizuru tried again. "Hime likes to deal with client-kings. If the Prince Calchis desires a part of the empire to call his own, that can be negotiated."

"As the queen's people negotiated with you?" the druid said. "That *is* what they asked for in exchange for betraying us, yes?"

"Yes, though I think you are not in the best position to speak of betrayals just yet, considering the druidic agenda."

At his incensed expression, she held up a hand to forestall protest and spoke.



"Let me say first that it is not a bad agenda, Cynos," she told him. "At its heart it has sense. I agree that a people's traditions need to be preserved. But they can be preserved without reducing your people to pitiful numbers through conflict. Think of the good you could do the many peoples of this land-Firensii, Mentulaeans, Carsini, Aexelli, all the others-if you were able to mediate an end to the war between us and the forces of the prince. And as for the king, what is to prevent all of us from simply removing him then, so that you may find a ruler more to your tastes?"

Cynos's round face seemed to lengthen as a scowl slipped over his face. And just as quickly as it had arrived, it went away.

"What indeed?" he echoed dully, before speaking in firmer tones. "You, General Fujino. You and Hime. You would choose all our leaders from then on, because you would want only puppets or catspaws in the ruling seat. We would have a sham of autonomy under threat of violence, not the peaceful liberty you would have me believe you offer. You'll bring your gods to this place and have us throw away ours-not overtly! You'd do it slowly, supplanting our deities and myths with your own until we forget that we ever had our own in the first place. That's what you people are good at, after all: slipping ideas into others' heads without showing that you're doing it. And after a while, what would exist of the Mentulae, or of the others you mentioned, the Firensii, the Carsinii, the rest? Nothing. You'd make of us a pathetic copy of Hime. No, I think we'll steer clear of your overtures for *peace*."

He made the word sound like a dirty thing he could not get out of his mouth quickly enough. Despite the coolness of the room his forehead gleamed gently, a thin layer of sweat forming atop it.

"You'll see, the prince has what this land needs: a true Mentulaean capable of uniting the many territories in a way his forefathers never could. He can forge it into a truly great empire, not the still-weak one it is now. If that goal is to be achieved, we need to achieve it without your help. The autonomy of the nation we form can only be true if it's achieved autonomously. So again, my answer is this: *no*."

She smiled at him without rancour.

"You touch on some truths there," she said. "But I think your passion for the subject blinds you to the positives of my proposal. Let us take them one by one."

"Yes, we would have greater influence on you than before, and we would be a factor to consider for your government. But you would be a factor to consider for ours too. Would that not foster a fine attitude of cooperation for our two states? One that could lead to more harmonious lives for all concerned, even? There could be more congress between us, shared learning, better trade. And though some may say such congress leads to pollution of a nation's cultural purity, I say otherwise: the best way to enhance a culture is to infuse it with new influences, expanding it and allowing it opportunity to reinterpret those influences in a way that would make them its own."

"As for the threat of violence, I shall not deny it... but only insofar as no state needs to deny its willingness to defend its interests by violence, especially if violence is the only recourse. Which we Himeans know is seldom the case. Otherwise, why would I be making such an offer to you as I do now?"

"And as for achieving autonomy independently, that may well be so- *if it were possible* . In your case, it is not. To achieve the idealistic goal of which you speak requires that you defeat not only the king but also the forces of the Firensii as well as of Hime and Otomeia. And possibly those of other local nobles and leaders finally realising that they can secede from Mentulaean rule very profitably after seeing the Firensian example. Consider the odds against you. I think I do not exaggerate when I say it would be very hard to overcome them, if not outright impossible. So no, I think the sort of autonomy you speak of is not achievable, only a dream."

"But still, some autonomy is better than none at all. It is certainly better than us reducing all of your peoples to slavery, in retaliation for the hostilities you began by assaulting our allies and our provinces. No use telling me it was the king's order to provoke us; kingdoms are always held accountable for the actions of their kings. That is the fact, Cirnos. We are here because your king as good as invited us here. And here we shall stay. So now you must all live with it, and there are comfortable as well as uncomfortable ways of doing that."

But the druid's full cheeks had set, his round jaw already refusing. Shizuru sighed loudly.

"A refusal again-as I knew it would be," she told him, watching disbelief spread over his face. "Yes, Cirnos, I knew you would refuse me. It looks better for the history to say that all reasonable overtures have been made, however. That way my opponents cannot claim me to be heedlessly and opportunistically bloodthirsty. I shall set down this entire conversation in my next reports to Senate."

The druid's eyes widened and he balked in outrage.

"So you provide proof of your untrustworthiness even here!" he cried. "You were only baiting me, General Fujino. Now can you still really wonder why I would refuse your attempts to arrange a meeting between you and our prince?"

"There is hardly need to raise your voice-the guards outside may hear you and come in. Besides, you are disturbing the polemarch's companion. That is never advisable."

The huge cat was on its feet, slinking against its owner's legs and peeking at him. The druid's mouth clamped shut; beads of sweat coalesced from the gleam on his forehead.

"And you misunderstand me," Shizuru continued. "I said those things expecting you to refuse them. But I said them too with every intention of seeing them through if you happened to buck expectation. You did not, so there it is."

She smiled suddenly, her teeth flashing in the yellow light of the torches. Her eyes seemed all the weirder to him after that flash.

"All the better for me that you refused, by the way," she confessed. "I shall have more lands to claim solely for Hime and more of your treasures to take than if I had been obliged to make concessions to another client-king. Your refusal tonight shall lead to an increase in my future glory."

She ignored his attempts to retort, holding up a hand again and flicking it to the door.

"Thank you for meeting with me, Cirnos," she said, her tone telling him she would no longer listen. "Though I suppose Queen Azula gave you no choice, you still answered me freely enough for most of our meeting. And thanks to you, I now understand the political force known as the druids a little better. But now I have said all I wish to say and heard all I need to hear. Now get out."

A click of the polemarch's tongue accompanied by the big cat's slow approach of him. The druid's exit was swift and his waiting jailers led him away again. The moment the door shut, Shizuru's mouth formed a sneer.

"Despicable," she told Natsuki, who looked at her curiously from the other chair. "Did you hear the man? It is one thing to do something out of self-interest, but it is quite another to pretend that you do it all out of obedience to some divine will. As though that could renounce one's motives or culpability! Even had Prince Calchis been reasonable enough to treat with us, the druids would never let him do it for fear of letting foreign influence in. They shall do all they can, I imagine, to keep him firmly opposed to all Himean presence as well. And not because they think it shall lead to national decay—rather, it will be because they think it shall be to the detriment of any chances they have for regaining their old ascendancy. Oh, even I am selfish, but there are degrees of it, Natsuki!"

Natsuki nodded and rubbed her pet's cheeks roughly. This set the animal rumbling in a transport of ecstasy.

"A toad," she agreed. "And such a silly. Dry brains!"

As she was still focused on her cat, she missed Shizuru's smile at this.

Another knock on the door, followed by a request for entry from a familiar voice.

"We thought you'd be done with the druid by now, Fujino-san," Shohei said once inside the room and pushing up his tunic's sleeves. He had washed himself, as had the others. As all of them had opted like her to go with military tunics, the entire Himean complement of the room's occupants was in a uniform red.

"I am indeed done with him," Shizuru answered her officer, with sufficient deliberation to hint to her legates that she meant more than one thing by it. "It is too bad you did not arrive earlier, however, as I fancy you might have enjoyed seeing him. He was rather against type for a senior druid, at least looks-wise."

"Pity I missed him then," said Shohei. "I'd have liked to see what you mean."

"Still young," Shizuru enlarged. "About Azula-han's age, I would say. And very plump."

It was Toshi who asked how plump.

"Perhaps as plump as Takahata-han." At her legates' incredulous stares, she looked to Natsuki. "Was he not as plump as Takahata-han, Natsuki?"

*Who*, the polemarch's look seemed to say.

"One of the scribes we left at the Atinu camp."

Again the look of enquiry.

"The biggest one, with the reedy voice," Toshi tried.

The pale face finally cleared.

"Ahh!" Natsuki exhaled. "The fat man? The so very fat man?"

Shizuru could not fault her legates for their poorly-masked laughter.

"I suppose some might see it that way," she said, trying to soften what she knew was a truth. "He does have some meat on him."

"A lot," the rail-thin polemarch agreed innocently.

"His weight notwithstanding," Shizuru coughed, summoning all her strength so as not to dissolve into giggles before her red-cheeked officers, "he is actually one of the best scribes in the army, you know. He works harder than most of the others."

But the polemarch gave her a strange look.

"I know that," the Otomeian said in her native tongue. "What has that to do with his girth?"

Shizuru sighed and abandoned Takahata's defence.

"Absolutely nothing," she admitted, getting to her feet. "Come, let us go already and see if we cannot enjoy the repast they have set out for us."

But the polemarch halted her even as she arose from the chair.

"Wait," was all she said.

"Why?"

A nod at the door. With unbelievable theatrical timing, a knock sounded from behind it.

"How did she do that?" Shizuru heard one of her legates murmur.

"Arania, enter," said the polemarch, and again her audience was treated to a theatrical touch in the accuracy of the spoken name.

Shizuru looked at her dumbfounded legates and shrugged, saying she had no idea either how her lover had done it. Arania-the trooper with the trimmed ear-did not linger but said a few words that Shizuru translated as *All of it is done*. Natsuki's response was more intriguing, and was delivered again in her country's language.

"Hold them and the room," she said to the woman, every word translated carefully by a listening Shizuru. "If one so much as coughs more roughly than you think acceptable, cut off their thumbs. Not heads. I wish all able to talk if talking must be done. And send someone to bring the Himean-" here came a word Shizuru did not recognise "-here, to be safe."

Arania nodded and left. Natsuki grasped her cane and rose from her chair.

"Now we can go," she said, and was followed by four mystified

Himeans on the way out.

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Only after all had retired to their rooms that first evening in Gorgo did Shizuru learn the story behind the polemarch's strange orders to her subordinate.

The princess, ever suspicious, had been wary of the feast Obsidian's queen had prepared for them. She had commanded her troopers to round up several of the cooks and even some palace officials that evening. These they had force-fed with samples of everything to be served at the feast. Some troopers guarded the plates while others guarded the hapless subjects of the experiment. As they were fed two hours before the feast started, there would have been ample time to recognise the signs of consumption for the most common poisons. This was also why the polemarch had ordered the army's *medici* -it was the Otomeian word for these that Shizuru had not known-to wait in a room near the dining hall, just in case one of the Himeans did ingest something poisonous before detection.

"I was afraid you were already ordering a massacre of Mentulaeans in their capital without my consent!"

Natsuki was puzzled at her lover's reaction: "But you said nothing, Shizuru."

Shizuru sighed.

"Because I knew in my heart you would do nothing so precipitous, I suppose. Still, to have the notion lurking in my mind was fright enough." She took a deep breath and looked pensive. "You do realise, considering that our army occupies the area and her father's treaty with us is necessary for her family's survival, the possibility of foul dealing from Azula-han would be practically nil?"

"Still. Better to be safe."

"Paranoid, you mean. It appears I shall have something to say to Azula-han tomorrow."

Natsuki squinted: "She knows."

"Someone already told her?"

"We fed her too."

Shizuru stared.

"*Ecaster* !" she said, eyebrows halfway up her forehead. "So that was why she made a point of sampling the food on my plate under pretext of ensuring its quality for her guest of honour! No doubt that strange display was for you, *meum mel*. "

She stopped, looked winded, then laughed weakly.

"Well, she was still marvellously civil to you during the feast," she told the polemarch. "Especially considering what you did to her. You must grant that much, at least."

"Now I can grant it, yes," the other said. "But before that, I could grant nothing. We are in *their* city, Shizuru."

Shizuru whistled and put one hand to her cheek.

"It is wonderful how mistrustful you are," she told her lover with some humour. "You shall make a perfect Himean after all, *mea vita* ."

As the polemarch had no sense of humour when it came to suspicions of harm befalling her lover, her answering glower was none too charitable.

"Now we are here," she said after some moments, changing the subject in that obvious way that Shizuru adored. "Their capital city. Now what do we do?"

Shizuru smiled at this and pushed her lover onto the sheets.

"Many things," she answered, following.

Many things indeed. Most important of them was that the legions had to be spread out for the coming winter. Given the relative quiet



of the south by now, Shizuru decided to leave only two legions there. The Fifth would winter at Asterion with Maiza Avaro; the Fourteenth went with Keigo Kurauchi three days' march away, overlooking a critical pass leading north and east.

Kenji Nakamura still commanded the Sixth and Thirteenth and moved further west with them into the lands now belonging to the Firensii. This was so they could depend on those allies for winter rations and possibly support if needed. The Ninth Legion, however, was removed from Kenji's command. The general had ordered it to join her in the Mentulaean capital. It would take the place of the Eighth, which she sent back east to winter by the territories of the Mentulaean peoples called the Carsinii.

The Eighth were led by Zanki Kiguchi and instructed to join the Third and Seventh. Those latter two legions were already working on subduing Carsinian opposition under the command of the general's cousin, aided Seigo Ushida. As the Carsinii were horse warriors, the general had sent part of her horse to her cousin immediately after the Battle of Berentum. The Eighth's arrival at Shizuma's autumn camp was thus preceded by the cataphracts and two alae of light cavalry. They were commanded by the Princess Alyssa.

The Fourth remained in Atinu Camp, which was left under the command of the logistics-loving Miyuki Rokujou and the similarly-inclined Taro Toshino. The Eleventh Legion Shizuru kept with her in Gorgo, along with Toshi Kumakura. Shohei Nagayama she sent off with the Tenth and the Twelfth: their task was to besiege the modest citadel of Bitur, which presided over a large town merely a day's hard march away from Shizuru's own position.

After learning of the capital's surrender, Bitur quickly capitulated. This was little surprise considering its citadel had no garrison-they had all been absorbed into Terrigos's annihilated army. Nevertheless, Shohei admitted in a letter to the commander that he did not "trust them a wink". They muttered terribly under their breaths, he said, and looked too sullen to trust. Still, their walled fortress made for a convenient defensive structure. They also had sufficient grain in their silos to support him and his two legions, so he would stay where he was.

The expectation was still for the remaining two royal armies and perhaps the forces of their supporters to approach from the northwest. The last reports Yamada's spies were able to get for Shizuru said the king had begun mustering again and was putting out a call for the barons and tribes to rally to his position. Of the Prince Calchis there was no word-only that he had supposedly taken the long path up the northern forests after being blocked by the Himean legions by the Holmys. Thus, Shohei's position was workable: it put her and one of her best legates in the way of any major enemy sally to reclaim captured cities and within close reach of each other.

For the most part the cooling months seemed to presage the usual military quiet of winter, however. Their new allies, the Firensii, sent her messages to say they had subdued the army at Resselium and would move themselves closer to their lands. This gave them easier access to their own resources and would let them defend their lands in the event of imperial attacks. As a token of assurance as to their continued loyalty, they sent all the booty from the city of Resselium to the Atinu Camp. The spoils from the army they defeated, however, they claimed entirely.

Thus Shizuru concluded her army's fall and winter arrangements. Obsidian might still be abroad and many of his supporters alive, but she had him on the defensive and she was ready for any response.

But that did not mean her work was done, for then she had to turn her gaze the other way. It was time to catch up with all her correspondence, as there were buckets upon buckets of it coming for her all the way from Hime.

The letters had accumulated throughout the march from Atinu Camp: Shizuru liked her couriers to be constantly moving and read every letter she received, even if it was only one from a gossip acquaintance back home. This meant that letters poured into the camps and checkpoints daily, ready for the next saddlesore courier to pack into his sturdy leather bags and gallop to the general.

Mail from Hime reached her more quickly now. That was owing to the roads her legions had been building. The *via Fujino* had been constructed the previous year and had seen so much traffic that she

felt unusual maintenance arrangements needed. She contracted a team to lay fresh cement dust and water it down twice instead of the usual once-a-year routine; indeed, many of the well-used roads of the Republic got by very well on that once-a-year resurfacing. This meant that the *via Fujino* was considered an excellently-maintained road by comparison. But that was to be expected, said those back home who knew the woman whose name the *via* took. Anything Shizuru considered attached to her name and person, the woman always took great pains to keep immaculate.

The first news of note came to her from her close friend's cousin, who was becoming a friend herself. Urumi Himemiya-Kanzaki had been asked by Chikane to write this particular news, she said, because the latter woman had feared it would bear a tone of petty vengefulness were she the one to write of it instead.

*Although I don't know how that exempts me from giving it the same tone, wrote the patrician-turned-plebeian. Suou may not have been my sister, but she was still my cousin . And as I have no sisters of my own, she served that function in my life. I do not hesitate to tell you that I take great pleasure in delivering this news as a result, which concerns the accursed man whose bungling left her dead.*

*As you already know, he was brought to trial for treason, extortion, and essentially overall incompetence. I'll not run over the specific charges again, as we are both familiar with them. In fact, everyone within twenty kilometres of Hime could recite them at the drop of a hat.*

*Public interest was high from the outset and trial attendance was spectacular: it's been a while since the last treason trial and the People were eager to see the man who led a whole legion to ruin-the most terrible military loss we have had in decades. A great many of the families of the deceased were in attendance, I think, both for the slain officers and rankers. The fear for the crowd was that Masashi would run before any of them could lay eyes on him. That was his prerogative, of course, as every Himean is afforded the chance to go into voluntary exile if he wishes not to face a court for his sins.*

*Here I must confess something that I think you will not look on too*

*harshly: I wanted that prerogative denied him. I wanted him to stay and face the court so he could be made to pay for what he did in front of everybody. I wanted them to see his disgrace: the people, his peers, the families of those his stupidity reduced to shades. Everyone had to see him fall, and to allow him to escape, I felt, was to deny justice.*

*For this reason I saw fit to round up some men, some of those I marshalled for your cause when I was still a tribune of the plebs. I placed them outside his house, hidden in shadows and dank alleys and ready to shadow the man the moment he stepped through his doorway. If Masashi tried to leave the city with his most precious belongings bundled, they would have forced him back into his house and kept him there until the trial. Perhaps I told them they could also rough him up a little while forcing him back into the building. This came to nothing, however: he didn't even try to leave Hime. I wish he had, since one of the men I had shadowing him has the largest fists I've ever seen on a mortal-it would have given me great pleasure to see Masashi with a blackened face after a blow from one of those buckets.*

*As it was he showed up for the trial looking presentable enough. Though that didn't last long, given how many members in the crowd were carrying foodstuff in their hands. The consuls had to summon the lictors from their quarters, just so we could get the crowd to let the man pass and make it to the Treason Court.*

*The presiding magistrate of the court this year is Natsuhiro Yoshinaka, who may come from solid conservative origins but is nevertheless a man of genuine integrity. For the prosecution Chikane lined up one of the most memorable lists of Military Men and Women also endowed with a talent for speechmaking; they were headed by none other than Jinto Urusawa, Chikane's old friend as well as a Military Man of no mean calibre.*

*The reason for getting so many martial personalities together is clear to you, I am sure: Chikane wished to impress upon the court and all listening that Masashi was deserted by Mars when he committed maiestas, if Mars even ever deigned to walk beside him. If ever there was a message of the gods willing someone to be condemned for military failure that would be it.*

*The defence wasn't short of personalities itself. Both Sergay Wang and Haruka Armitage were part of his defence, which I will admit made me like both of them better than many of the other Traditionalists. Most didn't even turn up at court and pleaded ill-though we all knew they were only scared the crowd would turn on them. Wang and Armitage clearly disliked their tasks too. Neither looked too fond of the man they were defending whenever they turned their faces to him. But it was their duty to defend him since they were the ones who got him the command you took back, and they put up with it.*

*I'll not repeat the speeches made, as I sent copies of them with this letter. Excellent though some of them were (Urusawa-san's deserves special mention), not a single one matters. What really caused all of those jurors to forget the existence of the word ABSOLVO was the wind-the wind the people blew across the backs of their necks, the threat of pitched violence that hung in the air. Had they wanted to get out of that place alive, the knights on the jury could only vote one way.*

*So the outcome is this: Takeda Masashi has been stripped of praedium et pecunia, forbidden fire and water within a thousand kilometres of Hime, and deprived of the citizenship. I am pleased to report that he looked absolutely wretched as he passed through the Porta Esquilina to quit our great city. But for all that he looked a broken man, I admit I still wished he had been broken further.*

When Shizuru read this letter to Natsuki, the Otomeian turned away and hid her face. As the older woman understood her lover's need for privacy when it came to the topic of Suou Himemiya, she did not press her for a reaction. For herself, she agreed with Urumi in wishing Takeda Masashi even more ill than he had already received-although she also had to admit she was still pleased with the severity of the sentence they had given him.

The second bit of news from Hime was less pleasing. The hot summer had apparently not been unusually hot in the north alone. It had extended to the south as well, which had seen no summer rains at all and now seemed set for a drought all over Fuuka that would last the winter.

*Or so say all the seers and soothsayers the Senate and grain merchants have consulted, Chikane wrote. But it is not so much what those have to say that makes me fear it to be a true prophecy than it is what the farmers are saying. I have sent agents to my farming estates to check the lands and sound out the managers and tenants, and the consensus is this: we are in for a terrible drought this year.*

*Drought is always terrible, of course. Droughts mean withered estates, no grapes on the vine, no profit for either the farming peasant or the rich landowner. Droughts mean bad harvests or even no harvest at all. That can only mean growling bellies in the Forum, which leads to the worst kind of trouble.*

*So yes, droughts are always understood to be terrible, even when the word is not explicitly mentioned. It must be explicit in this case, however, and due to various circumstances that I shall explain. Let us begin with the most irritating of them, which comes from our all-too-important, grain-growing province of Sicily: servile revolt is here again.*

*Another gang of Sicilian slaves, it seems, is running rampant on the island. Gang, I say, but that may no longer be the appropriate word. Now it has grown into a proper little army, at least going from the reports we have been getting. The first notice we had said the ringleader had only about a few hundred slaves with him, but reports since then have claimed numbers upwards of seven thousand!*

*The rogue running them seems to be persuasive: he gathers discontented slaves to him like flies to honey. He claims to be of North Fuukan extraction, alleges himself descended from noble stock in his native province, and is now calling himself the slaves' king. They acknowledge him too-which, if nothing else, serves to show that they are still slaves in their thinking. No true Himean would ever accept a leader claiming the title of "king". Not even a Himean of the capite censi, so my wife assures me.*

*I am certain their numbers have gone up since the last reports, so the figures above are likely already obsolete. Still, it does serve to show you how swiftly the group swells. You might be wondering how this is so, particularly when the great farms of Sicily all installed*

*guards several years back. Well, the Senate certainly counted on that measure containing this revolt, especially when the reports of this particular rebellion were still meagre and its members the same.*

*What we did not count on, my friend, is the idiocy of the Sicilian landlords.*

*After all the previous slave revolts in Sicily, of course, everyone knew that farming operations in the province had to be run more tightly. The Sicilian landowners certainly knew it, given the losses they had been made to suffer by all those revolts over the years. So they did as advised by their peers and senatorial relatives, militarised their properties' defences by installing guards and armoured overseers to look over the labour force. And those of us who had opportunity to visit Sicilia nodded approval, murmured that at least a visible deterrent to revolt was now in place.*

*I think we would have murmured something else had we known that many of the armed and armoured guards on those properties were slaves as well.*

*I know, Shizuru: I can hardly believe it myself. It seems that our sestertius-squeezing, money-milking plutocrats decided to cut their costs again by using slaves for guarding other slaves. And why not, they reasoned, when that would mean they would not have to pay them proper wages as they would have to pay freedmen?*

*This is folly at its best, as you and I well know. What would be the point of using slaves with weapons to deter servile revolt? Indeed, it would only make it easier, as we would be putting arms in their hands from the start. As the Sicilian slaves found out these past months, to the Sicilian landlords' collective embarrassment.*

*So now we have an army of slaves tramping all about the place, with a good number of them bearing arms their masters gave them. As they raid more estates they come upon more weapons. There are some estates that try to resist: not all the landlords employed feckless slave guards, we must admit. But most of these were overpowered by the growing army. And you know each time an army wins a victory, it also recruits new members more easily.*

*Now I come to the sorriest part of this Sicilian story. When it was apparent that something had to be done-and you know that with the House, that means three steps later than the ideal time for action-the Senate ordered one of the current praetors to take a cohort of troops to the island and put down the revolt. Eri Toshino was the one chosen. I think she is a relation to one of your legates, although I cannot be sure at the moment.*

*At the time she was sent, the slave army numbered about four thousand, or so we think. Again, take all the figures I am providing as unverified. The lack of information here is shameful, especially when you consider how close Sicily is. We have more precision from the reports of your faraway campaign than we do from reports on a group of slaves in a nearby province-although, yes, that would be due to the difference in our sources for either case, would it not?*

*As I was saying, Eri Toshino went to face four thousand. Not all of those were fighting fit. There were of course invalids, pregnant women, children, and greyhairs among them. We could not expect all those able to fight to be equipped with arms either, as the farming estates on the island only have so much gear in their individual armouries. So it was expected that Toshino-san would subdue them speedily, even with only one cohort of troops.*

*How it happened otherwise is still much-debated in the Forum. Toshino-san and her legionaries were overpowered by the rebel army and she only managed to get away before being taken captive herself. She says the army was bigger and had more able fighters than expected. She also says more of them were armed than expected. I submit these may have been true-in fact, I am inclined to believing her sincere in her reportage, which leads to more questions for us-but I also submit that these would not have been problems for a commander of finer competence than the one we had sent. Nor would it have been a problem for finer legionaries than the raw recruits who were slain and stripped by mere slaves.*

*Whatever the case, the embarrassment was too large to bear. Not only did the rebels trounce our army and send our praetor packing, but it also captured two other officers who had to be ransomed by their families. The Senate is seething and has deputed no less than the outgoing senior consul to take two legions to Sicily.*



*All well and good, I can hear you say. Keigo Onishi is no flimsy general and will surely deal with the rebels more ably. But now we come to the matter that started my discussion of this in the first place. With all of this going on, Sicilia's fields are lying fallow. Even those that were sown and which managed to survive the drought have no slaves to reap the crop because they are either dead, have joined the rebels, or are too afraid to work in the fields.*

*In sum, whether or not Onishi-san does manage to put down the revolt before the year's finish, we may be assured of one thing: there shall be no grain from Sicilia this harvest.*

*Not good news when you consider that we now have three active armies to feed on the field (we increased the troops in Asia Province due to the unrest over there, by the way). And then there is the true worry, the population of Hime itself... for it is when the people begin to starve that they are most susceptible to rabble-rousers, who can manipulate them into all manner of atrocities against the senators and their fellow citizens. A starving crowd may crave wheat, but what it cries for is blood.*

*It goes without saying that we shall be importing grain from abroad—the Senate has already passed a measure authorising its agents to cast their nets as far overseas as may be needed. But you as well as I know that it is hardly a matter of money or even reach. Droughts tend to strike everywhere at once, and reports say that both Asia Province and Africa Province were hit by it as well. Egypt is similarly troubled. Alexandria is even in ferment once again because the Nile's inundation has stayed steadily in the Cubits of Death. The Pharaoh shall have his hands full, as shall we if we do not find enough grain to keep the Head Count quiet.*

"Ye gods, what a headache!" Shizuru exclaimed after reading the passage to Natsuki, who scowled in sympathy. The Otomeian was an army veteran, after all, who knew the enormous amounts of food required to keep an army going. Even more in winter, when the troops had to remain stationary for months without much opportunity to forage or raid enemy storehouses.

She knew a large part of the grain that the Fujino Army consumed was brought in from Argus, and that most of it had been sent up to

that port province from the grain-rich lands in the far south. If those lands had been afflicted by drought-just as this one had been, though perhaps not as badly-grain from them would be sparse. The Fujino Army would have to look to other sources to augment its food supply until either the drought or revolt ceased.

"I will send messengers," Natsuki offered. "Our provinces may be able to spare some grain. Your people can also buy from further east, from Rheia, using our agents. I will have them look even further."

"Thank you, I appreciate it," Shizuru said, accompanying the words with a peck to her mistress's brow. "I shall talk to our allies too in the southern cities and those in the west. The Firensians shall have to put up more of their harvest as well. Oh, a pox on the Sicilian landlords! This is what comes of having tried to settle too many former legionaries on an island. Himeans do not do well on islands, legionaries especially."

Natsuki's face spoke her confusion clearly.

"What?" she said. "I do not understand. How does the problem in Sicily connect to legionaries? I see no connection."

"No, I suppose you would not." Shizuru put down Chikane's letter and helped arrange the pillows so Natsuki could sit up too: they were in bed talking. "You know we settle our legionaries on land after they have served their requisite number of campaigns. The land is their reward for their service to the state and it provides them with gainful employment as farmers after the wars are finished."

"Yes, you explained this to me."

"One of the first places we carved up into legionary settlements in this way was Sicily. The reasoning seemed sound at the time. There were still some insurrectionist local tribes on it back then and it was a fine place for agriculture, with soil able to grow anything. Settling veterans of our armies on it would resolve the former and take advantage of the latter. Or so the intention went."

She looked rueful as she continued.

"But Sicily is an island and it was not even a very developed one back then. It is different now, of course-there is culture, there are proper markets, all the amenities Himeans expect from their cities. But back then, it must have seemed rather an awful, backward place to the first legionaries settled on it. Very few of them were pleased at the prospect of spending their lives there, separated from the rest of what they considered civilisation by the sea. It did not matter that it was a very short trip over the water to reach Fuuka's southern tip. They also thought the tracts of land they had been given, individually, to be very small."

"And were they? Small?"

"Only by comparison to the ones given some other legionaries in what was called Outer Fuuka at the time-but it was a foolish comparison, really. Knowing all we do now and having seen the productivity of both regions over the decades, everyone knows the allocations made by the senators of the past had been just: no soil in Outer Fuuka can compare to that of Sicily for sheer richness. So though the individual parcels of land were smaller, they were also of far higher quality for those given lots in the latter place."

Here Natsuki smiled with understanding.

"They did not see this, naturally," she said, "because they were too busy complaining to try to see it, I am thinking?"

"Precisely. The vast majority of the veterans assigned lots in Sicily never even planted a single harvest-they never saw the astounding potential of the land they had been given by the state. To be fair, that was not purely their fault. There were others of more opportunistic nature who saw what they could not and who contrived to get the veterans off those lands before they got a chance to see the same thing."

"Thus the rise of the great plutocrats and landlords of Sicily," she concluded. "Most of these were Himean themselves, and they saw in Sicily a wonderful opportunity for investment. Their agents quickly flooded the place, persuading the landed veterans to give up their lots for supposedly good bargains-though they say most of the lots were sold for far less their true value-and thus accumulating side-by-

side lots until they managed to put together great estates. All for distant landlords based in Hime or Fuuka. So the veterans quit Sicily before they could ever spend sufficient time on it as stable Himean presences and the province fell into the hands of a few estate managers running large properties."

"This means that instead of many individual landholding free citizens, the inhabitants of Sicilian farms became large groups of slaves working for absentee owners instead. To be sure, the same thing is true of many other farms in many other places. Some of my own estates are run with similar arrangements. But Sicily seems to breed unrest among slaves more easily than other provinces, so large groups of slaves can be unwise on its farming properties. Due to its isolation, revolts also tend to pick up speed faster over there by virtue of being easier to ignore for the capital."

"How would one resolve this?" Natsuki pondered. "The troubles of Sicily?"

"Different persons might answer different things. For myself, I see two solutions."

Up came a fist: her thumb stuck out from it.

"First would be to defeat the current slave army and punish its members in a memorable way. The goal is that slaves everywhere would recall the example thereafter and learn to steer clear of revolt."

The index finger came out, the thumb staying as it was.

"Second would be to institute a law ordering Sicilian landlords to have freedmen make up a full fifty percent of all those in their employ, drastically reducing slave numbers on the great estates. The revolts seem isolated to slaves due to the sentiments fuelling them. So, let us reduce the number of slaves that can gather on a single property. This would also create more jobs for actual free citizens, diminishing unemployment. This measure would be hard to pass and enforce, I suspect, given the expense the landlords would have to suffer to implement it. But who cares? To be a Sicilian landlord is to be rich, so they should be able to afford it. They can

cry foul all they like provided they foot the bill."

She put down the fist. Her companion nodded slowly, absorbing the solution with the admiration of someone appreciating good sense.

"Which solution do you prefer?" she asked Shizuru, who seemed to frown a little at this.

"Prefer?" the older woman echoed. "The two go hand in hand, Natsuki. I would prefer to implement both, although I would have to see the situation myself in order to be able to better evaluate it, naturally. At the moment, though, only Onishi-han can do that-and I do trust his judgment."

"She said he was... 'no flimsy general'," Natsuki recalled, screwing up her eyes in recollection.

"And I agree with her. But even so, who knows when he shall be able to end this? Too many eventualities exist. He might finish the matter by or before winter, which would be good. Or he might not."

"Which would be bad?"

"Definitely, and not just for him or for Sicily."

Shizuru smiled, but it was shaded with wryness and held little genuine humour in it.

"The reason I am glad for my five-year guarantee of command," she told Natsuki. "Once a politician exits his office, it is possible for someone else to take away any commands he gained during his term. Onishi-han is a political moderate, which means that while he has no great enemies, he also has no rabid supporters, no powerful backing party. And the officials-elect of the new political year, going from the list Chikane sent me, are predominantly conservative. In fact, both consuls-elect are conservative. My, but the scoundrels must have bribed right and left to get elected despite the stink of Takeda Masashi's association."

"Bribe? Will someone not catch them for this?"

"For buying votes?" The Himean laughed softly. "Certainly

accusations of it fly every election, but it actually gets by more often than it gets prosecuted."

"And now that they have bought enough votes to win... office? What will they do?"

"Whatever they like, I imagine," Shizuru said, bisected brow lifting. "But as relates to our discussion, I have a strong suspicion that the Traditionalists will conspire to take the Sicilian command off Onishi-han at the first opportunity."

Natsuki looked displeased; she shifted against the pillows supporting her spine.

"And replace him?" she asked. "As they tried to do with you?"

"Yes-but they actually succeeded with me, Natsuki."

There was a scoff.

"No one could *replace* you, Shizuru," she said. "So they never succeeded."

Shizuru pretended to wince, though her grin peeked through it.

"Oh god, my ego," she said. "Keep it up and it shall grow to be the size of Greece one day."

"What makes you think it can become smaller, Shizuru?"

She pinched the Otomeian's arm and was answered with a slap on her own.

"Anyway! The Traditionalists would try to replace Onishi-han with a conservative consul-commander. I doubt it will come easily to them, especially with the Masashi fiasco so recent, but a consul taking over a command is a different thing entirely from what happened in our case. There is infinitely more justification for it because he is the elected consul, occupying the highest office in our state."

"But if one is consul, why want it?" Natsuki demanded. "There is no glory in fighting slaves. What commander-yes, what consul-would be

interested enough in it to take the task from another?"

"One looking to use it as political leverage for something, Natsuki," Shizuru explained. "I imagine one of the consuls might want to use a win in it to demand a victory parade. Putting down slave revolts does not merit a *triumph*, but it can get an *ovation* based on precedent. And many a senator too flimsy at strategy to ever hope for the former would be perfectly happy with the latter instead. Are you familiar with the *ovation*?"

"Yes, I read of it in one of the books you gave me. It is a... lesser kind of *triumph*, no?"

"Exactly right. Less of a spectacle, true, but still a spectacle where all of Hime shall be celebrating the parading commander's personal glory. That makes it something to remember for the rest of one's life, as well as for one's descendants to boast of long after one's death. One could invoke it too later as a distinguished achievement, if one wishes to run for the consulship again."

She shut her eyes to rest them as she continued speaking.

"As for the Traditionalist cause, a conservative commander's victory in Sicily might become a stepping stone for them-if they can link it to their party, it could lead to further political strengths. Public support would go their way again. Indeed, they seem to be regaining some of their prestige even now. Haruka-han certainly is. Do you remember Urumi-han's remark about liking her better in that letter she sent some time ago? The one acknowledging Armitage-han's and Wang-han's courage in doing their duties in Takeda Masashi's defence panel?"

"Yes," Natsuki said.

"Well, you should understand then that it is possible for certain individuals to escape the taint of their fellows, often by appearing the best of a bad crowd. Even if Armitage was shamed too by the fate of her party's pawn, she still managed to come out of it a little better than the rest of the archconservatives, I think."

Here she started giggling uncontrollably.

"Wuh-wuh-what is funny, Shizuru?" Natsuki asked, looking at her as if she thought the Himean slightly demented. "This is not bad for you? I thought she was your enemy?"

"The most obdurate one in the whole of the Senate," Shizuru agreed, finally managing to control the laughter. "But oh god, one of the most hilarious as well. Come, let me read to you Chikane's latest letter. You may understand then why I am laughing."

*Your beloved friend, Haruka Armitage, has been making a hero of herself again, and in that inimitably comic way she has made her own. I mentioned the drought to you in a previous letter. You should not be surprised to learn then that the water supply is lower even here in the city. Many of the aqueducts are still bringing water in, but since it is not as plentiful as it usually is, some arguments over rationing and usage are arising.*

*Now for whatever reason, Armitage-san has decided to make aqueduct upkeep her great cause this year. Certainly we need it, but why should she of all people tend to it? Some in the Forum are saying it is because she ran out of water in the middle of taking a cold soak in her own frigidarium-but we both know that story is fictional. Armitage-san being herself, no one who knows her could credit her doing something so decadent as to fill her private bath with fresh water in the middle of a drought.*

*Whatever the case, she began harassing the custodians of the aqueducts, insisting that they take more care with their duties. She started doing her own inspections of the pipes, checking the system for leaks or loose stones, and generally making life a headache for all the water wardens. You know what the woman is like once she has the bit between her teeth; she even demanded to see the records for the citizens' taxed piping.*

*Now we all know that pipes leading off the aqueducts are only taxed when they lead to private homes-as it should be, for to have water brought directly to one's house is a privilege. It saves one's household a great deal of effort as the slaves need not bring up water daily from the public wells and fountains.*

*But this generally means that only the rich get water piped straight*



*into their homes: the amount of water needed to run a household daily can be very high indeed, and rises too with the size of the household itself. The bigger the water demand, the bigger the bore of the pipe leading to one's home from the main channels must become... and the bigger the tax collected by the state.*

*Still, the convenience is sufficient for most of us who can afford it to pay for the privilege. I say "most", since there shall always be misers trying to get something for free. And while we tend to assume that the worst of those misers are often part of the business community, imagine Armitage-san's surprise when she discovered that the biggest transgressor this year was a senator and not even a member of the pedarii. In fact, it was a consular of no less than the august Hida family.*

*It was Takeshi, uncle to the Atsuko with whom you worked on a case during your year in the courts. You might not know the man-I myself needed to search my memory to recall his year as consul-but it is said he lost most of his fortune after having bought so many votes for the office, as so many end up doing. If it is true we have an explanation for the miserliness in his transgression, people say. Even so, we have little explanation for the excess of it: the only reason Armitage-san noticed him was that he had the audacity to illegally install three of the biggest-bore pipes in the aqueduct and leading to his home!*

*One can only imagine what he was doing with so much water in his house. All manner of jokes are sprouting in the Forum, from talk of an orchard (as though one could fit into a Himean city lot!) to jests about him planning to renovate his home and turn it into a public bath. At any rate, Armitage-san cared nothing at all to speculate on the topic. All that mattered was that he was cheating the state of its due taxes, and he was getting free water at a time when every drop might mean a grain of wheat.*

*Armitage-san delivered one of her most powerful speeches to date. She hounded and harangued the House and our senatorial hydro-hoarder by turns. It was rather thrilling to hear, as she did not stop at Hida-san and kept disclosing more transgressors at every opportunity-the poor senators she named were forced to sit there for the entirety of the lecture. The best part, however, was undoubtedly*

*her conclusion.*

*To understand what makes it so apt, I am compelled to disclose something being bruited about by our peers: that Takeshi Hida has a special fondness for initiating very young boys into matters of the flesh. Nothing too risqué in that, if one were to be hard-nosed about it, if only that were all... but the rumour goes on to say that his fondness is not only for young boys but specifically ones of senatorial blood.*

*It was a rumour that nearly lost him the race for the consulship, my sources claim. As well it might, considering the conventional distaste for cradle-snatching (despite the regularity with which it really takes place).*

*At any rate, whether or not the rumour about Hida-san's predilections is true, I cannot and obviously shall not say-and I cannot and shall not say either if Armitage-san knew about it or not. All I can and shall say is that her closing tirade in that day's session had half the House on the floor with laughter.*

*"And you!" she bellowed to poor Hida-san, rearing up at him like an outraged matron. "You're the worst, you criminal! Stop sticking that pipe of yours where it's not allowed! Go find a place where you can pay for it! How would you feel if someone stuck their pipe in your waterworks without telling you, eh?! What if someone sucked from it and didn't even have the decency to pay?!"*

*Had I still been consul, I might have granted her a division to test every one of those queries.*

Shizuru burst into laughter again, Natsuki trying not to do the same and only succeeding by pressing her knuckles to her mouth.

"Would she?" the Otomeian demanded. "Give it a division?"

Shizuru let the giggles run out before answering.

"Perhaps she might," she said slowly. "Chikane has her share of mischief, despite what some may think."

Chikane's letter was rolled up again and deposited gingerly into the

toughened leather cylinder protecting it from the elements.

"I wonder if it is possible to dislike a person yet like them at the same time," Shizuru thought aloud. "Armitage embodies many of the things I dislike in Himean politics-the relentless use of filibuster, the unthinking resistance to change, the opposition of personalities instead of their propositions. Yet one cannot deny that she has her share of courage. Besides, the things she says sometimes make me feel privileged to be able to hear them, all the more as she says them without knowing how others take the words. I very much doubt she understood the double entendre in what said, you know. How could one not like someone so accidentally on-point?"

Natsuki was shaking her head, although it was clear she was still amused from the way the corners of her mouth kept curling.

"That is your impossible humour, Shizuru," she told her lover. "If she is as *troublesome* as you have said before... and if she were of our people instead... she would have fought more than one duel by now. If she could live through the first."

Again Shizuru laughed.

"I am sure she could. They always said she was a good fighter. I never saw it for myself, though."

"Would you fight her in a duel?"

"I doubt she is *that* good a fighter, Natsuki."

"How would you know? You said you never saw."

Shizuru knew she was being teased but answered anyway.

"*Please*," she said with a pride that was only half-contrived. "I would only be in danger if yells could cause mortal injury-although hers do come close to achieving that, I admit. Besides, that midget would have to do a lot of stretching to even come close to touching me."

Natsuki was all agog, asking how Shizuru could have missed telling her before that her nemesis was so tiny.

"Well, no, I was only exaggerating," Shizuru admitted. "Blame the rhetorician in me. She is actually of average height for our women. But as you are so fond of telling me, I am very tall not just for our women but even our men."

"Yes," said Natsuki. "That must make her angry."

"What? The difference in our heights?"

"Yes." She paused. "She will say you always look down on her."

Shizuru blinked.

"Was that a joke, Natsuki?" she asked the Otomeian.

"No," Natsuki said.

But she flushed all the way to her ears so Shizuru knew the answer was really yes .

"Oh, it was very funny, *meum mel*. Very witty. It really was."

She could have dodged the pillow with her reflexes but decided to let the girl have that, at least. She put it gently to the side afterwards and tried to look contrite.

"Guh-go back to your politics, Shizuru," the still-fuming princess growled, her entire face aflame. "And do not think of sticking a pipe somewhere. The tax will be *very* high for it."

Thus she squirmed under the covers and turned away from a properly chastised Himean. It was a petty miff, however: forgiven even before the sun arose. It was forgotten too the moment new topics for discussion sprang up between them.

And discussion there always was. There was little else to do in those fall days aside from the usual military routine. Her legates had begun to show their mettle by dealing with their areas of concern and demonstrating their competence-their regular reports pleased her a great deal, as they confirmed that her faith in them, especially the new ones, had not been misplaced. As for her own area of concern and Gorgo, Shizuru preferred to work with a free hand.

Better to let its queen run it much as it used to be run, she told her lover, albeit without the terrors of the old tyranny. She wanted the people to see that Himeans were not the monsters their king made them out to be after all.

As a result of this and the good conduct of the legionaries-Shizuru's centurions kept her boys and girls on a firm leash-the locals gradually came to terms with the foreign army in their city that fall. Their good opinion was helped along by that presence's obvious economic benefits: legionaries on campaign made excellent customers for cooperative towns, so much so that Gorgo's more enterprising merchants got over their fear of the invaders in just a day.

The Himeans were pleased too by their present arrangement. Camp near a thriving city was always more agreeable as it meant they could have access to all the usual civilised amenities: markets, taverns, and-perhaps most importantly-brothels. The Mentulaean whores, male and female, very quickly learned to look forward to the foreigners in the red cloaks, with their friendly ways and generous purses.

It was the Otomeians who continued to intimidate the locals, ironically. It was a little strange, as these were also peoples of the north-but they had long turned their attention northwards and to the east. This meant they and the empire's denizens had seen scant congress before the war.

The Otomeians were a suspiciously taciturn people: they tended to keep to themselves. When they did speak to the citizens of Gorgo, they did it in a less recognisable Himean than the red-cloaks did. They did not seem to enjoy the loud business of bartering and some even appeared to find propositions from prostitutes offensive. They were uniformly tall and blonde and they seemed to insist on always wearing light colours for their garb-although there were a few hundred who gave locals chills, as they seemed to be in perpetual mourning. These particular Otomeians seemed to wear only black whenever they appeared. And to make them even stranger, they also seemed to venerate a very pale if beautiful character whose diabolical familiar made all the locals back away and cringe.

"They think she's a what?" Shizuru asked with a laugh when the queen of the city mentioned it to her as well as the character herself.

"A sorceress, one dealing in animal magics and spirits," Azula answered. "Are you, Princess Natsuki?"

The scowl said everything.

Azula nodded.

"I'll have people spread the word," she said. "Still, it shouldn't be too much of a problem even if they think it."

Thus fall wound down for into winter for Shizuru and her army, and through it most of her concerns shifted from the Mentulaean Empire to her home. By comparison to the north, Hime seemed to still be boiling with overt conflict and frank activity, and as political developments in it were ones Shizuru could touch only faintly from far away, it also seemed to promise more worries for her than her province-in-the-making.

One day, at fall's end, she went seeking her mistress with a scroll-cover in hand. She found the princess in one of the stables used by the auxiliary cavalry.

"I need senators on my payroll," she told Natsuki with a smile. "A letter from Shizuma."

Natsuki looked around: only three grooms were in the stable, it being the lazy afternoon hours when people and animals preferred to retire for a short sleep. She clicked her tongue to catch the grooms' attention and looked to the entryway. They bowed and made a swift exit.

"What is in it?" she asked her commander.

"First, her opinion that the Carsinii seem to be up to something, because they have gone completely quiet following the last battle she fought over one of their towns. She won that battle, naturally."

A smile. "Naturally."

"But she says that since then they have become too quiet for her taste. And the minor leaders-thanes and such-who agreed to sign alliances with her and Hime have been acting strangely as well. Shizuma smells treachery in the wind."

Natsuki's stroking of Aurea paused; green eyes asked the question.

"Oh, she says not to worry and that she has it in hand even if something happens. Besides, we are not that far away. A messenger can get to us from her position in a few days' time. What concerns me more about this news is that if it is indeed true about the ones who signed a treaty with her, we now have indication that the Carsinii do not find it difficult to break contracts of solemn oath. They are among the largest and most influential subdivisions of the Mentulæan people-that does not exactly bode well for our other treaties, does it?"

The princess looked dark: her culture despised oath-breakers as the worst kind of scum.

"That is a thing of shame," she growled, eliciting a smile. Shizuru approached and brushed fingers across the furry collar of the polemarch's dark cloak.

"Yes," the Himean said. "It is shameful to break oaths. But even if it does happen with the Carsinii, I shall have little choice save to hope that it will not with all the others. I want a province that retains the cream of its people, not the skeleton of one that I shall need to repopulate with peoples I bring in from far away. My goal is to have sufficient intelligent local leaders come to our side by showing them how much they have to gain from working with Hime. I can hardly achieve that by refusing to treat with them from now on just because I suspect one rotten seed."

"I have noticed," Natsuki murmured in Greek, "one rotten seed spreads corruption swiftly."

"So cynical at such a young age," Shizuru said in mock-dismay.

"Well, it is not as though there shall be no punishments made to deter traitors to alliances. Consistency and time serve as marvellous tools for enforcing many things. I suppose we shall see what

happens when it happens."

Natsuki turned and moved to the stall beside Aurea's. An enormous black snout was already snuffling needily and reaching for her.

"Niger," she whispered, and gave the animal a titbit she had been holding. She looked to Shizuru and spoke again.

"You did not explain," she said. "Why do you need more senators in your - mm, in your pay? And how does it connect to Shizuma's letter?"

"Well, it was Shizuma who drew my attention to it," was Shizuru's answer. "News of yet another victory for the archconservatives: they have managed to win several divisions in a row within the senate against reformist proposals. I shall not bore you with the details. Suffice it to say that they really do seem to be recovering their popularity. So I may need some insurance soon. Shizuma has sent me a list of ambitious young men and women of senatorial blood and depressed finances."

"Ahh. I see."

"Good." She noticed Aurea's golden head coming her way, the animal's odd pale eyes pleading. "May I have some, Natsuki?"

The polemarch offered the pouch from which she had been giving the horses treats and Shizuru picked out one to let Aurea nibble on it.

"She is offering to broker arrangements with them," she told Natsuki, petting the filly's strong neck. "Better if she offers introduction to me first, after all, than having me approach them."

Footsteps approaching from outside made her look to the stable's entrance: it was an Otomeian, judging from the garb and looks of him. He took one look at the polemarch's head-shake, turned around, and walked away.

"We might actually have to let some of the grooms in here to check on the horses eventually, you know," Shizuru said, amused. "Should we move our conversation elsewhere?"



"Soon," Natsuki said, still stroking Niger. His nostrils expanded, trying to get more of her scent. "But not yet."

She did not look away from him as she added: "I do not understand. You say you will buy senators for your security. But the officials of the year... they are not already elected?"

"They are," Shizuru admitted. "But I am thinking of the future. It is still unlikely that they can really do much to hurt my command at the moment-remember the five-year guarantee. You might say I am merely buying several years early."

"Ahh."

"What I do find strange, though," Shizuru frowned, "is that it is my cousin who gave me a list of all the up and coming young senatorials in debt. Considering they are nearer to my age than hers, how does she know this much about them, one wonders? I did see her surrounded by quite a number of them when we were still in Hime, but I thought that only the usual mob of admirers for her, little more."

"It could be it was then?" Natsuki suggested. "Perhaps she is... *cultivating* them?"

A hungry grin: "I love that word."

Natsuki laughed and accepted the kiss.

"But yes, I think that may be what she is doing. In fact, I think she may be making a little posse of her own. Well, well, my politically apathetic cousin may not be as apathetic as she likes to appear after all."

"Or as ignorant in - ah, things military?" Natsuki supplied.

"She is definitely not ignorant of those things," the commander said with pride in her relative. "Those fools in senate were predicting she would turn out a terrible senior legate. What satisfaction it shall give me to show otherwise in my reports! I daresay many of them shall be green with envy once they hear of all my legates' exploits. It is not just Shizuma, you know-everyone has been doing splendidly!"

Natsuki smiled.

"So we stay here for the winter?" she asked, finally turning away from Niger.

"So it seems, unless something happens to require my presence elsewhere. But for now this place shall do, especially as it is capable of providing the food and supplies we need. Those who talk about war but do not actually play a role in it themselves never realise, I think, that supplies are often what dictates a lot of the prudent general's strategies. We could have pressed on all the way to the northern mountains this autumn... had it not been for the worries over whether or not we would be able to find sufficient grain on the way. And how could I expect the men to fight against a more numerous enemy with empty bellies? Food always comes first, whether in life or war. Spilling blood is secondary."

Natsuki nodded.

"But," she offered, "it may be that this drought lowers supplies too for the enemy."

Shizuru said that was true.

"So all in all, despite the drought, I profess myself fairly satisfied with our winter arrangements," she told her lover while putting an arm around the Otomeian's waist and leading her out of the stables.

"Though I do not mind saying, dear one, that I would give anyone a million sesterces if they could tell me exactly where and what the Prince Calchis was doing!"

# Chapter 67

***Replace the spaces with full stops et replace the 3 X's with "C-O-M" absent the hyphens.***

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## ***Vocabulaire:***

1. ***Ala, alae*** - The singular and plural forms for a cavalry unit. For this story, an ala is set at 500 horse troopers.
2. ***Boom*** (Eng.) - A cable used to prevent naval vessels from passing through a portion of water.
3. ***Denarius, denarii*** (L.) - The singular and plural terms for one of the more common Ancient Roman coins. Like today's coinage, denarii could (and often did) bear different designs based on the issue.
4. ***Dioscuri*** (L.) , ***dioskouroi*** (Gk.) - Refers to the twins Castor and Pollux, who were revered by Ancient Romans and Greeks alike.
5. ***Gemini pro geminis*** (L.) - "The twins for the twinned."
6. ***Nausea*** (L., also Eng.) - English takes this word from Latin, where it originally signified "seasickness".
7. ***Our Sea*** (Eng.) - A literal translation of the Latin term for the Mediterranean, "Mare Nostrum".
8. ***Sagi*** (L., pl.) - The singular form is "sagum". It is the standard cloak legionaries used for foul weather, described as thick and water-repellent.
9. ***Tirocinium fori*** (L.) - a term of apprenticeship at the Roman/Himean legal courts, undertaken by budding politicians.

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## ***Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae***

*par ethnewinter*

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Prince Calchis passed through the Ruviccan.

This was significant. It was not because the task involved epic effort, nor even epic persistence. It would have required both had his army been any other, for the Ruviccan was no small grove to cross with a mere intention. Beyond its breadth was the other obstacle: its holiness and all that came with it.

This was the most sacred of Mentulaean forests. In it Esus had strolled in the days before men, leaving behind as proof a footprint the size of a hut. Taranis's presence was more current: the god still plucked the woods with his fingers. In this forest an oak could be immolated all of a sudden, entirely sans warning and with cloudless sky. Even those trees' remains betrayed the magic afterwards, their blasted forms the silhouettes of horned man-things reaching for the sun...

Easy to believe the trees were the stag men and the green people. Easy, at least in the Ruviccan. It had preceded the empire in its establishment and flourished alongside it afterwards. The first druids were drawn there, enraptured by the myths already woven into its being. Later the druids also came from it, many of their leading members having established homes in its environs.

From this arose the settlement that would become the centre of druidic influence: Tasgetia, where the first "learned" people of the land congregated. This began as a small community of druids on the Ruviccan side of the River Harene. As the druids had been the specialists of knowledge back then, it took no time for it to turn into a town, and later still into a city of great education.

Though druids now established themselves far and wide, this city remained the seat of the fraternity. Every druid spent some years of

his life there as part of his training. He could take instruction on a speciality from various elders living elsewhere. Yet only in Tasgetia could he learn the core knowledge that had always been reserved for him and his like.

The forest had a critical role to play in druidic production. It was a fundamental part of their training to perform ritual incursions into the Ruviccan. There the young druid visited the secret groves and sites of lore. He touched the trees of Taranis and Esus's footprint, and scented the fecundity of Toutatis around him.

Empowering to the druid, who established his connections to the gods in this experience. Hair-raising to the layman, who had learned to avoid the place for fear of being consumed by it. For druidic stewardship of the forest had ensured its unstinted growth, its regular obscuration of tracks with fresh greenery and savage assertion. Getting lost in the Ruviccan was all too easy. Who knew what followed after that?

The young druids themselves only managed to enter and exit with the help of the elders. These men, the foremost druidic minds, knew every path and sacred tree in the forest. No trouble for them to lead a few priestlings through its shaded depths.

Calchis's old tutor, Hiempnos, had once performed such duties for the apprentices. For him to do it with an army was more complex, but certainly not outside of his considerable resources-which included the support of his fellow priests when he sent ahead to tell them what he was doing.

"It may have been a nuisance to us at first," Calchis confided in him. "But now I think the hands of the gods in it. If we had managed to cross the River Holmys, who knows what might've taken place? We might've been caught between two or more of their armies before we'd found our feet on the other side of the river. Instead we get to gather ourselves before meeting them. Even the men's spirits are higher for having passed through the Holy Forest, though they were wary enough of entering initially."

"All to the good," Hiempnos said. "Your men will not make light of their accomplishment, despite having had little trouble in doing it. It

enlarges your reputation that you managed to come through the Ruviccan with an entire army. People will be talking, and it will be good."

"They'll know you and the other druids were helping me."

"Not all will think of us as the makers of the achievement. The conclusion is the same-that the gods and their stewards favour the Prince Calchis, who is thus worthiest of this war's command and of the throne."

"We've a ways to go for that yet."

"We will go wherever necessary, My Prince. Are you certain you prefer to camp at Vedio? Tasgetia would be willing to take us for longer than a simple resupply. You know you have the support of all my brothers."

"I don't want to burden you for too long. Besides, Vedio is nearer where I want to go. If I camp the army there, I can't be accused of anything."

Hiempnos harrumphed thoughtfully: "Vedio is nearer the Himean positions than Kereia, where the king is."

"Harder to call me a coward if I'm standing between them and him."

So out of the Ruviccan went Calchis and his army, towards druidic Tasgetia for restocking before heading on to Vedio.

It was in the latter leg of the journey that Calchis parted ways with his troops, although only temporarily. He charged his officers with conveying the men to their target and detached a regiment of riders to accompany him on his detour. His intention was Kereia to the west, where he would have been called later anyway as word spread of his return.

Both Kereia and Vedio were very far into the empire's northwest. This was not the purview of the western warlords, whose territories covered only part of that boundary. Their part was referred to as the "Western Frontier" because it was bordered by a periodically-hostile state: the Kingdom of the Nervii, which abutted the south-western

half of the empire's.

The northern half of the western boundary, though, was next to a less contrary neighbour. Celsor was ruled by a young king who had married one of the Mentulaean king's daughters. The Celsorian sovereign was friendly with the empire and occasionally aided it in its military ventures. The only reason he had not joined his father-in-law this time was that his troops were already engaged in conflict with another neighbour. Had they not been committed elsewhere, he would have sent Obsidian more than the five thousand Celsorian swordsmen currently with the latter's army.

So no-one called the northwest of the empire a "frontier" because it did not fit the situation. The word suggested an element of danger lurking just behind a very near line. Not the case for that area, which was more or less secure and reliably loyal.

Prince Calchis, in fact, considered it especially loyal. The lands of Kereia and Vedio were populated by the Mentulaean tribe known as the Ganni. Calchis's mother was a Gannian noble. The prince therefore had no fear of foreigners being in the area without his knowledge. He knew the people and knew he could rely on their fidelity to him.

Yet he was still a product of the court and the dangers it bred. He knew that there were other threats against his person besides foreign armies. Thus he appeared at Kereia garbed like the rest of his escort: in the drab woollens and green cloaks so common to warriors of the Ganni.

He found the city in a lather of concern, though his sister looked untroubled when she appeared. Then again, that was Faris. She could pretend a gale a breeze if it was more politic. It was a happy faculty given the general storminess of royal living.

"Gorgo's loss was bad enough," she told him, pulling off her own disguise as she inspected the room he had rented. It was on the ramshackle side and none too airy, but that suited their purposes.

"Then defection of Firens and its allies," she continued, subsiding into the chair he pulled out for her. "Everyone's biting fingernails.

You heard about this?"

He fell into his seat and pulled a harsh breath.

"How couldn't I?" he demanded. "The druids were gabbling about it in Tasgetia. A terrible business. Word has it they slaughtered half the nobles of the Western Frontier."

"Let's remember the nobles of the Western Frontier have been raring to do that to each other for years. Should I call for food and drink?"

"No-but while that's true, it's a different thing. To think I'd been hoping to rely on them!"

Her eyes showed true but measured sympathy.

"We could have," she said, emphasizing the second word. "The grievances between them and our father would have made them more likely to favour an alternative. But we were too slow on it, I'm afraid. The Himeans must have made them an offer first, and I can imagine how attractive it must have been. What a pity! I know we could have used their armies."

"Yes, we could. But we can't count on those anymore."

"Not for now."

He stared an inquisition, a line asserting itself between his mouth and one cheek.

"Not for now?" he echoed. "You think a time will ever come when it's otherwise?"

"Why shouldn't it?"

"They've slain their neighbours and made a pact with the enemy. No greater betrayal's possible here."

"We may be accused of betrayal in our own way, Brother Dear."

"On more than one count! But we aren't handing over our dominions



to foreign rulers, are we?"

"I doubt the Baron Entei will be doing that either. Or should we now call him 'King'?" Her eyes came up and registered the surprise in his. "Oh, I don't know if that's the way the wind is actually blowing. I just think that's what he'd have bargained for with the Himeans, knowing him."

Calchis folded his arms and pulled his big head to his chest. He said nothing for a while, which she allowed comfortably. There was a companionship that did not always demand speech.

A chair creaked: his heft was straining it. He planted his feet on the ground firmly and looked at Faris.

"You're right, damn it," he grunted. "That's what he'd have negotiated, and they'd have agreed. He's a far craftier man than most people think him. A partial kingship-they'd not have promised him all of it. Rule of Firens and nearby territory, probably."

"Exactly what I think."

She tapped the table with her finger and looked at the dust she picked up that way.

"Anyone who betrays an ally once can do it again, I think."

"Of course they can," he said for reply. "But doesn't that just make them cursed unattractive allies to everybody?"

"We'll see. Anyway, it's only an option and may even cease to be that eventually."

He knew that tone. " *Tell me* ."

"The throne has sent Prince Nagi on more diplomatic duty," she said, her tone mocking. "This time, to the Kingdom of the Nervii."

This produced a change on the masculine face, a new colour and interest breathing life into it. The Prince Calchis was as dark of eye as the Princess Faris: where animation showed in hers as a gleam, however, it broke into a fetching sparkle in his.

"He was sent to spur them into attacking their old foes," he guessed, voice hoarser than usual from excitement. "The western warlords and their fiefs, which have divorced themselves from his authority."

"And his 'protection', or so he puts it."

His laugh hurled across the table and nearly displaced the dust on top of it.

"What a devious old goat!" he guffawed, chair creaking afresh with each convulsion of hilarity. "I wouldn't have thought he still had it in him. Inviting another player into the game! You must admit it's wicked-in the best way possible, I mean."

Her answering laugh let him know exactly how wicked she thought it.

"Father had one of his strokes of inspiration," she mused. "You know he only gets them whenever he feels his position in danger, like some animal instinct. Maybe it's necessary for anyone who would be king of a land such as this? I would admire it if it were more controllable, but I see no evidence of the same genius when his status seems safe to him."

Up shot his eyebrows: "Faris, wait. What did Nagi do to trigger this instinct?"

"That old thing." The pleasant, oddly sincere smile turned to him. "You already know. Nagi's success in retarding Himean action at the start of the war was a little too successful for our sire. I suppose it's been stewing in his mind for some time. He was just slow in acting on it."

"Still, *Nagi*?" He snorted his opinion of their half-sibling. "That lily couldn't threaten a virgin if you armed him with a phallus at the ready."

"Maybe not, but that part of him isn't what our father fears. He always fears plotters more than soldiers. It's a reflection of how he himself gained the throne. Why do you think the most favoured members of the court aren't related to him? He'd clap all his family

members in irons if he thought them capable of plotting successfully."

"I thank the gods he doesn't see how much of a plotter you are then."

"That's exactly how much of a plotter I am, actually," she shot back. "The move is inspired, isn't it? We both know the Nervii will still be nervous about his invitation to attack the empire's Western Frontier. They'll take the deputation hostage as leverage for the future because of it. They'll think it a particularly attractive hostage party, in fact, since one of the members is a son of the king. What they won't know is that the king wouldn't want them to return said son to him. If the war did end with our side winning and father still in power, I think he'd provoke the Nervii just to ensure an execution takes place."

Calchis whistled with grim humour.

"He'll run out of sons at this rate," he quipped.

"I hope not, or he'll go through the daughters next." She waited for him to finish sniggering. "What are your plans, Calchis?"

Calchis felt the beard curling on his jaw and scratched at it. It had added to his disguise, but he was already tired of the way it felt on his skin. *I plan to shave*, he thought, before giving her the answer she was really seeking.

"It depends. What's the attitude here? Do they want him to meet the foreigners or aren't they worked up enough for that yet?"

"They're definitely worked up enough for it. I told you earlier - no nails left to chew here. And then there's the fact that we've nearly eaten Kereia out because of all the troops. This drought hasn't been forgiving on the crops."

"No, it hasn't. The harvest was thin even where I've been. Luckily that means it's thin too for the Himeans. Will he actually fight them soon, you think?"

"He's been thinking of it. Mind you, I use that appropriately: *thinking*.  
" She looked rueful. "All their successes have been making him

pause, along with the winter's onset. I think he thought that the Baron Terrigos at least would triumph against them, even if the others didn't. Before the baron's defeat he was talking about uprooting the army and sacking their bases. Gorgo took the wind out of him. But now that your army's here..."

"He'll want to take over it." Calchis sucked in his lips and blew them out angrily. "I can't give it to him."

"I think it's more like he'll have you accompany his army while still commanding yours, as a subordinate force."

"Either way, I can't do it. It's not just that I don't want to fight again under him. It would be folly to sally out with two of the royal armies in the same field."

He got to his feet, a big and impressive man with big and impressive energy that needed release. In that much at least, he and his sister differed: self-control did not come naturally to him. He paced to a shuttered window on the wall and stopped just short of reaching it.

"We've seen the quality of their leadership these past months," he said quietly. "This commander of theirs is no idiot, is she?"

Faris's expression told him she thought that person very far from it. He strode back but did not sit.

"So she knows how difficult it would be for us to keep both armies together," he concluded. "They're right in our heartlands, they saw the same drought and harvest we did. If their general's half as canny as she's shown herself, she'd just walk her little armies round ours until we ran out of stuff to eat. Never mind fighting. They'd just focus on our supply lines and leave us to starve ourselves with our own stupidity. I don't even know if we could run them down since they march at inhuman speeds. It's beyond belief! The druids said they took an army from Gorgo to Bitur in one day. You've seen our armies in motion, Faris. Could we do the same?"

"No. It's amazing."

"You mean frustrating."

"Also that. So what should we do?"

"Wrest back our rural lands swiftly," he determined. "We need to send the druids out to drum up trouble, especially in the areas the Himeans now count as their territories. I need to raise a fresh levy." A pause, during which there was a flash in his eyes that hinted of inevitability. "We also need to drive the king into facing the enemy."

She wrinkled her forehead.

"I thought you said you couldn't give your army and self to him."

"And I won't, I promise." He pushed a hand through his thickly curling mane. "But I will have to give him a part of it if I'm to avoid getting sent off like Nagi. That's why we'll need a fresh levy, aside from all the troops we've already lost. If anything's been made clear to me in the past months of this war, it's that he's a hopeless war leader. All that time worrying about threats to his crown have dulled the man. Sending his sons and barons and whomever to do all the commanding! It was different when he was the one on the offence. He seemed so vigorous then. But now that he's on defence, he's useless. Look at how much we've lost in territories while he sat here terrorising his council."

The chair creaked again: he was back in it.

"We'll lose the war if he stays in command. You and I will lose *everything*. Now, when we're so close! That would be the worst way, don't you think?"

"It would be," she agreed soberly.

"We have to get him out of the way now, Faris. And I think I actually know how to make the Himeans do it. They've been doing a lot for our cause this whole war. I think it's time we harnessed their menace for our ends one last time. Once he's gone the war effort will be entirely in my hands. Then we'll finally have the proper leadership for repelling these foreigners."

"But about father. You mean-finally?"

"Yes-finally."

He watched the dark vitality of her gaze reflecting his. He had missed her, he felt, as he did whenever they were parted for a while. One needed a conspirator in this deceitful world of theirs; that was what their mother had taught them.

"How lovely," she said. "I was sick of waiting!"

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Shizuru thought waiting a perilous activity.

The trouble with invasive operations was that they bred an illness that took time manifesting. It was an itch that started under the skin, turning into a boil and then a carbuncle, growing more purulent under pressure, storing up ever more force until its outbreak. When it finally erupted it was always beyond simple remedy. Yet dealing with it before that required huge skill, lest the act of lancing turn the early boil into a wound of even greater infective quality.

"Annexations of this size drain you even as you win," the Septentrian province's governor-general said to Natsuki. The latter had just asked if she expected trouble from their foes during the winter. "Yes, I am expecting trouble. Not just from the royal armies and allies but from the areas we already 'control'-I use the word with reservation, to be clear."

The polemarch played with one of the coins she had taken from a purse, flipping the circular piece of metal into the air and letting it fall onto her palm.

"This one has two men on chariots," she informed Shizuru. "Who are these men?"

"I think that's the one with the Dioscuri. Let me see."

"Dioskouroi?" Natsuki showed her. "Dioscuri. Hm."

"Yes. They struck a denarius with Dioscuri that year. Astonishing you did not recognise them."

"It is a long time since we met," the other said archly. "But this trouble of yours, Shizuru. It is not really about the poor harvest?"

"It is-oh, is it ever!"

Shizuru sighed, letting her chin fall onto her palm. She had an elbow on the table and assumed a pose of contemplation as she reviewed her problem.

"The accursed drought halved the harvest from here to all sides of Our Sea, Natsuki. The far south and east has fared slightly better- your trade ally Rheia and parts of our own Asia Province-but little good that is to us over here, a whole world away! Besides, whatever food can be spared in those parts is better sent to Fuuka, most especially to Hime. After all... Sicilia."

After all indeed-Sicilia. One of Hime's chief grain sources on Our Sea. The servile revolt it hosted was still raging, the year's hopes of harvest consigned to the flames. Add the widespread drought and a conclusion was clear: much of Hime would go hungry.

The added difficulty the governor of Septentria faced was directly related to her war. It had siphoned able-bodied men and women from many Mentulaean farms into the armies, drafted as offerings from local aristocrats to the cause of the king. Even those who remained had been disrupted in their regular routines. Agricultural activities became harder when armies strode the land and clashed with each other for mastery.

"So there was really nothing else for it but to spread them out further than before," she sighed again.

She referred now to the new winter positions she had assigned her twelve legions. The ever-dwindling amount of grain the buyers brought in had triggered it. Winter had not even set in properly before Shizuru saw the necessity of reorganising.

"I would rather have them in trios or quartets at this stage. You know how understrength my legions are, Natsuki. Alas, that would be insupportable with this grain shortage. Concentrating too many of them in one place would starve them in tandem with the local populace. It is not even a question of money, as we can pay for all we need. The problem is the shortness of the supply itself!"

Natsuki dropped the denarius with the Dioscuri back into the leather purse. She flipped over on the bed and made for the edge.

"Do you want your-"

"No." The Otomeian rose and simply hopped the few steps to the other chair, the purse jangling noisily as she went. She dropped it in front of her lover and got into the free seat. "See."

Shizuru shook her head. "You look like a demented rabbit."

"I like."

"That?"

"Rabbits."

Natsuki was rummaging through the scrolls in a rack next to them. It was one of the many Shizuru's army carried and assembled or disassembled as needed. She reached into its top shelf, which was not segmented into several smaller shelves like the others. The scrolls kept in it were the widest, so they needed the most space.

She put a scroll on the table between them. It was a map of the empire and Shizuru helped her unroll it.

"Show me again," Natsuki demanded. "Where now?"

Shizuru knew exactly what the other was asking. She took up the purse the Otomeian had brought and spilled its contents.

"It always looks better with tokens," she explained, picking up one of the denarii and setting it down on a small square on the map that had been labelled 'Gorgo'. "We are here, of course, with the Ninth and the Eleventh as well as the bulk of the baggage."

The coin she put down was the one with the Dioscuri, and Natsuki seemed amused.

" *Gemini pro geminis*," she said, eliciting a grin.

"Quite so, *mea vita*. "



Shizuru still slipped another denarius under the Dioscuri one, though.

"Just to ensure we remember there are two legions here," she winked, plucking yet another coin from the purse. "Then we have Maiza-han and the Fifth, all the way across the Atinu again. They sit on the westernmost tip of Sosia Province."

Down went the coin right of the line representing the River Atinu. To the coin's own right was a square labelled 'Sosia', a thumb and a half away. This was the city itself, where the governor and all the major offices and establishments stood. Though the province and city had the same name-as was the case for Argus-they were not reducible to each other.

"They may be best-fed of us this winter given that they have both the cities Argus and Sosia near them. They may also be sufficiently far east to get whatever grain comes in from further lands."

Then another coin, this time left of the River Atinu and north of a series of contiguous triangles. The triangles were labelled 'Caledonian Alps' and they stretched horizontally over a significant portion of the map.

Shizuru put the coin on a square right above them. The square was titled 'Trogum'.

"Here we have Keigo-han and the Fourteenth." A tap on the coin on Trogum. "A bit distant from the other legions, but with an excellent position for defence. Kenji-han previously held his place in Trogum's citadel for weeks without trouble. Some of our first allies are also not far from there. Asterion itself is just a few days' march away."

"A month's, for everyone not Shizuru Fujino," Natsuki mimicked so convincingly that Shizuru stared.

"That was uncanny!" the latter said. She was pink with enjoyment. "You should do it in front of her."

Natsuki's was pink too-naturally-but her smirk was plain: "She says it so often, Shizuru."

"Along with everyone else in the army, I wager. Speaking of her, though..."

She picked out two denarii, one to set east of the Dioscuri coin; another northeast of it. The second coin covered part of the thick line labelled 'River Holmys'.

"Shizuma is at Lanius with the Third and Zanki-han is north of her with the Eighth, at Heluvio. They can support each other against the Carsinii, as indeed I intended even before the reassignments. These people need to be brought to heel, at least if we want to take away a critical component of the imperial soldiery."

The Carsinii were among the more numerous of the original tribal groups of the empire. Horse warriors and breeders, they were a huge source of cavalry troops for imperial levies. Their nobles ruled the fertile flatlands running from the city of Berentum-where Shizuru had defeated the Baron Terrigos-all the way to a long section of the Holmys near its confluence with the Atinu.

Lanius and Heluvio were two of their key cities. They had only surrendered reluctantly after successive Himean victories cut their areas off from the rest of the extant Mentulaean armies. Their reluctance remained after surrender, even though they had already signed treaties with their new masters.

Shizuru was wary of them, calling them the horse in her stable that had yet to be broken in. It was why she had kept the senior legate and the cavalry-experienced Zanki in their territory. The Otomeian cataphracti and light horse troops were there as well.

She put down another coin, this time at the convergence of the empire's two big rivers.

"Not too far away is our old Atinu base. There sits the Fourth, helping to rebuild Argentum. Miyuki-han has command there."

She picked up more denarii.

"Shohei-han should also be relatively near them by now," she continued. "Here, at Fregum."

A pair of coins went to the square labelled thus, situated west of Heluvio. Like Heluvio, it was positioned beside a line denoting a river. This was a smaller river than the great Holmys, however, and in fact a tributary of it. The Mentulaeans called it the River Dulio, and the town of Fregum controlled a part of this stream.

"Fregum is on the very edge of the Carsinian territories," she pointed out to Natsuki. "Shohei-han can keep an eye on the next territory as well as on them. With him are the Tenth and the Twelfth."

"Two."

"What?"

"Two legions you gave him." Natsuki squinted thoughtfully. "Where do you send him next?"

A puff escaped Shizuru's nose.

"I would be finished if my enemies predicted me that easily," she said. "I would actually like him further northwest than Fregum, but that will have to wait until spring and more grain."

Back to the River Holmys she went, pointing to a square nearly at its headwaters. It was just south of another cluster of triangles. These represented a range, although a smaller one than the Caledonian Alps lower down the map.

"Here is the Mentulaeen city of Arvern. Are you familiar with it?"

Natsuki answered negatively.

"It is a place of smithies," Shizuru said. "Near it are most of the empire's big mines. It is a town grown around an agglomeration of manufactories for metalworking."

"Ah!" the Otomeian breathed. "Armour and weapons. The source?"

"Yes, or one of the main ones anyway."

"We must take it."

Shizuru picked up another coin from her purse, rubbing its face. She knew all too well the figure on it: a winged Victory.

"I would like that, but it is quite far in. Winter forays are hard enough without a grain shortage. We need more information too about the forces near it, one of which is reportedly a full royal army at Vedio. Allegedly the Prince Calchis finally come out of hiding." She eyed the positions of the coins already on the map. "Either way, Shohei-han can be useful where he is. Fregum is not a bad start on that."

The next coin went to a square in the southwest. It was southeast of Massae, the town where the western warlords had executed their defection.

"And as for Seigo-han and the Seventh, they should even now be approaching Xidia, a city of the Roscii."

This was the name for another of the nation's original tribes. They were known for their footsoldiers, unlike the Carsinii.

"The envoys sent to Xidia said they were surrendering peacefully. Seigo-han can settle down with them for the winter and get those people used to us."

Seeing the laugh in the girl's eyes, she hastened to admit the objection.

"I know the man is stuck-up xenophobe, but he shall do nothing too stupid for fear of me. So I trust, as I made it clear that his purpose is to help me build a peaceful province, not a Hime-hating one. At any rate, on the other side of the river north of him are our western friends. He will have help if he needs it. Kenji-han is also with the Sixth and Thirteenth in Firens for the season."

Two stacked coins were placed on the appropriate square to denote Kenji and his troops. It was her finger's length northwest of Xidia.

"There are still a few feudal armies remaining," she said. "Here and here, for instance. But most have already moved back up to join with the two remaining royal armies. This tells us their command is genuinely concentrated there for the moment. A good thing, in a

way. What do you think of the rumours that Prince Calchis crossed that sacred forest of theirs, to the northeast? The one they call the Ruviccan?"

The Otomeian seemed mystified by the query.

"Why think if he crossed it?" she asked.

"The locals believe it mystical and claim it has no paths for an army. They say what he did is wondrous."

"With a guide anyone can cross a forest. It is no wonder."

Shizuru chuckled: "Says a forest princess."

"And a mountain princess-you forget it."

"*And* a mountain princess, and a cavalry princess, and a Fujino princess-or soon, anyway." She suppressed a giggle at the other's cheeks. "At any rate, the prince's feat might cause problems for us in the spring. If they place enough stock in that petty wonder of his more of the locals might get up enough wind to join his army. I do not want them getting more recruits to replace the ones they lost already. *I myself* need a new levy, given that many of my legions are under four thousand!"

Natsuki smiled at this because she knew their foes would not credit it even if told the figures. It was difficult to believe, especially if you were Mentulaean, that such an outnumbered force could so often win.

"At least they are all blooded now," she said in her native tongue. "This is more important."

Shizuru agreed wholeheartedly.

"But I still need more, my bones tell me," she persisted.

"You sent for them already, no?"

"Yes, I did send Taro-han back home for it. Or back to the more northern parts of Fuuka, at least, since they are nearer. He can

drum up enough fresh recruits from there." She scowled all of a sudden. "The Senate shall be certain to give me grief once they learn of it."

Natsuki was confused.

"I thought they said-you have a minimum of ten legions?" she recounted. "When they authorised this war?"

"So they did. But that was when they were still feeling our losses." There was a brief pause to shake off her own sense of loss, far more sincere than the fickle public's and Senate's. "Now that is a distant thing, as they have concerns looming larger in their eyes. Sicilia and its servile revolt, the scarcity of grain and the mutterings of the populace. The nearer concerns always rub out distant ones. They shall say I am depriving the land of its able-bodied."

"Of... soldiers? To fight in Sicilia?"

"Yes, and of farmers too. No matter that the thin harvest is primarily caused by an act of the gods, or that most of the farms are in fact run on slave labour already-to which I have contributed greatly, by the way. They shall try to pin some of the blame on me even so. Besides, I already have twelve legions on the field. More than their stated minimum, is it not?"

The shadow-banked eyes squinted again, the black lashes fluttering so close they shadowed the green behind them.

"But as you say, your legions are so understrength," Natsuki observed. "If not, all your soldiers would make only ten."

Shizuru said this was true: were anyone to reorganise her troops using the standard minimum of men per legion, the legions thus produced would number only ten.

"But the day the Senate allows logic to precede legalese may be the day it crowns a king again," she said.

The Otomeian had an expression Shizuru was tempted to classify as disgust, or perhaps as disbelief.

"How your people became great with such attitudes is beyond me," she said, again in her language.

"Sometimes it is beyond us as well," Shizuru confessed.

She leaned back and crossed her legs.

"There we have it, my spread-out legions. Most of them sitting in what is still largely hostile if currently-subdued land. All of the areas we 'control' are still brimming with problems. Often they are aristocratic loyalists afraid of their status under a Himean government. Others are not-quite-loyalists who just happen to be incurable dissidents. Considering how we are imposing on their meagre stocks of grain at the moment, that dissidence just might boil over soon. Although I wonder if any of them realise it would be so much easier to just seize all the contents of their granaries. It would be my right, technically, as the conqueror of their lands. Instead I requisition only part of their grain and even pay for what I take. Resentment flourishes for the moderate conqueror as it does for the extreme."

Natsuki's large eyes fluttered open.

"Such is war," was her response.

"And such is conquest. It takes time, *a lot* of time, because true conquest happens in the mind."

Shizuru narrowed her own eyes at the map with denarii.

"The task of my command means that I must take the war beyond the actual battlefield. Beyond the flesh. What we need to finish is the thought of uprising, of a Mentulaeen Empire or people, definitively. That is the true goal, I think, and not actually elimination of all their armies."

Natsuki frowned, although it was not so much in displeasure as in consideration.

"You are saying," she ventured, "we must finish their... their spirit, is it?"

"Oh no, not quite that, for that would be savagery. Their spirit they can keep. But it will need to be a new spirit, one with first allegiance to Hime."

A pause.

"I am saying we must finish their cause, as it currently is. Fighting and defeating their armies - even holding their cities - are only parts of this greater thing."

Natsuki spent a few seconds taking that in.

"How does one accomplish this greater thing?" she asked.

"With time, certainly." Shizuru exhaled and let her chin fall to her palm again. "Among other necessities. I believe we can also make a good start on it by ensuring they have nothing around which to rally. Excepting Firens, which we can use as a buffer between us and the Nervii, there must only be Septentria after this. There must be a province, not an empire. No realm and no kings."

"Difficult," the princess said, "when their king will not even meet us in battle."

"He shall," Shizuru promised. "It is inevitable for his rule, you see."

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Until then there were other fights that chill season, just as she had thought there would be. The first was begun by Seigo Ushida when he marched the Seventh through the lands of the Roscii. He was on his way to Xidia, which said it was willing and ready to host the legionaries.

It was a mostly uneventful march. Seigo also conducted it with little urgency. If he had his druthers he would have stayed north, for that was where most of the empire's wealth lay. He thought of the empire's mines more than Shizuru did, but that was the difference between a would-be mine owner and an actual one. Oh, for a post near one of the big mining towns to the north of the country! Even Shohei Nagayama's draughty camp at Fregum would suit him better than Xidia.



Still he knew his place and followed the orders he was given. He doubted there would be a complete absence of pickings in the south anyway. Booty was like that: always there to be had in some form or other. Sometimes it just took more effort to find or even recognise it.

Seigo's need for money had been enlarged recently. The eldest of his younger siblings had written that he was commencing his *tirocinium fori* ; it would not be long before the next one came of age to serve in the army. Then there was his own career, which was on the up now he was attached to this campaign, but still had yet to peak. All of them needed money! They would not get far without it, even with all their good qualities-of which he knew there were many. Their ancestry and looks were at the top of the list.

Lucky that he had been posted previously with the senior legate and among the Carsinii. They were an unruly people, but their villages had held ample loot to confiscate. And with such would-be-rebels as governed them, it had never been difficult to find a pretext for confiscation.

But now his place was Xidia. Not entirely a Nowhere, but in it. Supposedly one of the chief cities of the Roscii, which was why it mattered: the Roscii were the only numerous southern people to have some affection for their imperial rulers. So he was there to show them that the legions were-what, also loveable in their turn? That Hime was both powerful and preferable to the alternative? To display the attractive reasonability of the nation conquering them?

Fine, then. That was doable. He could display reason, he decided. Even if his idea of reason was equivocal, as it was in everyone else.

The first reasonable thing was to actually get there. He had scouts along with the navigators the commander had hired from some Argus-based and firmly-Himean establishment. But when he entered the lands of the Roscii, several horsemen still came to meet him.

"We come from Xidia, General," they said upon introduction. "Our orders are to see you through these lands and safely to the city."

Seigo looked down the length of his sculptural nose at them.

"And why would there be any need," he asked, batting lashes as thick as his general's, "to see us safe? Are we in trouble?"

The riders exchanged glances.

"No, there's no trouble, General," one of them reassured him. "But some of the places around here still owe allegiance to the king. It's best to be on guard and our leaders were worried. We were sent to help you avoid the more dangerous routes on the way."

"I have my own navigators."

"Yes, we see that, General," they persevered. They could see his distrust of them. "But we're still locals and can come in handy. We know this land better than even your scouts."

One of the tribunes in his party leaned over to him.

"They might be right, Ushida-san," he said. "They might know things we don't."

Seigo said nothing, his face empty of feeling. Suddenly a smile came over it, and the smile was a beautiful thing.

"You're right," he said, and nodded at the additions. "You can help us get there faster, you said?"

"We can."

"So show us the way and work with my men."

They thus travelled for some days with the Xidian horsemen. These worked in tandem with the scouts and even gave them helpful advice on their duties. They also agreed unreservedly with the recommendations made by Ushida's navigators. One day, however, they rode far ahead of his scouts and returned dragging them back with difficulty.

"The path we're to take has soldiers hiding near it," they explained when asked what had transpired. "A lot of them, with their own scouts. We only managed to avoid them because these we know these paths better. It's why we dragged your scouts back with us,

General-they would have alerted theirs."

Seigo frowned and eyed the faint mist ahead.

"How many?" he demanded.

They said they were uncertain.

"Men in hiding are hard to count," said the Xidians. "But we have other ways to go, General. Around that hill to the east, for instance, is another path. Probio checked it earlier and said it was clear of soldiers. We could just slip past them."

The one named Probio agreed.

"Around that hill, eh?" Seigo murmured, looking from one to the other. Suddenly his lips pulled up at the corners. It was exactly the same smile as the one he had shown the first day, when he finally acquiesced to having them join his party. "You boys really did make yourselves useful in the end."

Later that day he fought an engagement with a band of armed Roscii. He had quietly executed his Xidian guides right before it. That was because he had insisted on sending out his scouts despite their warnings, and thus discovered the scheme.

He had then marched the troops through the path originally intended. They made it through safe-as the army scouts had reported they would-then curved back and towards the hill the Xidians had urged him to round. That was where they found the ambushers and reversed the game.

On reflection later Seigo considered that it might have been better to spare some for questioning. But his legion was the restored Seventh, which had suffered more than its share of anguish from Mentulaeen treachery. He would have been hard-pressed to stop their butchery even had he thought of it at the time. The few ambushers who survived had been quick to slip away in the mist.

Three days later he reached Xidia with his army and summoned the leaders for questioning. They professed ignorance of the ambush and asked to see artefacts from the battle in case they could help

identify the double-crossers. Seigo produced some items and they confirmed that these were of the Roscii.

"But this still fails to implicate us, Ushida-san," they pleaded with him. "Though we're also Roscii, all of the gear you stripped from the ambushers is for heavy infantry. There are swords and some heavy pikes here but absolutely no javelins. We Xidians are light footmen and we use the throwing spear. You can even check the town armoury. We've never supplied the king with heavy infantry, only light infantry all these years. In fact, we're celebrated for the quality of our spearmen."

*Although that doesn't mean they didn't collaborate with our ambushers, Seigo wrote in his report to the commander. They say some renegades from other Roscian cities may've been in Xidia and picked up word of my coming. They say these might've been the ones who took that information with them and approached some other Roscian leaders eager to do us in.*

*Maybe, I said. But it's too pat for me. For all we know, these Xidian aristocrats are the very ones who plotted with those other cities. They didn't need to send Xidian troops to participate in that attempt. Even those horsemen claiming to be Xidians may have really been Xidians!*

*I'd like to teach them a lesson. Still, I wouldn't be comfortable doing something without your permitting it. My suggestion is that we arrest and replace all the city's leaders and aristocrats in office post-haste. That would make a striking example and they'd be sure to remember it.*

Reading his letter, Shizuru knew that he also intended to seize the leaders' belongings. He was right in saying there was a possibility that the Xidians had conspired with the other Roscii. Still, there was no proof of it. Absent proof better than suspicion, she could not permit what he recommended.

"I told him that would be likelier to foster enmity than peace," she said after being asked by Natsuki what she had written in response to him. "Instead, I just told him to take hostages from all the likely leaders' families. No one has to die or be disgraced-at least not until

we have greater certainty of that person meriting it. Why the fool executed the false guides I cannot imagine. Now he has no one to milk for further information supporting his theory. Mistakes come back with a bite, do they not, Natsuki?"

The younger woman chuckled at this.

"Your legate will be disappointed," she said.

"Let him," was the weary response. "The rascal is fortunate he is good at generalling."

Then something more complex developed in the opposite direction, with Shohei Nagayama at Fregum.

Shohei had camped two legions outside the walls of this riverside settlement. As commerce between him and the Fregans was regular, the gates of his camp and the town were always open. One night, however, the Tenth's watchmen heard a lot of unusual noise in the darkness. At first light, they discovered that all the locals outside the walls had either slunk away or slithered into the city.

And Fregum's gates were shut, for the first time since the legions' arrival.

The duty watchmen did not even pause to debate with each other on what had happened. They sent someone to wake the legate. He materialised within minutes of the call, disgruntled but otherwise alert. One look outside and he ordered the most senior centurion on duty to wake everybody.

Not long after, two heralds came up to shouting distance of the Fregan gates. Thrice they demanded these be opened. The first two times there was no response. The third time, however, the heralds were treated to a small warning volley.

The heralds backed their mounts from the arrows in the ground and rode away. Soon they rode back with a third rider. It was Shohei, who asked the Fregans for an explanation. Finally the Fregans deputed a herald of their own, and they called down an answer.

*They feel that we've been deceiving them with our levies of grain,*

his report to the commander said. *Apparently, they suspect our real intention to be to have them starve even as we pretend peace. They say they're close to siege rations anyway with what we're leaving them, so they might as well bear a siege rather than see us take the rest eventually.*

*You may imagine what I wished I could say to this, but I took the calm approach first. I reminded them of the treaty they signed with us, which bore oaths to their gods as well as ours. I recalled all the conditions in our contract, which included the benefits they were poised to receive as thanks for the alliance. I even reminded them of the fact that I have two legions, whereas they have no army in their walls or immediately within reach. To no effect.*

*I've already begun investment of the town. Zanki-san said she would send up a little spare grain that she managed to find in her territory. Shizuma-san also offered to send her auxiliary cavalry my way.*

*I declined the latter. Much of the land around Fregum turns out to be wet meadow and I emphasize the "wet" at the moment. It's so soft right now that cavalry won't be a help. It does explain why the more important Carsinian aristocrats are elsewhere. On the bright side, it also means I won't have to reckon with a relief force for the city. After all, the Carsinii are horsemen and they wouldn't be able to do much good here.*

*I'll write another letter soon and keep you updated.*

So Shizuru was content to let events develop at Fregum without her intervention. When three weeks passed without the town falling, though, she went to Fregum herself.

Her first question to her legate was not actually about the progress of the siege.

"How are the legionaries eating?"

Shohei had expected this. One did not soldier for the woman without learning that she worried more about her soldiers' welfare than for her legates'. Her assumption being, he thought, that legates should be more than capable of caring for themselves.

"They're eating, General, though I'm rationing the grain. We're leaving the salt pork since there's fish. Fortunately, there's a lot of it in the river."

"No legionary likes eating mostly fish too long."

"None of them do." He was sick of it himself. Like the soldiers, he was already hankering for more bread to be put on the menu again. "We're also doing heavy foraging aside from the siegework. The entire Twelfth is out on forage duty this second, and some of the Tenth are fishing over there."

She looked at the group he indicated, which was below them.

Fregum was on a long and gently elevated stretch of land next to the River Dulio, but it was far from occupying the entirety of this plateau. There had been sufficient space for Shohei to build his camp on it, although his was farther from the river. Fregum-or part of its walls, anyway-actually appeared to touch the water, by comparison.

"We're still in good shape, despite it all," Shohei told his commander. "Even if some Carsinii do get it into their heads to relieve the Fregans-which I doubt, as I said in my letter-we shouldn't be in too much trouble. I reinforced the camp, to be on the safe side. It's also high up enough that we've a good view of what's around us, and I've scouts running tight patrols. That's why I've managed to dedicate more of the men to siege and forage operations than usual. Less worry about maintaining a heavy guard."

Shizuru hummed and started to walk.

"Tell me from the start," she ordered.

He followed her and her order. They did a circuit of the plateau's edge nearest the camp, which he knew was because she was checking what defence measures he had put up. She had agreed with him that the Carsinii were unlikely to try to relieve the Fregans. Still, she was a "just-in-case" sort of general. She naturally expected him to be the same.

"Then the Fregans dragged all of their stores inside with them," he

said at the end of his account. "The structures, they left behind. We dismantled everything for materiel, but you can still see the tracks and pits where some bigger structures were outside of their walls."

Shizuru approved of how thoroughly the legions had stripped the plateau. Nearly everything aside from the town and the camp had been torn down.

"That is what you used to build those?" she asked.

She was eyeing the big towers he had put up by the river. There were two pairs of them, with a tower on either bank for each pair.

"Do the city's walls run right to the edge?" she added to her enquiry.

"Yes and yes, but not these main walls. These walls-they're pretty thick, by the way-go around the city on that side, well away from where the plateau slopes toward the water. But there are also smaller walls that start from that big wall and go down to the banks. The space bounded by those smaller ones makes a little protected port for their use."

Which explained why he had not infiltrated the city that way. There would be a second, bigger wall to reckon with even if they managed to land a party on the bank enclosed by the smaller walls.

"We built the towers just where the water enters and exits their stretch of riverside," he went on to say. "We manned them with bowmen and ballistae. They've stopped most of their attempts at sending boats out since they first saw the damage those can throw at them."

"Most?" she echoed.

He looked disconsolate.

"It's one of our problems, Fujino-san."

"Just one of them?" she asked, eyes twinkling. Relief filled him at the sight of it. "Take me around so I can see the work on the siege side. Did you ram the gate?"



"Yes, but they broke the rams' heads off with beams. You can see the winches they were using to drop the beams, at the top of those front walls. I would have tried firing the gate, but-well, you see the weather."

Until then both had been ignoring the weak drizzle. The mist-like spray was ice cold, but neither so much as lifted a hand to shield against it. Besides, they were in winter gear and *sagi*, both of which had seen many a legionary through torrential rains. A winter drizzle was nothing. Or had to be nothing.

Shohei would personally have preferred to get under a roof already, but was obliged to stay out of doors if the general was. He knew she was slightly off-colour because most of her responses thus far had been short, if polite. Now was not the time for him to betray any thoughts of personal comfort.

"Before you tell me about the river," she said. "I hear you summoned captives from Heluvio?"

She had encountered a courier from Zanki, the legate stationed there, while on her way to him.

"Yes, for use in the siege," he said. "We had some captives billeted there and waiting for their slavers. I asked for two hundred of the oldest or weakest ones and had them conveyed here."

"Go on."

"When they arrived, we forced them towards Fregum. Spread the cohorts in an arc around the place. If they got near the towers by the river or near the soldiers, I said, they would be killed. Their only chance to live was to run towards the town and beg the Fregans to grant them safety."

He smiled broadly at her expression, pleased because she was even just a little pleased.

"And did they let them in?" she asked, knowing the answer.

"They were fellow Carsinii-it was hard to say no."

"How sentimental! But how have these added mouths not made Fregum more anxious about its future?"

His smile dripped away with the rivulet of water running down his face.

"They have, but not enough," he admitted.

"Are you certain they are not holding out hope for a rescue party?"

"We can't discount it, Fujino-san, but I have people posted at the likeliest places. We should know if something's coming, and as of yet, I'm confident nothing is."

"Then there is something else from which they derive optimism."

"There is. It's the boats."

"Ah, so we return to the problem of the river."

She stopped and turned to gaze at it. The day was grey and greasy, with just a few scudding wisps of white. As a result, the river was nearly opaque and it looked a very dark blue from where the pair stood.

"Your towers look good," she assessed. "So do the other entrenchments, even from here."

To dissuade the Fregans from crossing the river for escape, Shohei had constructed three more towers on the opposite bank facing the settlement. These were linked to each other by wooden palisades. Similar palisades also linked them to the taller, paired towers Shizuru had eyed earlier. The effect was a long and walled section of riverside that was guarded by artillery- and archer-manned lookouts.

"They do not try to ferry people across with all that over there, I trust?"

"They don't now. Not after the first failed attempts."

She was walking again, this time towards the river, and he took a

double-step to make up the space. He was not a small man, but she was taller.

"What they haven't given up on are the boats and whatnot coming in to help them," Shohei explained. "The little fishing boats they use in these parts can still come in at night. The shooting's tougher then, even if we light every torch we have on the towers. Usually the boats are bringing foodstuff, small amounts to supplement what the Fregans have in there. We think they're bringing weapons too, because there's been an increase in the number of bowmen on the walls lately."

He thrust his chin at the river before them.

"The Dulio flows into the Holmys north of here," he said. "Sometimes, the Fregans try to send boats and people there. We shoot arrows and plug them with as many artillery bolts as we can. The boom helps."

He was pointing to a thick cable floating on the water. It was strung between two of the taller towers, which explained why they were in pairs. Shizuru looked to the other pair, the one upriver of Fregum's port, and saw there was no boom there.

All she had to do was lift her eyebrow.

"There was one yesterday, General," he said. "They cut it down last night. Divers."

"I see. It would be hard to shoot those."

"Especially when it's gone dark, or even if only when the weather's cloudy, like it is now. It's one thing to shoot something on top of the water and another to shoot something actually under it. But we'll rig another boom there soon."

He frowned at the boom-less pair of towers.

"Trouble is, even if they don't cut them off, the booms don't do enough," he admitted. "They can't stop the divers, and there seem to be a lot of them willing to go in even in this cold to aid the Fregans. Oh, I hope their balls freeze and drop off in that water!"

Shizuru looked at him. "And if they are women?"

"Well, I suppose their breasts can go then."

"Fitting," she said. "From what you say, I gather some boats make it past the boom. I suppose the smallest ones can be lifted over or slipped under it?"

He affirmed her supposition.

"I hate naval warfare," he confessed.

A smile broke out on her face.

"You never did duty on a naval mission, did you, Shohei-han?"

" *Edepol*, no, General! Never!"

"Ah-is it *nausea* ?"

"Something terrible. I can't stand all the bobbing and swaying."

"Bobbing and swaying," she repeated mirthfully. "That seems as good an answer as any, now you mention it."

He turned to look at her, wondering what was going on in that unique mind now. She was looking at the swift waters and still ignoring the rain. Her hair was not plastered to her head but there was already enough wetness for it to be darkened. Even with water rolling down her cheeks she looked perfect.

"Go ahead with the boom," she told him, smoothing her wet fringe back until it vanished. "But before you string it up, bring in the other one too. Then have the length of each cable decorated."

"I... *decorated* ?"

"Decorated. People always did say I liked pretty things." She turned and made for the camp. Again he took a double-step to catch up. "Let us get out of this rain so I can tell you what decorations I fancy."

She fancied longswords and the blades on the Mentulæan falces, it

appeared. She had the soldiers string up dozens and dozens of these on each boom with thick rope, taking them from the piles collected from the enemy dead in past battles and skirmishes. These were combined with the sharp and fire-toughened stakes that the legionaries called *stimuli* .

By the time the booms were fully ornamented, Shohei knew both the boats and divers were finished.

"All that 'bobbing and swaying' will actually make these more effective," his commander told him. "The current will keep those blades waving enough to be dangerous even for the cautious. No swimmer will dare come near them now-and in this cold and with that current, no diver will dare swim where it is low enough to fully avoid them."

She left shortly after the booms went up, but not before giving him another piece of instruction.

"I want this town taken, Shohei-han, and my boys and girls in it for the winter. I want every Fregan in those walls taken prisoner as an example. They broke their oath in broad daylight and my legions have suffered for it."

She walked him to a map of the town and area.

"As soon as I leave, get the Tenth working on a wall here," she pointed it out to him. "Four metres high, going this way. Work at the double, as though you plan to surround the town in your siege."

He looked at the imaginary lines her finger had ghosted on the parchment, then to her face.

"Only 'as though', Fujino-san?"

"Do it with frenzy enough and they shall surrender before you are four days in," she said to him. "Appearances, Shohei-han-you must appear willing to do anything and everything to win. When they see you going as far as that, they will give in. Then you can occupy the place and take whatever provisions or possessions remain. Time to show these people we take treaties seriously."

She learned later in Gorgo that Fregum surrendered after only two days of vigorous wall-building. Her legate did as instructed and emptied the town of its inhabitants. Unwilling to waste precious resources on their imprisonment, Shizuru sold the Fregans in a single wailing lot to one of the biggest slavers. The town's leaders were not among these, however: suspecting their fates, they had all elected suicide.

Harsh punishment, she told her lover, but *just* in light of the circumstances. All her work would be jeopardised if she let declared treaty-breakers pass with impunity. Added to which was the fact that Himean treaties were solemn contracts before the deities and spirits. The actions of the Fregans were thus also technically blasphemies. A double-violation had been made and accordingly punished.

Her auditor, who had a way of asking her things others would not, asked such a thing very simply.

"Would you still have sold them all if they had not made a treaty?"

Shizuru considered her lover with fiery eyes.

"No," she admitted. "Only the healthy ones between the ages fifteen and forty-five."

The younger woman hummed and went back to her reading.

"Such is war," she said coolly .

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Not long after the episode of Fregum Shizuru got word from the senior legate. She had, the woman wrote, won a battle against the Carsinii. The commander rode for Lanius at once and left Gorgo in the care of her legate, Toshi.

"We trounced them. What did you expect?" Shizuma stated when asked of the happenings.

The commander eyed her cousin tiredly. She had ridden very hard to get to Lanius without any delay.

"I was hoping for rather more detail," she said, refusing the wine a servant offered. Her cousin sent the slave away and she demanded: "What manner of missive was that you sent? You only said there had been a big battle with them and you won, 'basically'!"

"It was the basics! Anyway, I thought you would understand what I left unsaid, which was that I was composing a more detailed account to send as soon as it was finished. That one you got was just the one I scribbled after the fighting was done. If you'd waited a little more, you'd have received this soon."

She dropped two very fat scrolls on the table, where they rolled apart from each other. One came towards Shizuru and she stopped it with a touch.

"Why did it take so long to compose these?" she asked more softly, mollified. "Did other events take place that had to be included in the accounts or are your scribes just especially slow at taking dictation?"

The other woman dropped into the chair opposite, still looking supremely sardonic.

"So long? It's only been a few days, Shizuru," she said disgustedly. "I know your obsession with speed, but you take it a touch far. Nothing could have been lost or was lost in the days of writing these. And I know your obsession with thoroughness as well, so I endeavoured to list every detail I could in these missives. That way you could add whatever you thought pertinent to the records you send the Senate."

She let a moment pass before adding: "Although I will admit that my personal scribe is still a little slow, actually."

Some moments passed before Shizuru caught it.

"*Ecaster*!" she said under her breath. Then more loudly: "I thought you were planning to seduce that girl, not train her to be a secretary."

"Who says I cannot do both?"

"I do. I am still commander of this army." The red eyes regarded her

in exasperation. "I honestly do not mind you seducing her, Shizuma. That was the thought from the beginning. But could you not use someone more accustomed to scribework when it comes to taking down your reports or else scribble them yourself? That way you get letters to me faster. You can still do whatever you like with her outside of that, even if it does give you slightly less excuse to call on her company while discharging your duties. But you hardly need her company then, after all-I thought the point was to use her for something simpler."

*It was, I thought it was*, Shizuma nearly said, but what came from her mouth instead was this: "Very well, if you like. I have been using more than a few others of late with the simplicity you recommend, though."

A split eyebrow lifted: "Not my recommendation, but your habit, in truth."

"More so than usual, is what I was trying to say."

She thought her younger cousin's eyes could sometimes feel like drills in your brain.

"I see," said younger cousin answered. "This is related to what happened with the Carsinii?"

Shizuma bobbed her head.

"We knew of the Carsinii's resistance to our occupation," she reminded, although there was no need for it. "The trouble was that they seemed content to cooperate even as they grumbled, so we lacked chances to put the most truculent down. All keeping their heads low, the canny wretches."

Shizuru agreed and settled herself more comfortably in her seat.

"I remember I told you I suspected them of doing it to buy time," she replied, folding her hands on her lap. "I thought they were just waiting to get enough of their fighters mustered and armed before unleashing their true protest."

"And I agreed with you. I remember."



The question of the Carsinii had been troubling them all winter. Though calm and obliging on the surface, these people had caused the cousins much misgiving. Ghost wagons making tracks at night, conspicuously armament-free cellars and storehouses. Too many furtive glances behind too much acquiescence, horse herds occasionally doubling overnight at the local pastures. Something big was coming-they just did not know when or how big it would have grown by then.

In their previous discussions of it, both had agreed that it would be better for that thing to come sooner. The longer the Carsinii had to prepare, the more troops they would be able to field for a fight. That they were compelled to do it covertly helped, as it slowed down what might have otherwise been a rapid muster. Even so, it was their land and they had potential recruits always close by. By contrast, the Himean legions were not only far from reinforcements but under standard numbers.

This was the predicament Shizuru had assigned her cousin. Not unwisely, it must be said: she was no blind nepotist to judge her relative's abilities above where they were. Shizuma understood this faith in her and appreciated it enough to give the problem all she had. All she had was a lot-and it included an already notorious talent for seducing women.

"I included in my letters the names and positions of all those I took to bed," she said in telling her story. "Although I do think it would be kinder not to mention them explicitly in the official dispatches. Or do you think that necessary as well?"

"Oh, I think we can preserve their anonymity," Shizuru said with a tone of fascination. "So you focused on the wives and lovers of the Carsinii's leaders, you are saying?"

"Or their near female relatives. In some cases, I even went for the local leaders themselves. But that didn't always work out."

"How so?"

"They had to be the ones I wronged, as opposed to their relations or spouses. Thus I had to be sure to cause great offence afterwards to

drive them away and into anger. But not all people turn to rage when their hearts are broken that way. Some just - how do you put it - they just become *sad*, don't they?"

The younger woman let a moment pass.

"Yes," she concurred. "Some just do that."

Shizuma lifted her hands and took the ribbon she was using to tie back her hair. The silvery mass settled on her shoulders like a cape. She combed it with her fingers, then retied it into the queue she had just undone.

"Well, at least it worked fine on the others, I think," she continued, drawling again. "Though it was a little troublesome. I had to sleep with them while concealing weapons. They could have tried to murder me in bed, for all we know."

Out peeked Shizuru's smile: "That would have been an explosive start to their revolt."

"Not one I would have welcomed, thank you very much." The senior legate looked grim, and in her standard legatal armour, Shizuru thought it made it her look very military. "Anyway, wronged women make excellent mouthpieces for denunciation. That much is the same here as it is back home. Opinions of the foreign legate-and by extension, her legions-plummeted faster than Vulcan cast into the sea."

She reached for her cup on the table and took a sip of water.

"When I judged the time right I sent a disguised rider to Heluvio, one of my best men."

"You were afraid the Carsinii would interrupt your courier? Had they ever done so?"

"No, they hadn't, but I wanted to be sure. In the letter I explained my plan to Zanki-san and asked her to march the Eighth on the double and to a location I indicated. Do it the first day of the week coming up, I said. I also asked her to send back as bedraggled a rider as she could after she got my missive. He had to be in military uniform

and had to be carrying a note that he would proclaim to any soldier within hearing to be urgent and for the senior legate. The actual contents of the note I cared nothing about - I said she could draw a dirty picture on it if she wished."

A loud chuckle: "I doubt Zanki-han could draw anything dirty even if I ordered it."

"She's frightfully clean, isn't she?" Shizuma made a face. "Little wonder we'd never met until this."

The commander's grin was bright: "A self-arraignment, if ever there were one."

"I was heading you off on it. But seriously, I cannot get over how... *principled* she is."

"I think what you cannot get over is that you like her despite that."

"It's hard not to. She's principled but somehow not judgmental. Or is it 'honourable'?" Her sometimes-green-sometimes-gold eyes narrowed, but with obvious mirth. "Do you know what she wrote in the note she sent me?"

"Surely not a dirty picture?"

"Surely not. Let me think." She paused to rehearse it in her head before reciting: "'Let me not then die ingloriously and without struggle, but let me first do some great thing that shall be told among men thereafter.'"

Shizuru's grin grew even brighter at this.

"The Iliad," she identified with delight. "How apt. One does find in her the virtues of Hector-but, we pray, none of his fate."

"None of it thus far, as it turned out," the senior legate said in response. "After she sent me that note, I sent the auxiliary cavalry out. I'd already informed them of the plan, so they knew what to do and where to hide and wait."

"Next it was our turn, so I marched out of camp with the Third," she

went on. "Helter-skelter we went, as though we were in such a hurry to get somewhere we had forgotten all our discipline. Can you imagine how tempting we must have looked to the rebellious Carsinii, the crests on our helms askew and our formation in apparent disarray? How could they have stood it, goodness me?"

Shizuru laughed at her cousin's lazy sarcasm.

"Going from what you said, they did not."

"No, they truly didn't. The first groups hectored the rear of my column the same day we marched. I ordered the Third to march in a tighter position then, as if frightened. Still they followed in our seeming retreat from Lanius, harassing us all the way. They'd been marshalled together so abruptly, though, that they only ever managed to make short sallies. The rest of them were still catching up to us, so we knew they could hardly supply a coherent attack."

"Soon we made it to the spot I'd marked out for the battle," she said. "There's a tributary of the Holmys a little way up from here. I took the Third there until we had the water on one of our flanks. Then we about-faced and stood ground to face the Carsinii lining up opposite."

Shizuru attempted to fill in the rest: "And when they tried to outflank you by riding for the side not protected by the river, the Otomeian cavalry showed up?"

"Yes, I'd had them behind a nearby ridge." Shizuma smiled in reminiscence, some wayward locks of whitish hair making her look somewhat raffish. "The Carsinii were in such a rush to catch up with us that they never bothered sending out scouts as soon as the first ones saw the Third's tail. The auxiliary cavalry, which they'd thought sent to Heluvio, was a nasty surprise when it appeared out of nowhere."

"Was it a hard battle?"

Shizuma took another sip of water before answering.

"Not at all," she said, and without conceit. "They had no notion that

we could possibly be prepared for them. Since they were attacking far earlier than they had planned, they were badly organised. Absolutely no battle plan-the mere sight of the auxiliary threw them into chaos. Then Zanki-san arrived with the Eighth in the last hours of daylight. We rolled them up then, chasing them all the way back here."

"Numbers?"

"The Carsinii fielded four alae of horse and near six thousand foot."

Up went Shizuru's eyebrows. "Good numbers, considering circumstances."

"Very good for winter. Had we waited until spring, there would have been ten times more."

The Carsinii around Lanius would have been able to call on all their kinsmen and fellows in the warmer season, which would indeed have expanded the number of enemy troops drastically. But this latest defeat would make other would-be rebels think twice before orchestrating anything again.

*For the near future anyway, the general thought. And a month later-who knows? It depends on so many things. I did tell Natsuki it takes time. At least this means the Carsinii will be lying low for a while. We headed them off before they could work up a good amount of steam.*

It pleased her enormously that her cousin should have had such a victory. It had been intelligent and daring and not without Shizuma's brand of rakishness spicing it. It was something that she could write into her dispatches with relish. Such good material for reading out loud, and to such lovers of gossipy stories as the Senate! The senators would learn the quality of the woman they had apostrophised as nothing but an apathetic philanderer fallen by chance into a plum legateship.

*Although she did cultivate that opinion herself before this campaign,* she shrugged mentally.

"All of it sounds well done, Cousin," she said, before editing herself.

"No, forgive me, that sounded as though I were making light of it, and I am not. I think everything was brilliant, from the way you precipitated their premature attack to the way you ensured its miscarriage. I could not have done better myself."

"The highest praise from a Fujino," the other said in good humour. "But thank you, General. Shan't you ask what I did with the ringleaders?"

"I was about to. How did you catch them?"

"Merely in the course of battle," Shizuma answered. "Of course, we cannot be certain they were the true masterminds of this petty insurrection. Those might have slipped away when the battle turned. They might even have elected not to come. But if an aristocrat or someone considered a town leader is found in a battlefield, one may assume with fair reason that he is part of the command, can one not?"

Shizuru concurred.

"So all of those who could claim such high status among our captives I separated," the senior legate concluded. "I clapped them in chains, charged them with treason for conspiring in armed revolt, and shuffled them off to Miyuki's camp in secret. I would have kept them here until you arrived, but I had no idea when that would happen. It was a risk holding them here for any amount of time. Local feeling, you understand."

"Yes, it was wise to send them off." Shizuru angled her head to one side and shut her eyes. "When they signed those treaties with us they became subjects of a Himean general governing a wartime province-one still being carved out, at that. Exact precedents are thin, but if we go from similar ones I can carry out judgment entirely by myself."

"Shan't you?"

"I could. Or I could hold a formal trial."

The senior legate blinked. Then she cackled the laughter of the

incredulous.

"Whatever for?" she cried, striving to negotiate the vertiginous heights of her cousin's odd reason. "You said yourself, this is wartime and an annexation! Military rule operates. There is no need for the usual civilian formalities."

"Perhaps, but I am attempting to build faith in a new state and government," Shizuru replied. "Although you are right-military rule is in operation. It is still too early for such things. Only a thought." A lift of her eyebrows. "Did you interrogate them before they went?"

"Yes, but they were stout rebels all. Refused to say much save to inveigh against our 'foreign oppression'."

"Local oppression being so much more preferable," Shizuru grinned.

"I doubt we could have learned anything too useful from them, anyway, that the battle did not already make clear. The upshot being that we were right in being wary of the Carsinii."

The senior legate paused abruptly and threw an indecipherable look at her cousin.

"You saw the wagons being brought in when you arrived?" came her query.

Shizuru had. These were the huge wagons with very tall sides, capable of carrying great loads and expressly made to be pulled by oxen. Mules could not have moved such wagons when they were at full capacity.

"A welcome sight," she said. She knew what was in them since they were fixtures of army campaigns. "Where did you get the grain, Cousin?"

"From the towns and cities of our captured aristocrats," Shizuma replied. "I levied double the amount of grain from these as indemnity, though I deprived none of their homes or liberty given that there was no way of proving their complicity with their leaders' attack. They may well starve, but at least they are alive to do something about it-forage and beg, for instance. Not fight,

fortunately. Fighting takes a full stomach."

Shizuru said that was so and commended the senior legate again for her deft resolution. The next day, riding back to Gorgo with her escort, she mulled over her cousin's reply.

*It's all temporary, the silver-haired woman had cautioned. These people still have more fight in them, and all I did was tamp it down until it comes shooting up again. You know who else agrees with me in that respect? The frozen salt lick-Natsuki's cousin. She didn't want to just double the amount of grain we were requisitioning. She was for taking all of it and burning down the towns I punished. In fact, she favours the idea of burning down every settlement in this territory.*

Princess Alyssa had suggested to the senior legate that the Carsinii be wiped from future history. If they did not exist they would no longer cause problems, whether by supplying troops to the empire or by assaulting the legions themselves. It was true, Shizuru admitted, that it would be simpler: but it was not necessarily the right approach. There were Carsinii in the area who seemed to genuinely want to work with the invaders. There were even some who had suffered from loyalists for their support of the Himean annexation.

These had to be preserved, as far as Shizuru was concerned. They formed the backbone of the new province she was hoping to build. She was not incapable of denuding a land of its people and introducing new ones as replacements. But that was the last resort for dealing with recalcitrance, not the first.

*I'd be stupid not to observe that the Carsinian territories are horselands, Shizuma had said. Or not to observe that the Otomeians are a people who love their horses. Or not to observe too, come to it, that the people next to us and on the other side of the Holmys now have treaties with the Otomeian throne. Do you observe these things as well or do I over-read your lover's cousin, Cousin?*

As a matter of fact, Shizuru thought the senior legate read that woman perfectly.





# Chapter 68

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Barca** - A town in Lydia, N. Africa. The 'undermining alarm' tactic described by Shizuru is related by the writer Aeneas Tacticus, who alleged its use there.

2. **Demetrius** - Specifically Demetrius I of the Antigonids, also dubbed Demetrius Poliorcetes ("Demetrius the Besieger"). This title was bestowed on him in recognition of his titanic efforts to take Rhodes by siege. He ultimately failed, but some of his inventions for that venture gained him lasting fame. The best example is his Helepolis, the biggest siege tower in history. Some accounts claim that when the siege of Rhodes was abandoned and the Helepolis left behind, some of the materials taken from its deconstruction were used to erect the Colossus of Rhodes-one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

3. **Curia** (L.) - Specifically the Curia Hostilia, the Senate's headquarters in Ancient Rome.

4. **impluvium** (L.) (n.) - A sort of cistern that appears as a shallow pool in Ancient Roman domiciles. It was often in the atrium and employed for collection of rainwater (for household usage). While it could have drain holes, these were usually part of the cistern itself instead of located at a distance from it that required a canal.

5. **scutum** (L.) (n.) - The standard shield for an ancient legionary. As it was made partly of plywood, legionaries were obliged to shield it from moisture/the sun by means of a leather cover. This cover was only used outside of battle or on marches where there was zero expectation of running into an enemy.

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**Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae**

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When Shizuru received the next news of interest, it came from an ally's lips instead of a legatal letter.

"Understand that I get this from a druid," Queen Azula-of Firens, no longer the Empire-cautioned her. "It's true the druids have rivalries among their septs, but they're still of one family. The trust I accord a Firensian druid would just barely set him apart from a Gannian one."

She looked a little less careworn these days, Shizuru thought, studying the older woman. Yet Azula now had more duties to worry her than ever before. King Entei's daughter seemed to have found her metier in her new role, which was to rule Gorgo according to Firens's and Hime's interests. Not an easy task and one Shizuru had wondered if the hugely-weary-seeming woman could handle. Now here was the same creature looking more instead of less energised.

"But it still sets him apart?" Shizuru asked.

"It does, despite that." No hesitation. "I don't think I'm merely being captious in putting down the Gannian druids here, but that's for you to judge."

Shizuru asked her to explain.

"The druids of the Ganni dominate the druidic brotherhood. They control all the important shrines in the faith and the Sacred Forest, the Ruviccan, is in their territory."

"Along with the centre of druidic training, Tasgetia. I know."

"The Firensian druids might be hoping to displace the Ganni from that ascendancy," Azula suggested. "Allying themselves with the new regime would make more sense than continuing to cleave to the old empire. My druid-averse husband would be scant help for their aims-his now-likely-heir, Calchis, even less. That prince belongs to the Gannian druids. They raised him, I told you before."

"You did."

"So the imperial side has never been a very cosy one for the druids from our lands. Nowadays, there's also the extreme awkwardness of

their origins speaking against them."

"Yes, your secession must have cast a bad light on all Firensians where your husband is concerned."

"Part of our druid's news is that every Firensian in the king's camp was beheaded."

Shizuru winced. "My condolences."

At this two dark brows lifted.

"That's not necessary," Azula assured her. "Only a fool would have stayed within his reach once news of our defection broke. We Firensii don't encourage idiocy, so I wouldn't count those executions as losses for Firens."

Shizuru's mouth quirked at the assessment.

"I understand the context," she prompted, wanting to get on to the other news from the druid who had just ridden into Gorgo.

The queen acquiesced.

"There's a lot of activity on the other side again," the woman offered in preamble. "He claims to have caught it while passing through the towns northwest, where my husband is now quartered. Fresh levies are being called up in that area and at a great rush."

"We have been seeing signs of that ourselves. The king is marching," Shizuru concluded, having expected no less.

"He is-but I have more. Our druid claims to know exactly where the king is going."

"My! The key word in this being 'exactly'?"

" *Exactly.* "

No point in asking what that exact destination was: the man would doubtless tell her that himself when she interviewed him. What mattered more was whether or not Azula thought it reliable

intelligence, so Shizuru asked this instead.

"Yes." A strong response. "But that doesn't mean that's all the information that matters, does it?"

"You think he might know more than he is telling?"

Here Obsidian's wife paused to think on her answer.

"I lean more to him knowing nothing else," was what she eventually decided. "Because if indeed we have someone feeding us information through him, it's likely they gave him no more than what he needed to convey. Whether he knows he conveys it to us for their purposes or does it ignorant of their intent, it would be safer for them. It's *what he doesn't know* that would matter."

Shizuru thought this good sense and asked to see him herself.

Their informant produced exactly the same answers for the Himean as he had for the queen. Yes, he was Firensian born and bred. Naturally, he thought a Firensian druid far superior to a Gannian one. Yes, he had been journeying home when he saw the king's agents. Of course he had it on good authority the king was going to take his army south very soon, hoping to separate the Himeans and their Firensian friends. Who was the good authority saying this? Another druid, a boyhood friend who had sheltered him during one night of his journey and hidden him from the king's executioners. This old acquaintance was now aide to the present chief of the druidic confraternity. Said chief was attached to the Prince Calchis's personal staff, so intelligence from people near him was generally to be believed.

"The question being," smiled Shizuru's legate, "if we're to be general in believing it."

Shizuru smiled too at this. "You think the idea has no merit, Toshihan?"

"Moving that way would put his army in a pincer! He'd have Firens on one side and us on the other, wouldn't he?"

Her chair creaked as she got up to loom over the map he was

facing. A finger tapped on a spot marked as Kereia.

"You assume there are only three players in the game," she told him. "It is not entirely stupid if he leaves a sizeable contingent of his forces around this place, for instance. The same if he can somehow organise simultaneous uprisings in the areas we already control. Then there is the other thing..."

"The other thing?"

"The one lurking just outside our theatre of conflict."

Her finger drifted, scraping over the parchment without a sound. It fell on a spot west of that marked as the Western Frontier.

"We should not discount the possibility that Obsidian is expecting something from the Nervii. Surely they have not failed to notice the war keeping the empire busy. Why they have not chosen to take advantage of it thus far, we cannot know. But if Obsidian does take the route that druid claimed, it might finally rouse their opportunistic instinct."

"The Nervii." Toshi's eyes were wide, as what she pointed out had not occurred to him. "Why didn't I think of it? Have you been waiting for something from them all this time, Fujino-san?"

"More or less. More, now that Firens has defected to us."

It took only a second for him to apprehend the logic behind her suspicion. Now that Firens and presumably most of the Western Frontier's warlords had broken from the empire, the border Nervii could say that the truce between the realms no longer applied to those lands. After all, they were no longer part of the Mentulaean realm defined by the original signatories in that treaty.

"It would only be a matter of time before those people decide to lend Obsidian aid against Firens. In an unofficial capacity, so to speak."

"Yes, I see that," Toshi breathed, still calculating the added difficulties such an eventuality could yield. "And yes, I don't know why I thought he would immediately take all of his army. He could and *would* easily leave another behind for such a march, wouldn't

he? He has two imperial armies up there now, after all. Why would he reduce it to just one?"

"Actually, he might." She cocked her head at him. "I only think he shall not leave another 'imperial army', such as they use the term here."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that he is very likely going to combine the two remaining, then leave a small part of one of them behind. That rear force will look like an afterthought compared to the one he shall be taking, I imagine. Were I he, I would split my forces into more than two forces to give me better coverage. But really, Toshi-han. Can you see that coming from this enemy?"

The pleasant face bloomed into a crinkly smile.

"No, I can't," he admitted. "So if he leaves a force behind, it would be a much littler one."

"I would stake my fortune on it. I daresay he would actually prefer to go without leaving behind anyone at all. But even the self-styled King of Kings cannot always bend reality to his wishes. It is impossible for him to bring his whole force where he goes right now. He could never feed it, you see."

"That's true, despite the claims of fresh levies of food. Still, should we make any moves yet?"

The cut-ruby eyes regarded him curiously.

"Why?" She sounded mildly astonished. "We know not whether this is true or false. Or when he shall march if at all."

He looked sheepish, fresh lines carving into his face as he pulled it into a smile-cum-grimace.

"I just thought you would want to take action now either way, Fujino-san," he explained. "Move to a better location to interrupt him or strike before he gets more men through his levy. Something like that."

Shizuru turned an amused look to him.

"Indeed?" she said. "No, much though I do prefer to act sooner instead of later. As it is, Toshi-han, the King of Kings and I share a weakness. Neither of us can bend reality to our preferences so easily."

He smiled back, privately thinking that she had a knack of compelling reality's flexibility despite what she said.

"There are other, more immediate concerns and objections," she was saying. "For instance, supplies are strained for us too, so there is little enough leeway for gambling."

He conceded that.

"Then there is the fact that our foes are great tortoises. If we send contingents to intercept them now, our assets might have pickled by the time they finally arrive."

That got him to chuckle.

"And finally..." she started.

"Finally?"

"All of this is arrant conjecture." She clapped him on the back with easy affection. "There is no sense in investing ourselves in something still so uncertain, you realise."

His shoulders sagged ever so slightly.

"That's true," he allowed, before casting her a doubtful look from the corner of an eye. "But we're not going to do *absolutely* nothing, I'm guessing?"

"Careful the Senate's rhetoricians do not hear you, Toshi-han," she teased. "Yes, we can afford just a little something. Send scouts to take up positions along every path from the vicinity of Kereia to the west and the south. Use ones who can blend in and load them with everything they might need for speedy transit in case of emergency. Money, passes where necessary, and two horses always for each



man."

"Should I inform any of the other legates?"

"No. The only one who needs to be told right now is Kenji-han in Firens, but I shall do that myself."

He waited but she ventured no more. He took this to mean she was not going to make that particular legate budge from his present location either.

"What I'd like to know is what it's all about," he mused, looking over the map again for the alleged route their enemy would take. "If we believe someone really did put this druid up to it-and I think we both believe that-then who was it and why did they send us that information? Are they people looking to make friends or more enemies looking to gull us?"

She gave him a look that he felt before seeing it. *Yet another odd question*, the look seemed to say.

"Why should we care about that?" the slightly lilting voice asked. "Their intentions are insignificant because this information is practically insignificant. We already knew of renewed activity over there before this druid arrived. I do not doubt we would have known shortly too once our foe started a march, even had we not been informed of these plans. Was it to warn us or to gull us that our informant was sent, you ask. It matters not because we are neither warned nor gulled. What actions we do take are ones we would have taken presently, even without this specific prompt. Later on this druid's tale may simply be a very minor aid or a very weak deception. A pebble, but not a boulder. Not even a stepping stone."

She smiled at him kindly as he thought on that.

"Never allow things like this to fill your eyes, Toshi-han," she cautioned, stifling a yawn with one hand. "You end up playing into someone else's game if there is indeed someone else. Note things, by all means. But do not overthink them."

She was right that he might be overthinking it, he considered while

enforcing the orders she gave. But he also felt that her relaxed attitude was a privilege exclusive to her rare ilk. Another general would be more troubled by the idea of a march cutting him off from two key legions and his allies. Shizuru Fujino, Toshi thought, could and would yawn instead. But that was because Shizuru Fujino's legions were always willing to march and her centurions always there to prepare them for any destination. Her scouts were among the most efficient he had seen and her veteran officers among the most loyal.

Most importantly of all, her mind was a veritable wonder.

These were not things the enemy understood just yet, even if it had begun to suspect the efficiency of the military machine it faced. Many things in the war might have changed were this otherwise. For instance, had the Mentulaeans truly understood the quality of this foe, a certain warrior-prince would not have sent a druid with news to lay at Queen Azula's feet.

Calchis informed the Himeans of his father's march to ensure their readiness for it. That he did not count this as aiding the enemy was because they would not be facing him. He was excluded from his father's march, ordered to command elsewhere with his own troops. These were now only a fraction of what they had been before his reunion with the king. As Shizuru had suggested to her legate, Obsidian would be leaving a small force behind: it was made of the skimpy remainder of Calchis's old army after it had been cannibalised to enlarge his father's.

In spite of this attenuation to his forces, the prince was untroubled at the moment. It was simply part of the plan, which was what mattered, even more than his army. Even the scheme to cut off Firens from Hime was part of the plan Calchis was authoring. Yet everyone in the know—including the king and Calchis—believed that particular idea to be the king's.

Well, the king did for the most part. Calchis believed it not at all, in reality. In spite of that he was the most assiduous in convincing people otherwise and saying the king had thought of it. That he could even do such a thing was thanks to his sister, whose courtly experience had guided him through it.

"The trick is to lead Father into saying at least one handy word each time he speaks," Faris had instructed. "That's all you need. One word you can seize and pretend to take as a hint."

Calchis had asked, "A hint of what?"

"Of his superior intellect's machinations, of course, which he's trying to get you to see. What has to happen is that instead of telling you what he's thinking outright, he's giving you clues to them. You shall be pretending that he's leading you to his thoughts, like a teacher who doesn't want to just spoonfeed his student. Like a father teaching his son, or a master guiding an apprentice. The idea is to voice your thoughts as though they're your interpretations of his hints and then praise him for what he's led you to realise."

"Sounds too contrived for me. A great general he isn't, Faris, but he's not entirely stupid. He'll think me taking him for a turn, like some of the courtiers he just had beheaded last week. He'll be even more suspicious of people right now. The Court's gone topsy-turvy again!"

Faris's smile had borne the complacency of an ironclad presence in the aforementioned council.

"It's true that he may suspect it," had been her response. "But if you do this right, he'll not suspect it as much. Knowing his ego, that'll lead to him suspecting it not at all, eventually. But let's talk first about why you can pull this off, as I see you're worried about it. You know you've spent barely any time as a courtier, Calchis? What time you have spent in Court has been spent mute yet compliant. You're considered a political lightweight in that regard, even if you aren't one militarily. I've contributed to that by regaling whomever I can with anecdotes of your moronic sincerity and obedience to the throne-peppered with the occasional true story of your stupider doings, for verisimilitude's sake."

"Hah! You're saying he'll think me too slow and too unsophisticated to mean much behind it if I'm the one doing this."

"Correct. He doesn't know you as a political entity. None of them do! So be the dunce they despise, Brother, as it's the only way to do this and live through it. He must always be the genius, and you a mere

spokesman for the ideas he's producing."

"I'll be shockingly grateful for their production," he had smirked, already knowing what to say.

So when his father said "We will break our foes now", he loudly admired the idea of breaking apart their enemies. Such a move would weaken them and let the empire deal with them separately, he observed, which was something only a man of his father's great intelligence could possibly come up with.

When his father said "Your army will give us the size and numbers", he gasped at the enlightenment of using military bulk wisely. Taking the vast majority of the troops and leaving only a small skeleton behind would give the king the power he needed to overwhelm all before him, even as the smaller force helped protect his rear in case of emergency.

And finally, when his father said "Someone less important shall command the troops to be left", he nearly wept with amazement, prostrating himself before the throne's wisdom and charity. His gratitude knew no bounds for being allowed to serve his king thus, he claimed: there could be no greater glory for him than to protect the king's rear. At the same time, he also professed it more than meet that he should not take part in the southwest march. Said march should rightly reap glory for the king alone, who would command it.

"At least, that's what we want him to think," Calchis told his sister as they held their discussions in yet another dark and close room. "But the truth is, it won't earn him the glory he thinks it will. I'll do everything I can to make sure it doesn't, though I don't need to do a lot at this stage. I'll just withhold my best men from him and send a warning to the Himeans about what he's planning. That way they won't be caught unawares... although I do disbelieve they will given how capable they've proven thus far."

"We can leak information somehow. I'll talk to Hiempnos."

The prince nodded and continued talking.

"Also, talk to all our people here, Faris-find all the Ganni unquestionably loyal to us instead of him. Have them hide away as many of their resources as they can so he can't commandeer them for his baggage train. The same for their fighting fit. Give 'em all bandages and red dye and say they've disabling injuries! Or say there's illness going 'round and have them go about weaving in their tracks. Have them hide their warriors away and claim them dead if they have to, so long as they escape his press-gangs."

"Clever!" she said appreciatively. She knew it was so the Gannian warriors would get saved for his levies once the king had marched away.

"I see what you're planning," she added. "But do you really think it's enough to end him?"

"It's more than enough," Calchis responded with eyes blazing. The enormous energies within his person were tumbling about, all astir. Only the import of secrecy mastered the urge to shout that was welling up within him.

"Yet this stratagem to separate Firens and Hime does make some sense," his sister tried again.

"Of course it does. It's why he went for it. But it's... a conditional sense, Sister, and one he can't fulfil. Were I the one implementing it, it might even lead to victory. But he's the one doing it so he won't do everything that needs to be done for it to go that way."

"I suppose I'm concerned someone else might see that, Calchis."

The princess made a steeple of her hands and contemplated her own objection.

"He'll be commanding some of our oldest, most experienced generals on this march," she elucidated. "Not to mention all of his advisers and the totality of the Court-with my exception, given a timely illness that I can see in my future. Put all those minds together and they might be enough to counteract his failings. They might turn this into something fabulous yet by counselling him into what 'needs to be done', is what I fear."

"They won't, Faris. Trust me."

He bounded over, grabbing the smaller hands and pressing them with resolve. Even in his excitement, though, he was mindful not to crush them because of his strength.

"I know war," he declared hoarsely. "I know war! What's more, I know *him* even if he doesn't know me. Yes, he could have a chance with the scheme we've dreamt up for him. I admit it. That chance exists. He even has enough forces now to make a good sally with the right movements and decisions. But like I said, he won't realise any of those. He can't because they go against his nature."

He gave her a grin of confidence and she reflected it on instinct. There was an answering confidence in her grin too, yet he could see it was a confidence in him and not in his scheme. He could see her still waiting, unwilling to release her doubt until he gave her reasonable cause to do it.

It was expected; it did not sting him.

*She always belonged to Esus*, he thought fondly as he looked upon his sibling. Faris belonged to a god with an affinity for air so her mind and spirit ruled her being. Just as he belonged to Taranis, the lord who preferred passion and flame. No wonder they made a good team: air and fire mixed beautifully.

"He won't split up his army because he won't command anything that can't swarm over an enemy. You know this. You know he won't listen to anyone who so much as suggests it because he's also a bully to the bone. Bullies only understand what they want and how to overwhelm others to get it. They're impatient as children drooling over a sticky treat. That's what he thinks he's headed for, Faris. A great, big sticky treat! He thinks he can just waddle along as a result and let the enemy try to bash itself on him. Because he's so sure nothing can take down an army that big. Isn't that just like him? To think all he needs to do is be big!"

They traded smiles, both being familiar with the juvenile side of their sire's character.

"That big army won't last long, even if it does win something. He might get a piece of his treat at first. A battle or two if he's lucky. It won't change the outcome, you see. He's going to get dragged down by his ineptitude and that army's going to trip over itself, which will be the bully's ending."

"If he doesn't manage to run away before someone kills or captures him."

"Aye, there's the beauty of it. They don't even need to kill him, do they? They just need to show him up for the incompetent he is. After which all those still loyal to the empire will look for a better leader on which to pin their hopes for dealing with these invaders."

" Ah . Now I see."

"So what do you think of our chances?"

Her smile said she liked them a great deal.

"Even if we will lose many of the imperial soldiers this way," she cautioned, because that was her role: to caution him. "As well as most of the veteran imperial officers and arms, which is something of a pity. He'll take them along with him, you know, and won't leave you with much when he leaves."

"I don't expect anything else." Calchis broke into hearty laughter. "But I don't care. Let him! That way, all of the forces loyal to him will share his destruction. I want new blood, Faris. You need new blood to make a new empire. There will be new imperial soldiers, so why not new officers? There are hundreds, even thousands of other potential officers around us now. Just as courageous, just as experienced! They work for the nobles instead, for the small aristocrats, for the old feudal powers running their territories under our sanction. We won't run out of men to turn into imperial officers even if that whole army of his ends up dead. I'll build my own army with fresh men, ones levied from the Houses and tribes eager to side with us and ones who'll see me as the first king they've officially belonged to. It will be a better army than the old ones, I promise you... and it will be the one to thrash the Himeans when all this is over finished!"

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A fortnight after the Firensian druid, reports began of a gigantic army in the northwest. It was supposedly the main imperial one, now rolling out of Kereia and geared up for conflict. Further reports said it was picking its ponderous way south and pointing its snout where the druidic informant had said it would after all.

Shizuru summoned the senior legate and told her everything.

"Do you want the Third?" asked that worthy, snapped to attention by the words "gigantic" and "army".

"No, I need you to retain command of it." Shizuru smiled breezily. "I am summoning the Eighth, Tenth, and Fourteenth already. Actually, I sent for the Fourteenth a while ago. It should be on its way here as we speak."

She took on a pensive look, but far from a troubled one.

"Do you not think Keigo Kurauchi-han has been proving quite capable?" she said suddenly. She was speaking of the legate leading the Fourteenth, whose stoutly Traditionalist brother had not been ashamed to ask Shizuru for a post on behalf of his sibling. "I confess I am a little astonished. He had only decent recommendations besides his brother's, so I did not really expect a lot of him."

"Yes, well. But about Obsidian-you shall go after him?" Shizuma persisted, wondering at her cousin's airy comportment. They were talking about a *gigantic army* here!

But "Who knows?" was all the answer she got, followed by a commander going off to talk to one of the lesser officers about something trifling. It was an unorthodox dismissal and not altogether polite, not to mention handed out by someone who had once been babysat by the one receiving it. Little wonder the volatile senior legate was near explosion when a touch stalled the blast she was raring to unleash.

"Ave," said the owner of the hand on her arm. "I am pleased to see



you again, Shizuma."

Shizuma cursed her weakness for pretty young women, especially ones with sparkling looks of greeting. Against her will her scowl trembled. It finally fell away when two pink lips curved shyly.

Yet her irritation with her cousin was not so easily scotched on the inside, so her first words were less than charming.

"You're all oddly business-as-usual here despite the news." Her tone made it plain that it was an accusation as well as a critique. "Does she realise half your natives have barricaded themselves in their homes and the other half taken to furiously debating whether or not to decamp?"

"Yes."

"Yet still oddly business-as-usual."

"Yes."

Shizuma's back bent afterwards from the force of her sigh.

"You know she thinks I came here at her summons but I really came to see you?" she eventually said to the only person in the room apparently still willing to give her serious attention.

The Otomeian coloured as she had hoped, but did not lose composure.

"I am complimented," Natsuki said. "You will walk with me?"

Shizuma was taken off-guard and showed it. More and more oddities in her cousin's offices today!

"It would be my greatest pleasure," she said, recovering her gallantry.

She took the offered hand, which she knew by now to carry scars aplenty. Conspicuously glossy patches and lines ornamented it in an embossed and chaotic relief. Yet the colour on those disfigurements was the same as on the unmarked skin, which was ice-white and

without blemish.

"But shan't they miss you?" she asked. "I know that cur I call cousin shan't miss me!"

"No. Come."

They walked out of the stuffy room and its choking, acidically-paper-scented air. Their exit took them to a colonnaded hall bustling with Himeans and bright with noon sunshine.

The Otomeian guided them through that and many salutes and numerous turns. Shizuma barely recalled their convoluted path afterwards. The route took them to a wide courtyard that was as bright as the hall outside Shizuru's offices. However, unlike that hall, the courtyard was devoid of bustle.

Shizuma took time to survey the place to which her escort had brought her. It was old, to judge by the wear in the floors, which were paved with slate-blue and purplish flagstones. The space was also a perfect square, each side of it the same length. There was a small recess in the centre that repeated the shape and reminded her of a Himean *impluvium*. She did not think it served the same purpose: canals ran from each corner and into drain holes at the courtyard's edges.

Natsuki stopped their promenade by the recessed area in the middle. Shizuma saw that it held only a shallow and scummy layer of water.

"This," the Otomeian said, which word Shizuma took to encompass the whole square. "Where they held many executions."

Limpid eyes regarded the cistern.

"Beheadings," she expanded.

And that was all.

A darkly amused Shizuma processed the words. That explained the concentration of purplish flagstones by the cistern, which she supposed was where the heads and blood fell after the axe dropped.

Shizuru's senior legate realised that it might explain the emptiness of the place too. Doubtless most of the locals associated it with a dark and headless nightmare.

"Have you been talking to the local executioner?" she asked.

Natsuki said she got her information from the Firensian queen.

"An *upper-class* local executioner, then," the Himean drawled back.

She ran a hand through spun-silver hair, wondering what had brought them to this place. She liked her cousin's lover-even fancied her quite a bit, to be honest-but the Otomeian was not really a model of comprehensibility. Sometimes she was easy enough to read, but at other times she reached a level of alienness that extended beyond her status as a foreigner. Shizuma for her part doubted she could resolve that without her cousin's help.

She supposed she could try the direct approach first.

"I am complimented too, Natsuki, to use the words you did earlier. This is the first time a girl has ever invited me to a walk that had a destination so grisly. I suppose you brought me here for a reason?"

"Spies."

The Otomeian said the word in a whisper, her natural register aiding the intended secrecy as well as gravity of the revelation.

"She asked that I tell you after you finished," she went on.

"Somewhere safe."

Hard to stop the laugh. "This place is your idea of safe?"

"Hm." A spark of humour. "The beheaded neither speak nor listen."

"True, although it's hardly as though we could behead someone for eavesdropping on us right here."

Shizuma folded her arms and took another survey of what surrounded them. The nearest persons appeared to be slaves carrying jugs a good distance away, likely too far for eavesdropping.

And she and Natsuki had been speaking Greek.

"She thinks Obsidian's spies are listening in on her own command room?" she asked, low-voiced too.

Natsuki asked if she thought it impossible.

"Of course it's possible," was her admission. "I suppose it's true too, in this place more than any other within the empire. Has anything happened to cause her to worry about spies? Aside from that episode of the Firensian druid-informant?"

The other's response was a denial.

"And you?"

"I?"

"Has anything happened to cause *you* to worry about spies?"

That put a twinkle in the green eyes. "You think me more alert on this than Shizuru?"

"I wouldn't know if I would word it thus," Shizuma admitted, dissecting her own reason. "Why *did* I say that? I merely imagine you've more experience with those than either of us, having been reared in a monarchy."

Natsuki actually grinned.

"But Hime," she retorted wickedly, "is six hundred monarchies masquerading as none."

"Brutal truth," the Otomeian's lover said later when Shizuma reported the opinion. "Although her choosing not to answer your other question really means she has seen nothing worthy of report. That is more or less how we feel about the spy issue, anyway. Highly probable but nothing so alarming yet that we cannot take easy precaution."

By which she meant having their talk in her private quarters, ostensibly away from prying eyes and ears.

Shizuma observed: "For this discussion you thought it better to be especially safe, evidently."

The other canted her head.

"I did not want anyone in the other camp getting the faintest inkling of what I shall do once I lead several of the legions out of this city."

The senior legate's eyes grew wide.

"So you are going to meet him after all!" Shizuma hissed.

"Yes, but not immediately," was the younger woman's response. "I am not about to oblige them with a direct confrontation from the get-go. I want to head up a bit first and possibly dog his tracks."

The shrewd Hanazono mind came to the fore: "You'll try to seize his supplies."

"Right you are," Shizuru said, winking at her cousin and friend. "If I know my Obsidian by now he shall be trailing a lot of baggage behind him. Getting all or even just part of it would be the idea. And who knows? I think I may take the legions on a romp through Comus too, just to remove another cog in the imperial machine. I hear it's one of the only two foundry towns really able to mass-produce the imperial army's falces. It takes a great deal of workmanship, most people do not realise, to get a piece of steel into the shape and sharpness of a Mentulaean falx."

Her expression changed into one of restrained displeasure.

"If there is a chance we can rid ourselves of those things, I shall take it," she added suddenly. "We may be able to get the upper hand when we hit them with ranged assaults or lock them up so tight they cannot swing the damned things about. It does not change the fact that those weapons often leave worse injuries than their swords when they do make contact. I am tired of seeing my men with shoulders and arms sliced like hams! Our only good fortune is that Hime has faced falces before. Otherwise the *scutum* would not have been redesigned and we would be seeing more casualties than we do now."

The fairer Himean said that was true, but then moved to warn her of something.

"One of your ideas comes with a share of risk," she submitted.  
"You'll be in deep Gannian territory if you go to Comus, Shizuru. Terribly loyal to the imperial powers, our people say."

"I know, but it shall not be all that distant from Firensian territory either. Yes, the Ganni shall be informing Obsidian of our movements as soon as we enter their turf. Or shall they be informing the Prince Calchis instead? Either way, either one of them-he shall never be anything but short of finding us unless I wish it. A big army packs a punch, I grant, but it is a very slow one. What matters it if he knows our position when he shall always be too sluggish to get there in time?"

"What of local resistance?"

"I shall deal with it, although I do not expect anything significant. All our information indicates that he has spent his time dragging new men in to further stiffen his army. Most of the Gannian warriors shall already be within his ranks, I think. Fewer militia forces to think about if so."

"You don't think he'll leave a rearguard force to look after that area?"

Shizuru explained her suspicions about that.

"I can deal with it if ever," she concluded. "I would be more worried about what I am leaving you to, actually. You will only have five legions left to hold our current territory, Cousin"

The senior legate thought about that. She knew that would not be the sum total of her resources. Besides those five now-veteran legions were in fact other forces she could draw on, such as the Otomeian auxiliaries and the militia called up from the provinces of Sosia and Argus.

That noted, she was still a Himean of Himeans-and possibly even more of one than her cousin in one way. To her, victory was still something won by proper Himean legions, helpful though she

conceded auxiliaries were.

"We're expecting new recruits any day," she pointed out. "Shouldn't Taro-san be sending up more legionaries now from Outer Fuuka, Shizuru?"

"He sent a legion up already for Miyuki-han's camp. He says he should have another in a few weeks, he wrote to me, and he shall bring that one up himself. I arranged for more artillery to be brought up too. One can never have enough of those, in my opinion."

A pause before she added: "The new legionaries will be raw, of course."

Shizuma had been about to sip from her cup and now put it down with a look of disgust.

"Oh, *of course*," she echoed with distaste. "Much help those would be, Cousin."

"They can be with time."

"Two legions of raw recruits, for Jupiter's sake!"

"It cannot be helped-you know what is going on over there," Shizuru reminded the other woman. "We should be able to find opportunities for getting them up to speed in the coming months. We all have to start somewhere, do we not?"

As Shizuma knew she would likely be the one blooding these novices, her response was a dirty look. Shizuru smiled in apology and amusement.

"It is not as though you shall be entirely without help," the younger of the cousins ventured. "I imagine Miyuki-han shall do a fine job of drilling them even before you can blood them right."

That was a thought. The senior legate had a vision of five thousand pimply youths fainting on a drill field, a remorseless Miyuki yelling their ears off. How that comforted her!

"Miyuki shall definitely take care of them," she purred, at which her

cousin looked amused again.

"Toshi-han also forwarded a letter to me from the King of Caledon," Shizuru disclosed. "I wrote to him advising that he tighten watch over their mountain passes and post some troops on fixed guard near them for the duration of the spring and summer."

Shizuma's eyes cleared, the vision of Miyuki torturing the recruits fading away.

"I see," she told her cousin. "You're worried some of the more adventurous Mentulaeans might get the idea of emulating your march through the massif."

"I do doubt it," the other shrugged. "But better to be safe."

"I agree. The last thing we need is for this war to bleed southwards. He assented?"

"More than that. His letter offered to send a contingent of spearmen over as added auxiliaries. I accepted, of course, although I did advise against sending too many of them."

"Worried about the food?"

"Among other things, although I did ask that they carry their own," Shizuru replied. "It is not as though I cadged those spearmen off him, after all. He offered, so he feeds, is how it goes. No, Cousin, I think my chief reason may be slightly less prosaic, at least in the sense of the prosaic being immediate."

The fire in her eyes banked lower as she spoke her next words.

"Caledon's continued existence was always for our own protection, not so? Their pliancy as allies was a great factor too, but it was really out of defensive self-interest that we pursued an alliance with them in the first place. This area, the Far North, has long been a wild place in Himean imaginations. The people on the other side of the Alps-the Mentulaeans before they all became Mentulaeans-were also constantly embroiled in some manner of tribal or clan conflict. The Caledonian Alps served as a physical barrier against that even back then. The Caledonian Kingdom added a further layer of



defence. Both were meant to stop nasty northern powers that might have been otherwise tempted to go traipsing down to our lands."

Shizuma drained her cup as her cousin mused aloud.

"That's so," she said when the younger Himean was done. She was familiar too with the political history of their lands, so none of what her cousin had said was novel. She knew that it was only Shizuru's roundabout method of saying something else.

So she said: "Is your descant on this your way of saying you don't want to siphon too many forces out of Caledon for Hime's sake?"

Shizuru said yes.

"Remember that it also serves as a near source of auxiliary forces," she told Shizuma. "Caledon's auxiliary armies are the closest non-Fuukan ones for Hime. Especially considering the worsening piracy on Our Sea and what we know of the unrest in Asia right now, I would feel better with Caledon's forces staying at home. They can thus be nearer Hime if something comes in over the waters-an insurance policy, just in case."

"I can understand that."

The senior legate put down her goblet and smirked at the distortion of her face on its reflective side.

"You do realise," she jested, "that this talk of keeping the Caledonian barrier still tempts me to think you do not trust me to control our territory in your stead?"

"Well, do not give in to the temptation!" Shizuru laughed, before suddenly sobering. "Though I do have my fears over that, come to it. Not because of you, Shizuma, but because of what you have to do and what little I have to leave you with to do it. You may have the more difficult task between the two of us, in one way. Do you think my uprooting so many of the legions will precipitate movements like the one you narrowly aborted with the Carsinii?"

A tangle of silver hair was smoothed back as Shizuma pondered the question.

"Hard to say," was her answer. "Despite their moments of savagery many of the Mentulaeen tribes are actually sophisticated, especially the Carsinii-sufficiently so to appreciate the reprehensibility of breaking a contract, which is what matters. There's also Fregum, which I think made clear how we view egregious breaches of our treaties."

She pursed her lips and made her conclusion.

"I think not at first, Shizuru. We shall have quiet at first. But later on? And even later on? The odds against peace mount the longer you and Obsidian stay on the field. Obsidian will have to go down quickly if we want no unrest at all."

"True."

"I am not about to wager on us getting unnaturally lucky in that respect, though."

"True again. You will get your own battles before I am finished, I think."

A pause as the two cousins sipped at their cups in silence, considering their respective tasks. It was the younger cousin who broke the silence.

"Can you handle it?" she said, which drew a smirk.

"Is a Himemiya blue-eyed?" Shizuma quipped.

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It took time to get three legions up to Gorgo, but still less than it would for Mentulaeen troops to do the same. Even the queen asked how long ago Shizuru had summoned them when Shohei showed with the Tenth and Eighth in less than a week. Then soon after that, Keigo Kurauchi led in a very jaunty Fourteenth. These had wintered at the southern citadel of Trogum, a secure place surrounded mainly by allied townships. Owing to this, the men and women of that legion had seen less action of late than the legions of the centre and north.

It was why Shizuru had chosen them in particular for the march she

was about to undertake. It was bad generalship not to sate troops so long hungry for battle. The Fourteenth was also one of her original legions from the first northern campaign. In fact, of the four extant legions from then, three would be coming for the march on Obsidian and the lands of the Ganni.

The auxiliary dispositions she settled early with her cousin. She would be taking all of the horsed archers, some of the foot archers, and part of the light infantry. To these she added some of the horsed skirmishers and the entirety of her favourite horse division, the Lupines. As for auxiliary leadership she bequeathed the Princess Alyssa to her cousin along with the remaining auxiliary. She would have done the same with the other Otomeian princess if she could, but said other princess had a very strong preference to the contrary.

They argued the matter for hours until one gave an ultimatum.

"Leave me," threatened the Otomeian, "and I shall marry my cousin."

So that settled Shizuru's defeat nicely. She surrendered on a condition, however, which she supplied with a look that said she was wrestling an impulse to break something.

"Fine, come if you wish. But if an arrow so much as grazes you I shall wed you to your horse, you accursed wretch. One arrow! Do you hear me? You wouldn't be so distant a pair-a mule is half-horse, is it not?"

"Yet it is not a nag," the other uttered defiantly.

This twisted Shizuru on the first days of the march, left her feeling an abrasive mixture of sourness and adoration. That was not how she wanted to feel when she saw that beloved face, but there was no helping it. This was no march on an open road, as it had been when they had headed to Berentum. This was a sally into enemy lands, with myriad enemy forces that were still unknown quantities. It was so unnecessary to take this risk. Only, what choice had she been left?

The stupid girl would have done it. She would have married that

woman Shizuma called "The Frozen Salt Lick" in a sophomoric tantrum. She would have abnegated all they together had on a single frustration of her selfishness. The stupid girl. The too-wily, too-stupid girl!

Despite her fury there was a part of her that said this could be a good thing. There had to be such a voice in her, she supposed, else she would never have agreed even with that ultimatum. There was still no safer place than by her side anyway, this voice said to her objections on the danger. There were wounds too on Natsuki that only this could cure, the same voice said further on the topic.

She wondered if the voice was the Creature Martial in her sympathising with another. But why wonder about that-what more did it matter? They were on the march already, she and the stupid girl herself!

"Do not think," she said one evening, draped over the other's body, "that I have forgiven this."

The sigh cooled the side of her neck.

"I know."

Moments after, the elegiac voice appended: "But you will?"

She considered lying, but disliked being so petty.

"I will," she admitted. "Eventually."

It was fortunate there was much generalling to keep her busy. She had to keep the army trudging an evasive course, speeding west and north as the foe dragged its ponderous bulk towards the east and south. Shizuru erred on excess with her scouting parties for this march, intent that she should not blunder into the imperial host at too early a stage. What she intended to find first, as she had told her cousin, was said host's baggage so that the men could eat. Food was the desideratum still.

The Mentulaeans followed standard army practice by having their supplies and noncombatants pull after the soldiers. They were also standard in using oxen for their carts, which carried not only army

necessities but also the many trappings required of a royal entourage in transit. There were many such carts with very heavy loads, and there were whole herds of oxen yoked into pulling them.

Oxen are very well equipped for dragging a lot of weight, of course, but not for doing it at speed. Even heavily armoured men will outmarch an ox wagon in a few paces. This meant that the Mentulaean baggage typically fell very far behind of the soldiers. They could be separated by sufficient distance to mean days passed between the army's crossing a marker and the baggage doing the same.

Now what Shizuru was hunting was a prodigious baggage train because it belonged to a prodigious army. It meant two things that she hoped to use to her advantage. First, it would be rolling very far behind the main force given its weight. Second, its guard would likely be either stretched along its length or limited to closely watching just one end of it. She rather doubted Obsidian would leave a full army just for the baggage, even with its importance. Even if he did, she suspected it would be smaller than the five-legion one she carried.

She had the measure of her man and knew he considered himself the most important thing in the army. Never mind the fact that he himself had a vested interest in the army's supplies: what came first and would need the most protection was his person.

That said, she still worked her scouts heavily as she progressed. If she knew anything of war, it was that naught was certain until it had happened.

So the search dragged on, the careful feeling about in the territory in search of an enemy's tail while evading its head. It was not quick given the distance between her force and the enemy's. Shizuru knew it would take weeks before the enemy's baggage came within sight of her scouts, which meant it would be awhile before she could feed her troops Obsidian's hoarded meat and grain. She was also travelling light. No heavy baggage for a Fujino army looking to capitalise on its speed.

She resolved the problem of supplies as most commanders did in

times of great urgency. But she sacked only settlements or villages that did not give her army a welcome. Only those few-and these being loyalist lands, they *were* few-who readily greeted the foreign invaders were spared.

Pickings were meagre from the start. Feeding soldiers on the march was always a challenge in drought-riddled lands. It was even more so when said lands were still chiefly hostile. Then there was the fact that most agricultural activities had been halted by the war. In fact, most of the fields they passed were empty of both crops and dwellers. The latter had evacuated long ago, back when she penetrated the imperial capital and took residence in its vast halls.

While this was a good thing in that it reduced the persons noting and passing word to the foe on her whereabouts, it also meant less food for her army. Shizuru suspected too that Obsidian's levies had already taken a great part of the northwest's stores. So in addition to seizing food from hostiles, the legions were forced to put in a lot of foraging.

It was anything but an easy march, but she had known it would be so. She had been sure too to let the legions know it, even when they had still been in Gorgo.

"I shall not stand here and tell you this march shall be a holiday," she told them in her address before they set out. "The thing is, boys and girls, if we go we will not eat well. We know it for certain. But if we do not go, another thing is certain. We will still not eat well and will be besieged to add to it! That bloated cow our enemy calls an army will eat up everything on the field if we take no action now! It will try to lock us up here or do it to my other legions, your comrades in another city. Licking its lips all the while! Feasting while we starve!"

She had licked her own lips showily and fixed the troops with a predatory smile.

"So it's go or do not go, and neither will be comfortable. I still know which option I prefer. What of you? Which one would you take?"

Thus her legionaries were ready from the start to deal with

discomfort. So set were they to take on the challenge that they even downed meals of pure protein with gameness and goodwill.

Her legate-on-loan from the Traditionalist camp (or so her cousin liked to call him between the two of them) observed this with amazement.

"Not a grumble-when others have mutinied for less!" he exclaimed to his fellow legate.

"Fujino-san doesn't invite mutiny," Shohei said.

"Nor even dissent, sometimes," replied Keigo with a weak smile. He was recalling an unpleasant memory: a terrified Katsu Hitagi cringing before the commander in the *Curia*.

Shohei was a Fujino man to the bone and looked puzzled.

"Why should she, when she's often right?" he asked.

And right she was. It took nearly three weeks from the time they set off, but they found Obsidian's baggage train. Her scouts confirmed its distance from the main force as more than sufficient for her purposes. The size of its guard was also reported to be manageable. The moment she had all she needed, Shizuru pulled a double march to catch up with her target.

She let the horsed skirmishers lead the assault on the train's rear. So large was it-and so poorly organised, in her opinion-that the Otomeian horse had devastated its rearguard by the time the escort at its head got word of the attack. These did not turn back, receiving reports that the ambushing army was no small fry. Instead, they hurried the front and middle part of the caravan forward, trusting that getting them nearer the army would afford better protection. In effect, the rear of the baggage was sacrificed with an alacrity even Shizuru had not expected.

She took the gift, although not as graciously as the escapees hoped. She sent the troopers out to harass the departing train for some time, which task the ever-bloodthirsty Otomeians found delightful. She would not let them follow the baggage all the way, though. She

was mindful of the possibility that some of Obsidian's main force might have fallen back enough to take them by surprise. She also refused to leave her legions without horse in relatively open and foreign territory.

This was since they had now passed into what her Firensian allies called "The Greencloaks' Lands". These were avowedly unfriendly.

"It's harder to get information here," Shohei reported after Shizuru called a swift council. "Even our disguised scouts are regarded with suspicion. We'll be working with a shorter range."

"So no idea yet if he left another army here and where it would be?"

"I'm afraid not, General. We'll keep working on it."

She waved her hand: "I know you are doing all you can."

A look over her shoulder as she addressed one of the tribunes.

"Please fetch the *primipilus* of the Ninth," she asked the woman, who trotted out of the tent. Once the officer was gone, Shizuru continued her brief.

"Anyway, we have what we wanted, so we can cut back on foraging. However, what effort is spared there has to go into caution and speed. Obsidian should have word by now of what we did to his baggage and he shall be very unhappy. He shall also be deciding whether or not to turn back and try to punish us for our effrontery. I personally think he shall not turn around. In front of him is too appealing an opportunity, given that he now knows he can expect fewer enemy forces east if we are here. Even if he does decide to come after us instead, I have no intention to let him see so much as the dust cloud from our column. It is a forced march hereon. Firens is not that far away despite us being among the Ganni, so we have a fallback position we can try to run to in case something happens."

Her glare raked over the officers. Each one strove to look extra-attentive.

"Do not misunderstand me. As I told the legions, this is no holiday. We are in enemy territory and dealing with a gargantuan enemy. We



have no idea if there is another nearby and whether or not it poses a problem yet. We are also near enough the boundary with the Kingdom of Celsor to make that Mentulaean ally a threat. Even if our last reports indicate that it is too busy fighting off its own would-be-invader to participate in this conflict, we cannot be certain it shall take no action. No one, and I mean no one, may slack off. If you see a legionary marching with his *scutum* covered, you may box his ears with my blessing. But bear this in mind-if I see you seeing that and doing nothing, I shall box your ears myself and return you to Hime in profound disgrace. Clear?"

Everyone said it was.

"Where are we heading?" Keigo dared to ask, simultaneously disturbed and thrilled.

"Comus." A quick nod to the tribune who had reappeared, *primipilus* in tow. "Kenji-han should be closing in on it with the Sixth and Thirteenth as we speak. So as I said, we need to hurry. I am not leaving those legions in a lurch if indeed the Ganni have something to throw their way!"

She faced the centurion just joining their party and acknowledged the crisp salute from the red-haired woman.

"Nao-han, I need you to get to work on the captives."

"What am I looking for?"

"Everything they can give, although I would specifically like to know first if there is yet another imperial army, where it is, and how big it stands."

The centurion's smile sent a shudder through the others, who saw in it more than a touch of eagerness. Despite their misgivings about her methods-and about her enjoyment of them-they all had cause to be thankful later. A carefully-controlled bout of torture managed to produce results. Cross-checking individual captives' disclosures yielded similar responses, so Nao reported that her torture specialists had good confidence in the information. Shizuru informed her officers that there was indeed another imperial army: the king

had not fully absorbed his son's forces after all.

"To all appearances, it is a modest force," she continued. "How long it stays that way is anyone's guess. It should be at Vedio, so I have sent scouts to ascertain its whereabouts."

It was Keigo who spoke up again: "And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime we meet Kenji-han. Comus it is."

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Shizuru had been sending missives to Firens even before her scouts found the enemy baggage. Written in Greek and always tucked into odd hiding places, communications sped to and from her legate despite the prevalence of enemy forces around the areas they traversed. Prior to the assault on the baggage, Shizuru sent another of these communiques. Her disguised courier carried a very tiny and folded-up letter inside a false patch sewn onto a waterskin. It instructed Kenji to march on Comus. That legate had ascertained by then that no major enemy force sat near the foundry city. It was therefore feasible for him and his two legions to try and take it by themselves.

His post being nearer the place and his route less twisted-as Shizuru's was of necessity, given that she was both pursuer and evader-he arrived there before the Gorgo contingent. Accompanying him was a complement of Firensian cavalry ready to war with yet another of their longtime neighbours. There would have been more of them had it not been for some alarming movements across the border in the west, which separated the now-Kingdom of Firens from that of the Nervii.

"It's mostly just skirmishing," the Firensian king said. "But there's the stink of something more about it."

"How so?" asked Shizuru's legate.

"It feels like they're testing us before something more serious. Do you know those pricks and prods armies often give each other right before a full-on engagement? That's what it feels like to me, Legate.

I may be wrong, but my old bones say I'm right and they've seen a lot of war already."

Kenji thanked King Entei and said he was grateful for whatever the man could spare him.

Thence Comus, the foundry city. It was a modest town once, but had grown fat over the years, all thanks to the imperial armies and the way they kept expanding. It went through growth parallel to that of its main customers, its mass even coming to sprawl over its walls and reaching far beyond them. Its borders as a young town were still marked by those barriers, which had grown larger and thicker over the years. However, they not been extended to encompass the new additions to the city. Now many of the foundries actually stood outside of these old defensive structures. They were joined by roads, homes, and the myriad other features of urbanisation.

Unprotected streets and buildings meant easy pickings for an ambushing army. Kenji rushed the Sixth and Thirteenth to Comus and began the assault with nary a preamble. That he did not give the locals a chance to capitulate was because he understood his General. She did not want Comus as a base or as an addition to the list of exemplary converts from the empire. She wanted Comus gone, simple as that, so terms were unnecessary.

Unfortunately, the place's destruction at his hands was not to be. The city was still existent when Shizuru showed up with the other legions and the part of Obsidian's baggage train that she had seized. Kenji had dismembered Comus by then but failed to still its heart, which was still beating. That organ continued to pump with the roaring bellows of the foundries sheltered by the old walls of the city.

What had saved Comus was its own sprawl. While most of it was easily taken by Kenji's assault, its core had more resilience as it was protected by the old town's walling. This central location also had more time to prepare for assault given that all the urban clutter surrounding it served as further defensive barricades. By the time Kenji managed to get the Sixth and Thirteenth to the gates of the city-interior, these had been shut and reinforced with heavy steel. Many of the people inside the walls had already been armed too with weapons of their own making.

"I wish I'd caught them all napping," Kenji related to his commander soon after she arrived. "But as you can see, it would've still been damned tough going. The city extends so far and so thickly from its old walls that the buildings themselves were obstructions to us as we progressed inwards. We had to wade through a lot of other structures before we finally made it to those gates. Many of the locals had shut themselves in by then."

She took a deep breath and searched the walls before them, no doubt seeking a weakness he had not yet discovered. That she would find it eventually he did not doubt. No one could rival her talent for tearing down defences, at least not among the generals he had known. Perhaps it was because of the way she approached it? Most commanders did not enjoy siegecraft and its exercise in willpower and patience. Whereas she revelled in its challenges and treated each siege as an enlivening game.

*She'd take the title off Demetrius and bear it with more merit*, he thought while watching her work. The problem was that a siege needed time-and he knew they were working on a short schedule. She did not want to stay in Comus long enough to give Obsidian a chance to turn around and catch up, but neither did she want to leave this crucial city unbroken as a symbolic win for the Ganni.

"What is inside?" she asked.

He rattled them off in a list: "Local nobility's houses. Also most of their public structures, governance buildings. Meeting hall. Temple. Storehouses."

He hastened to add something when the last word elicited interest.

"Not all of them, Fujino-san. The city's grown too big from its origins for the storehouses inside to keep all of their food. There were some outside the walls and we took them."

"Good. But it still means they can hold out if it came to a true siege."

Nothing to say to that, so he simply nodded. Then he indicated the ribs of a good-sized foundry, still being stripped down to raw materials by his troops.

"There are foundries inside the walls too," he told her. "Not to mention the warehouse. Well, a number of warehouses, actually, all managed by the same entity. It acts like a common depot, from what we gather, to spare the foundries the trouble of storing as well as delivering big orders. The foundries pay a fee for the service."

"Efficient system. I am guessing this depot also holds the bulk orders for the throne's armies?"

"Falces upon falces in there, our prisoners are saying."

She folded her arms and dropped her eyes in contemplation. Her foot scuffed the ground when she turned to look about them. The track of loose and dark soil her boot left caused him to voice an idea.

"Those walls aren't thin," he said. "But this is good ground for tunnel work. I was thinking of undermining."

Even as she shook her head he knew the objection.

"Too slow and it would not work," she stated with no small certainty. "I talked to your Firensian troopers and they say a lot of the locals hereabouts work the mines in the north and west. They would see it coming and dig countermines the moment you begin."

Undermining was a critical technique for destroying walls in a siege. The besieger dedicated some troops to digging tunnels and setting up pit-props of dry timber within them. Once a tunnel was sufficiently large and extended under the wall the besieger wanted to destroy, the diggers fired the timber props and swiftly got out. The result would be an explosive collapse of the ground above the tunnel and a consequent collapse of the wall on that ground. Done right, it was hugely effective. But it could also be easily thwarted, especially if the defenders knew someone was digging.

One way was for the defenders to do their own excavation. The hope was for their tunnel to touch the besiegers' enough for them to try several things, from smoking the enemy tunnel to causing a premature cave-in. Sometimes, defenders even sent armed men down to kill the diggers from the enemy.

Shizuru had seen such things happen, also against towns with a lot of mine workers in the populace. These were not only experienced enough to start countermines quickly but sometimes had ingenious ways of detecting when mining took place. She recalled a famous instance from faraway Barca where locals thwarted underminers by placing shields on the earth. The bronze on the shields had vibrated whenever there was tunnelling in the vicinity.

"The wrong enemy for it," she said in a soft voice, seeming to him very far away. "And besides, we just do not have the time, do we?"

It came back to that, he thought ruefully, feeling this failure keenly because he saw it as his. Perhaps Comus would survive after all, even if only as a core without its limbs. How the Ganni would gloat about it!

"Ah!"

The exclamation brought him out of his misery. She was bending over to pick up something, which she showed to him.

"I cannot be certain from this distance," she said. "But their walls look to be made of stone similar to this."

He frowned as he eyed it.

"It *is* the same stone," he told her. "Much bigger blocks up on the walls, of course, but exactly the same otherwise."

She turned the rubble around and around her fingers.

"You are certain it is the same?" she asked.

Her voice told him this was very important. He gave his answer with assurance.

"I promise you it's the same, General."

"Then let us have a little experimentation," she said to that, dropping the sharp rock onto the ground again. "I suppose you also tried ramming?"

A twist of his mouth said yes.

"There's a problem with that too," he said. "For one, we can only attack the walls. The area in front of the gates is liked a death trap right now, especially with those two towers they have over it. I don't put it past them to have heaped up iron beams and whatnot behind those gates either. They've materials enough for it in there, I'm afraid."

She urged him to continue.

"Now while we can attack the walls instead, there's still an issue," he said. "One, they're thick. Very old but thick, and made of large blocks that've been cut and mortared together properly. Granted, the age helps us, as it means some of the joins between blocks have been weathered and weakened over the years. Still, hitting them won't do much good unless we aim for the mortar and keep it up for some time. But as you said-

"We have no time. Quite so. Keep going."

"Defenders aren't shy about fighting back either, probably because they have a surfeit of weaponry all stocked up in there. We've had caltrops, spears, fire, and even molten metal and red-hot pieces of it thrown onto siege engines we bring near them. Iron sheets helped with the first three. Not the last ones. Horrid! The red-hot pebbles-they're usually bits of lead-are the worst. A handful eats through iron and even armour like a flame goes through paper. It doesn't stop there either. Just keeps going. Those poor men-

He blenched at the memory. She waited as he fought down his gorge, saying nothing.

"It's why our siege tower didn't work too well either," he went on later, still unable to forget the screams of the legionaries as the bits of hot metal sank into their skin. Deeper still, into the muscle, and even into the bone, where the evil things kept glowing. The way the flesh hissed! Who could forget that? Who could live through it?

"Getting it close wasn't the problem. Using it once it got there was. Aside from the molten metal they seem to have a huge store of

incendiary material and pitch in there. Probably because it's a foundry town."

She looked up at the sky with her fine brows slanted. There were black spires rising from within the walls, no doubt signalling the defenders' ability to cast more bits of hot lead onto their attackers.

"So the tower burned," she guessed, which he affirmed. "And I suppose all the previous rams you made are gone too, then."

"Yes, though we could make more easily." He ran a hand through his ginger hair and gave her a wry smile. "The only good thing about seizing foundry towns is that you get a ton of iron to work with as long as you seize at least one foundry. We have enough sheets of iron to roof a dozen ram sheds if you wanted them. Even two dozen, easy."

"Good. Make them."

His jaw went slack. It stretched out his already lean and somewhat wolfish face, giving him the look of a man both astonished and hungry.

"Two dozen?" he repeated dumbly.

"Leave me two without iron roofs. Use only wood on those. Thick wood, of course, but dry. And capable of holding a fire. Not stuff that burns out too fast. In fact, find a way to fit chopped firewood inside. I want a lot of loose fuel that they can heap up."

The wolf's face grew even more astonished, became hungrier at this.

"You want those to *burn*?" he asked in bewilderment.

"Very much so," she told him. "Get on it now. Whom did you assign to sort through the stores seized here?"

"One of the tribunes, Hayao-I'll send him to you."

"Good," she said again. A wide smile came from out of the blue and was bestowed on him. "You did well, Kenji-han. Most of Comus's



foundries have been destroyed, and the few remaining in those walls will not be able to produce nearly as many falces as before. Even if what I have in mind does not succeed, we can afford to let Comus survive as it is. You have taken away most of its value to the enemy already."

The long face looked its gratitude to her, yet the discomfort remained in the rangy body's movements.

"Maybe it would've been better if I had sent a party first to infiltrate it," he proposed, still trying to correct what he saw as his error.

She shook her head at his persistent self-critique, her eyes warm as they regarded him.

"Maybe," she said. "And maybe not. Either way, you have already done most of the work, as I said, so be of good cheer! I count this a victory. Now let us see if I can do any better before we leave this place."

She put a hand on his shoulder and led him away. Suddenly her smile brightened, something very close to mischief in it.

"Honestly, I have no idea if this will work at all," she said in a confidential tone. "But it seems a shame not to try it. How my girl shall enjoy this if it turns out right, though!"

The polemarch seemed to enjoy it even before that, as it happened. She followed the operations with red cheeks and an indelible smirk on her mouth. Both told Shizuru's puzzled officers that the Otomeian at least knew what the commander was trying and was wildly entertained. Not that any of them shirked their jobs for their own ignorance of their commander's plan. They did all Shizuru required, even if they had no idea what was playing about her head.

It took but a day for them to build all the rams she wanted and put together everything else she said they would need. However, it was already too late by that time to do anything but put inside camp for a good night's rest. Their commander said they deserved it.

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They began with the morning.

It commenced with a quartet of rams sent to strike at a part of the wall. Two went ahead of the others, which appeared to move more slowly in the advance. The pair in the lead was conspicuously devoid of sheet-iron roofing but quite fast. They even sped up on the last few metres, so much so that their operators smashed the sheds into the wall in their enthusiasm. They did not bother pulling them back once there. They simply began working the rams against the old stonework, a noisy tattoo flagging the start of the battle.

The defenders were not slothful in their tasks. As Kenji had said they would, they mounted the battlements over the attacked section even before the rams struck the wall. Then they cast pitch and torches on the two already-working ram sheds, choosing not to bother with molten lead when they saw the naked wood roofing. The moment the defenders' bombardment took place, the battery from the engaged rams seemed to weaken. It became progressively more anaemic, until at last they ceased to swing entirely. In spite of that no operators came running out of the sheds, which had begun to smoke already.

Still more pitch and torches were cast. Soon both sheds' roofs were aflame right next to the wall. Still no operators had exited their confines despite it, yet no fresh battery had been delivered by the rams. The perplexed defenders were on the verge of calling for the bits of hot lead from their comrades when a great roar hit them, followed closely by a billow of heat. An eyebrow-singing conflagration licked up against the wall and the sheds burst into a terrible flame.

The defenders of Comus had to shelter behind their battlements to avoid being seared. When they looked over the wall again they saw several sooty legionaries running in the opposite direction. The two rams' operators, it seemed, had finally been ejected by the blaze.

The slightly-burned legionaries escaped to the safety of the two laggards in the original quartet of siege machines. This pair of sheds had apparently stopped moving and now sat out of reach of the defenders' firebrands. It was clear that the ones driving these sheds thought better of their venture after their precursors' spectacular

failures. They hesitated, creaked, then turned back instead of pressing on.

The people on the walls raised a cheer, casting many a gibe on the retreat.

Comus had little time to bask in the small victory. More rams and a stunning array of siege engines were suddenly drawing up in front of the gates. As the rams approached the siege engines began fire, their intent clearly to prevent the defenders from venturing out from behind the parapets. Some of the first volleys from the little catapults were off, but Himean *ballista*-shooters were trained into expertise: they found their range in no time. Soon the bolts were picking off defenders as fast as the shooters could load them, giving the rams time to do some damage before the lobbed pitch and smouldering "pebbles" forced the rammers to abandon their work.

To the defenders and even many besiegers that day, the action at the gate was a maelstrom. Yet the commander of one side noted that war often only appeared to be chaos when the observer was in the thick of it.

"Participants experience fractured pieces of the whole, which is the norm for all events, to be sure," Shizuru told her princess as they watched from a distance. "The trouble is that all of them assume their piece central even if it is not. It leads to some constructing the totality around an insignificant fragment. One man's wound became the centre of the event, another's close call the turning point of the action. It leads to distortion of the greater picture and that means distortion of the pattern. In warcraft, one must always be alert to the pattern. Do you think the defenders of Comus see it now?"

The other took time to observe the fray some more moments before giving her response.

"No," she said. "I think not."

"It is what happens when there is no one truly functioning as the leader," Shizuru concluded, watching the same thing with interest. "It tends to happen most often in civilian-led actions, such as the one you see now. Lack of authoritative structure. No one is high up

enough to see the motif in the maze."

This was true, for while the defenders were long on bravery and resourcefulness, they were short on military leadership. Most of the soldiers who lived in Comus had already been called up for the army when Kenji arrived. Nearly all the defenders the Himeans were now fighting were either civilians or merchantmen.

So when the flamboyant assault on the gates got under way, it blinded them to the possibility of grave assaults elsewhere and wrapped in less recognisable skins. So desperate had the unceasing volleys of the *ballistae* looked that even the ones masterminding the defence eventually sacrificed supervision for involvement.

There were thus few to notice that the rams at the gates always came in trios or quartets with at least one playing a slug. The leading machines would be the ones doing an attack and the men from the attacking machines were quick to exit their sheds once the hot lead came out. These men were always ready to flee under artillery cover and into the one shed hanging back. As this shed retreated to carry the men to safety, another set would advance, and the volleys would begin anew.

There were also few of the defenders to care that the first two rams to attack that day burned throughout the entirety of the battle. They burned so hard and so long that the wall glowed with their heat like a white ember. They continued burning even when they had been reduced to a heap of black wood smoking against the stone.

That was past noon, and it was when Shizuru gave the signal. A row of artillery that had been held in reserve materialised before the wall where the first two rams burned down. At first all the shooters did was hurl stones to find their range. Once they had the mark, though, they began a rapid bombardment with sealed crocks that broke in wet splashes.

The action at the gates was not yet finished by then. So concentrated was the defence on that area that one could count the defenders to take note of the fresh bombardment on the other side. Even then the gates seemed more important, the assault there

being noisier and far more aggressive, not to mention unrelenting considering it had gone on for hours. It was difficult to care much about a place assaulted by crockery when the other side was taking actual bolts and rams. If the foreigners were trying something funny with the former, there would be time enough to laugh at it after the action at the gates had wrapped up. Some passing near the area with the crockery bombardment did think the dying fire stank of something tart and remarkably familiar, but there was still nothing to give them cause for alarm there. Besides, the enemy itself had put out the fire on that part of the wall.

Then more rams came, not for the gates but for the wall that had suffered the blaze. Cavalry preceded them, quick-riders carrying jugs, and these threw water against the embers that still remained. By the time the rams arrived there were defenders ready to ascend that part of the wall again. The chiefs of the defence had woken up.

But the defenders found it impossible to reascend the battlements above the now-dead fire. The blaze they had left there for so long had rendered the stone so hot that it burned them through their shoes. All the defenders could do was mount the battlements beside the steaming section of wall.

Still the new group of rams advanced. The defenders attempted to hurl their pitch and firebrands at the rams from a distance. These had proper metal sheeting on the sheds, however, so they weathered the attack. When one was finally close enough to the wall to strike, it did that and produced an ear-shattering crack.

The stone wall split from its bottom to very nearly the top.

The defenders stared at the fissure from the cooler battlements, nerveless. Where the rams had made barely a dent before, they now seemed capable of breaking down the wall completely. Their serried ranks clustered in that area, the legionaries in the sheds ignoring the great heat still in the already-watered ground. Powered by them the rams beat into the stone like hammers beating into chalk. Each blow the great logheads struck caused a new fracture, and the defenders had to watch the large stone blocks break into shards that splintered off in a heartbreaking defection. On and on went the pounding, the heartless beat, until a concerted strike ended

the matter.

A fire, a crockery bombardment, a few rams. That was all it took for a century's worth of protection to crumble into wreckage.

The waiting cavalry stormed over the gap first, their steeds easily leaping the rubble. The legionaries followed later. The defenders of Comus were dragged down from their walls and slain with great efficiency. Their pans of red hot lumps were upended and their corpses fed into their still-glowing furnaces. Then the army's officers took control of the looting, seizing everything that could be of use before directing the destruction of each edifice and foundry.

Shizuru's officers quizzed her in the aftermath.

"Fire quenched by vinegar," she said to their question. "Followed by brute force to finish the job. Not original, to be sure. Hannibal."

She met several blank stares and one of dawning recognition.

And at the corner of an eye was that smirk, the red cheeks, the green eyes. How it had pleased her girl!

"Oh, I remember! During his crossing!" The one who said this was her old scribe, Aisuka, who babbled on before the others could say a word. "Who would have thought it would be true, though? I admit I suspected old Livius of fiction when I read that part of his work."

"Well, I thought I would test it first before doing the same," Shizuru said to him with a grin.

She turned to the others and gave the explanation.

"Hannibal was said to have done it with vinegar when a boulder blocked his crossing the Alps. I used vinegar too when I first tried it back home, to see if it was fact or fiction. I used far smaller rocks then but it seemed to me that there was no reason scaling up the other factors accordingly would not produce the same results on a larger rock. It does not work as dramatically on all stone, by the way. I noticed that in my experiments. But this type, limestone, always cracked."

She threw a piece of the rock to Kenji, who caught and eyed it with wonder.

"Oh, no one will believe this!" Aisuka cried, unable to keep still. "It never even came to mind as something to try in this sort of situation! That was-oh, I don't know-wonderful creativity, General!"

"Spare me the blandishments, Aisuka-han," she joked, entertained by his excitement: her eldest scribe had been reduced to hopping in place like a boy. "I am not lessening your workload no matter what."

"So that's why you had Hayao gather all the vinegar," Kenji rumbled out. He looked less hungry than before, despite the crooked grin seaming his face. "Damned if I could have guessed that was what you would do! What would you have done if there had been none of the stuff, Fujino-san? Tried the legions' wine? Most of it's gone sour by now."

She said it would have been her next option.

"Although I do not know if it would have worked as well," she conceded. "Ye gods, can you imagine if it had not? Our poor bibulous troops would have thought it a ruse from us trying to turn them teetotal."

Incredulity from Kenji as Shohei laughed his retort: "General, no one in the command is teetotal!"

"How does it work, Fujino-san?" Keigo cut in. His voice was softer than the other legates' and his eyes were still wide in a fixed fascination. Fire and vinegar to take down a wall? There was something magical about all of this; Aisuka was right when he said they would not believe it. He could not wait to write to his brother. Only how to do that without letting on his perpetually growing admiration of this woman?

The commander was answering.

"I am not certain either, Keigo-han. Part of it is I think due to the sudden change from hot to cold. A kind of shock to the material, I suppose."

A moment to give an order to a tribune, then back to them.

"They do the same thing when mining tough rock faces," explained the rich mine owner to her officers. "They set a powerful fire against the face and then cast cool water upon it. It cracks the rock face, renders it brittle and easy to chip away. But that still does not explain the more extreme reaction when it is strong vinegar instead of water that quenches the blaze. I can only guess here, but if I had to, I believe it may be something in vinegar's sourness-its biting quality."

Natsuki told her later that if this was so, she might as well have thrown the Ninth's *primipilus* at the blaze instead. Shizuru retorted that the hitch with that substitution was said *primipilus*'s preference for fuelling fires over quenching them.

"One need only look at that hair," she said, laughing.

"You did not worry they would think of it?"

"Who would not think of what?"

"The people of Comus. Of what you were doing." The Otomeian narrowed her eyes and elaborated: "You said before they had many miners. You did not worry they would see you were, ah, you called it?"

"Fire-setting."

"Fire-setting. Yes."

"Not really. Or not very much." Shizuru displayed her even teeth.

"Why do you think we had that farce at their gates, *mea vita*? I keep telling my legates to give people something to think on before they can think up anything else. It is true of a lot of things-you should always keep them busy!"

She repeated it to her legates later at another quick council, after which they asked where she wanted to keep the enemy busy next. Where now were they headed, they asked their general.

"I would have thought it obvious," she said with upraised brows. "Is it not obvious to *you*, Your Highness?"



The young woman beside her squinted.

"Vedio," said the princess, her voice saying she found it painfully evident. "Where else?"

# Chapter 69

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Aquiliferi** (pl.), **aquilifer/o** (s., L.) - The standard-bearers of the legion, so-named for the eagle emblems on the standards. The standards themselves may thus be referred to as the *E agles* (capitalised).
2. **Aquae Sextiae** (L.) - Modern Aix-en-Provence, this was the location where the Ancient Roman general Gaius Marius defeated the migrating Teutones who threatened Rome (in the story, Hime). Marius was vastly outnumbered when he won, but also technologically superior to the foe. Among other things, his victory was due to the favourability of the field: Marius managed to entrench himself very solidly in a hill before the Teutones came. When an Ancient Roman said he wanted an *Aquae Sextiae*, it signified a desire for a place where the few could feasibly oppose the many.
3. **Fronti nulla fides** (L.) - "No reliance can be placed on appearances."
4. **Octet** - A clutch of eight men; a grouping often used in the Roman army, as in camp housing (there were generally eight legionaries to a tent).
5. **Via praetoria** (L.) - One of the main roads in a Roman camp; runs north to south.

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## **Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae**

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They took three more towns on the way, staying at each only long enough to revictual the army. What little the Mentulaean king had not seized Shizuru now took from those it would have stopped starving.

"We have scant reason for mercy," she said on the march to Kenji. "These are mostly the territories of the Mentulaeen people called the Ganni. The druids hold influence over them, as does the prince we seek, and neither party likes us very much. There was always little expectation of peaceful welcome here."

"Odd as it sounds, I'm glad of it," the man beside her said. His horse nickered and he smoothed a big hand over its neck. He and the commander were at the head of the Ninth's column, flanked by tribunes and followed by the *aquilifer*. Behind them, that lionskin-clad and silver-armoured soldier bore the legion's Eagle high above all heads.

"It probably strikes the wrong note to say that," Shizuru's legate continued. "What with us aiming to convert as many as possible, I mean. But well-we can use all the grain we seize this year!"

"As can the Prince Calchis," she said. "These are his stamping grounds, so every bit we take, he shall miss. Just another reason to seize it. I tell you, Kenji-han, I will be relieved when we finally run the prince to earth with his army."

Fresh angles on the lean, long face: Kenji's interest was piqued.

"Do you think him dangerous, General?" he asked. He had long ago learned to give all of her suspicions importance. "Is it because of his military reputation that you're worried?"

"They do say he is one of their best," she answered without actually sounding concerned. "But no. It is his connection to the druids."

"You think he'll use them to rally resistance," Kenji guessed.

"Or they will use him, which amounts to nearly same thing." The perpetually red lips pulled up at the corners. "Not yet, however, or not to a significant extent. If I understand all I have learned of the royal family recently, that prince shall probably save most of his resources for himself. Doing otherwise might reveal him a threat to the throne prematurely."

Kenji did not hide his amazement.

"You're not suspecting another Firens?" he demanded, which she denied.

"Let us put it this way," she said. "I only suspect the prince would rather he sat in his father's throne, as is true of many royal princes. I doubt he imagines peace with us to be necessary for such a thing. Did he think that, he would have reached out to us by now. A pity, but logical. Being in the line of succession means he would have more to lose to us than to gain."

"You mean kingship over his father's empire."

"Indeed. Monarchy over a smaller territory, like what we gave Firens, would seem less attractive."

They paused as a centurion nearby unleashed a blistering tirade. There were smiles all around at the diatribe; the cause could be anything from a legionary being out of step to having untidy gear. It was worse because this was the Ninth, reflected the listening Kenji. The Ninth was the general's favourite legion, the one with which she had worked the longest and asked for most often. So when she was in proximity, its officers were especially severe on rankers who made errors. The soldier being rebuked would surely get latrine duty when they made camp.

"Anyway," the commander resumed. "This is only supposition. I simply want the prince out of the way as soon as can be."

"Hence the march to Vedio instead of in pursuit of the king," said Kenji. "You didn't want Prince Calchis showing up suddenly when we fought the bigger army, did you, Fujino-san?"

"Among other things," she agreed. "I am not overfond of being prodded in the rear."

She said this because Calchis's splinter force served two purposes in the northwest. First and most obviously, it helped to secure that vital region against enemy sallies. The Gannian lands held the empire's two chief arms-producing cities-or it had used to, before Shizuru had sacked Comus-as well as the druidic stronghold of Tasgetia and its sacred forest, the Ruviccan. Shizuru had no

intention of attacking the two latter locations any time soon, however. She wanted to subdue more of the other territories and Prince Calchis first, thereby depriving Tasgetia's druids of reason and means to resist. An agreement of surrender from the enemy's religious leaders was still preferable to a massacre of them, thought the canny commander. Were they to see that there was no other future but that offered by Hime, the druids might do a lot to help the locals make peace with the new reality. A reality under Himean governors, not Mentulaean kings or queens.

The second purpose Calchis served was similarly strategic. From his position in Vedio, his force covered the rear of the king's army. A venture like Shizuru's would have to contend with him when trying to outflank the king. He might not be an immediate threat, especially given the disparity in speed between the contenders, but he would have been one eventually. In rushing her forces to Vedio, Shizuru was avoiding the pincer by hastening the conflict.

It was therefore a surprise when Vedio capitulated the moment they entered its territory.

"Unconditionally?" Shizuru asked the messenger the Vedians sent. "Without suing for terms, at least?"

The woman started at that and looked ashamed. Her body bent and she bowed in that deep and fawning way people with kings did. It drew Shizuru's wince. Like most Himeans, she was uncomfortable with floor-scraping obsequies.

"Yes, pardon me-our nobles do request that you consider meeting with them," the messenger admitted after being asked to straighten. Her whole posture nevertheless continued to ooze unctuous timidity. "If you find that satisfactory, General Fujino. They will meet you anywhere you like, at any time you please."

She indicated again the gift she had brought, the one that had seen every eyebrow in the Himean command hiking its peak.

"They hope too that this gift is satisfactory in showing our eagerness for peace," she said.

Shizuru flicked her gaze at the object only long enough to acknowledge it. Her officers were less subtle, most choosing to linger in their stares. And why not? The offering was a curiosity to them, these people who had long cast off their royalty: an outlandish crown shaped like a tapering casque, its narrowing circumference inlaid with dozens of small but precious gems. So large and heavy was the thing that it had to be ceremonial. Shizuru imagined it was hugely uncomfortable and was not at all inclined to trying it out.

She asked the Vedian: "Who are your leaders?"

The messenger gave her five names. They did not include Calchis, who the messenger informed them had already quit Vedio with his army.

"When?"

"Ten days ago."

"To go where?"

"My apologies, General. I do not know."

"Very well," said Shizuru to this. "If they are amenable, I would speak to them in an hour's time. I shall send an escort with you if you wait a moment."

Thus dismissed, the messenger was led away by one of the many tribunes on the commander's staff. Said commander wiggled her eyebrows at her officers upon the woman's exit.

It was all the signal they needed.

"They *surrender*?" Shohei pretended to gasp, showing the rest a funny face. "And here I was hoping for a good siege! Is this real?"

"Would you really have preferred otherwise?" an equally perplexed Kenji teased him.

"Pah, I wouldn't have said no to it! But what-" Here was another funny face. "-did the Vedians eat to make them do this? Their walls aren't trivial and I'm betting they've bigger storehouses than the past

three towns that we've taken. They could've held out if it was only that the Prince Calchis's forces left, as they claim. They could easily have waited for him to turn back and relieve them. Since the campaigning season has just started, in fact, they might have held out for relief from other loyalist forces. Or they could've tried to wait us out by themselves."

A barking laugh out of his fellow legate: "With Fujino-san here? They wouldn't have had long to wait."

Their general smiled at the compliment as the rest grinned.

"We know that, but they don't," Shohei responded. "I don't think they believe yet how effective our commander is at breaking a siege, even at this stage. And as Mentulaean strongholds go, they'd believe Vedio is still a challenging city to invest, isn't it?"

The others eyed the stronghold's imposing walls, the high-if-somewhat-ugly towers flanking it.

"So they should've thought of holding out, I think," Shohei insisted. He dropped his chin and looked burlier than ever. "Gods know we'd have been hard-put to keep up a siege for too long anyway. They'd have known that with the state of the harvest as it is. So why surrender, and so easily?"

Keigo Kurauchi put forward a suggestion.

"Maybe it's those towns we've been taking on the way," he told them. "Our successes could've rattled Vedio the way it did Asterion at the start of our campaign when Fujino-san came out of the massif. For all we know, that might even be why the prince took his force away. All the better for us, I think."

Their commander chose this moment to speak again, and all of them quieted instantly. Himeans were not a people who genuflected to their leaders, but they still knew enough not to interrupt when one of them was talking.

"I am not certain of that," their leader said. "So I agree with Shohei-han's bafflement-to some degree."

And to one of the tribunes nearby: "Primipilus Nao Yuuki, First Cohort, Ninth Legion. Quickly."

The tribune tore off to fetch the woman who had been named. Meanwhile, Keigo asked why the general thought the surrender not good for them.

"For one," she said, "since it allows the Prince Calchis another day away from me."

Here Kenji rumbled, recalling their earlier conversation on the topic.

"It's a nice crown, though, General," he shrugged humorously, with a nod to the Vedians' offering. The rest stared again at the reminder, obviously dazzled by its alien looks and obvious value.

"A bit grandiose for my taste, but then, *I* am no queen," their commander said, with a glance at the dark-haired Otomeian standing nearby. "As I said before, we are close to the gold mines of the empire, so this is unsurprising as a gift."

She pulled at her shoulders and slung off her cape to cast at a servant, who was told to stow it.

"Make camp. Half on guard, including all the cavalry not currently on scouting duty. What I saw of this clearing appears to be mostly grazing land. Is it sufficient to support all the auxiliary, Natsuki?"

A nod from the polemarch, whom the Himean officers had come to accept as a near-fixture of their councils.

"Good. That means we shall not have to keep the horse too far from the infantry."

She was all business now and her people took the hint: they stood just that little bit straighter.

"Do we suspect foul play, Fujino-san?" asked Keigo, intrigued by the number of guard she had requested for simple camp-building.

"No, but I never expect people to play fair either," she answered.



It was Shohei who clarified for the greener legate: "This is Ganni territory and they're loyal. Fujino-san doesn't get caught napping."

The centurion she had requested showed up just then. The commander called to another of the tribunes in her retinue.

"Futaba-han," she said. "Take five cohorts of the Ninth-bring Yuuki-han's century-and escort their messenger back into the city. Give the members of the treating deputation an hour, then bring them back here. My tent should be up by then."

She looked at the city again, seemed to decide on something.

"Bring an ala of cavalry. Seize and garrison the gates and towers with what forces you deem needed, then have the rest work on locating the city's storage. They may well have hidden most of it by now, but that does not mean we cannot find it. What do you think, Yuuki-han?"

The centurion was brisk: "I'll flip the city if I have to, General."

"Good. I have a feeling they would not have hidden it too far away, for reasons of convenience. Send for more cohorts if you need them. We have to do this as quickly as we can, or they may try to move it."

Her officers had been listening with interest and now understanding dawned on their faces. A grinning Kenji put it in words to her: "You think they'll try to pull the wool over our eyes, don't you?"

Their commander turned one of her dashing smiles to them.

"I'm no fool," she said simply, and turned to Nao and Futaba again. "Send soldiers to the homes of each of the leaders I am meeting, by the way. Two to three octets each, to be safe. No aggression, mind you, but permit no one exit or entry save the leaders themselves, even once the deputation has left. And someone put that thing-" This, of the crown the Vedians had sent. "-in with the booty."

The centurion and tribune affirmed the orders and left. The Himean command broke up too shortly. Their general did not like to see them dawdling before her troops had been properly bivouacked.

Fortunately, Himean camps all used one basic layout. Everyone involved in the construction more or less knew what to do from the start.

So by the time the city's delegation came, Shizuru's camp was under way. The troops had already managed to establish the main roads and ramparts in the hour that had passed. The Vedians thus had the privilege of travelling down an already cleared *via praetoria*. It was still a dirt track, of course, and not a proper Himean road as only Himeans could make it. But it was flat and kind to the feet and still leagues better than the roads Mentulaeans thought sufficient for their armies.

Treated to their first tour of a Himean military encampment, these particular Mentulaeans goggled and gaped. The sights confounded them, for they defied Mentulaeon logic. No Mentulaeon commander ever made camp thus because it would have wasted time and energy. They did not bother putting up such towers or erecting walls that belonged less to a camp than to a small city. Indeed, what was the point of the effort when one would be moving again shortly?

What seemed to befuddle the delegates most was actually one of the first things they saw of the cantonment. These were the *fossae*, or the outer ditches that lined the perimeter beyond the ramparts. As well they might gawp at those, thought their tribunician escort, who nevertheless knew the Vedians gawked at them for reasons other than hers. Hers was since most Himean commanders did not demand so many ditches, nor ones so deep. It was standard to have but one ditch when there was no immediate threat. But Shizuru Fujino believed in safety and thought digging good exercise for building up legionaries. So dig more *fossae* than normal the Fujino army always did.

They found the Himean commander in her tent, taking a report from a soldier. It was one of the *primipilii*, going from his crest and dress, but the Vedian deputation did not know it. Like most Mentulaeans, they still found Himean legionaries largely indistinguishable from each other. They were so different from Mentulaeon soldiery, where officers always had the more glamorous kits. Whereas the Himean centurions, the backbone of their armies, appeared to wear the same mail shirts their men did. Mentulaeon officers were more

easily visible; they commanded the vision; they were *dramatic*. In that much the Himeans for all their uncanny organisation bred disappointment.

Until the delegation got a proper close look at the Himean commander and realised she brought enough drama for the whole company.

Said commander dismissed the primipilus and welcomed her guests. More Himean organisation followed: the company was efficiently seated and supplied with drinks.

"I am Shizuru Fujino," the commander said afterwards. "Senator of Hime, proconsular governor to Septentria-what King Obsidian currently thinks his empire, or most of it-and general of this army. Would it please you to introduce yourselves?"

The Vedians gave their names and titles.

"Where," Shizuru asked, "is the Prince Calchis?"

There was silence as the deputation exchanged glances at the candid inquiry. No alarm, however, and Shizuru marked it. They had known she would ask about him, and not merely because she had asked their messenger earlier.

"He left us some days ago, er-Senator Fujino," said the eldest of the group, a man named Quaro. Shizuru supposed he was the leader, as he had also occupied the middle seat in the five set out for them. "To all appearances, he was following the king's army, which had gone south."

"To all appearances."

"Yes."

"The prince did not say where he was going?"

"No." Quaro's eyes met her square. "He merely took the supplies he wanted, uprooted his army, and left one morning."

"So the prince did not inform a single one of you? Even the highest-

ranking member of the local gentry?"

"The prince had no obligation to do that, Senator," another of the deputation replied. "It would have been impudent for us to demand that he do so."

"And impudence gets your head lopped off here," Shizuru said. "Or so I understand."

She paused to take the measure of them, the evaluation somehow carried out with courtesy despite its forthrightness. It did not take long and she smiled warmly afterwards.

"Now then," she said, "the surrender. I understand you wish to form a treaty of peace with Hime? One whereby you forsake all prior alliance to the Mentulæan king, Obsidian, and all his progeny or possible successors?"

"Yes-and ask you to spare our people and property as a consequence."

"Provided you stand by the terms of treaty, you need have no fear for either. We shall, however, requisition certain supplies and consider them part of your first tribute. Grain, meat, wine, iron, the usual. You probably know it by now, having enjoyed the presence of an army in your walls not too long ago."

"Yes, of course, yes," Quaro said with faint distress. It was explained in his next words: "But Senator, we have little that we can give. It was not only the prince who levied men and supplies from us. The king did the same. What little grain we had in our last harvest, much of it they also seized. We have only the merest scraps left, just enough to see us through the next planting. Perhaps you could allow us to keep it, in honour of the peace between us?"

Her smile had not fallen throughout his impassioned speech. She nodded now, looked understanding.

"Perhaps I could," she said. "It would not be meet for me to starve you out indeed, for that would not be concomitant with the spirit of our treaty. You still do want a treaty with us, yes? An agreement of

friendship and shared interest?"

"Yes, yes, most certainly."

"Then in the spirit of shared interest, I suppose we can share."

There was a moment's confusion as the deputation struggled to process what she had just suggested.

"I mean your grain," she clarified. "I propose we take a third and leave you the remainder."

Some discomfort at this, but no great alarm. Again, this had been expected.

"Only a third, Senator Fujino?" Quaro asked with patent demureness.

"Only a third," she repeated.

"Then-" A long exhale, perhaps of reprieve. "We accept!"

"Good!" She smiled broadly. "I shall have my men fetch our share. You may observe the division to be certain of the fairness of our measure."

"I shall have one of my men lead you to it."

"Lead us to what?" Shizuru echoed.

A broad smile from Quaro: "Why, to the grain!"

"No, please do not bother," she replied. She was also smiling, her expression open, which was why they did not catch on to it quickly enough. "I already sent my men to seek it out, as a matter of fact. They should have been doing that in the city from the moment you headed here. Did you not notice them?"

The entire delegation twisted; its leader hurled out in appeal.

"Oh, there is no need!" he cried. "We can lead you to the storehouses ourselves, Senator."

"Call me 'General'," was her response. "As it is in that capacity that you now address me."

Quaro amended his discourse: "Forgive me, General! Please, allow us to lead your men to the grain stores. It would be much quicker, I assure you."

"Yes," she said with deliberation. "It would be."

A stillness fell in the tent. It seemed even the servants arranging desks stopped moving. The myriad sounds outside-barking centurions, thudding hammers, the usual symphony of camp-making-supplied the only commentary.

The Vedians realised it at last. The Himean knew they had hidden most of their grain.

"By the way, as is standard for such agreements," Shizuru resumed, "I am taking hostages. I am certain you know it to be commonplace for situations like these. They serve as guarantees that you shall stand by your words of alliance with Hime. Whomever is chosen shall be treated well and lodged in the utmost comfort, I assure you. They shall also be schooled by proper tutors if they are young, for however many years they have opportunity to stay in our care."

Again every one of the Vedians had expected this, so none took it with alarm. The secreted grain was still at the forefront of their attentions. What would happen if she found it?

"Of course, we expected hostages," Quaro said, striving heroically to remain equable. "We shall be happy to nominate them. Perhaps we can fetch them now?"

But again she asked them not to trouble themselves.

There was a glint in her eye as she clarified: "My men are still at your houses, watching over your families."

"What effrontery!" she complained later in the day, when the hard work was done and her ablutions finished. "Even if I believed that rot about them not being told where the prince was headed, they would have to be stupid indeed not to get a general idea of his direction."

Exactly how far should I suspend disbelief for the sake of diplomacy?"

She made her way to the desk in a corner of the tent, removing all the paraphernalia atop it to a cabinet. Once cleared, she hoisted the desk up and relocated it to the side of the bed.

"I forgot to tell them to move this here tonight," she said. "I need to catch up on my dispatches to the Senate."

The woman in her bed asked if she needed help. Shizuru turned in the act of arranging the desk, her crimson eyes twinkling.

"Why, *mea vita*, would you have lifted this for me if I said I did?" she quipped, aware it would have been impossible. Even had the slender arms somehow borne the weight, the slender legs could not: the Otomeian no longer bothered with her prosthetic once they had retired for the evening.

Said Otomeian now squinted, saying she would have summoned their servants to the chore. Shizuru smiled at this and set about retrieving her writing implements.

"My imperious Dominilla," she said in good humour.

She had already perched on the bed when offered a drink. There was a decanter of wine on their nightstand and her lover fetched a cup of it.

"They say you found the grain in tombs?" came the question after the cup's delivery.

Shizuru drank and responded in the affirmative. She would have licked her lips to catch a stray drop afterwards, but the other beat her to it.

"It was in crypts," she clarified. "The vaults we found are probably used by the entire city, at least from the size of them."

"They put with the dead?" her mistress asked again, with another kiss. "It is not, ah, unsanitary?"

Shizuru laughed and patted the fair cheek.

"They burn their dead, silly girl, so there were no slimy corpses if that is what you imagined. Only a lot of dust in a lot of urns... and they were not mad enough to mix the grain with those ashes, thank goodness. They merely hid the sacks with the pots. I suppose they thought we would be too afraid to tread on sacred ground to search there."

Natsuki asked if her legionaries did not feel such anxiety.

"Not really, or not in this case," Shizuru said. "Especially as what the tombs held was not that alien. It might have been different had there been dead bodies strung up like diabolical puppets in it. But we Himeans see mausoleums with regularity, you see. The familiar does not really inspire fear."

She put the cup away and eyed her mistress with a grin.

"Did you actually want to see?" she guessed. "The Vedian crypts? Had I known I would have brought you earlier, when I went into them."

Natsuki masked her curiosity poorly. As far as Shizuru was concerned, that settled it.

"I shall show them to you tomorrow, in the morning." A pause as she recalled something of note. "I shall have to carry you a good way down, all right?"

The other understood: there would be steps, with which she still struggled. She could actually negotiate a few by herself, but more than that became a trial, especially when there was no rail.

She told her lover she did not mind being carried, provided Shizuru did not mind the carrying.

"Hah. I would have you in my arms all day did you only allow it." Shizuru spread parchment on the desk and held the corners down with paperweights. "Although I warn you not to expect too much, Natsuki. It is really just a large basement stuffed with pottery. Some dusty keepsakes like weapons and clothes belonging to the dead,



yes, but nothing too exciting. Certainly not the equal of an Egyptian noble's tomb if you are hoping for it!"

Natsuki promised to master her expectations. Her mind was on something else, it seemed, for she noted all of a sudden: "You took only a third."

"A third? Oh, of the grain?" Shizuru said, drawing a sound of assent. "Did you expect otherwise?"

There was a long pause. She could tell Natsuki was measuring how to answer this.

Finally, the words: "I - I do not know."

"Well."

She turned and reached. Her hands found her lover's body and dragged, manipulating it like a doll until she got what she desired. This was one pale leg on her lap and another at her rear.

"I wanted your legs around me," she said bluntly. "At any rate, I suspect I know what you really wish to say. Did you find it odd after their farce with the grain, my seeming leniency?"

Natsuki was sheepish.

"Only, I thought," the Otomeian admitted, "you would be angry."

"At their attempt to keep their own food?" Shizuru turned back to her desk and her writing. "Do acquit me of such hypocrisy, *meum mel*. Even if we did thwart their scheme, I cannot truly blame them for the attempt. They *did* suffer levies from two other armies previously and they too need to eat as well as plant for the next harvest. What bothered me more was that ludicrous tale they spun anent the prince. And for that, I did punish them."

"The hostages," Natsuki said.

Shizuru agreed.

As was usual when treating with former enemies, the Himeans had

taken relatives of prominent locals as living security. What was unusual in the Vedian case was that Shizuru singled out certain clans to give up even more of these captives. In particular, she took nearly all the young members of the Vedian delegation's families. Returning from their first meeting, an appalled Quaro and his fellows had found their children and grandchildren already rounded up, guarded by legionaries. They were treated well, as Shizuru had promised: housed and fed as comfortably as any officer in the army. But to avoid shrewd parents slipping a slave child in the hostage's place, none was allowed any more private time with family.

The hostages would travel with them until she could send the lot elsewhere for safekeeping. It would not be unlikely, even, for them to end up in Fuuka for the duration of their captivity. Shizuru actually preferred this. It served her purposes to have the next generation of Mentulaean-nay, Septentrian-aristocracy reared and educated so near Hime that they ended up almost Himean themselves. Former hostages brought up thus were better able to see the risks of war with Hime. They were indoctrinated to it and in turn, also better able to see the benefits of being a Himean province.

There was a long period of quiet, and Shizuru knew her lover was mulling over her decisions. She was halfway into her description of the siege of Comus on the dispatch when Natsuki spoke once more, again mentioning the Himean-Vedian treaty.

"You think they will honour it?" she asked.

Shizuru shammed astonishment.

"Do you not trust our new allies, Your Highness, who despite their little trick now appear so submissive?" she asked.

"*Fronti nulla fides.* Shizuru. Do you?"

Shizuru emitted a low hum in response. She penned a few more words as she considered the idea, the scratching of her quill audible in the night-time quiet.

"I can only hope," she finally said. "But even with the hostages we have taken, I admit to my doubts. As you seem to, I see. They did lie

to my face about Calchis. What do you think, Natsuki ?"

Natsuki said that she thought the Mentulae a difficult society. Shizuru asked what she meant by it.

"They treat oaths lightly," was the answer.

"Well, it might boil down to technicalities," Shizuru grinned. "They might not consider oaths made with us to be worth keeping. Different people have different views on honour. Perhaps they believe that there is no honour in agreements with or to the benefit of the enemy?"

A response in loftiest Attic: "That reeks of convenient casuistry."

Shizuru had to put her quill down to avoid defacing her script.

"Well, and why not? All people incline to that which is expedient," she chortled, turning her upper body so she could look the emerald eyes direct. "Another reason I preferred not to sack the city. It would have served little purpose at this juncture. I cannot yet allocate resources to this region-at least, not until I have dealt with the king's current forces. All I could spare to garrison Vedio, had we indeed taken it for our use, would be a single legion, two at the most. Not enough, for they would then be surrounded by some of the empire's more recalcitrant people and a good way from the nearest allied base."

Natsuki absorbed this as Shizuru resumed writing.

"Besides, it demonstrates the extent of my generosity. They still surrendered, in spite of it all, and did not resist even after we discovered their secreted grain. I know we are at war, but I want the future to hold a settled province. If I want a chance to prove Hime the right master for this land, I must give the Mentulae a chance to be part of that. This is Vedio's chance. Should its people bungle it, I shall eradicate them. But not before, and not so lightly. We still invaded them; should they be annihilated now simply because they did not trust us at the first instance?"

Natsuki denied that, although she admitted to having thought

otherwise, previously.

"I thought to kill was simpler," she put out in tones of regret. "But now I see. There is more to this, more than their lying. I ah-I am hasty still, Shizuru. You still teach me."

Shizuru had put her quill down again the moment she heard the self-recrimination in her lover's voice. She was aware the girl worried about her grasp of the Himean attitude sometimes, occasionally grew anxious over what she perceived to be her distance from it. Personally, she thought Natsuki already excellent in her comprehension. It was simply that her culture-one that espoused capital punishment often and prioritised honour always-ruled in this one case.

She stroked the limb on her lap: it was the abridged leg and she palmed the rounded stub gently.

"Oh, do not worry so much, *mea vita*," she said. "Certainly your solution would have been simpler, so it is understandable that you arrived at it. Even other Himeans would. And who knows? Perhaps a day will come when we may wish we had employed it instead of mine. No one is ever perfectly certain of their actions' rightness. But for now, for the future of my province, this was the only judgement I could reasonably make."

She waited for a smile before starting on her report again. But she kept her free hand on the other's leg, enjoying the warmth beneath her palm. After a while she asked if her companion should not already be sleeping.

"I need you rested as we shall march again presently," she warned. "And very swiftly, if we are to catch our prey this time. The Prince Calchis may have escaped but, gods willing, the next foe shall not be so fortunate."

The next day their scouts confirmed what Shizuru had suspected. Instead of bearing south, as the Vedians claimed, the prince had gone in the opposite direction. Little though the Himeans knew it, the prince himself had told the Vedians to lie on that topic. It was a desperate recourse to delay the enemy, whom he had not intended

to meet so soon. His expectation had truly been that they would go after his sire's much more conspicuous forces first.

But the capricious Himeans had bucked his expectations. They had dogged his father only long enough to harass the royal army's supply line, then shot like a calamitous comet into the northwest. Where he and his resources should have been safe, waiting comfortably for his father to weaken.

An embarrassing position, all of a sudden. Calchis's army was nowhere near as large as it had been since his sire had appropriated so much of it. The king was still alive and still the rallying point for the empire's defence. He himself had not even managed to intrigue with the other Mentulaean tribes yet, had not secured all the alliances he needed for his great scheme.

Avaunt from Vedio, then, and to retreat; Calchis was playing the long game now. Part of why the Vedians had yielded to the invaders: Calchis had told them to do this as well. They were of his mother's tribe, the Ganni, so they obeyed despite misgivings. In this way the stronghold of Vedio would be spared and remain a viable resource for the prince in the future, whatever became of his royal sire's great army.

Shizuru might have suspected some of this, but had no way of proving it. There was also no way she would pursue the prince, not now that he had retreated into the stamping grounds of the druids. The further northwest the Himean snake had marched, the more forest it had encountered. Vedio itself was still bound by clearings, but beyond it were the tall green edges of oak groves in the distance. To pursue the prince into forest territory he knew best would require time and care-as well as the creation of new roads, going by the miserable tracks all over the empire.

No, Shizuru had neither time nor care to spend now on the wily Calchis. Another day she would find him, she decided, and possibly show him her own wiliness. But for now there was the king's army, which she could no longer ignore, and had always intended to face.

So from Vedio curved the Himean army, back towards the centre of the empire. Their foes had been crawling deeper into it the whole

time, lumbering towards the capital city. If they had made good time- not something all that probable-they would have reached and invested it already. Not a problem even then, as they would be assaulting a place that had spent over a month preparing for a siege. Besides, Gorgo was widely considered impregnable by the empire's denizens. Shizuru knew what to do to take it, but rather doubted *they* did.

And as for defection by the city's inhabitants, she doubted the chances of it. Her cousin was no fool and neither was the Firensian queen. Both would have instituted law martial at the first opportunity and ensured all knew where the dice fell here. Were Obsidian to regain the capital, he would be expected to order executions for those who had surrendered to the invaders. That meant just about all of them, as the only dissenters had been locked away from the beginning. Even the Mentulae of Gorgo knew which master made a better gamble for their skins.

The real difficulty was not in Gorgo but in the other legions. The scantiness of the past harvest had obliged Shizuru to spread these out over the empire. What she disliked was the idea of the king's big army falling upon one of these by itself. Her legions were fast and her legates trusted, but were the Mentulaean peoples around them to be inspired to truculence by the nearness of the king's forces... well, then there might be some problems.

She needed to come to grips with the king, and before the remaining Mentulaean lords raised fresh armies to add to his. Which meant taking the shortest route back to the heartlands, walking right in the footsteps of the enemy.

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They found the foe earlier than expected, at a valley their Firensian guides called Aggir Hagor. To be precise, it was only *part* of the enemy. Obsidian had seen fit to leave another splinter force behind him, perhaps as a response to the havoc Shizuru had wrought among the Ganni. It was a goodly army too, only a little smaller than the Himean one. In this the latter got a sense of the enemy's full size. Shizuru now marched with seven legions: just about thirty-two thousand men, as some legions were understrength. If their

numbers-obsessed foe could afford to leave a splinter force that almost matched this, the whole block had to be truly titanic.

The splinter force at Aggir Hagar was clearly there to look out for them. It had been installed into the choicest part of the area, a high plateau that permitted sight of all comers while granting a nice defensive advantage.

*Smart, she thought to herself upon surveying their position. Practical too, as separating them would have lightened his main force's logistical burden. Some of the king's people have been thinking. They knew we would pass here to get to him quickly. A good idea to leave a pin.*

For pinning her was the chief purpose of the army in the valley. She knew she could slip past and save herself the trouble of taking their hill. They would be obliged to give pursuit and thus abandon their advantageous position. But Shizuru was too cautious a commander than to assume this army was alone. What if the king had left one more splinter force behind in case the one at Aggir Hagar was insufficient? She might end up between two enemies instead of baiting one down from its perch. And even were that not the case, she knew the army in the valley would follow her all the way to the king did she outrun it. It would be slow but it would catch up once she reached her destination. Again she would be in the pincer, not a prospect she relished.

Someone clearly had brains in the royal retinue. In fact, several did. Shizuru only guessed at it, but the king did have with him most of his remaining court generals. He was gearing up for a big engagement, so it had served him well to bring his big talents with him. They were the ones who had advised him to break off this smaller force to keep another eye on his rear.

The Himean general understood. Better to finish this splinter where it squatted, right in the valley.

"We need to get them off that plateau," she told her legates. "Otherwise, we shall waste a lot of manpower fighting them. Form up a standard battle line and let the Eleventh lead the way. Have them take that lower camp-" A smaller encampment on a lower hill,

for the enemy cavalry. "-to provoke a defensive manoeuvre. When enough are involved, let the Eleventh fall back along with the rest. Tempt them down from their perch with the retreat. If we get them far enough into the lower camp, they will follow the rest of the way."

Things transpired much as she wanted for most of the engagement. But when the order to retreat came, something happened that not even Shizuru could not have anticipated.

The order blared by the army bugles roared out and was snapped up by the valley. The great cliffs of Aggir Hagar now showed an unforeseen menace: they formed a massive, natural echo gallery. Sounds like those of the Himean army's horns were taken up and reformed into new compositions before returning. Round went the echoes, the music of the buglers squeezed through a thousand crags, the now misshapen notes thrown back again and again in a bizarre cacophony.

The sound was one that the legionaries could no longer recognise, never mind interpret accurately.

Instead of retreating, the Eleventh pressed. The other legions too pushed nearer and nearer the enemy's camp, which meant they moved nearer and nearer unfavourable ground. Shizuru and the officers, realising what had happened, took to their horses to turn the men around. Only by dint of speed and sheer discipline did they prevent the near-debacle, one that had Shizuru scowling furiously in her tent.

"Well, that was unexpected," she said to her officers, disgust curling in every syllable. "Our position has become untenable, so much is clear. I have no intent of subjecting the soldiers to that absurdity again!"

Her legates agreed to a man, knowing generalling would be impossible in such a place. How could one direct soldiers without sounding out orders to them?

"Shall we get the army ready for a march, General?" Kenji asked, his low and gravelly voice as deferential as he could make it. He was keenly aware this was the first time the general had ever been



forced to retreat from a field. While far from a defeat, it was nevertheless a draw-and that would grate anyway on someone of her ilk.

"Yes," she told him now. "But not all of it."

Her upper lip curled and displayed fierce teeth.

"So be it," she said. "They think me pinned? I have a lesson yet for the Mentulae."

She had the army throw up a camp at the mouth of the valley. It was large enough for half her force and she promptly installed the Fourteenth in it under Shohei's command. She bolstered them with the Firensii Kenji had brought to besiege Comus, then slipped away with the rest of her army as soon as the sun's light vanished.

It was a bluff, but a strong one. The Mentulaean army could not know how many of its foes had actually left. They could not know if what occupied the enemy camp was a piddling rear guard or still a sizeable army. They could come down to check... but then they would lose their advantage. Their position up on the plateau was sturdy, safe. Down there, where the camp's inhabitants waited, was much more of a risk.

In effect, it was as the Himean general stated: the lesson for the Mentulaeans was that those who sought to pin could also be pinned. Whereas she was free to go after the enemy's main force again.

*Which I need to do soon, she mused, riding once more at the head of the column. Soon enough to head off others from further swelling it, but not so soon that I oblige the foe by blindly entering the field. A delicate balance. My scouts will see to it, as I have all of them seeking what I need. I need an Aquae Sextiae, for I shall take no more chances after Aggir Hagor. Who could have seen that coming, that freak phenomenon? Even our Firensian guides were amazed. They said that though they had known the valley echoed, they had not known it would have that effect on our bugles. I believe them: it was a freak. A freak of nature sent me into retreat. But I still think I should have been aware of it.*

So deep were her ruminations that she failed to notice her mistress watching. They rode alongside each other and were surrounded by other Himean officers. So when Natsuki finally intruded upon her cogitations, they were the only two who understood the words, at least in that company.

"Even you cannot command the earth, My Commander. Nor can you the wind."

Shizuru turned to look at the girl, startled. The green eyes were open and intelligent and she knew there was no hiding from them.

She sighed with a little ruefulness.

"I do know that, Polemarch," she admitted, using the Otomeian language as well. A pause, and then: "I suppose it was childish of me."

"No," said the other. "It was unforeseen and you are annoyed."

Some beats passed before she added, " I would be."

Shizuru nodded and was quiet. Her lover permitted it.

"Did I still look annoyed just now?" she asked of the Otomeian some moments later.

"No."

Shizuru asked how the other had known her annoyance, if that was the case.

"You said yourself," the younger woman explained, "that you are impatient. You dislike things to be this - to be *unfinished* . So this, after the prince? It would have rankled more. I need not your face to know it."

The Himean was watching her closely, it seemed. Natsuki channelled the question mutely.

"Only marvelling," Shizuru declared. "How easily you see through me."

The Otomeian had something to say to that too: "Then it is fortunate, My Commander."

"What is, My Polemarch?"

The smile she loved, so thoroughly scotching annoyance that Aggir Hagar was already only a memory: "That you do command me."

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While the Himean general had been terrorising the Ganni, her cousin had been at work. Her charges were to strengthen hold of their controlled territories and to prepare for the foe's advent. The former she did by having the legions assault dissident townships and the latter by doubling scouts all over the west. She also followed Himean procedure for stiffening fortifications. That meant finding the artillery's ranges and laying in siege spears, hoarding stones for ballistae and literal tons of food for the warehouses.

"Should I be worried about treachery?" she asked Obsidian's former queen. "The locals still know the city better than I, which means there may yet be passages some enterprising defector can open for the king's agents."

"At the risk of being discourteous, Legate, I think you forget that I am a local," Queen Azula told her. "I know every passage in Gorgo myself and my men are already stationed at them. Whatever you may think of the city's denizens, we Firensii are less prone to stupidity. Obsidian would torture by inches every one of my people here were the city to fall to him. My men won't chance it."

Shizuma had the queen show her every single opening in the city anyway. These she showed to her fellow officers in turn, along with the Third's centurions.

"I want men on these," she told them. "In octets round the clock. And let them know that this counts as legionary watch duty. That means anyone caught shirking or napping on his time at these posts will be bludgeoned without appeal."

Then there was the matter of informing the locals, all of whom

already knew anyway.

"Your former master approaches and may intend a siege," she announced at the square, before a great crowd of the city's distraught inhabitants. "As you should have seen from our preparations by now, we are more than ready to deal with such an event. None who stay shall lack protection, thanks to the legions and the Firensii. Nor shall you lack food, given our heavy stockpiling. That said, we shall force no one to stay who wishes otherwise."

"Those who wish to leave may leave," she said, "but must do it now. They may carry away any property of theirs that they so desire, but all they leave behind is instantly confiscate. We may shut the gates at any time, at which point no one may be allowed entry or exit. So decide now! Stay in the city and we shall defend you with our lives. Exit and you take yours in your hands."

There were very few takers, she later observed. As her amused officers noted, many of the city-dwellers were too reluctant to give up their property to chance it. Besides, where would any refugee truly be safe? There were still armies fighting it out all over, in between the more "settled" locations like theirs. At least if they took their chances in the capital it would be at home, in a place they knew well.

While all of this happened, the king's army crept nearer and nearer them. The senior legate's scouts caught him early, so they tracked his progress the entire time. Like her younger cousin, Shizuma had no fondness for being caught napping. She was determined to know the precise moment the foe came near enough to be a true menace.

What she had not counted on was that said foe would be arrogant enough to send his menace ahead of him.

King Obsidian of the Mentulaean Empire sent a troop of envoys to the capital. They rode well ahead of the king's forces, having been sent to warn Gorgo of what would happen should it resist. They drew up outside the city gates a full week before the king's army even came in sight of the nearest watch-station.

They accosted the soldiers at the gates but were refused entry.

Indignant at such treatment, they then demanded to speak with the "High Commander" of the Himeans. But the high commander was not in residence, the tribune in charge stated; they would have to content themselves instead with her senior legate or second-in-command. Whereupon the emissaries demanded the senior legate, but prefaced that meeting with a notice.

"Tell this senior legate," the lead envoy sneered at the gathered legionaries, "that His Radiant Majesty the King Obsidian, Emperor of the Mentulaean Empire *and* rightful ruler of Argentum, Argus, and Sosia, gives her and her army a single day to quit the city. Those who do so and lay down their arms may be allowed to live. Those who do not shall be tortured until they perish. Your very leaders shall be dragged off the battlements, to be roasted upon our spits. His Majesty comes with a great army and those who do not surrender shall be devoured by it!"

So much did the envoys bid the soldiers tell the legate, whom they intended to beard further during the meeting. But the senior legate was a greater aristocrat with a more bilious constitution than the deputation could have predicted. No sooner had she ridden through the city's gates than she told them to 'stuff it up their yaps' and tell the king to come and take Gorgo if he wanted it.

To add insult to injury, she also had her armed escort take three of the king's delegates. Whom said escort bore off into the city, all screeches and kicks.

"You see how easy it is?" she told the remaining envoys, who gazed at the madwoman with fear. "I wanted so I took, none of this palaver or posturing. Only the weak expend themselves on threats. Be sure to tell His Radiant Cockalorum I said this. So stuff it up your yaps, you damned curs, and get you going! *Get!*"

"Unexpectedly direct," the Firensian queen observed when Shizuma returned. The woman was thinking of the what she knew of the Himean general and comparing it to the senior legate. She thought the cousins were rather different.

"That popinjay only sent that lot to try and intimidate us," the cousin in front of her answered, supercilious Himean nose up in the air.

"Not to mention to lie to my face. As though I thought he would actually spare anyone surrendering! No wonder Shizuru gave him a verbal spanking when they met. Rightful ruler of even our Argus and Sosia provinces, eh? Aaah, what a poseur! How did you stay married to him, exactly?"

Azula was succinct: "With great effort."

"I believe it."

"What should we do with the emissaries you seized?"

"Whatever you like," said the senior legate, opening her beautiful eyes wide. She actually appeared to have forgotten about her captives. "Keep them in the dungeons if you want or push them right out of the gates again. Cook them over a spit like they threatened to do to us. I suppose you can torture them too, although I doubt they have any information we can use that we do not already know. I honestly do not care, Your Highness."

"Why did you take them then?"

A wicked smile: "I thought it might be amusing."

Oh, but the cousins really were different!

"But now that we know Gorgo is truly his object, I must act." A frown to the queen. "I have to get to the lands of the Carsinii where most of the Otomeian auxiliary are encamped. My cousin will need all the cavalry she can get in these flatlands, and it's in these flatlands I think she shall find her great battle. Your former husband wouldn't be game to meet her elsewhere, would he?"

The other woman smiled sourly, knowing what the other was saying.

"No, he wouldn't," she agreed. "He's a bully."

"So he will want to bully her with his army's size," Shizuma confirmed. "The best way to do that would be in the wide flats in this area. My cousin will be looking for a place around here. She knows he wouldn't be tempted otherwise."

She was already moving around the command room, rapping out orders to her staff. After issuing a summons for the rest of her officers, she addressed Azula once more.

"I need to move the other legions too," she stated, "in case the king moves faster than we expect. I'll be leaving Toshi-san and the Third to support here, and you also have the Firensii your father sent. Is that enough? Can you hold out against them?"

The woman's look was telling.

"I would have to suffer my former husband again if I didn't," she said.

Contented that Gorgo was in good hands, Shizuru's senior legate took a band of cavalry and rode northeast. There she found several thousand Otomeian auxiliary brooding over the Carsinii with the Eighth and the First.

"You already know, but Obsidian's coming, Zanki-san," she informed the legate in charge of them. "And so is my cousin. Which means she'll want some more troops to even out the numbers, at least if we can bring them to her. If I had my druthers, any reinforcements we send would include Himean legions. But I'm not certain those can march to her unmolested by the time she reaches the heartlands. Too many plains and too exposed, especially with the threat of that horde. We shall look sitting ducks if we take the soldiers west already, especially if we've no notion of where to go yet. Shizuru wouldn't thank me for risking them."

"The heartlands," the other echoed, latching on to that part of her speech. "So you think she'll force an engagement near their capital?"

"Near enough, as the king shall be parking around there. He wants it back badly, you see. Anyway, he'll want to stay on the plains too."

At Zanki's enquiring look, she expanded: "He'll only meet her somewhere that looks like he could throw all his weight into it. But she'll only meet him somewhere she can make her weight count for more than what it is."

"Some might say those two conditions are incongruous."

"Do you think they are?"

"For someone like Fujino-san? I doubt it," the other woman sighed, knowing their commander-in-chief. "She'll find herself an Aquae Sextiae, Shizuma-san, nothing surer. She'll also want the cavalry. They'll be ready."

"Good, because that may be very soon and they're the only reinforcements we might be able to send. How are they, by the way?"

Zanki had been working with their cavalry in the past months and had enjoyed every second of it.

"Spoiling for a fight as always," she said.

"Just the way we want them." Shizuma grinned at the other legate and proceeded with her concerns. "I know my cousin and she'll want to draw the king as soon as she finds a battlefield. But before that happens, we need to be defensive. I think I dislike having the legions so spread out. If what's coming *is* the big one, then Shizuru will want most of them within reach of each other too. I already sent messages to Miyuki and Maiza-san. As for Seigo-san, he should be practically among the Firensii now, so the Seventh's distant but safe."

Zanki asked where she should take her own group.

"I think the Twelfth and the First should move a little nearer the Atinu Camp," said the senior legate. "Lasandre might even do nicely. I've already sent word to Miyuki to inspect that base, so they should be ready for anything."

"We can march today if you want it," Zanki offered, but Shizuma demurred.

"Not quite yet," she said, "because I've no intent of letting Shizuru march back here without doing what I can to disoblige the opposition. My worry is that some of the places we've already subdued shall revolt afresh. What are the odds of the Carsinii and



the Arvetii-" This was another of the subgroups of the Mentulaean nation, their territories abutting the Carsinian ones. "-attempting another muster once the king's forces get close enough to serve as, shall we say, an inspiration?"

Her auditor was grim.

"Pretty high," Zanki admitted. "Even with that engagement we fought, they've fighting people left still. Everyone knows by now that the king is marching. Though that's only stirred up mutters thus far, things will change the closer he comes." A hard look at Shizuma to show her own concern. "There *will* be trouble."

"So we head it off again. The question is," Shizuma said, "how do we do it? You've spent even more time here than I have, Zanki-san. How do we force these people into fighting us precipitously again? I doubt what we did before shall work another time. Even with the threat of the king's army marching, I think these louts have learned enough now not to assault two full legions with auxiliary support. We need a new stratagem."

"I think the old one might work again, actually," Zanki responded. "If we pair it with an affront. Aside from the land itself, what do the Carsinii have that we consider of great value right now?"

"If not the land... oh. You mean its produce?"

Zanki averred.

"The last harvest's thinness still has them on edge," she reminded the other woman. "And you know we've been levying more tributes of food from their lands compared to others."

"Only natural, as they have more to give," Shizuma reminded her in turn. "Many of the empire's richer farmlands are in the Carsinian lords' holdings."

Zanki did not contradict this.

"The thing is, they're still touchy about it," she said. "Remember what happened at Fregum? They were quiet enough at first, but they turned on Shohei-san the moment they got a hunch of being

cheated with the wheat. Never mind that their hunch was actually wrong. I think if we do another requisition here, we'll finally push many of them into an early rebellion."

Shizuma took that in for a moment.

"So you think we should commandeer, what?" she said. "Another third of their grain?"

But the other woman had another notion.

"I think we should take almost all of it," she proposed.

The senior legate lifted steely eyebrows and looked hugely entertained.

"That would precipitate rebellion, all right!" she hooted. She eyed the other senator afresh, taking in the tranquil and friendly face framed by dark hair. A delicate face, for certain. But what she had proposed was anything but delicate.

"And here I thought you would counsel something subtler, Zanki-san," she said. "I was just beginning to think you an eagle-you might be more of a wolf!"

"As I see it, Shizuma-san, the move is necessary either way," Zanki insisted, smiling at the jest to her character. "If their king does come near these territories, that resource-all the foodstuff, grain, and herds still available here-will be one of his goals. We can't let him have that grain for his baggage. Nor can we let the loyalists among the Carsinii bring it to him or use it so they can bring more numbers to him."

Shizuma saw the good sense of this.

"As for subtlety, we don't need it," the other legate stated. "They're hotheads who've been boiling all winter and who have very short memories. Now that they think they have allies coming, trust me on this: it won't take much to run off some steam."

Shizuma took some time to think about it and decided it was worth a try. She voiced a final concern to other legate, however.

"The Twelfth is ready, I know, as are the Otomeians," she noted. "I'll also have Miyuki send up the Fourth to be safe. But will the First do? It used to be raw."

"Oh, that was months ago!" was the dismissive answer. "They've been blooded more than once, thanks to the raids we've been running on the holdouts. They've a lot of steel for being so young, Shizuma-san. Your cousin would be pleased."

She *would* be pleased, thought Shizuru's senior legate, when the First actually vied with the Twelfth and Fourth in thrashing the enemy. Because they had shown violent resistance to giving up their grain, the Carsinii provided Shizuma and Zanki with a *casus belli*. The pair rampaged, running an unsparing circuit among the eastern townships that saw the emptying of countless granaries, the overturning of homesteads, the seizure of herds and poultry. The campaign was so fast that every attempt to fight back was crushed under the legions' heels.

Zanki had been right, Shizuma thought. Short tempers and hopes of the king's return had shortened these Mentulae's memories. Again they had failed to mount a proper resistance by waiting to collect all their fighters before launching an assault. Of course, had they waited, they would likely have lost all the foodstuff they were fighting for anyway. A cleft stick for the Carsinii, and a neat one. So the two legates only had to deal with pockets, disarranged swells of rebellion that they put down with hard-bitten efficiency.

Thirteen days of this saw the east bruised and battered, its people exhausted. The Carsinii would not be able to agitate again any time soon or marshal forces in aid of the king.

"Didn't I say they had a lot of steel?" Zanki asked Shizuma as they watched the First loading up yet another baggage train bound for the Atinu camp. "They're lovely boys and girls, these!"

"They are, by the gods," the senior legate responded. "Proper veterans now, I think. After all that, it's time we got them to a safer place. We've done our part, for what it's worth. Now for the real challenge, which is all up to my cousin."



# Chapter 70

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Ala** (s.), **alae** (pl.) - A cavalry unit. For this story, every ala shall be equal to 500 horsemen.

2. **Aquiliferi** (pl.), **aquilifer/o** (s., L.) - The standard-bearers of the legion, so-named for the eagle emblems on the standards. Aquiliferi were chosen from among the ranks with a view towards personal bravery. They and the Eagles could become rallying points for soldiers, so aquilifers were respected and paid more than the rankers.

3. **Aquae Sextiae** (L.) - Modern Aix-en-Provence, this was the location where the Ancient Roman general Gaius Marius defeated the migrating Teutones who threatened Rome (in the story, Hime). Marius was vastly outnumbered when he won, but also technologically superior to the foe. Among other things, his victory was due to the favourability of the field: Marius managed to entrench himself very solidly in a hill before the Teutones came. When an Ancient Roman said he wanted an Aquae Sextiae, it signified a desire for a place where the few could feasibly oppose the many.

4. **Auspices and augurs** - Roman augurs were state priests. Augury was a precise science for the Ancient Romans, who practised it by taking the auspices prior to momentous events. The augur would observe the flight, calls, or behaviour of birds and then interpret them according to the precise rules of augury set down by tradition. Auspices were thus essentially rituals for taking omens, to see if a venture boded ill or good fortune based on divine approval. In the story, Shizuru is an augur, having "inherited" the priesthood from one of her relatives.

5. **Cannae (Battle of)** - A battle between Carthage and Rome. Numbers are only approximate due to lack of verifiable sources, but the Carthaginian Hannibal may have faced as many as 85,000 Romans (in this story, Himeans) with his 50,000-strong army (about

30,000 of which were heavy infantry). The Romans were massacred despite being numerically superior.

6. **Cataphracti** (pl.) - A cataphract is a type of heavy cavalry, a fully armoured man on a fully

armoured horse.

7. " **Ercle!**" - "By Hercules!" A Latin expression.

8. **Fabian Strategy** - The classic war of attrition, named after the Ancient Roman commander Quintus Fabius Maximus Cunctator ("The Delayer"). The idea is to avoid/delay pitched battle and attempt to wear down the foe by interrupting his supply lines and depriving him of actual victories. It is especially useful against foes with limited resources.

As a side note: Ancient Roman names are often replaced in this story with Japanese ones in a (half-hearted) attempt at consistency. For example, were the story of **Aquae Sextiae** (s.v.) in the text itself, "Gaius Marius" would be replaced by a Japanese name. "Fabian" is left alone because the name itself has entered the English lexicon. The names in the ancient or founding legends are left alone too, because they are already so well-known, e.g. Romulus, Remus, Aeneas, etc.

9. **Verpa** (L.) - Latin obscenity; refers to the erect male organ with the foreskin drawn back.

10. **NOTE on positions in battle** - Keep in mind that the right flank/wing (consider these terms interchangeable) of each army faces the left flank of its opponent, in the same way that your right shoulder fronts the left shoulder of a person you are facing.

Thus, if Army A's right flank marches forward while it and Army B face each other, it would be marching to meet Army B's left flank.

Next, the commanders in this chapter divide their infantry forces into distinct corps. If you have difficulty assigning visual position to the terms in the text, follow the legend below. Assume that the army (denoted by LFLCRCRF) is facing the exclamation mark:

!

LF LC RC RF

[Legend: LF = left flank, LC = left centre, RC = right centre, RF = right flank]

Now assume that the exclamation mark represents north. If we **reorient the army to face east instead**, it should look like this:

!

LF

LC

RC

RF

In this new arrangement, if we say the army's right centre [RC] was attacked from the south, it signifies an attack on the side adjacent to the right flank [RF]. In a similar fashion, an attack on the left flank's [LF] north side would signify an attack coming from the direction of the exclamation marks. Furthermore, if I wanted to attack any of these corps in the rear, I would have to attack their west sides.

Finally, let us say the army's general has a squadron of horse [SH] in reserve. Say he places it to the rear of the left flank for security. If the army still faces east, it would now look like this (the ellipses denote empty space):

!

SH LF

... LC

... RC

... RF

11. **NOTE on Terantrum** - It can be difficult to visualise topography.

*For convenience's sake, imagine Terantrum as a great plain bound by a "U". The left and right (vertical) lines of the U are ravines and the bottom (horizontal joining) line is the stream. Naturally, these are vastly more irregularly shaped in the actual location, but it serves to give a bare idea of the place.*

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## ***Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae***

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It was not quite an Aquae Sextiae but it would have to do. When Shizuru's scouts came back with news of the king, he had begun a siege of the capital. Undaunted, she continued making smokeless camps and hunting for her battle theatre instead of trying to relieve the city. Her scouts were thorough, her decisions rapid; it took only three more days to find a serviceable place. She hustled her troops to it, steering north of the capital and forcing march all the way.

The King of the Mentulaean Empire was none too happy when his own scouts found her again. Obsidian's hope had been for the Himean army to come to Gorgo's defence. This was why he had entrenched his own forces south of the city, on favourable ground for so many men. So valuable did he-and most of his subjects-consider their capital that they believed she would not leave it long endangered. But their priorities were not those of the invaders, so much was obvious. The Himean commander would rather abandon Gorgo than risk engagement on so open a turf. She had even stolen a march on him and found herself a better place to make a stand.

The site into which the Himean army had fled was known as Terantrum to Obsidian's subjects. This was a great expanse of mostly flat land interrupted at its far edges by imposing ravines. The northern side was the most open, with few points of interest to the military strategist. But to the east and west it was fringed by deep gullies that ultimately ran into Terantrum Stream.

This meandering watercourse was a tributary of the River Agrius; it formed the southern border of Terantrum Plain. The stream could be forded by an army at one place and it was that crossing the



Himeans had secured for themselves. This put their camp on the southeast side of the stream and the gulch.

"A good position for them, My Liege, as it makes retreat feasible."

This was from one of Obsidian's highest-ranked generals, a man who had won more than a dozen battles for the crown. He had been summoned to this meeting along with the other senior military members of the king's cortege.

The man now pointed to a map and indicated the land west of the gully, north of the stream.

"They have their army drawn up here, although their camp is on the other side of the watercourse. This is because we can only attack them from the west, on the plain of Terantrum itself. Fortunately, there's enough space for us on that plain. We shall be able to deploy the whole army easily, in spite of their position."

Obsidian worried his lip at this, asking, "Why can't we just attack their camp itself by coming at them from the south or the east? We would then be on the other side of the stream-and the gully-too."

Every one of the advisors clustered around his war table knew the answer to that but tried not to show it. The man who had been speaking took on the task of answering, as the king's eyes had settled on him.

"Alas! It would be unfeasible, My Great Lord," he told his ruler. "The land east and south of their camp is unfavourable for a large force. It holds even more ditches and canyons. Their smaller army would hold better than ours in such terrain as they could use the natural impediments to avoid a pitched battle. Further east is also the River Agrius, which we would have to cross in order to attack from that direction. And after what we have seen of these Himeans, I have a feeling they may have already downed the bridges at that waterway."

A menacing silence followed this elucidation. The king sat in his travelling throne, an eye-popping affair of carved wood inlaid with jewels and gilt. Now he creaked in it, his armour straining against

the many gems at this back, and demanded to know how best to proceed.

"I see that much!" he said, talking through a glower that boded ill. He did not like to have a weakness shown up, even at his own prompting. "What I want to know is what best to do next. I want these foreigners gone! I've had enough of them-and all of their blasted allies-cavorting about my territories. You said we could end them if they came here to try to save the capital city. It looks like you were wrong."

His audience's necks prickled at the indictment in the air. They bowed their heads to propitiate the man still swelling in the carved chair.

"Now you lot are saying we should go to Terantrum," he eventually rumbled. "They chose that location themselves. Are you certain we can finish them off if we go there?"

"Lord King, Wise Sovereign, I would lay my life on it," the advisor who had been speaking returned, even while knowing he was doing just that at the moment. He looked at his fellows around the king's war table and received unanimous head-bobs. "There's more than enough space to engage them at Terantrum. The great ravines to its west are sufficiently far from the field."

Another of the advisors requested permission to add to this and received a cantankerous nod.

"It is all as Vinthurios says, Your Highness," said this other advisor. "More than that, Terantrum's western ravines present a barrier not unlike the eastern ones. They may only be crossed safely at a few places, most important of which is the Bridge of the Wasp."

Her finger pointed out the said structure, which supposedly took its name from the crest of the lord who originally built it.

"So what the Himeans have done east, let us do in the west," she continued. "I say we establish our camps on the western side of the western ravine. This grants us our own defensive advantages, as we would then have a path northwest and to the lands of both the Ganni

and Celsor. An important option should anything untoward occur."

A baleful spark from the royal eyes at this.

" *Not* that it would, Your Most Excellent Majesty," the woman amended with speed. "But Your Majesty is of the wise kind who arranges for all eventualities. Besides, having access to that route is not merely a safety in case of retreat. It can also give us access to further resources from those loyal lands, like reinforcements, for example."

Another request to speak from someone else was impatiently granted.

"As theirs gives them," the new advisor put in, gaining strong nods at the statement. "This is the other problem with the Himeans having managed to encamp where they are, My Lord King. They effectively control a route to the east that opens them up to reinforcement from their farther camps. The very first camp they established in our lands, the one by the River Atinu, is in that direction. So is the citadel of Lasandre, which their forces currently inhabit. It means we risk their numbers swelling the longer we hold off on attack."

The speaker looked his king in the eyes in a rare fit of daring, knowing the urgency of the situation merited it.

"Now is the time, Great One," he implored. "We must get them before they can call up more legions. They may already have done so! But it will take those time to reach Terantrum and we are very much nearer. Even at the speed they march, we could still crush that army before more of these Himeans came."

He turned to seek support from Vinthurios, whom they knew the king favoured most of them. Not only was the man undefeated as a general, but he was also shockingly low-born, coming from peasants. He would never be able to present a claim to the throne in spite of his many victories. That he owed all he had to the king made him valuable, for it made him a tool that could not be insubordinate.

Vinthurios agreed, as did the rest.

"We can be there in mere days if we go now, Your Highness," he put forth. "We can even attack the very day after. And though their position is better than it would have been had they come here, it will still not be good enough to fight our forces. We have an army the likes of which no one has ever seen! It dwarfs theirs so badly that even their renowned discipline will be for nothing. We can annihilate them at Terantrum, My Liege, I swear it. But it is more certain the earlier we go there. Each day's delay is another chance for them to swell their army."

Thus King Obsidian followed the Himeans to Terantrum, establishing camps on the far side of the western ravines and pouring his army through the crossings and into the field. They arrived in the noontime, and there were so many of them that it took the rest of that day to get them sorted. In the meantime, they formed upon the plain in their thousands upon thousands.

South of Terantrum Stream was the one significant elevation in that place. It was a knoll just ahead of the Himean camp. The day the Mentulae established themselves in their new location, the Himean command ascended it to better see the enemy.

"*Edepol!*" Keigo blurted when he joined the others on the rise. "That's not an army-it's three!"

It was breath-taking, to say the least. The Mentulaean king had aggregated an army even his foes had to view with reverence. With him was still a big part of Calchis's former troops, along with fresh ones levied during his progress to the capital city. With him too was the bulk of the royal cavalry as well as the empire's last complement of bladed chariots. In that great mass all those falces, swords, and shields flashed so brightly that they made the Mentulaean side of the plain look like an unsettled sea.

Little wonder, thought the gawking Himeans, that their enemy had indulged them at Terantrum. This stretch of land was among the few nearby capable of sustaining that vast throng. It would support not only the king's cavalry but also his infantry, the bulk of his force. Of the latter, he had brought more than ninety thousand. He had once told the Himeans' commander that he could bring a hundred thousand to bear on her if he wished. It appeared he had finally

managed to make good on that promise.

The incredulous Himeans surveyed this colossal menace, feeling suddenly like ants about to bite an elephant.

"*Edepol*," Keigo said again. The word croaked out of him. "Tell me again. We're supposed to fight this?"

His commander's look was calm but she vouchsafed no response. It was her cousin who answered; and, Keigo noted, with a throat that sounded as dry as his.

"We're supposed to *beat* this," Shizuma told him with a shake of her silver head. She was latest in the party, having just arrived at Terantrum the previous evening. The moment her own scouts had sighted her cousin approaching the capital, she had detached all the Otomeian cavalry in her command to send the woman's way. At first, she had toyed with the idea of sending a tribune to lead them. But the import of the task had seen reconsidering the delegation: she ended up leading the troopers herself.

*I thought you would need them*, she had said, at her cousin's delighted welcome. A pity she had not realised how many more of them said cousin would need, she now mused.

Keigo's uneasy voice intruded upon them again and she frowned at him.

"How many, you think?"

Shizuru's other legate answered this time.

"You said it yourself," he told Keigo. "If they don't outnumber us three to one in foot alone, I'm no judge of the battlefield."

Their general finally contributed her piece.

"Then it was our good fortune we pinned that other force at Aggir Haggor," she told them. "It might well have been four to one otherwise, or near that number."

Again more shaking heads as the rest digested this incredible

quantity.

"That's true," Keigo said shakily, still trying to wrap his mind around the idea of facing the horde before them. What a horde! What an enemy! He knew his history and knew there had been such multitudes in history: Aquae Sextiae's Teutones were just one example. But the Teutones had been a whole people, migrating south with their spouses and families. They were trounced by a smaller Himean force, but they had also been rank savages. They had barely even known how to form up a battle line, never mind a siege tower. Many had not even worn proper armour!

These were not Teutones milling about Terantrum. They had properly soldered armour and weapons. They knew what army lines were and had the sophistication to employ tactics in battle. These would not be beaten simply out of technological backwardness-and there were enough of them to counter with their numbers what technological advantages the Himeans did indeed possess.

"This is-is-why, it beggars all belief!" he burst out. "Jupiter and all the gods! Have you ever seen the like of this? Have any of you, in any another campaign?"

No need for anyone to answer: even their commander was silent.

"Hannibal faced so many of you at Cannae, they say."

This was from a voice no one had expected.

It pursued: "He won then, no? Though you outnumbered him."

Every eye turned to the speaker of the comment, every face projecting bewilderment. Even their general looked amazed that the polemarch of their auxiliary had spoken. She barely spoke in councils, save when a question had been directed her way or if exigency required she add to the dialogue. So for her to speak now and so coolly of such an enemy had them all forgetting their tongues for an instant.

It was Keigo again who managed to recall his first.

"He wuh-yes, yes he did and we did," the legate said to the

foreigner. His eyes bulged at the strangeness: their general's mistress had never before spoken to him. "But, *Ercle* ! That was a different time! With different circumstances. And armies!"

"And generals?" she sniffed.

The Otomeian pressed on to general amazement, ignoring their looks but flashing colour on her cheeks.

"Now you are the smaller army," she observed. "A Cannae in your favour this time, maybe?"

Their commander finally recovered enough of herself to reply at this.

"Hannibal still had rather more than we do here," Shizuru pointed out mildly. It was a tease: the amusement in her eyes was discernible to the whole company. "True, they say his infantry numbers were not that far off what ours are at the moment. But he had with him two times the number of cavalry."

The Otomeian polemarch's response was uttered with crackling disdain.

"You Himeans like to say your legions are why you win your battles. If so, the auxiliary cavalry should not count for much here."

Several laughed at the flagrant jab, their commander included. It was true, after all: most of them still believed battles were won by their legionaries, not the auxiliaries.

"And Otomeian cavalry, of course, count for twice what Hannibal's did," the commander now allowed.

She reached for her mistress's hand and lifted it for a kiss, ignoring the flash of alarm the gesture earned. Their eyes met and her thought was clear: *Had we been alone it would have been your mouth and your lips, and my teeth.*

"So," Shizuru said, having reduced her lover to crimson silence once again. "You heard the Polemarch-Princess, my friends. Surely we cannot balk at that challenge! Shall we turn it into a Cannae in our favour, then?"

Her cousin sighed and looked her usual irony.

"This would be the best time to try it," she told the general. "But look you there first, Shizuru. Would you say they have more cavalry than ours or less?"

"More, I should say," Shizuru answered, and with a mindful look at her lover, added: "But not *better*. Anyway, the difference in numbers is not as great as it is with the infantry-if I had to guess they have only three alae more. Which means they shall be banking more on their foot than their horse. All the more as they now have a healthy wariness of Otomeian riders."

"A sound strategy, with that many footsoldiers," the senior legate responded. A hand came up, clenched at the air. "How I wish I had brought some of the legions! Even only one more."

"Yes, but you might have arrived after the battle had you done that," her cousin said. "The cavalry you brought are help enough. We shall make do."

"Are you sure we can't delay them enough to wait for Zanki-san to catch up?"

This was since she had sent a message to that other legate midway through her dash to Terantrum. Upon learning of Shizuru's exact position, she had sent Zanki an order to bring up more legions.

"Three legions would make a big difference," she said now. "You really think the Mentulae won't hold off a bit?"

"If they did, I would prod them out of it," Shizuru answered. "Every day we wait would increase the chances of those extra legions making it to us, but so would they increase the chances of the remaining feudal lords bringing reinforcements for the king. Anyway, I never intended a Fabian strategy. We neither of us can afford it."

Shizuma agreed with that, knowing there was nothing for it but to have the battle.

"Well, I'll admit to curiosity about what you shall do here, Shizuru," she said to the general. "Many's the time I've heard and read about



your fights against foes who are larger. This shall be the first time I get to participate-though I confess my bones do itch about it!"

The fiery eyes regarded her laughingly, the setting sun caught up in their depths. An arm wrapped about her shoulders.

"I promise your bones will feel better soon," Shizuru said to her, squeezing her close. "Have faith in me, Cousin! I knew what I was about when I led them to this plain. Now to council, for I believe our enemy will oblige us tomorrow morning in his eagerness."

The next day proved her belief correct. Dawn showed the Mentulaeen host formed up and ready for combat. They spanned almost the breadth of the west, file after neverending file of soldiers revealed by the sun in ascent. It was a line the likes of which even Shizuru had never seen in its scale.

The Mentulaeans had attempted (rather effectively) to cover the plain. Their infantry line spread the span of a full eleven kilometres. It was not a continuous line despite that. The Mentulaeen commanders had still been obliged to leave large gaps to achieve such frontage. Since the army faced east, their line's left flank was tactically the most exposed. The right flank, on the other hand, was just a little over a kilometre north of the stream.

The gaps in the line showed that the Mentulaeen commanders had quartered their army. This was partly for manoeuvrability and partly for the command structure. The Himeans would not learn it until the end of the battle, but Obsidian had assigned five generals to Terantrum's command. One of them was named High Commander, which put him just below the monarch.

In reality, the king did barely anything for the duration of the combat: he ceded the real work to these five generals instead.

It was a wise decision, for the king was no battle strategist. His chosen generals, on the other hand, more than made up for him. With so many military minds working together, it would be harder to lose-although they all agreed that losing was unlikely.

Save for the high commander, who oversaw the whole, the generals

were assigned one out of four corps. There were over twenty thousand soldiers under each of them. This meant that two of the corps already numbered more than the whole Himean army.

The Mentulaean horse was distributed evenly among the corps. It too had been split into four. Hence there was one cavalry unit for the left flank, one for the left centre, and so on; each one simply took position behind its respective infantry group. The placement told the observer that the horse would be in reserve, a safety measure against flanking attempts. The only anomaly was the small chariot contingent, which was placed between the left centre's horse and right centre's horse.

Shizuru took one look and knew this would not be another Argentum.

Part of the Himean success at Argentum had been due to Mentulaean overconfidence in numbers. The Prince Artaxi had taken a look at the paltry foe and decided only a third of his army was enough to do the job. Accordingly, when battle opened, he had sent in merely a third. Only when the first corps failed had he added a second-and still only another third of his total force, even then. The final third of his army had not actually met the Himeans in battle, having fled when the first two waves failed.

Himeans had won Argentum by battling in detail. It had been a lesson to the Mentulae in the fallacy of numeric superiority.

Since Argentum, there had been many such lessons. To the foe, all opportunities for learning. And while the Mentulaeans continued to believe that numbers were decisive, they had absorbed part of the message. They had begun to learn that numbers were not *absolutely everything*.

So Shizuru knew this battle would be more dangerous than Argentum had been. So much did she explain to her officers the day before the conflict.

What she did not want, she said, was to allow the enemy a general attack along the breadth of their line. That would grant the Mentulaean army all the advantage its enormous numbers could bring. Yet she could not compact her line to avoid that. To do so

would risk envelopment by the gigantic enemy.

So while she deployed her troops in a four-corps formation matching the foe's length, there was a significant (and to the enemy, peculiar) difference: she echeloned her line from northwest to southeast.

This meant that instead of drawing her line parallel to the foe's, Shizuru drew it diagonally. One flank was thus much closer to its enemy counterpart than the other, at the start of the battle. Adding to the irregularity, she stacked that nearer flank with more troops than her three other corps.

"Today I wield the hammer," she joked. "Not the rod."

The 'stacked' corps or hammer, the right flank, she filled with men and women from the Ninth and Thirteenth. The Ninth was expected: it had been her legion before this campaign and now held her most experienced soldiers. As for the Thirteenth, it was the other one she had taken on her famous trek through the massif. Not only was it heavily blooded, but it had long gained the confidence intended when she granted its now-talismanic, no-longer-disastrous name.

Next to those was the right centre, made up of the Sixth. This was another of the old legions she had at the start of the Northern Campaign, nearly as steely as the Ninth. That it was not was only since its deficiencies had been filled out with raw troops after Takeda Masashi's interim command. But these too had been blooded many times since and had grizzled veterans reinforcing them.

The left centre was held by the Eighth. The left flank, by the Tenth. Both had been accruing heavy experience during their time in the lands of the Mentulaean Carsinii. They and the Sixth were further stiffened by troops from the veteran Eleventh, which Shizuru seeded across the three corps to improve their steel. Only the stacked right flank did she leave as it was.

She divided her horse too into four units. Unlike the foe, she did not have them corresponding to each corps of her infantry line. Rather, she placed one unit behind her right flank, one behind her left flank, and one behind both the left and right centres.

The last cavalry unit she placed behind the third. This kept it free of an infantry counterpart and in reserve. It was the Lupine Division, now a thousand strong, and more than ever an instrument of terror.

"I am not assigning a tribune to your brigade," she informed its captain, the Otomeian Kyo. "This is since you shall be getting your commands direct from me again. Yours is the most powerful cavalry unit on this field, so I shall treat you as a floating resource, to be used wherever I find opportunity. However, there may be times when I have to give the rest of the army my full attention. At such times, you shall have to lead your troopers in my stead."

Kyo looked to his polemarch first, then bowed to the Himean general.

"Kenji-han shall take command of the infantry's right flank," Shizuru proceeded. "Shizuma will have command over both right and left centres. I shall try to help you with those where I can, Cousin, but I need you to try to watch both when I am busy."

"I'll manage."

"I have no doubt. Keigo-han, you have the left flank."

This was the refused flank, which meant it would meet the enemy last. She informed him that she had put more of the cataphracts in the cavalry unit behind his corps.

"Only for safety, as they would be a big help for defence," she said. "But I doubt you shall need them, especially given that you shall have the stream on your left."

Keigo voiced understanding and promised to hold the left against all comers.

"I have no need to say we are outnumbered," Shizuru went on. "But we all know we have the better people. The Mentulaeans have not our discipline, nor have they our leadership. We know a good number of them are also freshly levied, which means they are likely still green. Whereas *every one of our legionaries* is by now the veteran of several successful battles. The same for our auxiliary-

which I think all will admit to be capable of riding down the best the foe has to offer."

Smiles and murmurs of assent at this, which the few Otomeians at the council took with fierce-if-quiet pleasure.

"Quality, not quantity. We will win today because we have the former in abundance!"

She touched them with her eyes and each one straightened up at it.

"Listen to me say that because it is true. We *will* win! You must place your faith in that because I cannot have a single one of you falter. Our enemy today is not even that horde we are facing. Our enemy is doubt. You cannot doubt, you must believe. You must believe in the quality of our men, of our leadership, of this whole army. You must believe in our victory even before you see it."

And unspoken but clear to all of them: *You must believe in me.*

Kenji's gravelly voice answered the moment she finished.

"You can chain me to the Ninth's aquilifer, General," he offered. "That's how much I believe it."

There were smiles at the proposal, including a snort from one of the senior *primipilii* attending the meeting.

"You'd slow Yozora down, dammit," Nao grinned at the legate. "General, don't let him do it."

There were more grins as the other officers relaxed enough to join the ribbing. Shizuru's ginger-haired legate took it, although he did sham a frown at her ginger-haired *primipilus*.

At length, Shizuru demanded her officers' attentions again.

"I am going to talk to the legionaries tonight," she said. "I suggest you all do the same. Focus on the legions to whose corps you have been assigned and talk to both the rankers and their officers. Stiffen them up and assure them of our impending triumph. I shall give an oration before battle tomorrow, to be sure, but I want them to receive

the assurance from their direct superiors as well. I shall have no cowards for this battle! Apply yourselves to ensuring that. If I see a single terrified face in the legions tomorrow, I shall blame his officers and court-martial the lot of them!"

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She saw no frightened faces on the day: her people had done their work. To further encourage them she performed the auspices herself, and pronounced the omens "resoundingly positive" in her pre-battle address. Her lover, ever-insightful, asked if they were ever *not positive* when she was the augur presiding.

"Not yet," she said with a grin. "But as I am undefeated, that seems to support my interpretations."

Before the battle she left the young woman on the hill south of the stream. She installed her there with a sturdy chair, under an awning and with a trio of big and armed slaves. The Otomeian's hulking body-carrier joined them, which made the girl's retinue a quartet.

"I have no intention of losing, you know," Shizuru told her, smiling very brightly.

That got a lift of the eyebrow, to her amusement.

"Do I need assurance?" the polemarch sighed.

Shizuru chuckled. "I suppose not."

"I know you will win. Save it for a fool."

But when she acquiesced to Shizuru's request for a kiss she followed it by burying her face into the golden hair. This despite the fact that they were surrounded by people, most of whom tried unsuccessfully to appear as though they were not watching.

"Then I shall simply promise to fetch you from here later," Shizuru pledged, turning her smile to their unsubtle audience. There were coughs and apologetic nods. "I hope you like what you see while you wait."

"A fool," came another rebuke. "You know I will like it. You need assurance too?"

Then it was time to go down to the army and prepare for the battle anew. Impatient to get started, Shizuru toyed with the notion of having her horse get into skirmishes to provoke the king into attack. But such was the confidence of Obsidian's people that they needed no great incitement to start. They only waited for dawn's weak mist to lift, then went for their enemy.

The Himeans met them. As expected from the formations, Shizuru's right flank met Obsidian's left flank first. These bodies met so far ahead of the others that it took nearly half an hour before the corps next to them finally engaged their opponents. These flanks' soldiers therefore fought the longest-and had the most casualties-for either army at the end of the day.

Now the right flank was Shizuru's strongest, it being made of two legions. But this still put it at only half-strength compared to its opponent. So outnumbered was it that it actually stalled the moment it met its Mentulaean counterpart. It took a shocking amount of struggle before the legionaries at the front even managed another step.

They forced it even so, these legionaries Shizuru loved best. They strained sinews and muscles and unearthed in themselves new reservoirs of strength. The legate commanding them helped, rallying tirelessly with the rest of the officers. Soon the outnumbered corps was pushing back its opponent-at a tortoise's pace, yes, but without pause.

*How do they do it, wondered the general commanding Obsidian's left flank. They should've been unbalanced and outnumbered, but they weren't and now they're pushing me. Pushing me, with only half the number of troops! How do they do it? It can't just be training. Or is it something they're trained to believe?*

He was aware of his responsibilities even in his wonder, however, for he quickly rattled off an order for a cavalry sortie.

"Send in our cavalry reserve," he ordered his officers. "Have it attack

their infantry from the north."

"Yes, General."

"And tell our officers to wake up. They're slacking! The Himeans shouldn't have pushed us back at all."

It was with satisfaction that he observed the Himean push come to a stop. The cavalry attacking the Himean right flank had done its job. The Himeans were still fighting valiantly, but the two-pronged assault had pushed back their right flank. They lost ground slowly but steadily and it seemed as if the Mentulaean left flank would soon overcome them.

Unfortunately for Obsidian's army, the Himean commander was prepared. In went her right flank's cavalry reserve, which stopped the Mentulaean one by engaging it. Thus relieved of pressure from the north, the Ninth and Thirteenth were rallied again by their officers and redoubled their efforts. Their backward drift was arrested and they dug their heels into the ground.

It was at this point that Shizuru sent the Lupine Division into its first engagement. It passed through the gap between her right flank and right centre, and crashed into the Mentulaean left wing's south side.

Shizuru had not exaggerated when she described her lover's old cavalry squadron as the most powerful. Beyond the skill of its fighters was the horror they continued to engender in the Mentulaeans, who still could not make sense of the lot. They rode with the barest regard for reins, often even dropping them to attack with both hands. Then there were the great sickles, allied to those chains they liked to use to tangle enemy arms. And to make things worse, the black-clad troopers also had a weird propensity to produce all manner of darts in the middle of slashes.

So when the Lupines slammed into the Mentulaean left flank, they cast the whole side of that corps into screeching alarm. Never mind that the Himeans were outnumbered, that they had been losing ground. These facts left the Mentulaean infantry's minds for a few moments in their dread.



Those few seconds were sufficient for Shizuru's right flank to exploit: the Ninth and Thirteenth pushed forward again and regained much of the ground they had lost.

The fighting at this point had been largely isolated to the armies' north flanks. With the rest of their corps in march, the Himean right centre and Mentulaean left centre would be next to fight.

Here the Mentulaean chariots made an appearance. They issued from the rear of their lines and passed between both Mentulaean centres. From there, they drove steadily for the Himean right centre. Their goal was obvious to anyone: they wanted to soften up the foe before the infantry met.

But Shizuma, commanding that corps, had been warned by her cousin about these units. She let them accelerate first, then ordered the legionaries to part when they neared.

The move was one the Himean officers had been drilling into the rankers. Mentulaean bladed chariots, like most other wheeled conveyances, could not turn at a rush. As a result, the chariots at Terantrum passed harmlessly through the Sixth for the most part. The soldiers simply reformed the lines and closed up the gaps once the chariots were beyond them.

The sally actually cost the king his chariot units in the end. For in passing through the Himean right centre, they emerged right in front of an unengaged Otomeian cavalry squadron. Which quickly dispatched them, Otomeians having learned how slow and unwieldy the carriages were compared to mounted horsemen.

The polemarch of the Otomeians, watching from the hill, said one thing: "Good."

She was not the only Otomeian among the battle's spectators, but she was the most prominent. Every Himean on that perch knew whose mistress she was and who had troubled to set her up in such comfort. So, though there was a lot of moving about on the knoll, no one was fool enough to impede the polemarch's vision.

"Got the bastards there," one of the spectators whooped, a scribe

for one of the legates. "They didn't think our soldiers would be ready for their chariots this time."

"Well, but there aren't that many chariots anyway," someone else said. "They're not the problem."

"Not any longer. The cavalry's finishing them. Let's count our blessings those are gone."

"I guess you're right. But we're not even halfway."

The pair suddenly quieted along with everyone else on the hill. The Mentulaean left centre corps and Himean right centre corps had just met.

"Pluto's cock, it's too fucking thin," one of the Himeans spat shortly afterwards, before lapsing into further curses. "Those *cunni* are more than double them."

So large had been the Mentulaean left centre compared to its Himean counterpart that it had pushed the latter back upon impact. The legion forming that corps, the Sixth-and several cohorts of the Eleventh-rallied bravely, but only just managed to hold their ground.

"Hanazono-san is commanding that section, isn't she?" the spectator who had lauded the Otomeian defeat of the chariot spoke. "Why doesn't she send in her cavalry reserve to relieve them?"

"Because the Mentulae will just do the same thing with theirs," someone answered. "Besides, she only has one cavalry regiment to cover both that section and the one beside it-the one with the Eighth, I mean. I think she wants the enemy horse out of it as much as possible."

"They're struggling. Damn, damn, *damn* ! They're in trouble."

"No," the watching polemarch whispered, so quietly that none heard it. "She comes."

While the Sixth struggled to come to grips with its much larger adversary, the Himean commander had been pulling out the Lupine Division from its first fight. The situation at her right flank now having

stabilised, she could afford to put her elite cavalry back in reserve.

Just as she was doing that, however, the general commanding the enemy's left centre decided to bring out his own horse. Eager to push the flagging Sixth back completely, he threw his cavalry unit at the harassed corps from the south. It was a move not unlike his left flank colleague's earlier.

The attack rocked the Himean right centre, but not for very long. Seeing the danger headed for the Sixth, Shizuru had ordered the Lupine Division out of reserve and into the fray again. This time, though, she split it into two groups first.

"Take this group-" The larger unit, carrying about two-thirds of the whole division. "-and engage the cavalry attacking our right centre from the south," she instructed the Lupine Division's captain. "The smaller group I want to attack their left centre corps itself, from the north."

The elite cavalry's pincer clamped very hard and very fast. It repulsed the Mentulaean cavalry and caused bedlam in the enemy's foot. This reprieved the Sixth from their deadlock.

To the jubilation of the spectators on the hill, the Mentulaean left centre was suddenly the one being driven back.

The polemarch of the Otomeians said it again: "Good."

Her sweating slaves nodded to her, hands convulsively clenching on their sword hilts. The other spectators continued to cheer, although their enthusiasm flagged as time went on. All corps of both armies had now entered the battle, and the whole field was a logjam. Minutes turned into an hour and still the desperate fighting yielded no side an advantage. The Himeans, it seemed, were too pigheaded to be truly pushed back; the Mentulaeans, on the other hand, were too numerous to drive off.

In that great mass of men and women on the field, though, there were still several conspicuous pockets of inactivity: the enemy cavalry no longer seemed keen on attacking the Himeans and contented itself with guarding the enemy corps' rears.

One of the watchers on the hill noted it.

"Way this is going, they won't need to," someone else grumbled to general dissent.

"How you can say that?" one demanded, sounding ready to punch in the other's teeth. "Look, our entire line's holding! They've not pushed us any less than our boys've pushed them!"

"We're not moving either! Our boys are all on defence-they'll swamp us if this keeps on!"

"Oh, aye? Want to say that to my fist?"

Another voice intruded before there could be any clouts.

"Ahh, pay that *verpa* no mind, Sendou-he's just bitter because Kurauchi-san wouldn't release him to ride for Atinu Camp alone yesterday. Said he could follow up on the call for reinforcements, as if Hanazono-san hadn't already done it! You'd think we didn't know spinelessness when we saw it."

And to the author of the unpopular remark: "What would you know about combat, you filthy coward? Shut your mouth or leave! You'll ill-wish our lads with your ignorant grumbles."

Others joined in and threw their own diatribes. As they berated the hapless man into silence, another voice put forth a query.

"Why *don't* they use their cavalry? They outnumber us even there, so I'm surprised they won't throw them in any longer."

"I think," someone suggested, "it's because of the manoeuvres earlier. With our elite cavalry, I mean."

A pause as the speaker seemed to recall the presence of the Otomeian polemarch and directed a quick nod to her out of respect. She blinked back.

"I think it's showed them they can't match up," he continued explaining. "Not to those, anyway. They might be wary of provoking our cavalry into more engagements after that, so they're keeping

their horse in reserve again. Well, it could change. Just what I think."

"Well, ours is-hold on, what's this?"

The crowd on the hill quieted, all focused now on the field.

"Well, by Jupiter!" one eventually said in a voice full of confusion.

"Where's our cavalry going?!"

To his side, the Otomeian polemarch broke out a grin.

From the start of the clash, the general of the Himeans had been watching the enemy cavalry with wary eyes. Like her audience on the hill, she had just come to conclusion that the foe now preferred to play it safe. The Mentulaeen commanders would keep their horse in reserve unless she used hers to draw it out. That was good, it gave her an idea: and it was one of extreme daring given how outnumbered her troops were.

She sounded orders to peel off her cavalry from the corps whose rears they protected. They drew further and further north, riding behind the legionary corps to converge on one location. This was the rear of the Himean right flank, where they paused to reorganise themselves.

Shizuru moved the moment her horse was properly concentrated. The whole mass, ten alae strong, rode out of the battle line and past her right flank. It went west and cleared the legionaries of the Ninth and Thirteenth-then shot south and hurtled into the enemy's left wing like a battering ram.

To be precise, it smashed into both the Mentulaeen left flank and its cavalry support. The Otomeian horse was now in a group so large that Shizuru was able to deploy it against multiple targets without trouble.

A full half went barrelling into the Mentulaeen left flank's cavalry reserve. As this half was now not only larger than its enemy but also led by the elite horse, it took very little time for the Mentulaeen cavalry squadron to fold. Most of its members went flying north in a panic, the elated Otomeians snapping at their heels.

During this slaughter of their cavalry reserve, the Mentulaean left flank saw its own share of peril. The Himean general had divided the remaining half of her horse yet again in attacking it. She sent one group-a quarter of all her horse-to take the corps in the north. The other-the remaining quarter-she sent to take it from the west.

All of a sudden, the left flank became the worst corps to be in for Obsidian's footsoldiers. Assailed from three directions and with no cavalry support, it yielded to the inevitable. The whole corps crumpled into the only direction it could go.

South, smack into the Mentulaean left centre.

Pandemonium ensued on the whole left half of Obsidian's army. When its northernmost corps bolted into the one south of it, it disarrayed the lines in the latter group. To make things worse, the reason for the Himeans' battle formation had just become manifest. The "stacked" Himean right flank-Shizuru's hammer-had been steadily eating into its enemy. Now it pursued the Mentulaean left flank's flight by wheeling a full ninety degrees. This southward turn was executed in formation and saw the reoriented corps pummelling the Mentulaean left centre in its now-defenceless north side.

Obsidian's left centre was suddenly in a situation not unlike the one that had collapsed its left flank. The only difference was that it faced pressure from only two sides.

This was because the Otomeian horse troopers were too busy to assault its rear. Not a cause for celebration among the Mentulaeans, for what occupied the Otomeians was an even bigger blow to the king's troops. Shizuru's horse, massed again, charged towards the remaining Mentulaean horse reserves.

When Obsidian's high commander had noticed Shizuru's huge cavalry move, he had sent out an order for his own cavalry to concentrate. A fair counter, had it only been made much earlier in the battle. But by the time the buglers blew it out, the Mentulaean left flank's cavalry was already lost. And the Otomeian troopers had begun to regroup yet again.

So while Shizuru's infantry hammer had been turning southwards,

her horse was already reconcentrated and heading for an enemy cavalry still in the middle of adjustment. It caught them unprepared and miserably disorganised. A third of the Mentulaean riders were still riding to formation when the thrilled Otomeians fell upon them.

They did it with horrific tumult, actually picking targets before they struck by yelling their claims. As these yells were all in their language, the Mentulae only heard it as insane babble. The Lupine Division was still in the lead and contributed their share: the limbs they had caught in their chains and lopped off foes earlier they now hurled at the enemy. All the while yelling that insensible, ululating whoop that sent every Mentulaean hackle flying.

The Mentulaean horse was routed and dispersed north in terror. The Otomeians were so deep into the blood-rage that they nearly followed in hopes of running them down.

It was their Himean commander who held them in check: she refused to let her own troops spread beyond control. The moment she was certain that the enemy horse was beyond salvation, she pulled the Otomeian troopers away from that enticement and sent them east instead.

Which had them riding into the rear of the Mentulaean left centre, already en route to perdition.

The legionaries knew they were winning now and hewed carnage on all sides: the Mentulaean left centre's fate was foregone. Some of its soldiers fled southwest, scrambling to get away from its eager assailants. Others did as their comrades from the now-defunct left flank had done and fled into the corps beside them. As had happened with the left flank and left centre, they threw their fellows into disorder in their flight. The Mentulaean right centre buckled, its length rolling up like a carpet. Retreat was not long after. Very soon the right flank followed and then the contest was done.

The massive army Obsidian had brought went into full collapse, most stampeding south to the stream and others to the ravines and their camp. The former leapt straight down the gulch in a bid to reach the current. It was a move of utter desperation.

Terantrum Stream actually deepened as it wound to the west. Its waters should have been higher had it truly been later in the spring, but the calendar was early and the melts late. The gorge into which the Mentulae dove had banks thirty metres above the water at the shortest drops.

Some made it into the waters, and thus managed to take with them the heartbreaking news for all defenders of the empire. But the gorge was so steep and so rocky that more died than succeeded in these attempts.

The Mentulaean forces who fled west fared even worse. These had only one clear route through the ravines and this was where most of them headed. It was the chief bridge crossing the chasm, the Bridge of the Wasp.

They found no succour there, no escape. The Wasp's bridge had become a Himean one. The Himean commander, foreseeing that this would be the main avenue of escape in the west, had disengaged half her cataphracti midway through the battle and ordered the bridge seized. This sealed off the clearest escape route for Obsidian's forces, destroying their chief hope of refuge.

Otomeian cavalry wreaked havoc to the north. Chasms and enemies to the south and the west. And still the relentless Himean infantry, its beautifully ordered line closing in.

Of the hundred thousand the Mentulae brought to Terantrum, sixty thousand perished. The Himean losses, by contrast, numbered only twenty-seven hundred.



# Chapter 71

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Dominilla** (L.) - This is the diminutive of "domina". Just as "domina" signifies "mistress" or even "madam", "dominilla" signifies "little mistress" or "young mistress".

2. **The Eighteen** - The original eighteen centuries of the **Ordo Equester** ( **Equestrians**, s.v. ), meaning the original eighteen divisions within that group in its early days of existence. As time passed, more divisions were added to the Ordo Equester to accommodate the expansion of the knight class, but these eighteen centuries were kept untouched. Hence, The Eighteen were the most influential knights of all.

3. **Equestrians** (pl. E.), **Equites** (pl. L.) - Members of the **Ordo Equester** , called "the knights" as opposed

to "the senators". Those of knight rank were usually as well-born as those of senatorial rank-in fact, they were often related-but the difference was that they chose not a political career but a commercial one. One may consider them the equivalents of the modern "business sector" of the community, with the senators being the "government or political sector", for a simplified but convenient categorisation.

4. **"Imperator!"** (L.) - The cry of approbation Roman soldiers give their general after a great victory. It entitles the commander to petition Senate for a **triumph** (s.v.).

5. **Triumph** - A parade of floats with actors depicting scenes from the campaign, entertainers,

carts bearing spoils, the army, the commander, and prisoners of war. It was a celebration of a general's victory and could only be granted if his army had hailed him "Imperator!" after a battle. The parade went around the city of Rome.

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## *Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae*

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The governor of Septentria found her nascent province significantly quieter after Terantrum. In defeating the empire's former king she had crushed the fountainhead of opposition to invasion. More than that, she had furnished undeniable proof of the invaders' power. None among the Mentulae had genuinely thought them capable of defeating the king's army, despite the previous losses of Artaxi and Terrigos. An army of a hundred thousand, it was said, was another kind of monster. An army of a hundred thousand could not lose on a plain. Yet it had, which gave every other resistance-minded Mentulaean sudden reason to hesitate.

In the days after the battle, Shizuru found more and more locals suing for peace. Mentulaean magistrates and lords sent heralds loaded with gifts: all for the Himean general, all asking for treaties of friendship-and, of course, permission to keep their titles and estates as subjects of Hime's newest territory. Those who had raised small armies to guard their cities in the war demobilised them as well and sent their arms to Shizuru along with their gifts and heralds. It was with great satisfaction, in the latter half of June, that she instructed her cousin to continue treating with the locals in her place.

"I daresay you already know what to do," she told the woman, "so I shall only say to continue it. Clarify their obligations as new members of a Himean province, take hostages, log gifts as part of the official booty, and so on. I am leaving some of my staff clerks to help yours get settled."

The other woman's green-gold eyes roamed the room interestedly. All the room's other occupants were Himean and very busy, not a single one without at least two scrolls or wax tablets. Unsurprising, because they were her cousin's people, and she knew her cousin ran a tight ship. Yet had it been any other commander there would have been more slack, especially considering their recent victory.

"Generous of you to add their presents to the army's spoils," she told Shizuru. "Along with the contents of the vaults from several cities.

Gorgo alone had, what-six thousand talents, I hear?"

"Almost that much, yes," her cousin answered. "My rankers will find themselves very much wealthier once this is finished. As will all my officers, naturally."

The senior legate, already a wealthy woman, smiled at this.

"It makes a greater difference for some than others," she said.

"It does that. But it makes a difference nonetheless." A flash of impishness in the red eyes, one of them winking. "Did you actually expect me to set aside some of the treasure just for myself?"

Her cousin was actually more familiar with the law than most would have believed; she showed this in her response.

"Legally, you can with most of the gifts," she pointed out. "Provided it shall be coming from a member of an allied town that also pays tribute, it would be above-board if its value is not deducted from the tribute itself."

"Perhaps, but these are just newly allied. It seems to me wiser to accept personal tokens only *after* the treaties have been signed and the first tributes paid. Anyway, I was actually referring to the treasure gathered from the cities we took or sacked. I wondered if anyone thought I spirited away a few bags of gold from the booty."

Shizuma laughed at the tease.

"I certainly did not!" she retorted. "I know you too well. Even so, you have to admit anyone else would have. Such speculations are only smart, not to mention customary. Besides, you know as well as I do that as long as the Treasury gets a bag of gold for every one you keep, its clerks say nothing."

"I know. Would you have done it?"

A shrug.

"Probably," Shizuma said with unapologetic honesty. "But not if I had as many people watching me as you have watching you."

It was her younger cousin's turn to laugh, red eyes twinkling.

"And there you touch it!" Shizuru said to Shizuma, who grinned. "You know my opponents would only be too quick to prosecute me for a misdemeanour they forgive of absolutely everyone else. So I think I would rather behave with circumspection rather than give them a chance. At any rate, it is not as though I am not swiftly adding to my fortune as the campaign proceeds. I have already begun looking into local mining concessions. There is also my perfectly legal share of the total spoils as well as the sale of our captives. I recently made over three thousand talents from the sale of Lasandre's people alone."

" *Ecastor* !"

Jolted out of her usual languor by that number, Shizuma tried to process the figures. How many thousands upon thousands of slaves was that? And how many millions of sesterces when converted?

"You're a Croesus, Shizuru," she told her cousin and general. "With the shrewdness of The Eighteen. What is this I hear about you forming a consortium of Gorgo's businessmen to travel down to Sosia and Argus?"

Shizuru nodded at the question, having intended to mention it at some time during this meeting.

"It is only the first step," she explained. "In the future, more consortia and meetings between The North's plutocrats may have to be convened. Our war has gone on long enough to depress the local economy significantly. Even cutting out my first term here as well as Masashi's interim, do you realise this land has been at war for three years? For those three years we have been stalking up and down the land with our armies, interrupting agriculture, overland trade, and other industries. At the same time, the empire's lords have been sucking it dry of manpower and resources to build and finance their own forces. If we are to have a salvageable province at the end of this, we would do well to start rebuilding the financial structures of at least those areas we have already claimed."

She proceeded to explain her other measures for breathing life into

local businesses. They included fostering new trading agreements between Hime's other northern provinces and the cities and townships that now made up Septentria. Perhaps most importantly, the local leaders would have to be improved. Which was to say that the more reluctant local authorities were to be replaced by ones more willing to cooperate.

She had already done something like this after the Battle of Terantrum, when she had led her victorious army to the edge of Carsinian lands. Terrified by the prospect of a greater walloping than the senior legate had recently given them, the Carsinii had sent a deputation of welcome that all but prostrated itself at Shizuru's feet. Whereupon Shizuru demonstrated that her senior legate had informed her of all that had gone on in her absence: she promptly stripped several barons and baronesses of their titles and authority, then sifted through the deputation to find more tractable alternatives. From these she obtained fresh treaties of friendship and allegiance as well as a promise to get their estates and communities back in shape. Of particular importance were those lords with great farming estates. These she exhorted to get people back on the fields as soon as possible.

She had not expected mere treaties and promises to be sufficient to enforce her orders. She had also peeled off two of her legions along with the legate Keigo Kurauchi to see to them. Two more had been left in Terantrum to clean up the battlefield. Another two of the five remaining-Zanki Kiguchi had joined her with more legions after the battle with the king-she sent with the Third out of Gorgo into the northwest. Their purpose was Aggir Haggor, to relieve Shohei Nagayama and the Fourteenth.

Another pair of legions she had march to Lasandre Citadel and the Atinu Camp, led there by Shizuma and Toshi. She had summoned the latter from Gorgo at the end of the battle and charged him and the senior legate with consolidating their authority over the central-eastern roadways. Such had been the effect of Terantrum on the local resistance, however, that the paths connecting the capital to the eastern bases were now largely safe. Most of the action the two legions ended up getting was road construction and repair.

"I left Toshi-san to it, although I also had him keep the legionaries

ready for battle," Shizuma told their general. "He was very happy-I think he actually enjoys roadwork! Taro-san should have joined up with him now with some of the auxiliary. They'll ensure the integrity of the whole thoroughfare from here to our Atinu base."

"I'm glad," Shizuru said, and meant it. "I need as many roads as possible safe and in top condition if I am to restore local as well as interprovincial commerce."

Her companion hummed.

"Are you setting up permanent base here?" she asked. "For the governorship? It would make sense."

"Yes, I suppose it would. Certainly any of Septentria's later governors would likely choose this palace as well. Besides which, Queen Azula has formally separated an entire wing for our exclusive use, since we have installed so many offices here already. You stayed here too during your tenure, did you not, Cousin?"

"Yes, although not in the suite you and your girl now occupy."

"I see." Shizuru looked around her command room with apparent contentment. "Well, the place suits, so let this be the official base of Septentria's governor. But I have no intention of just staying put here, I can tell you that!"

"I never thought you would, even if Terantrum does seem to have quieted all local protest." A pause. "Where do you go next?"

"Northwest again. I still owe some cities there a visit."

"Will Tasgetia be among them?"

A grin: "Certainly!"

They stopped talking as a tribune walked up to snap a salute.

"Pardon, General, Legate," he said, passing her a scroll. "A message from Legate Seigo Ushida."

Shizuru thanked him and cracked the seal on the missive.

"He is heading back east," she told her cousin, poring over the short letter. "I want him at Asterion, where he shall rendezvous with Maiza-han and the Fifth."

She went on to explain to her cousin her opinion that the old Mentulaeen southlands had long been left to languish. With ruler after ruler choosing to ignore the region, the place had become a backwater, with only the flimsiest of ties to the rest of the country.

"It worked to our advantage," Shizuma stated.

"That it did," Shizuru quickly agreed. "Nevertheless, I am determined our tenure should see it flourishing. I want more congress between it and the rest of the province. Moreover, I want it to have more congress with Sosia and Argus as well."

She then outlined her plans for improvement, including the enlargement of the current bridge connecting that region to the Himean side of the River Atinu. She also noted that she had already sent orders to another legate to march down south and build new and better roadways.

Shizuma was intrigued: "Is that what you want him and Seigo-san to do all spring?"

"Not entirely-as you know, there are still towns down south that have not sued for a treaty," Shizuru said. "They can distinguish our friends from our enemies as they go along."

"So that's the Seventh, the Fifth, and the First," the senior legate listed, before frowning. "If you want Maiza-san and Seigo-san to join up, whom are you deputing to take the lead?"

"Neither, as I expect them to work together as equals," Shizuru answered. "Anyway, the two are friendly, so I believe it should be fine. But I did specify in my letter that I want Maiza-han in charge of matters of diplomacy."

Shizuma grinned. "Worried about Seigo-san's distaste for the locals?"

The commander grinned back.

"Let us say, rather, that it would be a waste not to exploit Maiza-han's political skills," she said, to her cousin's further amusement. "Try to keep tabs on their progress from here, Cousin. I also want you to keep working on the more seditious places. Again, do what I have been doing. And pray do not neglect the local business community."

Shizuma was already wincing: unlike her cousin, she had little taste for matters monetary. Her own fortune, inherited from her parents, was cultivated on her behalf by several very well-paid financiers.

"Being your senior legate gets more and more thrilling, doesn't it?" she snipped, to Shizuru's laughter.

"So call up Miyuki-han to handle that part of it!" Shizuru said. "I heard she acquitted herself very well when she was a quaestor of the Treasury, so she should manage financials well. Taro-han can hold down the Atinu camp by himself now that he has returned. Anyway, he shall have Toshi-han and even Keigo-han within reach if he really needs support. I doubt he shall, given how peaceful the eastern province is getting."

"There may still be holdouts," her cousin reminded.

"Not for long," was her verdict.

She took her leave shortly. Then it was out of the army command's headquarters and up two storeys to her private rooms in the palace. An entire suite and all the rooms on its hall had been dedicated to her use. Thus she was able to establish not only herself but the chief figures in her army household in comfort. She met one of them while moving down the corridor.

"Hermias," she said to her steward, who strode up in his lithesome style. "Has the Dominilla returned?"

"Over an hour ago, Domina," he answered. "She is using the reception room at present."

She eyed the door that led to what was now her study, which she also used when consulting individuals in private. She had told her



lover to use it if she ever needed a reception room when discharging her duties as polemarch of the Otomeians. To her knowledge, Natsuki had not taken her up on that offer before today. Her eyebrows asked the question of her steward, who revealed the identity of her lover's guest. The name set a mischievous quirk to her lips and she asked if they had been attended properly.

"We served them some refreshment, Domina," he said. "But no wine, as they declined it. Would you join them and have some yourself?"

She said she might and he left to see to it. Opening the door to the room, she breezed in swiftly, enjoying the faint surprise her entrance incited. The two she surprised were seated at a large and oval ripple-grained table; while she walked up to them they remained silent.

"My apologies," she said in tones of blatant insincerity. "Do I interrupt something?"

Alyssa got in before Natsuki could deny it: "Yes."

Out came Shizuru's teeth.

"Excellent," she purred, drawing up a seat and falling into it. She made sure to push her chair right beside Natsuki's. "It has been a while, Princess Alyssa. How goes it?"

"Good, for the most part," the blonde Otomeian said. "Your war is the same, I've been told. I heard how you won Terantrum. Outstanding generalship. I'm very sorry not to have witnessed it."

Shizuru's eyebrows lifted a little at such generosity. She thanked her for the compliment.

"I had the tale from the other barons," Alyssa enlarged. "As well as Natsuki here, who saw the entirety of it."

"She observed the battle from a hill with command of the field."

"Yes, I heard that too." The wonderfully blue eyes blinked, their yellow lashes flapping. "I wonder at the wisdom of situating your

lover so near the battleground. She may have been on the other side of the stream, but it amazes me you even took the risk."

Shizuru accepted that calmly and even spoke in moderate agreement; it disappointed Alyssa, the Himean was amused to see.

"I would have placed her farther away and in a more secure location, myself," Shizuru said. "But she refused, so if you take issue with that you should blame her, not me."

Alyssa's eyes slid briefly to Natsuki's incensed ones before returning to the Himean.

"So you cannot even control her, then?" she asked, addressing Shizuru again. "That militates against your alleged ownership."

"You think *you* could do better?"

"Unquestionably, if this is the best you can manage."

"Oh, you would not like to see my best."

"Perhaps because there would be little to see?"

They were interrupted by a harsh exhalation from their subject, to whom they turned.

"Neither of you," said subject hissed, eyes ablaze and chest heaving, " *controls* me."

Up came Shizuru's hands.

"I did not say it," she said to the polemarch, who nevertheless looked ready to knock both older women's heads on the table. "It was the Princess Alyssa who did."

There was a frigid look from that princess. "Only theoretically."

The younger princess was still infuriated. Shizuru wisely changed the topic.

"Shizuma said you have begun making changes to Pascera

already," she said. She was speaking of a great stretch of land west of the Atinu that she had granted to the Otomeians: Hime would retain ownership but the Otomeians would have use of it on an indefinite lease. The purpose was to ensure these doughty people had a ready place to quarter and keep training horses for the auxiliary. As the area was prime grazing terrain, their horse-loving allies had only been too glad to take over it.

"Another batch of materiel and provender should be reaching it shortly," she said. "As well as more of the horses we have taken from the defeated Mentulaean cavalry. Can the place fit all the structures you need?"

"For now, yes," Alyssa said, going along with the new subject. "But most of the cavalry is not actually on it. Many are afield."

"You think you would have difficulty accommodating them otherwise?"

"I think it would be wiser to expand it or choose another place." The cold eyes, direct yet unforthcoming, met Shizuru's gaze. "I actually came here to ask the polemarch to say it for me, but now that you're here, I might as well do it myself."

"And here I thought you would exploit my fondness for your cousin," Shizuru grinned.

"Were that possible, I would have let her say it instead," Alyssa admitted. "But you and I both know she would have told you the idea came from me anyway. Princess Natsuki's honour can be inconvenient that way."

Shizuru loosed a laugh and tried to ignore Natsuki's dour face.

"True!" she said. "It can be inconvenient."

"So here it is. Things would go better for you were you to install my people where the Carsinii currently live."

Hermias entered to set a flagon of watered wine and a fresh cup on the table. He poured some of the beverage in the cup. Shizuru thanked him and he absented himself again.

"You still suggest we expel the Carsinii entirely?" Shizuru said, to continue their conversation.

"Given how much of a headache they have been from the start to your annexation, I think you would profit from such a move," Alyssa argued in her cool and calm way. "Say you kick them out and let us take over their territory. Instead of worrying about their loyalty, you have in their place allies of whom you're assured. If we settle enough of our people here, we might even discourage most thoughts of rebellion among the other former Mentulaeen peoples. I know you Himeans settle your own army veterans in conquered regions to discourage local revolt."

The other woman conceded that, saying, "That we do."

"It would also make it easier for your nation to call up more auxiliary forces," Alyssa went on. "You would have an even nearer base from which to draw them, instead of having to send for them all the way from our kingdom. You already tried to achieve this by giving us Pascera, true. But if you actually let us settle properly on an even larger property, we could improve whatever gains you hope to achieve."

Shizuru took a sip of her wine and seemed to think seriously about it.

"You make some very good points, I admit," she said. "But I would still like to preserve some of the local horse territories before taking so drastic an act as what you propose. For one thing, having your people at Pascera is already a powerful deterrent to any rebellious Carsinii due to proximity-enough so it seems unnecessary to install a more drastic deterrent so quickly. For another, this is only the beginning of Septentria Province. Even the Carsinii may yet prove more tractable once they realise Hime's inevitability. Who knows? Perhaps they may eventually supply auxiliary horse for us as well."

Even her lover looked askance at that, she saw. She smiled at both Otomeians and held up a hand to forestall their protestations.

"You will say your cavalry is much better-and I wholeheartedly agree!" she declared. "For myself I have no desire to use any other

cavalry in this war. In fact, given the option, I would use only your cavalry for all my wars! But I was thinking of my fellow generals posted in other provinces. You know we are forever sending to our allies for horsemen. It may be that once people like the Carsinii, Arvetii, and Aexellii spend enough years in Septentria, they shall be supplying such horsemen too for future generals of Hime. Look at the Numidians of Africa, for example. Or the Thracians of the East."

The two foreigners exchanged looks of comprehension at this, the high-strung protest going out of their faces. Although Alyssa reserved some doubts as to the wisdom of the idea, as she proceeded to express more clearly.

"That would be a good outcome," she said. "The difficulty is that good outcomes rarely come out of the disloyal. My cousin here has observed it herself: these people have no honour, no fidelity."

"I understand the concern," Shizuru answered. "But my decision stands. As I told your cousin here-" A wink for the polemarch. "-let us give them one more chance first, given that they were only trying to repel what they saw as violent invaders before. If, after demonstrating the benefits of our governance and providing them with ample opportunity to thrive under it, they persist in being dishonourable..."

She shook her head, knowing that said it all.

"Anyway, perhaps the first test of their honour is coming soon," she told her audience. "I plan to have messages sent to every city whose allegiance we now have. The smaller towns and villages shall have to be overlooked, but every place with a baron or feudal lord of note shall be included. Each city shall be invited to send delegates to an official meeting between us and local leaders... perhaps early next year, I think. Perhaps in March. In the future, I shall have all the Septentrian Conferences at the start of spring each year."

Alyssa made no secret of her bafflement at this speech.

"The Septentrian *whats*?" she demanded, sounding as though the words stuck to her palate.

"The Septentrian Conferences," Shizuru repeated. "I would like to institute these as an annual event, each conference lasting several days. They would offer a venue for both us and the locals to determine what sort of place Septentria should become. Ideally, they would also offer a chance for us to solve misunderstandings and adjudicate grievances. Thus you might consider them an opportunity for both former Mentulaeans and Himeans to work together for the common good."

Shizuru observed that the Princess Alyssa's expression could be very flat when necessary.

"What else would they work together for, naturally?" Alyssa drawled.

Shizuru barely managed to hold the smile at bay.

"As I see it, it would be of help to all of us," she argued. "We have a chance to prevent conflict by using diplomacy. The same for them. It also makes it clear that we intend to treat them as true members of a Himean province. It tells them they can influence their own future, in spite of having switched to a healthier, more reasonable master than their old one."

For a moment she thought Alyssa would laugh.

"You expect," the woman said instead, radiating disbelief, "people like the Carsinii to attend such a conference?"

"I actually think they shall, if only because they shall believe it mandatory at first. Most of them are still wary after Terantrum. The year after? They might still attend out of curiosity... and probably to make sure none of their neighbours gets the jump on them politically."

Alyssa's eyes narrowed and slashed to the still-silent Natsuki's. *This foreigner of yours*, they seemed to say, *does some hugely unreasonable things*.

"This seems a Himean concept," she said. "So I'll not try to understand or argue. I see it would be futile anyway."

"Not necessarily, but I suppose I feel the same about convincing you

of it."

The Princess Alyssa inclined her head to that and took her leave, promising to call on her cousin again when opportunity afforded.

"Perhaps we may even be able to continue our conversation uninterrupted then," she said before she left, which had Shizuru smirking as the woman finally made her exit.

"Want to lay a bet on the odds of that happening?" the Himean quipped to her lover subsequently.

Natsuki's weary look made her chuckle, and she leaned to the younger woman so as to kiss her on the cheek.

"I wish..." the girl began, before shaking her head and thinking better of it.

"You wish what, Natsuki?" Shizuru prodded humorously. "Come, you know I wish to know all your wishes so I can grant them."

A dry look: " *I wish* the two of you would be civil."

Shizuru's eyes were very large and innocent.

"Did you see us tearing out each other's hair?" she said, causing the other to sigh about small mercies.

"I will admit, though," Shizuru added, "that I was a little astonished by her willingness to compliment me about Terantrum. Unless she was being sarcastic."

Natsuki said Alyssa was not, with which Shizuru privately agreed.

"No one could be sarcastic in praising that battle," the Otomeian expanded. "To attempt it would make one seem mean."

"Suggesting the Princess Alyssa would never let herself seem mean."

"She would not," Natsuki said. "She has too much pride for it."

"Something of which you have accused me too, I think."

"Because it is so," answered the Otomeian. "It is why you two often argue. You are in some ways very like. So you would find reasons to dislike each other without me."

She stopped to point out something before Shizuru could find an answer to this. Her finger indicated a bucket of scrolls on another table, an ivory-legged one in the middle of the room. The table itself was low and long, being meant to serve the two large couches next to it.

"Hermee brought earlier," she said. "Letters from Hime."

Shizuru rose to get to them. She hovered over the table for a moment, looking over the seals and initials on the missives. She chose one at length and left the rest, then walked over to hand Natsuki the leather canister. Back she went to the bucket to sift through the contents again, while the Otomeian stared at what she had been given.

"What?" the latter eventually said. "Why did you give me this, Shizuru?"

Shizuru stopped examining the scrolls in the bucket and turned around.

"Well, that is for you," she told Natsuki. "Look. It is addressed to you."

Natsuki turned the cylinder about and saw that it was so. And then she deciphered the initials below her own name and realised who was the sender.

She blanched.

"Well now," Shizuru said, unable to help smiling. "I am fairly sure Chikane did not hope for that reaction."

The face turned to her was all eyes, a sketch of merged befuddlement and terror. Shizuru read the questions in the emerald maelstrom and answered the ones she thought most important.



"I believe she wrote to you as a gesture of friendship," she began. "Chikane is a courteous person, so it might have struck her odd to take part in planning your future when you two have never even had a conversation. I am sure that if I open my own letter from her it shall say that scroll is her attempt to rectify that. I think too that she shall expect you to reply. Do not worry about that, for I shall help you with it if necessary. As for what she could have to say, the best way to know is to open it and read for yourself, *mea vita*."

But Natsuki continued to stare at the tube in her hand, viewing it as one might a box from Pandora. Shizuru thought the polemarch looked all of thirteen when afraid, and by now wanted only to smother her in kisses and hugs. She understood that it was not the right time to make light of Natsuki's anxiety, however, so she settled for offering something more constructive.

"Do you want me to read it with you?" she asked, being curious herself about what her friend had written. "We can look at it together and I can read it out loud."

The other agreed quickly, then just as quickly caught herself.

"Would-would she mind?" she asked.

"I doubt it. That cylinder feels light, so I suppose that message is mostly greetings," Shizuru said, coming back to her seat beside the girl. "It would be a short letter in that case, you see. I expect everything there is innocent enough to be shared beyond its intended recipient."

She asked Natsuki to do the honours and open the canister. The latter did so with pronounced delicacy, as though afraid the contents would break on contact with the air.

"Duh-did you tell her to do this?" she asked while breaking the familiar Himemiya seal. "Um, to maybe write to me?"

Shizuru denied it and took the letter.

"I confess I was about to, but she beat me to it," she said, as she unrolled the costly parchment. "She always did have a knack for

reading my mind. Well, now, let us see what she has to say to you."

She ran her eyes over the first lines and instantly separated words and sentences, reading aloud and seamlessly the way only she could.

*Greetings to Princess Natsuki, Polemarch of the Otomeians, Heiress to the Late Throne of Ortygia. Doubtless you are familiar with my name: I am Chikane Himemiya. I have no grand titles to come after it that may begin to match yours, but perhaps you can take in their stead some relationships of which I can boast. I claim the title of Friend to your paramour as well as that of Sister to one you once called friend.*

*I write because it seems passing strange that we should not be on more intimate terms considering all we have in common. By now you shall have learned too of my offer to adopt you into my own family. Would it not be odd to take someone as a daughter without ever having met them, even if only through a letter?*

*So I hope you shall understand why I dared to send this missive. Perhaps we could strike up an acquaintance with each other this way? You are under no obligation to agree, of course, but I would ask most politely that you consider it. I would deem it an honour were you to respond, and I know it would gratify your lover, and would have gratified your late friend.*

*Until then, please accept my compliments for all you have done for our cause in the north and my wishes for your good health. My wife Himeko sends hers as well-she would be your other mother were you to consent to the adoption. I believe you would like each other: Shizuru told me that you like art and my wife is an artist of no mean order. Even if she does have a penchant for sculpting me in haughtier lines than I would be prepared to admit for myself.*

Shizuru concluded her recital with a laugh and an explanation.

"She only says that because she has no notion of how haughty she looks," she told the girl, who smiled back a question. "Every one of the busts Himeko made of her is faithful to the subject-who does tend to look down the length of her beautiful nose without knowing

it!"

Natsuki was looking again at the letter.

"She does not sound... so haughty," she said as she rubbed a finger over the parchment.

"Oh, she is not, really," Shizuru assured her. "She *looks* it, is all-she looks it terribly. But as you may have gleaned from that letter, she is a very nice person. Very likeable and not at all haughty."

Her smile softened as she added: "Much like her sister, actually."

She saw the swallow before Natsuki could conceal it. She reached out for the smaller hand, an attempt at comfort.

"It was nice of her to write, was it not?" she asked and got agreement.

"Suh-should I write?" Natsuki asked a little later. "A reply?"

Shizuru lifted an eyebrow. "That is your decision, as she said."

"But you think," Natsuki persisted. "I should?"

"Yes, definitely." She squeezed the slender hand and relinquished it. "But again, do not let my desires dictate your actions. Do it only if you want to, Natsuki."

The answer was surprisingly definite: "I do."

"Then write," she said, pleased.

"Buh-buh-but, Shizuru."

"Yes?"

"What should I write?" Natsuki asked, looking terrified again.

Shizuru chuckled at the Otomeian's consternation.

"Anything you like!" she said. Apprehending that this did not satisfy the younger woman, she offered something more specific.

"Perhaps you could accept her offer of friendship first and send her and Himeko your own greetings. Then you can mention something you two might have in common and see if she takes it up in her next letter. That would start the conversation."

"Wuh-what have we in common?"

The same thing came to their minds, but neither voiced it. It was not exactly ideal to start a conversation with a new acquaintance on the basis of a grief still raw.

"Literature and poetry," Shizuru recommended. "Chikane is a voracious reader of both, like you. Legislation. I know you were interested in hers and even read my copies of them, so you can put any questions about those to her yourself. Philosophy and rhetoric. She actually spent two years in Athens to polish her knowledge of both when she was only an adolescent. Art, music, culture, and anything and everything of interest to a person of exquisite refinement. Start a dialogue with her on any of those things and you can go on for days and days. You may write in Greek if you wish, by the way-hers is excellent, and I daresay she would love an opportunity to write in it. We senators only ever write to each other in Himean."

The Otomeian was very still, but Shizuru could see in her splendid eyes the beginning of excitement. She reached for the girl's hand to squeeze it again and made a final offer.

"You can show me your letter before you seal it if you wish," she said. "In case you are worried about it being suitable, I can go over it for you. Is that good?"

The fair face sported splashes of pink and Natsuki's head bobbed.

"It is good," she decided, taking the epistle now to spread before herself. She started to read it again, silently. Shizuru leaned over to nuzzle her temple, then got back up to go over her own letters. She finally settled on two of the scrolls from the bucket and lowered herself to one of the couches. She waved the cylinders at her lover when the young woman looked her way.

"Look, I got one from Chie-han today," she announced as she opened one of the scrolls she had chosen. There were some minutes of silence as she took in the contents, followed by a delighted laugh as she reached a certain passage. "Oh, good news! Senou-han has finally accepted her engagement!"

Natsuki smiled, diverted from her rereading. She knew how long the former senior legate had been pursuing said engagement and asked how the woman had finally managed it. Shizuru hastened her reading to get the answer.

"She says Hikaru-han-that is her betrothed's *tata* -narrowly escaped the Bankruptcy Court! *Ecastor!*"

She dove back into the letter; Natsuki was fully diverted.

"Bankruptcy Court," the Otomeian murmured. "This says what? She paid his debts for him?"

A few moments later, Shizuru confirmed it.

"Apparently," she said. "She says she covered the principal on his biggest debt as well as the interest on it. He can provide his daughter no dowry, of course. Naturally!"

She read a little more until Natsuki drew her attention with another query.

"The dowry," she said. "It is done among you as it is among my people?"

Shizuru took up the topic with equal curiosity: "Is the family of the one accepting the suit the one to provide the dowry for their child among you?"

"Yes."

"Then we are the same." She regarded Natsuki drolly. "Why, worried about which of us should be coming with a dowry when we get married?"

The other laughed, seeing the funny side of it too: what difference

did it make in their case since both of them were fabulously wealthy as well as devoid of parents to quibble over the matter?

"Anyway," Shizuru said, "this is news indeed. Rarely do suitors have the persistence and loyalty Chie-han displayed. Oh, did he ever make Chie-han pay through the nose for her betrothed, though! Canny old Hikaru Senou. So all that patrician snobbishness does not discriminate against plebeian cash when the creditors come a-calling!"

Her young lover summed up the story: "So this - he sold his daughter in marriage?"

"More or less," Shizuru admitted. She was still scanning as she talked; it gave her no hardship to read while holding up a conversation. "It is not all that unusual. Arranged marriages too are still common in our society, and most of them are arranged for financial expedience. But at least in this case the buyer is someone who loves the person being bartered away, as well as someone said person loves herself."

She put the letter down so that she could beam at Natsuki. A naturally generous woman, she took great joy in knowing those she esteemed were happy. She was also still pleased by Chikane's letter; she truly had been on the verge of suggesting it to her friend, just to prod Natsuki into accepting both adoption and marriage that much faster.

"What a pity I cannot attend their wedding," she said to her would-be bride. "But I can at least take satisfaction in the fact that I helped make it possible. It was the booty she made during my first campaign here that bought Pater Senou's acceptance. I feel like this deserves a celebratory drink, at least."

She made to get up and fetch the wine she had left on the table beside Natsuki. The Otomeian halted her with a hand, however, and told her to remain in her seat.

"I will bring," she said, for which Shizuru gave thanks happily. What the girl actually did next stripped away Shizuru's happy mood, however. Natsuki rose from her seat in one smooth motion-and

promptly toppled to the floor like a statue kicked off its pedestal.

" *Jupiter* !"

She stared at her lover after the utterance, her scraped knees shrilling pain. She had only managed to save the girl from smashing into the tiles by diving recklessly down herself. Natsuki's body had fallen into hers instead, and she stared at the young woman now against her breast.

The Otomeian looked as astonished as she felt.

"My god," Shizuru whispered. " *My god!* What happened?"

To her further shock, the response was a rich torrent of laughter.

"Stupid!" the Otomeian gasped. "I-Shizuru, I was-"

She gurgled again, ignoring the Himean. Shizuru waited in silence and eventually Natsuki calmed enough to get out a proper sentence.

"Thank you, Shizuru," she said, eyes wet with mirth. "You saved me."

"Indeed I did," Shizuru replied, more flabbergasted than ever. "And glad I am of it, but what was that? Why do you laugh? You had my heart tripping when you went down. If it was a joke, I fear I did not enjoy it."

Natsuki's hilarity had subsided enough by now to allow her to drag herself into a better position. She curled an arm about Shizuru's neck and used the other to point to the base of the chair she had just vacated.

"I forgot I removed it," she said, index finger aimed at the prosthetic leaning against the chair. "I forgot and-ah, I stood up and walked. It was a surprise also to me."

Shizuru stared for another moment. Cautiously, she drew the white arms about her neck and got to her feet, bringing Natsuki up as well. She guided the Otomeian back to the chair.

"Well, could you please be more careful?" she asked, still a little shaken. "I doubt my heart could live through another such scene."

She put a hand to her brow and ran it backwards, pushing it through her hair. A glance down at the polished stone flooring put in her mind's eye an image of how Natsuki could have been hurt. Bruises would have been the least of it; the fool girl could have broken her nose!

"Jupiter and all the gods," she muttered, perturbed by the thought of the other being harmed. "That was too close for my taste. Now I need that drink even more."

The other straightened in her chair as if to get up again. Shizuru froze her with a glower.

"Stay there!" she actually snapped. "I can sit at the table and get it myself."

The Otomeian seemed to find her anxiety entertaining.

"I wanted to sit there," the young woman grinned, gesturing to the couch on which Shizuru had been seated before their little drama. "I can put on the leg first."

But the Himean would not let even let her do that and carried her over instead. Natsuki waited patiently while Shizuru went back for her cane and prosthetic, as well as the cup of wine that had started all of it. Shizuru drank down half of the beverage when she returned, sitting down heavily beside Natsuki.

"Surely you can check if you have it on before you rise," she murmured. "That much is doable, surely."

"I forgot."

"Well, do not forget."

Natsuki had not yet managed to lose her grin. She shifted on the couch and edged nearer her lover.

"Sorry," she said with a brush of her mouth against Shizuru's jaw. It



was followed by another on the cheek, and on the corner of the lips; the older woman was weakening. "I am sorry I scared you, Shizuru. I will take more care now, see?"

The answer was wry: "You could not take less, Scamp."

Fingers scratched at her scalp with another "Sorry."

Shizuru turned towards the kisses, soundly defeated. She was not really angry, only unsettled by the near-accident, but she supposed the woman in her arms knew it. Still she was tempted to ask if this was the Otomeian's revenge for Terantrum. For whatever anxiety she had felt just now was probably nothing to what Natsuki had felt then.

*Little though she showed it at first*, she thought, and held the pale face in both hands. A grave starkness of line gave Natsuki her astonishing beauty, but it sometimes made reading her difficult. Even Shizuru—who could read the polemarch best by now—occasionally likened it to teasing out fresh feeling from an already-carved statue. She had seen at Terantrum, for instance, that Natsuki had been worried before the battle. Yet she had not seen the true complexity of the girl's apprehensions until after she returned with her victory.

She had gone back to the hill where she had installed her lover with the screams of *imperator* still ringing behind and around her. What joy she had felt! What glowing warmth! What pride in herself and her indomitable army! All of which had fled from her body at the polemarch's actual greeting.

*It shocked me so much I forgot about my accomplishment*, she remembered, shaking her head. For upon Shizuru's approach, the polemarch had smiled wincingly—then dropped her face to her hands and issued a heartbroken sob.

So outrageous was the incident that Shizuru was not the only one confounded. Both Himeans and Otomeians nearby had fluttered in a panic at the polemarch seemingly in anguish. Shizuru's own thought was that someone beloved to her lover had fallen, although she wondered who that could possibly be. Neither of Natsuki's cousins

was in the battle and she had known it. Even Mino was safe, for he had not been part of the fighting!

She had shepherded the girl away from the rest, cooing and clucking to her.

"Why now, what is this?" she had spoken. "Why the tears, *mea vita*, when we have won here?"

"I knew," Natsuki had said, dashing away tears. "I knew you would win."

Shizuru had smiled, held her closely.

"Then," she had asked, "why are you crying?"

"Because," the other had growled, looking as if she would thump her, "you *did* win!"

It had been fear, Shizuru had apprehended, of the irrepressible kind those who love always feel. She knew Natsuki had been telling the truth when they parted before the battle: that the girl had possessed every faith in her generalship. Yet she saw in those tears afterwards the equal of her own intolerable worries-the ones that said, even had Natsuki not been crippled, that she would still have banned the polemarch from all future battlefields.

How good to be able to tell her afterwards that the worst of the conflict was finished! What she had put down at Terantrum was the biggest and stiffest single army the enemy had left. It would be years before they would be able to raise and equip another such again. That meant years during which she would be able to work on pacifying her province. And in the process, lower the chances of resistance recrystallising.

"It is over now," she had told her lover, laughing a little but kindly at the embarrassed girl. "That is likely the last gigantic army in this war for many years, *mea vita*. You have no more reason to fear for me, as it is unlikely I will need to take such risks again. Even if I do, remember this day and what I did. I crushed a hundred thousand on the field! What need would you ever have to again be worried?"

Thus had she assuaged her lover's ragged nerves that day. The real challenge had come after: how to reassure Natsuki that none would think less of her after that outburst on the hill. The polemarch had been so mortified by her lapse that it had taken all of Shizuru's verbal skill to convince her she could show her face again to the army.

"If you've not noticed," she had told her then, "some of my own men are crying. For that no one will blame them. Do you understand, *meum mel* ? No one will ever forget today, not in Hime or in these territories or anywhere else once word spreads of it! Why not cry, then, when they know they achieved that thing of which others can only dream? They have written themselves indelibly into history!"

She was eminently conscious of the prominence her own name would have in that history. Inspecting the enemy's camp following the battle, her mind had raced with ideas of how she would represent the battle in her *triumph*, when the time came to have it . Some of those impressive bladed chariots would have to be put into storage; several alae of the Otomeian cataphracts and Lupine riders borrowed for the parade; perhaps a few hundred actors hired to don the looted arms and armour of the Mentulae; the blinding gold furniture in what they discovered to be the king's tent collected against the day.

Although that furniture would have to be refurbished, the Tyrian purple tapestry sections removed and probably replaced. She doubted the bloodstains marring their lustre would ever go away.

If there was anything that dampened her pleasure in Terantrum, it would have to be that one mystery. When her troops had taken the enemy camp, it had been entirely deserted. The soldiers meant to guard it had obviously fled the moment their great army folded. Even the Mentulaean army's slaves and noncombatant members had vanished. When they saw their side was the loser, they had scattered far to the north and the west.

Only one tent among all those thousands had not been devoid of inhabitants. This was the largest shelter, almost a pavilion, an impressive production in finest cloth and leather with gilt wooden poles. Going inside, the astonished Himeans had found a strange

tableau of bodies: corpses still in their armour and strewn all about the floor, stained by their bleeding. They had been caught in the middle of packing for escape, one could see from the scene. These were probably among the first to have bolted the battle, little though their haste seemed to have served them, ultimately.

It was a scene of assassination, the Himean officers determined, and the story likely of treachery. For how else could each body in the tent have sustained such localised injury, such clean cuts to the neck and stabs to the kidneys? Whoever had slain them had been trusted enough to get close to the victims.

As there were no living people left in the camp, there was no way to tell the identities of these killers. The mystery was only made greater when the Himean commander arrived to form her own impressions. At the centre of the slaughter was a large man she identified without difficulty. It was the late king of the Mentulaean Empire, his neck cut so deep that the white of the bone showed in it.

# Chapter 72

## Vocabulaire:

1. **Ancilia** (pl., L.) - Singular **ancile** ; these were among the most sacred of Rome's/Hime's possessions. The story goes that one shield fell from the sky and at the feet of King **Numa Pompilius** (s.v.). A voice proclaimed that Rome would rule the world so long as this shield lay safe and in Rome's possession. To thwart those who might wish to steal it, Numa Pompilius had 11 replicas created. The original shield was stored with these in the **Regia** (s.v.), rendering it impossible for any potential thief to tell which was the real thing.

2. **Augur** - A Roman priest of divination, belonging to the **College of Augurs**. It had 12 members, half being patrician senators and the others plebeian senators. Note that to be a member of a priestly college was a distinction, and in the present setting, members are co-opted by their fellows, usually with a view to keeping the priesthood in the same families. Augurs were entitled to wear a **toga trabea** (a purple and red toga) and a **lituus** (a curlicued staff) when performing their duties.

3. **Diadem** - Here, a white ribbon worn by sovereigns around their heads, not a metal crown.

4. **Flamen dialis** (L.) - The priest of Jupiter Optimus Maximus. He had a great many prohibitions on his person, which made the priesthood invidious for those with political ambitions. Among other things, he could not ride a horse or even come into contact with iron.

5. **Numa Pompilius** - This was the second king of Rome (Hime), preceded by no less than Romulus himself. He was supposed to have ordered construction of the **Regia** (s.v.), although it is disputed whether or not he actually used it for what the Ancient Romans believed (as a royal residence), given some of its features.

6. **Regia** (L.) - One of the oldest buildings in Republican Rome's Forum, this was supposed to have been erected by Numa Pompilius and served in much later times as the meeting place of the

*pontifices for certain occasions as well as a repository for some very holy objects (see **ancilia** ).*

**7. Rex sacrorum** (L.) - A patrician priest who, like the **flamen dialis** (s.v.), could not pursue political ambitions. Even though he was not the head of the College of Pontifices, he was nevertheless revered as one of the holiest of Rome's priests.

**8. Tace** (L.) - "Shut up!"

**9. Vestal Virgin** - Women of typically august birth consecrated to the goddess Vesta at a young age. They tended the goddess's sacred hearth and were expected to be chaste for the duration of their service, which lasted 30 years. After that, they were released from their vows and new vestals would take their place. The chastity they maintained during service was held to be necessary for Rome's existence.

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## ***Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae***

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Shizuru waited for Zanki to return to Gorgo with the Eleventh and Twelfth, then rested those legions for four days before again setting out. She was heading back to the northwest and the echoing valley that had forced her to retreat.

Her march was broken only by the intermittent appearance of more embassages. These were always from towns or feudal lords nearby whom she had not yet visited. All came loaded down with gifts: often bags of gold and silver, sometimes jewellery and pieces of art. In one case it was six slabs of pure gold cast into rough ovals no one man could carry. When Shizuru had them weighed each was found to be worth a little more than three talents. Half a million sesterces from one baron alone!

"See the riches of the mines in the northwest," she told her lover when the latter came for a look. The two of them dissolved into laughter for reasons none of her officers could understand.

She struck treaties almost without pause now, but took care to have insurance. Any town of size she encountered she pressed for noble hostages and weapon caches. Let any rebellious Mentulaeans in the future worry about where to find more gear! For one of her objects in returning to the northwest was to settle the matter of the remaining foundry city in that region: Arvern, shaded by the land's northern ranges and near the easternmost edge of the Ruviccan Forest. But first there were the legions and that enemy force at the echoing valley.

The second legate she assigned there actually rode out to meet her. Thus she knew he and Shohei had been victorious even before she reached Aggir Hagor.

"Nabbed some twenty-three thousand of them just yesterday," he revealed, ranging his horse beside hers. "We were going to have the Firensian auxiliary escort them down to the Atinu camp today."

She lifted an eyebrow at the number. "Do you mean to say there was no fighting?"

"We made them surrender, Fujino-san. You'll see how when we get close enough."

"I daresay I will." She studied his face. "If there was no combat, what gave you that scratch?"

He touched the long scab on his jaw with a grimace.

"My own clumsiness," he sighed. "And that idiot the buglers have for an apprentice! The oaf puffed his horn while passing my tent. My shaving razor slipped."

His commander laughed, eyeing the cut afresh.

"You keep it sharp," she told him.

"Very, or I actually get more scratches. Women are lucky in that sense," he said. "You don't have to worry about cropping your jaw every day. I'm blessed in that I've smooth skin, but I've a cousin for whom it gives problems, as the poor fellow has acne. So he's never without a bit of beard."

"Troublesome indeed," she said, wondering what he would say if he knew about all the pains she actually took to keep hair off her body. Considering she often plucked instead of shaved-when the slaves she used to do it were available, anyway-she thought she went through more trouble than he did.

She asked if he had punished the hapless bugler yet.

"Put him on shaving duty for all the officers," he grinned. "Every scratch he makes goes into a tally. If he reaches five we're shaving his head."

The Otomeian beside his commander murmured something and Shizuru grinned.

"I believe the prospect of that punishment just horrified the polemarch," she told her legate.

"Baldness isn't as bad among us as among you, Natsuki-san," said Kenji, addressing that young woman and marvelling again at her side-saddle seat. How *did* she control the horse like that?

"It's not ideal," he said, "but no one would consider it shameful either. Besides, we wouldn't be shaving off all of his hair. Just enough to leave an embellishment on it."

The polemarch's eyes asked the question. Kenji grinned at Shizuru and hoped she would not make him answer.

"Let us just say they plan to put another head on his head," Shizuru offered.

When they arrived at their purpose the flush had quite vanished from the polemarch's cheeks. Shizuru went off with Kenji to see her other legate while Zanki drew up the troops in a square.

Shohei and Kenji led their commander to a high ridge from where she could see their work. The camp she had built herself and left in the care of the Fourteenth was still there. Fortifications spread from two sides of it like wings: they ran perpendicular to the shoulders of the valley. A similar camp and line of earthworks could be spied at the other end of the vale. Whereas the ramparts on the Fourteenth's



camp covered much of the valley's maw, though, the ones at the other end extended barely a kilometre in either direction.

"Oh, you *are* men after my own heart," she told her legates, who laughed. "I suppose they came down screaming surrender when they realised they would be penned in?"

"We also sent heralds to inform them of your victory at Terantrum," Shohei said. "Just to pile it all on, you know! After that, it took only an hour of fortification by Kenji before they came spilling out of their camp. I expect they debated first about whether or not we were being honest about Terantrum. Took all the fight out of them when they realised it must be true. Else how could you have had the confidence to send away another three legions to us, Fujino-san?"

The other legate chuckled low in his throat.

"Although we know you would have had the confidence for it anytime, Terantrum or no Terantrum," he said, getting a grin out of Shizuru.

"Did you see much action before Kenji-han arrived?" she asked Shohei, who shook his head.

"Very little, since it was a stalemate," he said. "We declined to go in there and they declined to go out. Just a lot of prancing about and occasional skirmishing, with both of us trying to get the other abandon his territory."

"So now we have all these prisoners," she said, glancing at the great mass of men and women under guard in front of Shohei's camp. She noted their wan, rather lean faces. "Impressive they lasted so long, though. I suppose they ran out of things to forage after the first month, or that you made it harder for them later?"

"As far as we could, although even that was difficult," Shohei admitted. "No way I was committing too many men to fighting in that sound trap! No, most of it's just that they ran out of forage eventually, as you say."

"Anyone interesting from their command tent?"

"A baroness and some other minor aristocrats," Shohei answered. "Awfully snooty for all that they surrendered! They also came with some nice little moneybags. All the coins have old Obsidian's face on them."

"Of course they do."

"The curious thing is," Kenji interjected, "that our captives seem to have no idea of what happened to the Prince Calchis either. I brought him up when we were interviewing them, but it seems they had in fact assumed him to be defeated. By us when we first came to Aggir Hagor, no less. We would have been coming from his direction, after all."

"The prince is supposed to be among their finest commanders," Shizuru noted. "Did they not find it at all difficult, such an assumption?"

"They say the army he had left was very small-probably twenty, twenty-three thousand-so I suppose such a defeat would have made sense to them. I don't think they're lying, General, for what it's worth. They said it was difficult to accept, but what else could they have supposed had happened? No one expected him to dissolve his army, as our informants are now saying he did. Nor did they expect him to go like a bubble-the man just vanished into thin air!"

Shizuru looked at Aggir Haggor's cliffs and inhaled luxuriously.

"Well, the mystery of the prince shall keep," she told her legates. "How many mysteries Obsidian's dynasty casts to us from beyond the grave! Anyway, to get back to business: we need to get these to Atinu Base and the slavers as soon as possible. Their leaders will be war prisoners, of course. They were part of the king's army. Our Firensian allies need not handle the delivery by themselves. The Fourteenth has earned a little light duty and can see to it."

They asked her whom she wanted leading the cavalcade.

"Kenji-han, I think. You have earned a little light duty too," she told that legate.

The taller of the two men stretched his arms out before him, the reddish-blond hair on them winking in the sun. His fingers laced and flexed, the joints popping.

"If you say so, Fujino-san," he said. "Although I wouldn't have minded more heavy duty, if that's what you call it."

"Wouldn't have mind- *tace* !" the other legate exclaimed, startling both Shizuru and Kenji. "I was stuck babysitting some ninnies too cowardly to venture out of their crib while you were fighting the best battle of the campaign! What I wouldn't give to have been in your place! Wouldn't have minded more heavy duty, he says. I'd chair Fujino-san around the Forum for a year if only she'll throw me such duty! With Natsuki-san up on her lap, even!"

His two auditors had doubled over laughing, both shaking their heads.

"Oh, Jupiter," Kenji wheezed out. "I can actually see it!"

"I cannot, thank the gods!" Shizuru had one hand over her cuirass's belly. "I shall certainly try to find you some heavy duty, Shohei-han, so you need not stoop to so inglorious an act. Although I should note that I doubt you could actually have done what you offered. I am much heavier than I look, even if the polemarch is not."

Shohei lifted two hands the size of buckets and clenched them, with a complacent look down at his gladiator's frame.

"Always up for a challenge," he said. "And after spending the last few weeks just prancing before an enemy camp, I'd welcome a bit of real work."

Shizuru obliged him with a tough job: she had him build a road from Aggir Hagar all the way to Vedio. She gave him three legions to do it and a very tight schedule.

"I want you at Vedio by the second week of August and no later," she said. "So you shall have to hop to it! For myself I plan to take the Second and the Twelfth over to Arvern to see if it will open its gates to me. After that I shall either meet you at Vedio or send you a

message about where to go next."

"Tasgetia," he guessed.

"Probably," she hedged.

Thus she beat a rapid march to Arvern. She had torn down its sister-city two months past and was prepared to do the same to it should it be uncooperative. But Arvern had trembled when Comus fell and had also heard of the Battle of Terantrum.

When Shizuru reached it with her two legions, the city's gates were open and the members of its council waiting outside the walls.

Shizuru showed them that she was inclined to be merciful.

"Because you opened your gates there shall be no sacking," she said. "You may keep your lives and, for most of you, your titles. The same for your property, which I shall not touch save in cases where merited. All caches of arms and the contents of your armouries shall be confiscated, for instance. This is in the interests of peace, which you say you wish to exist between us."

"However, a great many of the weapons used by your late king came from here," she went on. "And I know you were paid for them. You have thus profited from a war waged against Hime. I shall levy a war indemnity of both materiel and coin from you, as a result. This shall be held separate from your first tribute."

"I also need hostages," she stipulated, "from the families of every member of your town council. In addition, I require hostages from the families of the twenty biggest or most influential businessmen of the city. These may well overlap with the council, so people who belong to both categories will only be counted once. If they are on the town council, they cannot be counted among the twenty businessmen."

"You shall be prohibited from crafting arms or armour in bulk for the next five years. Bulk orders shall be those that exceed ten units per item. The only way to get past this prohibition is to obtain a dispensation from the governor. That would be me for at least the

next couple of years. Should I be unavailable to receive the request for an exception, the governor's senior legate shall suffice. Obviously, any bulk order coming directly from me or my senior legate shall also be granted exception."

She also demanded every finished piece of armour and weaponry from every smithy in the city. She exhorted them not to despair at the economic costs of her measures towards disarmament: she would help them obtain new business from the rest of the province and beyond.

"In fact, you can create a consortium of representatives this moment," she said. "As soon as you can, send them to the capital. My people will assist them in gaining new contracts for metalwork-although, for the next half decade at least, it shall be for other types of goods than armour and weapons. You shall have to adapt, but given what I have seen of your smiths' talents, I daresay it should not be too difficult."

That this was true could be seen in the gifts her army carried away when they left the city. Arvern's leaders had presented to her five different crowns and three sets of gilded armour when they came suing for peace. One crown in particular drew her admiration. As opposed to the heavy circlets she had thus far seen, it was instead a delicate wreath of silver wire and golden leaves.

"A shame it must go into the army's spoils," Shizuru said to her mistress. "It may end up just being melted down to make more bullion for the Treasury. That is unless I can have it entered as a donation to one of the temples, of course. But I shall have something similar made one day, with finer leaves and little emeralds for berries. I want you to wear it, *mea regina*. As a present from me."

Though the other woman was of a people Hellenised enough to prefer a diadem to a crown, she thanked her lover and said it sounded beautiful.

At Vedio, Shizuru found her other legate right on schedule. There they recombined the legions into one army. The great Himean war machine swung north and made for Tasgetia, skirting the Ruviccan

Forest the whole way. With five legions roadwork was faster than ever, and still the messengers from the northwest's nobility kept coming. By late August they had settlements of peace from the majority of the Gannian aristocracy. At the same time they drew up outside of the city that was their destination.

The centre of druidic learning was a veritable metropolis, Shizuru decided. She had not actually imagined Tasgetia to be so large or so urban-looking. Oh, there were still enough details to lend it a sort of wild appearance! There were groves and gnarled trees all over, for instance, growing right next to structures like shops and houses. But the jumble outside the city's gates-which were open, she noted-was yet more reminiscent of Gorgo than she had thought to expect. The walls of the city-proper also appeared to be of stone, in some places surmounted by towers.

*They may style themselves magicians out of the trees and the mist all they like, she ruminated. But all of this shows me that the druids have grown beyond their earthy roots. They have been urbanised by the growth of the empire and its societal development. Which means they have grown too in the sophistication of their aspirations. They shall say they serve the Mentulaeen People and their gods. No doubt they believe it, what they say. But Tasgetia shows me that they will also always serve themselves. After all they have lost and all they have managed to hold on to, I do not blame them.*

Shizuru eyed the city from a distance and told her officers to make camp. For several hours they toiled about the business until every tent and palisade stake was in its proper place. Having thus established her force right in front of Tasgetia, Shizuru then proceeded to do something not even her officers had expected: she sat back to chat with her mistress and twiddle her thumbs.

"Let them sweat it out," she said, when asked if her officers should send a herald. "If they are in earnest they shall send one themselves."

Which they did not half an hour later, complete with two of their higher-ranked druids and the noble whose family ruled the city.

Shizuru treated them with all due courtesy when the embassy

was brought to her tent. She even stood up to make introductions and conduct them to their chairs. And when that was done she herself put drinks in their hands.

The Mentulaeans were patently bemused by her friendliness. They had expected her to be rude and standoffish given that she had forced them into seeking her out. The truth was that Shizuru had never intended to be rude or standoffish. It simply had not been in her plans to gratify the druids' sense of importance by being the one to approach them.

"Well, then," she said when all were seated. "What may I do for you fine people?"

That scaled up the ambassadors' befuddlement. One of the two druids in the group spoke up, a woman Shizuru estimated to be some forty years and with a scholarly look about her. Her name was Raethis, and like most of the druids they had seen thus far, she was in predominantly white robes.

"Please excuse us, Fujino-san," she said, showing she was familiar with the proper methods of address for Himeans. "But we were under the impression that you came here for Tasgetia. Certainly one cannot think otherwise when you not only encamped yourself outside of the city but also built a new road to it."

"I have improved the existing roadways, it is true," Shizuru conceded. "Does this offend you?"

"By no means," Raethis replied. "Although it strengthens our impression that you have grave business with us. You would not have bothered improving the road had you not thought it possible that you would need to use it again."

"Oh, well said!" Shizuru answered. "I see now why your people used to consider the druids their chief intellectuals."

"They still do that now," Raethis replied with some dignity.

"Of course, please pardon me. Nevertheless, there are other sources of learning for your people now, are there not? As well as

other scholars and tutors."

Raethis admitted the truth of this. Her fellow druid, a man of the perhaps the same age named Sendral, took it upon himself to say more.

"But there are those who continue to regard us the best sources," he said in tones that made clear this was the only acceptable view.

"They come to our city for edification, for healing, for guidance and advice. To this day many of the nobility of our land prefer to send for druids from us when they need tutors for their children. Some even request our presence at their councils, as our familiarity with law and tradition make us valuable advisors. Tasgetia remains a centre of culture and learning for the Mentulæan People."

"Which may well be why I decided to pay it a visit, do you not think so?"

The pair of druids exchanged glances. Shizuru eyed the other members of the deputation. All were nobles, including one they had introduced as the leader, the Baron Marlus. But they said nothing and made no signals, content to let the druids take the reins.

"Then you came here for that reason?" Sendral asked. "You came to visit-to see the city?"

"I did, of course. Am I allowed?"

Raethis held out her hands in a supplicant's gesture.

"There is no reason you should not be, General," she said, quickly amending: "Provided you intend the city no harm."

"Why would I?"

"Several Gannian towns-including the once-great city of Comus!-would say why."

Shizuru sighed out a breath.

"I would that people would not paint me so procrustean," she uttered. "Surely you know by now that I spared many other cities.



Those settlements you mentioned closed their gates to me and harboured enemies of Hime. I note that your gates were open the moment I arrived. Although, of course, I cannot note so swiftly whether or not you harbour enemies of Hime. Are you suggesting now that you do?"

"We do not!" Raethis and Sendral said simultaneously.

Shizuru grinned at the two for their duet. She saw now that these two were the only members of the deputation who mattered. The Baron Marlus might be the greatest noble of Tasgetia-as well as the source of the bags of gold they had presented to her earlier-but he was not its leader, so much was patent. The druids pulled his strings.

"I have no reason to wish any of you harm," she pronounced. "Only those who declare themselves my enemies or enemies of my people merit my aggression. It would be wonderful to see the city, if you are indeed willing to have me visit."

The members of the deputation appeared to relax just the slightest fraction.

"Then please permit us to serve as your guides," came the offer from Raethis. "Our chief druid is also in residence and would consider it an honour were you to consent to meeting him."

"I echo the sentiment," she said. "Has he any grand rituals planned or is this a straightforward consultation?"

"I believe all he intends is a friendly interview. Unless you wished him to perform a ritual of some kind? Perhaps of blessing? Or of prognostication?"

"Oh, no," she said. "I was merely curious, as it might be more proper for me to don my own augural vestments and trappings in that case."

There was a brief silence as they took that in.

"Augural vestments... What are those?" Raethis enquired curiously.

"They would be the *toga trabea* and *lituus*," Shizuru answered. "The traditional clothing of augurs when performing their duties."

"You wear them?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean... you perform auguries too, yourself?" Raethis said smilingly. Her expression had the faintest air of indulgence. Shizuru recognised it as the tolerance a professional grants to the inexpert dabbler. "You know how to do it?"

Shizuru smiled widely.

"Of course I do," she told them. "I am a member of the College of Augurs of Hime. That makes me not only an augur of the state but also a priest of Hime's official religion."

That wiped the indulgence from the druids' faces. Their jaws went slack.

"A priest?" Sendral gasped, his astonishment speaking for the rest of them. "Formally? A recognised priest?"

"Yes."

"But you're commander of an army!" one of the nobles cried, finally jolted out of silence.

"Yes, and a proconsul, governor, and senator besides," Shizuru said. "These offices are not exclusive."

The Mentulaeans still looked shocked by what they saw as an incongruity. It was clear she had transgressed some boundary with her offices and she wondered what she had said. One of the druids finally revealed it.

"A priest cannot command an army in our world," Raethis explained. "It makes no sense. To us."

"So I see," she replied. Inside, she was wondering. The druid Cirnos had not reacted this way when she had informed him of her augural

status. Or had it been because she had not clarified that her being a state augur also made her a state priest? She had not thought it necessary to clarify that, because all Himeans understood it. Not so a Mentulaean, then? Perhaps Cirnos had dismissed her as a dabbler in the way Raethis initially had?

"I understand this confounds you somewhat," she told the deputation soothingly. "But my being a priest surely should not be seen as a disadvantage in our dealings. At least you know I am not blind to the importance of religion."

The two druids nodded, obviously still chewing on this fresh intelligence. As for the Tasgetian nobles, they were silent again.

"Is your chief ready now to meet me?" she prompted, eager to enter the city. They agreed.

"Hiempros-that is our chief druid-also said he would be glad to come to you here," Raethis added. "Although he did think you might want to see the city, in which case it would be his pleasure to have you as a guest in his home. As you see, we have been prepared to admit you as guests to our city from the beginning."

Shizuru said she was obliged to them for such hospitality.

"I would like to see the city, as a matter of fact," she said. "As would some of my officers. Perhaps one of you would be good enough to ride ahead and inform your people thus? Some of my soldiers shall be coming along and I would not like to alarm your people at the sight of them. I come in peace, as I said. Make no mistake, however: I shall be obliged to act should anyone so much as cast a stone at my men."

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Wily as ever, Shizuru brought her mistress when she entered the city. Since said mistress emanated her usual otherworldliness and also came accompanied by her pet, the locals (especially the druids) were impressed from the beginning.

"You knew they would stare," Natsuki accused her in the Otomeian

language. "You wanted to use me, use their fear."

"I would rather term it awe, or even reverence," Shizuru replied, also under her breath. "Does it trouble you that I employed you and Shizuki so, Princess?"

Natsuki took the philosophical tack: "It is no less than what I expect. But if they ask me to conjure up a spirit, My Commander, I shall have to leave you to it."

They made no such demands of the polemarch, although the chief of the druids did request to meet Shizuru in private. Which meant in the reception room of his residence, a two-storey edifice that looked more like a town hall than a private dwelling.

The chief druid himself let Shizuru through the front doors-which were of bronze plate old enough to have turned verd-along with some of her officers, the polemarch, and a group of soldiers peeled from their three-cohort escort. The polemarch brought her own security detail.

While the rest of her party settled on some prepared benches within the entrance hall, Shizuru walked with the chief druid to a central courtyard. The chief druid's home looked almost like a Himean mansion, she thought, at least in its basic layout. It was the details that localised it. There were the rough drums of wonderfully mottled stone that made up the peristyle's columns; the weird knotted patterns on the ceiling; the recognisably-Mentulaean tableaus painted on the walls. On the grassy dirt floor of the unroofed courtyard was also a sculpture one would never find in a Himean home: a great slab of stone over two large boulders, like some primitive and archaic table.

*Interesting*, she thought, taking in all these things together. *Very large and not unhandsome.*

She was not awed by the chief druid's dwelling, whether for size or for beauty. Her own house in Hime was even larger, and-though she supposed architectural taste varied-by far the more attractive. Even allowing for regional differences in design, though, there was no question that her house was the more striking, its materials the more

precious. Even the handsome mottled stone of the chief druid's columns paled before the coloured marble sheathing of her own pilasters and pillars.

Still, she could appreciate what the chief druid's house suggested. From it any visitor to Tasgetia could see that the chief druid was important, was an institution of ancient background and current potency. One needed only a few changes to transform the house into a temple, which she supposed was part of the point. This was a place that supported both spiritual reverence and earthly gathering.

She stopped short of the peristyle and turned to her host.

"It reminds me," she said, "of the Domus Publica."

His head cocked to the side.

"What is that?" he asked with genuine interest.

"The official home of the *pontifex maximus*," she said. "That is the head priest of our state."

"Oh, of course," he said. "He would be something of my counterpart, would he not?"

"Yes-although like me, he is a senator. Which means he could technically command armies were it ever necessary, just as I do."

That reminder of her oddity caused him to frown, although more in confusion than disapproval. He went on to reveal a degree of knowledge about Hime that was not common among Mentulaeans.

"I knew before that you chose your priests from among your senators," he told her. "But I thought those who were so chosen functioned from then as priests in the main. Are there no restrictions upon them intended to preserve their sacredness?"

"It depends on the priestly office," she said. "The priests we call the *rex sacrorum* and *flamen dialis* have a great many constraints hedging them round. The latter, for instance, cannot touch anything made of iron. But these are special priesthoods, quite unlike the minor ones. My own priestly college-the Augurs-has no such

requirements of its members. The priesthoods forbidden martial careers are decidedly the exceptions, since Himeans generally do not see martial enterprise as incompatible with holiness."

"And your Vestal Virgins? Are they also exceptions?"

"They are indeed sacred, but not considered pontifices," she said. "Rather, they constitute the luck of Hime itself."

"By their chastity, I heard."

"That's right."

He looked mildly puzzled.

"Your religion is curious," he concluded. "You forbid intimacy to some women and say it constitutes a nation's luck, then permit your priests-the leaders of your religion!-to lead armies without seeing a problem. Our own priests do not command armies, General Fujino. It is a solecism to our kind, what your priests do so casually."

"So you say, Hiempnos," she grinned. "Yet I would challenge what you say about your priests not commanding armies. You may not have done so as the generals, for most of your history, but you have nevertheless led them as the people pulling the strings or as key counsellors."

"Yet not as the direct commanders," he said. "In that capacity you mention, we merely guide the military commanders. We offer insight when required, we try to guide them towards the side of right. We do not give the actual orders that see men deprived of life. That is different."

"Is it different too when you deprive men of life as human sacrifices instead?"

The watery blue eyes gleamed. "Ah! The great taboo."

They had drifted to a bench facing the open court and settled themselves on it, Hiempnos doing so rather creakily. Shizuru studied the stone table again as they spoke, wondering if it was where Hiempnos himself made his sacrifices.

"I have already had arguments galore about it," she said cheerfully. "With the druid Cirnos, for example."

"Cirnol! How is he? We heard he was incarcerated."

"Yes, in the capital and under the Queen Azula's orders."

His smile turned very slightly bitter.

"Queen no more, surely," he said. "If her secession from the empire was not sufficient, surely the king's death is."

"Queen *of Firens*," she clarified.

Still the bitter smile: "I see. I'm astonished you gave the capital to them too, though."

"We did not. She acts as an administrator of it under our authority, as well as our liaison to the king."

"The King of Firens."

"Yes."

He drew a long breath through his lips, the air stirring the hairs of his beard as it whistled in.

"I had no idea," he said, "that you were a priest."

Shizuru was intrigued. "Does it make a difference?"

"It might," he answered. "You are technically a fellow religious. As such you have some knowledge of how to tap into the energies of the aether, into the will of the divine."

"Do not all people, in a way?"

"Yes, but a layman's connection to the spiritual is much more tenuous. Else why would there be a need for people like us?"

This time, she laughed outright.

"I fear that in the Himean case, the answer is chiefly *for prestige*,"

she said. "It takes a long time to produce a true druid, I am told. Twenty years, was it not?"

"Yes," he agreed, unsurprised that she would have done some research. "Even longer if they pursue a difficult specialization. Those of us who study medicine can spend as much as twenty-five years on our study."

"Well, it can take as little as an hour to make a priest of our state," she countered. "In some cases, even less. I believe I was made an augur in no more than ten seconds."

He was stunned and she explained it for him: "When a priest dies in one of the priestly colleges, the vacancy is typically filled by one of his relatives. All the remaining members of the college need do is vote for which relative they believe best suited to it. In my case the voting was so quick because the vacancy I was filling was my uncle's. He had no offspring and there were no other senators of the name Fujino, so I was the obvious choice."

"But is there no training at all?" Hiempnos enquired. "Is there no formal preparation after you have been selected, no attempt at a religious education?"

"Not really, or not of the kind you druids undergo," she said. "Most of us know the usual rituals and motions, so all we really need to do is brush up on them with a quick peek at a manual if we do forget. Most of our religious activities are already codified anyway. There is a chart of omens for the College of Augurs, for instance, so that those who cannot bother remembering our longer manuals can quickly glance at a list of the most common signs instead."

At his aghast expression, she added: "Pray do not misunderstand. Our priests may not undergo the training yours do but they are priests of the state nonetheless. Whatever rituals I perform in my own priestly functions are sacred. Our lack of lengthy training-and our military careers, come to it!-do not make us any less authentic. I have taken the auguries for every one of my battles in this war, for example, and every one of them was categorically positive. As you can see, my readings have been correct thus far. This should suggest I am no less an augur than, if you would permit comparison,



yourself."

But he was still confounded by all she had revealed to him, especially the differences in training between their two peoples' priests. His creased-paper brow was more lined than it had been at the beginning of the meeting.

"I fear I have confused you," she said, observing his mental struggle.

"No, please do not apologise," he responded, with a strong shake of his venerable old head. "I did ask, and it is not your fault if I am slow to comprehend. The ways of our people are not like, so much we can see now."

He let some moments pass before he spoke again.

"So you have defeated His Majesty, King Obsidian," he said. "You and the Firensii, who now claim their own kingdom." A short pause. "They say you burned the king's body at Gorgo?"

"To be precise, Queen Azula did. She said it was the practice of his ancestors."

"It was," he confirmed. "Did you place the ashes in the mausoleum at the capital as well?"

She said they had and added: "If your concern is whether or not it was actually the king we cremated, you may ask anyone in the capital. We permitted all the inhabitants to approach the bier before we burned it, to pay their respects."

The faintest smile from Hiempnos.

"And to make sure everyone knew it was actually Obsidian lying dead there," he said.

She smiled back.

"I *do* have several thousand witnesses," was her answer.

He nodded, untroubled by his former king's end.

"You and the Firensii have triumphed," he said. "Between the two of you, any final elements loyal to the old dynasty will certainly be too afraid to offer any more resistance. You are now essentially master of the empire-or Septentria, as I hear you prefer to call it. This much is clear to anyone with eyes. No one would dare oppose you for the moment."

Though Shizuru found that qualifier-"for the moment"-intriguing, she did not interrupt.

"This means we cannot afford to oppose you either," Hiempnos finished. "You see we did not even attempt to resist when you marched here with your army. Tell us then what it is you demand. What would you have of the druids, Shizuru Fujino? And of Tasgetia, which has long been the Mentulaean People's central place of culture and education?"

"Only your cooperation," she told him. "Tasgetia now falls within my fief, which means it must adhere to the laws of my province."

"Which will see druids like me and our faith banned."

"Not at all!" she said, sounding astounded. "Save if a tenet of your creed were the assault of Hime and Himeans, there is no reason your faith should suffer under my aegis. It is not our way to tamper with the religions of the peoples we take into our fold, Hiempnos. Ask the people of our other provinces. We respect your history and your traditions as a people, and the druids are the acknowledged authorities on those. I would see you prosper and continue to spread education among the people of my province."

"Yet you would bar us from human sacrifice."

"Yes, I would." Her smile remained but her voice was firm. "That is one thing that must change. It shall now be unlawful to sacrifice people in the name of religion throughout the entirety of Septentria."

His face was already of the sort that always seemed slightly fretful, being of small and pinched features. It tightened further at the injunction.

"So many of the things you say seem to be contradictory," he told her, albeit without a tone of argumentation. "You say you are a priest of your people's religion-yet you command armies yourself. You say you will respect our history and tradition-yet you outlaw one of traditional ways of sacrificing to the gods. How can these things be reconciled with each other? I find it difficult to believe your assurances to us as a result, you understand."

She nodded to the words.

"I can see that," she said gently. "But the fact remains, as you stated earlier: I am now master of this land. I have already told you that the druids may continue to exist and even thrive under my governance provided they cooperate. That means giving up some things and modifying others."

"You are saying our faith will no longer be as it was."

"Is any faith ever as it was?" she asked. "Our own changed over the centuries and continues to change today. We learned which practices served both our gods and Hime best, and which ones were better left by the wayside. We learned what could go together-like our founding god Mars and our traditional war goddess, Bellona-and what did not. We learned *compromise*, Hiempnos, just as you must now. Learn to change what you must so that you can survive, so that the core of your faith-its deepest, most precious teachings-can be carried over into the new age. Even Hime's religion had to make compromises and evolve as the years went by. And now here we are, stronger than ever, because we saw the truth. Everything must change, but not everything must be lost."

He had sat with eyes shaded, gaze trained on the ground. Now he looked up and met her red eyes without fear.

"Is this when you threaten to burn down Tasgetia," he asked, "if we fail to comply with your regulations?"

That amused her and she showed it.

"Actually, this is when I invite you to the first Septentrian Conference," she said, before proceeding to describe what this was

and what it entailed. He listened with interest, she thought, and perhaps a touch of confusion. She concluded by saying she would send a formal invitation to it once she had already fixed the date and place.

"I assume the Baron Marlus and the other nobles shall send delegates as well," she concluded. "The most important thing is to ensure that your city is properly represented."

He seemed to regard her anew, as if what she had just said required that reconsideration.

"You mean what you say," he said after a moment. "About this conference you are planning."

Shizuru noted the wonder in his tone and took him to task for it.

"I would hope you realise that most will be suspicious of your plans," he explained. "Not just because you are an invader but because of our own rulers' pasts. The late king himself once invited some opponents to a banquet only so he could have them cut down at the dining table."

"Most politic of him," she said dryly. "But you just showed why I believe your order valuable and worthy of preservation. You are among the best repositories of your people's history, the professional intellectuals and scholars! You have much yet to teach your people, especially in your function as the aristocracy's tutors. For instance, I hear you tutored the Prince Calchis, Obsidian's son."

"I did," he said simply.

"Did you tutor his sister, Princess Faris, as well?"

It did not seem to discompose him at all that she knew those names and his acquaintance with them. His voice when he answered was calm.

"Yes. The siblings were much of an age and took the same lessons together." He looked out at the stone table under the sunlight, the simple earth floor. "They were very bright."

She hummed a soft sound.

"We were tracking him recently," she said with cool detachment. "As we had wondered where he betook his army. Our scouts learned that he went north from Vedio and should have ended up here. Yet our scouts also say that no army fetched up outside of Tasgetia when it should have. This leads me to think he disbanded what remained of his army and fled, anonymously. Did he happen to visit you or seek your aid? Perhaps send you a missive?"

"No," he said. "Else I assure you that the whole city would have learned of it. The prince's face and seal is known here. You may ask anyone if they saw him recently. We have no notion of where the prince has gone. Perhaps, given his father's fate, permanent anonymity?"

She bobbed her head to show she saw the sense of this. The topic of the prince was shelved away, but *not* -so the glint in her eyes told him-forgotten.

"As Tasgetia is now a Septentrian conurbation it must observe my gubernatorial edicts," she said, returning to their true business. "One of which we have already noted: there is to be no human sacrifice. Furthermore, I shall require hostages as well as the contents of your arsenal."

"Our arsenal," he said with some asperity, "is found in our minds."

She nodded to that approvingly. "Even so, you take my meaning. There are surely weapon stores in the metropolis."

He said he understood and asked what other demands she would make of the city.

"My officers are already seeing to it," she said. "I instructed them to do so while we had our interview. Now I think I had best see how they have been faring. We shall remain here until at least tomorrow, Hiempnos, so do feel free to approach us or send to me should you have concerns on anything. You will find me more reasonable in that respect than your former rulers: I believe in giving people a fair hearing. If you are wise, you will learn to take advantage of it as well

as all the other changes my governance will bring. Cooperate! In doing so, you may even see your old ascendancy over the local peoples return."

"And if we do not?" he asked mildly. "Cooperate, that is?"

"Ask the people of Comus."

He took a deep breath.

"We are your subjects now," he said. "So we will do as you say. But fair warning, Shizuru Fujino, from one augur to another."

"What is it?"

"You said yourself that everything must change. That means even Hime's reign over us will not last forever. Our gods too are powerful. They will someday take exception to this."

"If that happens, *our* gods will be prepared," she replied evenly. "I should know-I'm descended from two of them."

She got to her feet and helped him up gently, one hand taking his, the other holding his elbow. After saying a farewell, she turned and went back to her retinue, who had gotten to their feet too. Her officers clustered around her as they exited the building and joined the rest of their comrades.

"I sent Ikue-san to empty their armoury and Natsume-san to grab hostages," Shohei said as they walked down the street. Though it had been paved with flagstone and bordered by a stone hedge and gutter, there was as much green on it as there was grey. Grass sprouted from every tiny fissure where soil and seeds could find a way to exist.

*Little wonder*, Shizuru thought, considering how much of the city's interior was actually bare of paving. The paths and buildings lay skewed at haphazard angles because they ran around stretches of earth dominated by greenery. Many of the bigger stretches actually had small copses. She supposed they were sacred because of the obvious age of the trees, which were so tall they shaded most of the nearby buildings. The first lords of Tasgetia had probably decided to

build the city around these rather than commit sacrilege by levelling the place.

Hiempnos might have suspected her of thinking Tasgetia's urban planning barbaric had he seen her naked surveillance of the city. Yet the truth was that Shizuru had no such critique to make. The Forum of Hime itself held some bizarrely planned buildings, as earlier Himeans had required sacred structures to be oriented between north and south. There was also the outlandishly shaped *Regia*, which contrived to have no side facing any of the major directions. Yet it had been part of the city since King Numa Pompilius and was so sacred that it housed the *ancilia* of Mars.

She wondered where the Tasgetians housed their sacred artefacts and whether or not they had anything like the *ancilia*. She resolved to investigate the city more closely the next day, for the rest of today would likely be spent dicking with the druids. Perhaps she could ask them about their holy relics? One suspected the chief druid's house held some of these. She rather suspected the stone table in the latter's court to be one. How odd it had seemed surrounded by all that manmade architecture, by the predominantly red walls with tops picked out in gilt! Inappropriate, in a way. It should have been in a forest, shrouded in blue mist.

Hiempnos too was a bit of an oddity. So old she fancied his hair and beard having cobwebs, his joints popping with arthritic effort whenever he levered himself off a chair. Yet the man was obviously no dotard, going by the clarity of his conversation. Actually less visibly-cultured than the pair he had sent to meet them at her camp, the ones named Sendral and Raethis. Devoid of ornament as well, although she had seen enough metal on the others to know that druids were not forbidden such vanities. Physically small and almost timid of movement. Someone temptingly easy to dismiss unless you spared time to talk to him.

She had a strong suspicion that what she had met was a mask. The true Hiempnos was probably the image she had kept seeing in her mind while they had their conversation: a wizened and wise man leaning over a stone slab in a forest. A man who chanted a lay of the ancients while plunging a dagger into a man's heart for in exchange for a glimpse of the future. Ancient and archaic, a creature with its

own laws. Did that make it incapable of following someone else's?

Outside of Hiempnos's abode there had been perhaps a hundred other druids clustered to see the invaders. As they marched down the street and towards the city gates, Shizuru found even more of these holy men and women out to observe them.

"We were actually talking to Raethis and some of the other elder druids while you conversed with their chief, Fujino-san," Zanki told her. "And as you asked, we probed for Calchis."

"Let me guess," Shizuru said. "Nothing?"

Her legates confirmed it.

"Although I don't believe them, obviously," put in Shohei. "Of course he passed through here! There was only one way for him to go when he fled."

"He might be here right now, you know," said Zanki.

"He might even be one of those druids," smiled Shizuru.

"That would take balls!" Shohei laughed, eyeing the faces of the locals with increased suspicion. "D'you think we should've brought Nao-san to do some searching?"

"I doubt it would have worked here," she said. "They have too much invested in the prince. I disbelieve any of them would have betrayed him. Hiempnos himself invited me to question anyone in the city. That either means they are all in on it or that the prince was so heavily disguised when he passed through that none of the local population even noticed it was he."

She beckoned her mistress nearer and the latter acquiesced with a cluck to her pet. It slunk after them, seemingly unruffled by all the attention it was getting from the locals.

"What a curious city," Shizuru said. "Ruled by the religious, which gives its leaders the wherewithal to shroud even their politics in sacred motive. They were critical of my generalship in light of my being a priest. Yet they can condone the sort of slaughters I hear



their beloved prince perpetrated among the peoples north of the Holmys. Even that deputation they sent was interesting. They send three nobles and only two druids, but every one of the nobles is a cipher. It is the druids who run the place. I wonder... Is that the sort of thing they would like to happen with the Prince Calchis? And would he permit it?"

She was speaking very quietly and in the middle of their escort, which meant they were separated from the nearest Mentulaeans by several lines of soldiers. Her legates and the polemarch listened to her observations, murmuring agreement with several of them.

"Well, we have done what we must," she said. "We can expect them to send another deputation to settle the terms of their treaty with us before the sun sets. That should see us out of here the day after tomorrow. I want to be away as soon as possible."

"Where to next, General?" Shohei asked her. "Fancy taking a gander at Kereia just yet?"

She smiled dreamily at him.

"I fancy a small stroll further west instead," she said. "Do any of you feel like taking a peek at the Kingdom of Celsor?"

# Chapter 73

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Aquiliferi** (pl.), **aquilifer/o** (s., L.) - The standard-bearers of the legion, so-named for the eagle emblems on the standards (called the *Eagles*). Aquiliferi were chosen from among the ranks with a view towards personal bravery. They and the Eagles could become rallying points for soldiers, so aquilifers were respected and paid more than the rankers.
2. **Consuls** - The chief magistrates of Rome, elected each year in pairs. The senior consul is the consul elected with the most votes, and thus the more prominent of the two.
3. **Friend and Ally of Rome** - This is taken from a title the Ancient Romans granted some non-Romans in recognition of a service done to the Republic. It carried significant prestige, especially as it was formalised by a decree of the Senate. A lot of foreign kings lobbied to have it applied to them. Some even spent impressive amounts in bribes for that purpose.
4. **Helepolis** - The biggest siege tower in history, built under the orders of Demetrius Poliorcetes for his siege of Rhodes. It was more than 40m tall.
5. **Hispania Citerior, Hispania Ulterior** (L.) - Two of the more important Roman provinces, the Spains. Spain was divided into two parts back then, and the one that was nearer Rome was called Hispania Citerior, the one more distant, Hispania Ulterior. H. Ulterior or Further Spain was more important because its mountains were rich with ore. Modern-day Cádiz lies there.
6. **iugerum** (L., pl. **iugera**) - A Roman unit of measurement for area, specifically for farmland; one iugerum would be a little over 2,500 sq. m.
7. **Knights** - Those of knight rank were usually as well-born as those of senatorial rank, but the difference was that they chose not a

political career but a commercial one. Recall that there are restrictions on senatorial businesses, which is the reason the knights are generally the richer of the two ranks.

8. **Nausea** (L.) - English takes this word from Latin, where it originally signified "seasickness".

9. **Praetor** - The number of praetors elected in a year varies from six to eight. They serve as magistrates of the city second only to the **consuls** (s.v.). Among other things, they serve as judges in the law courts. The **praetor urbanus** or urban praetor as well as the **praetor peregrinus** or foreign praetor are the most important since the former deals with all civil litigation in the city and the latter deals with all litigation concerning foreigners.

10. **Princeps Senatus** (L.) - Leader of the House. In the Roman Senate, once someone is chosen to be Princeps, he or she retains that title for life, and thus has a very important say in discussions. He is also traditionally the senator who heads discussion on foreign affairs. To be Princeps often means one is a very remarkable speaker. Here, it is Reito Kanzaki.

11. **Scutum** (L.) - The Roman legionary's shield, roughly oval in shape and convex. It was made of wooden planks covered by canvas and leather and bordered by iron. It was well over 100cm tall and around 45cm wide.

12. **Sestertius** (s. L.) - In plural, **sesterces** or **sestertii**. This is a common Roman/Himean coin; made of silver. The conversion is thus: **25,000 sesterces = 6,250 denarii = 1 silver talent** .

13. **Tarpeian Rock** - The traditional place of execution for traitors and murderers who were Roman citizens. The more radical tribunes of the plebs (s.v.) liked to make threats about getting the People to cast others from it, as that was how traitors used to be executed.

14. **Tribune of the Plebs** - One of the most important offices in Ancient Rome, reserved exclusively for plebeians and purportedly existing to protect plebeian rights; in truth, by the time referenced, they had mostly become associated with demagogic antics . They were a prime law - making body, though, and vested with the power

to veto just about anything.

**15. Wolf-fed Twins** - Shizuru refers to the founders of Rome/Hime thus because of their legend: Romulus and Remus (who were sons of Mars) were supposed to have sucked milk from a she-wolf. The history she recites is that of the Iulii Caesares, which is replaced in this tale by her family.

**16. NOTE on the bridge** - For the sceptics. Like some other seemingly ridiculous things in this story (e.g. Shizuru's little trick at Stych Gorge), this is actually based on history: Caesar bridged the Rhine thus. A few historians still challenge his alleged method of construction, but most engineers concede his claims to be feasible.

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### **Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae**

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She did end up going to Kereia first, as it was already so near. Here they found another surrender instead of a siege. That great city was like the rest, disinclined to resisting the woman who was now the most feared power abroad the country. It furnished everything she asked of it, from information about the late king and his court to noble hostages and supplies aplenty. The drought of the past year was no longer, and the Kereians were only too glad to oblige their new foreign governor.

Although none of them could still tell her the location of the missing prince.

"So the mystery of Calchis goes on," Shizuru chuckled after another fruitless investigation.

"Maybe he really has absconded permanently," Shohei contemplated. "It would make sense, Fujino-san."

"Would it?"

"I'd say so. He has no more imperial armies. We also captured practically all of the king's court, including most of the surviving royal

offspring. Prince Calchis knows he's alone and a wanted man."

But Shizuru said she disbelieved his position as hopeless as Shohei described it.

"For one thing, we did not capture the Princess Faris," she said. "And I have my suspicions about where that other royal sprig has her true allegiances, wherever she is! The prince is not as devoid of potential allies as one might imagine. I know we have treaties now with most of the Ganni, but if the prince were to ever come offering an alternative, they would not be so quick to refuse it. For as long as the prince is at large, he *is* an alternative. I want ears to the ground constantly looking for him. That is one fugitive royal I do not deem inoffensive."

"*Are* fugitive royals ever inoffensive?" her other legate, Zanki put in. "Gods know the Senate gets its share of deposed kings seeking help to regain their thrones every year."

"I can remember one or two times, but I wouldn't say it was yearly," retorted Shohei.

"We have one in Fuuka petitioning the House for that right now!"

He looked to Shizuru for confirmation of this.

"Ariobarzanes of Cappadocia," the commander specified, smiling. "But it is understandable that you would not notice, Shohei-han. Most of the Senate does not! They only remember foreign deputations when those come bearing heaps of gold to spend on senatorial lobbyists... and I fear poor King Ariobarzanes would not have that with him. Cappadocia is not a rich land, even if it is strategically important. Kanzaki Princeps Senatus shall have to remind our fellows of this and flog up a little interest in the king's plight."

"I don't envy him," said Shohei, not at all embarrassed. He could not feel put out by his own ignorance as he truly was typical of the members of Senate. Who could really drum up much concern in the doings of a distant king from somewhere around Asia Province? Why, they could barely drum up interest in the Mentulae before

Obsidian's attempted invasion-and the former Mentulaean Empire was much closer to Hime than Cappadocia!

"At any rate, we should count our blessings," Shizuru told them. "Prince Calchis and any other members of Obsidian's dynasty still at large do not have a Hime to run to for help! This makes our impending trip to Celsor more important. After all, its current sovereign is married to one of Calchis's half-sisters."

Shohei asked if she expected Calchis to be seeking sanctuary with them.

"Not really," she said. "But as we are already so near the border, why not take the detour to check? It is but a hop and a skip from here to the river boundary."

Before they took that hop and skip some messengers from Firens found them. From these Shizuru learned more about the conflict Firens had been having with its neighbours. As she had herself predicted, the Nervii west of Firens had launched attacks not long after the latter seceded. This had kept her allies busy while she herself had been trying to deal with Obsidian.

"We've reason to think the Nervii were even egged on by the late king," one of the messengers said when asked for details. "Some captives we tortured for information claimed it."

"Crafty old King Obsidian," Shizuru said, knowing she would have done the same. "If it is true, he must have sent them messages while he was still quartered here in Kereia. That would have kept Firens busy the entire time he was moving his army east."

"Yes, or we would have sent you reinforcements earlier," the Firensian in the lead, a distant relation of Entei's, said apologetically. "My cousin asked me to convey his abject regrets for it, Fujino-san, but we were beating off an army ourselves when you were dealing with Obsidian's. He also charged me to send you his earnest admiration for Terantrum. It's in honour of that battle and all your victories that we tender this gift to reaffirm our alliance."

He beckoned to two of the men accompanying him. They brought

forward a large flat object bundled in rough woollen fabric. That it was heavy was clear: a third man had to assist them in placing it on the table.

Shizuru and her officers watched, dying of curiosity, as the Firensii finally untied the ropes holding the cloth wrapper. All that revealed that was another cover of hide, however. Removing that too, the Firensii finally unveiled their king's personal gift. This was a huge shield the size of a Himean *scutum*, its silver surface a riot of chased metal sculpture. It was superb work and obviously worth a fortune: even its border was ivory with inlaid gold.

"His Majesty was also very pleased by the confirmation of his status," the group's leader explained, referring to King Entei's formalisation as a Friend and Ally of Hime. This title had been bestowed to him by Shizuru upon his daughter's delivery of Gorgo, but it had been more in the nature of a promise by then, still requiring as it did the ratification of the Senate. Before leaving Gorgo again for her second northwest trip, Shizuru had received a letter confirming that ratification. Thus Entei of Firens now had his name inscribed in the list of foreign powers and individuals granted privileged position by the government of Hime.

His ambassador now enlarged: "We also sent a fresh train of provisions to Gorgo for your legions two weeks past. It should be reaching the capital soon."

Shizuru thanked her Firensian allies with warmth, asking if they needed assistance in dealing with their troublesome neighbours. She knew from her informants that they had been managing competently, but it was customary to make the gesture.

"As it is, we've had victories of our own," Entei's ambassador said with quiet diffidence. "Though nothing to compare to yours. We're fine for now, Fujino - san. We've not held the Western Frontier for centuries without learning a few things. The Nervii are completely back on their side of the border and our lands as well as yours are safe."

Shizuru commended them and their king for their martial performance and promised to come should they ever be pressed

enough to need her.

"Although I have a feeling that shall never happen," she confessed to Natsuki that evening, the two of them retiring to the bedroom of their tent after having dined with the Firensian envoys. "It would take a great deal of pressure before His Majesty King Entei decides to ask for my help."

For once it was Natsuki who had taken her work to bed that evening. She was looking over some papers, so it was a few moments before Shizuru got a reply.

"Because," the Otomeian proposed, "he prefers that you see him as capable?"

Shizuru flapped a hand in good humour.

"Oh, they would all prefer that, to be sure!" she said, before asking about the stack of paper on the other's lap. She was told that it was the latest endorsements for the Otomeian army's promotions.

Before the creation of Natsuki's title, promotions had been reviewed back in the capital-or, in the case of troops stationed in one of the kingdom's other provinces, in one of the regional capitals. Prior to each review, recommendations would have been tendered by the officers to their current or last general. If approved, the recommendation would be escalated to a conference.

This was a discussion of the relevant officer between said general and the officer's superiors. It had to be held in one of the Otomeian capitals because it was overseen by at least one member of the Otomeian High Council. In cases where the Otomeian army was distant from the kingdom's capitals, a significant amount of time could pass between a commendation and a decision.

Now that there was a polemarch on the field, however, she acted as both the commander receiving the recommendation and the councilmember reviewing it. This was since being polemarch gave her the status of a general as well as a member of their monarch's High Council now: the Princess Alyssa had clarified this soon after creating the position and gaining her father's approval. Most of the



Otomeians thought it excellent. The polemarch's presence made the creation or preferment of their officers much faster.

"But why then?" the polemarch prompted, recalling Shizuru to their earlier subject. "Why will the Firensian king not ask for help?"

"Put yourself in his shoes, Dearest," Shizuru said. "Imagine all you know of me is what he does. Do you really think he would be so keen on having me traipse all about his land? Oh, I do not say he misdoubts my faith as an ally! I think, rather, that he would prefer not to present a temptation to a one he essentially views as a conqueror. It is why he would be quick to claim the Nervii across his border manageable. Were he to truly have trouble fighting them, he fears it would give me a pretext for establishing camps in his kingdom."

"But you would do so to protect him."

"Indeed, but it would grant the beginnings of a foreign foothold all the same. What is to prevent us from keeping those camps there for years afterwards, citing defence against the Nervii as the cause for their maintenance? Sooner or later those camps would turn into towns, and those would, by the terms of our agreement, be considered Himean settlements even if they are in Firensian lands. Not too savoury a prospect for a king still establishing his realm."

Natsuki nodded, seeing the danger.

"You are not the problem," she said, "but those who come after."

"Yes," Shizuru answered. "Although I do hope that a little more time in my acquaintance shall see him trusting me better. He is a client of mine now. Even once another governor takes over Septentria, I am obliged to look after the interests of King Entei and his offspring."

Natsuki put down the paper in her hands.

"His offspring?" she echoed. "Like Queen Azula?"

"Yes."

"And whoever becomes his, ah, successor?"

"If they are of his House or have been adopted by him or Azula, they remain my clients, as will any successor of their line by blood or adoption."

The Otomeian was fascinated. "It goes on so long?"

"If you mean the patron-client relationship, yes," Shizuru told her. "And it passes down the line on my side too. For example, my great-grandfather was the governor responsible for pacifying most of Hispania Ulterior and even parts of Hispania Citerior. In establishing most of the communities there and granting the Extended Rights to several, he made a great many clients, sometimes whole tribes. Now those tribes-the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of my great-grandfather's clients-have me as their patron."

She stopped to point at the sheets of paper again, having been studying what Natsuki was doing.

"What does it mean," she asked, "when you fold the upper right corner?"

Natsuki explained her method: "It is for consideration. Upper left, I approve it."

"And if you fold not at all, you decline it?"

"Yes."

"I notice most are for consideration," said Shizuru. "I suppose that means you wish to do more digging to see if they deserve to be promoted. But why do you decline a promotion, usually?"

The polemarch laid out her reasoning. Some of the Otomeian officers, she said, still tended to promote for reasons of bravery and skill in combat-natural, given their culture. But Natsuki knew the truth that not all great warriors made for great leaders. Some great warriors served the army best by staying among the regular soldiers.

"I tell the officers to give bigger shares in the spoils or decorations," she said. "But still some insist and try to promote them. Stubborn. And stupid."

Shizuru asked the question just out of curiosity: "You do not think good fighters should ever be promoted by virtue of their skill in combat alone?"

"Not if the promotion is to command," Natsuki answered, before elucidating that it might be permissible if the promotion were to something like Shizuru's own *aquiliferi*. She also imagined a possibility of stationing such warriors in locations of greater tactical import or prominence in battle. In exchange, they could be granted higher pay and shares of plunder. Still a promotion of a sort. But they should not be granted powers of command, in her opinion.

"That will put the many at risk," she said, "simply so one man can be improperly honoured."

Shizuru agreed wholeheartedly and said so, secretly marvelling at the wisdom in the girl. For at only three-and-twenty years-she had her last birthday on their way to Tasgetia-Natsuki was still very much that. *Her Girl*.

"But Shizuru," the Otomeian said, drawing her back to their earlier topic, "about the patronage."

"What of it?"

"Does this mean you will be patron of the Men-no, I mean the Septentrian communities?"

"Certainly," said Shizuru. "It is the inevitable outcome for situations like this."

Natsuki folded a corner on another sheet and moved it to the bottom of the heap.

"In-evi-table," she repeated softly. "Hmm... for governors of a new province?"

"More or less," her lover answered. "Technically, I already am the patron of all the aristocrats I installed as local authorities. The same for all the ones I allowed to retain their positions and charged with rebuilding their fiefs. It is simply too early in the war and in the province's history for them to articulate the relationship the way a

Himean would articulate it. Even so, I predict that within a couple of years the Septentrians will be sufficiently aware of Himean socio-political mechanics to actively claim or seek patronage from me."

Natsuki thought about it for a moment, looking up from the sheet she had been perusing.

"You will have many clients," she concluded.

"I *already* have many clients," Shizuru corrected.

"In Hime too, no? Besides the Spains?"

"Of course. As well as in Campania and Capua. And, as you know, even some in Argus and Sosia. You did watch me enlisting clients in those provinces, after all." A start, followed by a laugh. "Oh, and all around old Alba Longa in Latium, naturally! I always forget to mention it because it seems self-evident."

Natsuki asked why it should be.

"The Fujino hail from Alba Longa, in Latium," Shizuru explained. "To be precise, my ancestors used to be its kings and queens. When my forebear Aeneas fled Troy-he was the son of Venus, you know-he fetched up there and his son established the dynasty. Later, the kings of Hime warred with and conquered Alba Longa. Instead of exterminating its royalty, they co-opted it into their own nobility. In so doing they enhanced their own claim to pre-eminence, you see."

"Because," Natsuki ventured, "they wanted to say the blood of Venus was now part of Hime's royalty?"

"Indeed. Besides, the mother of the Wolf-fed Twins was in fact from our clan. The blood link was there from the beginning."

Shizuru reached for a handful of black hair. It fell through her grip.

"Well," she went on, "my family might have turned Himean, but we continued to own tracts of our ancestral land throughout the centuries. Some of our first clients were from those areas, when Hime went from being a monarchy to a republic."

The Otomeian had put down her work completely, engrossed in this recital of Shizuru's family history. She transferred the stack of recommendations to an end table and asked if Shizuru still had much of her ancestral properties.

"I do," was the answer. "Pater and I actually added to them. Before my great-grandfather revived my family's failing fortunes, the five hundred *iugera* he owned in the Alban Hills was just about all he had left to his name. For the Fujino after him, it is a hereditary possession that we must strive to keep in his memory as well as for the sake of our illustrious lineage."

Then she consciously demolished the loftiness of her sentiments by supplying a wicked addendum: "Besides, the Alban Hills are so close to Hime and so fertile that real estate there will only get more valuable. I can get a million sesterces right now for every hundred of the two thousand *iugera* I own."

Natsuki had already dissolved in hilarity by the time she reached the price quote.

"You will take me to see this valuable real estate one day, Descendant of Venus?" she chortled.

"Why, naturally!" Shizuru scooted closer to tickle some ribs and had a shoulder nipped in retaliation. She pushed the girl down and covered her, purring when legs wrapped around her waist. "This is one of the things I did promise you of our marriage. I shall take you exploring to places you have never been. If anyone asks you, that is why we are going to Celsor, by the way. Tell them we simply felt like doing a little sightseeing."

Natsuki scoffed and said no one would believe a Himean senator with an army would cross an international border for the sake of tourism. In fact, Shizuru counted on that disbelief. She even slowed her march to the waterway separating Celsor and her province so that any lookouts posted there would have time to warn the Celsorian sovereign. By the time she drew up her legions beside the river called the Flundanus, she knew the other bank was already full of scouts monitoring her progress.

She walked out with her officers and those of the Otomeians to see the river. This had been the boundary between the Kingdoms of Celsor and the Mentulaeans for more than a hundred years. That it was mighty was not in question, for it was past ten kilometres wide where they stopped to view it. It was also very dark and fast, which told them it was dangerously deep. The shore on either side of the water was a verdant slope, trees and other well-watered flora thriving.

"What do you think?" she asked her lover, smiling at the dark blue expanse before them.

"I have seen bigger," was the verdict.

Shizuru chuckled her on the chin, laughing.

They marched further south to where there was supposed to be a bridge connecting the two banks. Not so, however: all the Himeans found was a ruin. Even the piles had been dragged out of the riverbed in a thorough demolition.

"I doubt they did this in just a few days," she said to her legates. "They probably tore it down months ago, perhaps after they got word of Terantrum. Nothing for it but to march on."

Down the river there was a small community of rural Mentulaeans dependent on the waters for their livelihood. They sold fish happily to the marching army and spoke of their king's recent demise with only passing interest—an indication, the Himeans thought, of how small and rural their community really was.

"Are there no other bridges nearby?" Shizuru asked the leader of the settlement.

He denied it, saying the great bridge they had found demolished was the sole means of crossing until it had been torn down. She asked when that had happened.

"Two, three months, give or take," he said and pointed to the other bank. "Them Celsorian soldiers did it. Sold them fish too, we did."

She thanked him and his people for their help. Before she left he

offered the use of some large rafts their community used to cross the river.

"Take a lot of going back and forth," he warned. "But we can get all your soldiers across. We'll charge only a small price for it."

But Shizuru disliked the idea of having her legions ferried over the waters in such a manner. It would be harder to keep them organised and in defensive order if the transfers were so piecemeal.

She marched further south until she found a place that looked viable for a crossing. Her engineers were summoned and they performed a survey of it.

"Two hundred and eighty metres," they said of the distance between the shorelines. "So around nine hundred forty feet. The depth is easier at this place, though, General. On average, five metres. We can bridge it, easy."

"Well and good, but I want more than an easy bridge," she told them "I want a bridge that will let my men pour through it so fast they spend barely any time getting from one bank to the other. I want a bridge that tells the King of Celsor, *Look, we can walk right over to your backyard whenever needed.* I want a bridge that can scare a king, so you can scrap all your plans for one only the usual five metres in width."

They conferred quickly with each other.

"We can double the usual breadth of the deck," they said. "We'll also use foot-and-a-half-thick logs for the piers. Is that acceptable, General?"

"How long shall it take?" she asked, whereupon the engineers crossed their fingers and gave their speed-obsessed general the lowest estimate they could furnish.

"If we work fast, thirteen days," they said hopefully, "with another thirteen for gathering materials."

She dashed their hopes with a shake of the head.

"Do you know," she said, "how many bridges I have had you demolish? How many I have seen you build? Some of you were with me during my first generalship, so you should have an idea of how many that is."

"Dozens by now, General," one answered.

"Dozens," she agreed. "And that is without counting all the other, far more difficult engineering tasks we have worked on together. Mining towns, building siege ramps, cutting off the water sources of many an enemy city. You are the best engineers of Hime by now, with years and years of experience! Enough so even a city engineer would flush with envy."

They were starting to smile, buoyed by her praise. It meant more to them than another commander's would have because they knew she herself occasionally performed engineering feats. It was that particular talent of hers that had earned her a reputation for very fast siege.

"Now this is only one more simple bridge," she told them. "Not a tower to beat the Helepolis. It will be large, yes, but still only a bridge. You have built dozens of these already! Others would take thirty days to build it. But you are not ordinary engineers. Surely we can throw it up faster than those of average skills! My boys and girls will fell trees and build as fast and well as you can direct them. So direct them better and faster than all other engineers can!"

They looked at each other and started new calculations. One of them brought up one last hurdle that had to be surmounted.

"The current is a problem, General," he told her. "If you want it to stay up safely both during construction and even after we go over, we'll have to make much stronger piles. That's what will take longer."

"Because the current acts like a ram," she observed.

"And can carry down tree trunks and the like that can knock down the piles," he expanded.

"Not if we put shields on them," she told him.



She had them put together the "shields" she wanted: huge and angled buttresses made of seasoned planks and branches of oak. These went into the river and sheltered the pillars, dividing the current with their wedged points as it reached them. This took the pressure off the piles and gave the structure added strength. In what seemed no time at all, Shizuru had her bridge over the river. It was so large that she was able to march her army in the normal eight-men-wide column without filling it, and she led five cheerful legions further west into Celsor.

It threw the monarch of the kingdom into a pother when his lookouts ran up to tell him.

"Ten days?!" he gulped. "You're telling me this woman bridged the Flundanus in ten days?!"

The men he was facing winced, having debated amongst themselves how best to say this. It was so incredible a story they might even be executed for lying! The only reason they dared deliver the news was that other reports would soon substantiate their statements. The Himean army was marching fast, even if it did it somewhat curiously. The lookouts had seen the glittering column swerve around the first farmlands it encountered, for instance. There had been no columns of smoke either, no screams on the wind. Absolutely none of the usual signs of pillage. What *did* these foreigners want, in that case?

Celsor's king, Leontes the Second, boomed: "No one could bridge the Great River in such a time! It's impossible and you fools know it!"

"Yes, Your Majesty," said the baron in charge of the lookouts, sweating. "Nonetheless, she did it."

Leontes grabbed at his beard and gulped again.

"But how did they even get the materials?" he asked. "Did they bring all of it with them?"

"They gathered those in ten days, Majesty," the baron related. "Then they spent another ten days building the bridge itself."

"But how could they even build against that current?"

"They constructed what looked like small dams, Majesty," the baron said. "These kept the current and whatever it was carrying off the structure's legs."

"But-the river! The depth!"

"They built something that looked like a crane, Majesty," the baron said, trying very hard to keep the awe out of his tones. "They placed it on a raft and thus managed their work without being troubled by the waters."

The king chewed furiously on his cheek and looked panicked.

"What is it they want?" he asked of no one in particular. "Why have these southerners come here, so soon after King Obsidian's defeat?"

To that there were many possible answers, of course, but none in his company dared vouchsafe them. The king had been a nervous man ever since he got news of Terantrum. The first reports of a Himean army loitering about the other side of the Flundanus had seen him shouting for his generals. He had marched an army straightaway to a citadel near the great river. There he had been waiting ever since for the least indication of assault. At a mere four days' march away from the boundary, he knew he could head off the enemy before it reached any of his more important cities. The problem was, said enemy was not really acting like an enemy!

To attack them or not to attack them. His pride said to attack while his instincts said to leave be. The Himeans had all but conquered the Mentulaean Empire in a run of battles that had every strand of his dense body hair standing on end. Outnumbered and on foreign lands, the southerners had prevailed against all expectation. It made his situation hugely unpleasant, as he was not only married to one of Obsidian's daughters but had also sent some of his own soldiers to join the Mentulaean-Himean War. Something the Himeans probably knew by now and which might explain their current presence. But how was he to have predicted they would be the victors? Everyone had thought they would lose!

Well, it was why he had taken the precaution of tearing down the bridge on the Flundanus two months ago, was it not? It would have made the passage of Himean armies into his kingdom so much harder. That had been the intention, much good though it did him in reality. Ten days to bridge the river-was it possible, truly? His mind said no while his bones said yes: these southerners were masters of the impossible, he was starting to see it.

Oh, all the decisions! To attack them or not to attack them. To flee or not to flee. Every choice could make the difference to whether or not the southerners would go after his lands too. Eventually what made up his mind for him was the news from the scouts who came after the first wave. The Himeans, they said, had been conducting a perfectly peaceful trek. They had sacked none of the settlements or buildings that they had encountered. They had even been buying food from the locals, paying for grain and meat with hard cash!

This heartening news saw the king ordering his army to march towards the foreign one. He met it just a day after having set out and certainly much earlier than expected: like the Mentulaeans, he had no conception of the speed a Himean army could achieve.

The two forces stopped on a wide field, staring at each other from across the green. At first sight of those serried ranks, King Leontes found himself too impatient to wait for heralds. He did not deem it beneath his dignity to be first to approach the foreigners, particularly when they were in his kingdom. Up he went on his parade car, a wondrous conveyance that flashed and flickered under the sun. It was so bright that his own men were obliged to shield their eyes: no silver for Leontes when there was a possibility of gilt!

The team of white horses pulled his car up and towards the Himeans, where a small group seemed to be detaching from the rest. Their officers were coming to meet him. He drove on, eager to finally face these strangers, and swelling with pride as he imagined how they took his presence. The Himeans were coming out on foot and all in the same red and brown costumes, which meant his own group was by far more impressive. Flanking his car were his royal guard in their yellow-and-red outfits, the long yellow tassels on their helms trailing behind them. As for himself-well, he had enough gold on his armour to know he looked nothing less than a vision. He had

made sure to have his shoulder-length locks brushed back carefully before this. His dark beard too had been meticulously barbered into a jaw-hugging trim.

Then the two groups were close enough to talk to each other loudly. Both stopped, knowing their leaders were expected to meet. Here the king of Celsor parted from the usual by getting down from his car to do it. Most kings would have insisted on staying in the car for the meeting: it put them higher than the ground and therefore higher than anyone on it. But Leontes deigned to walk on the grass of his kingdom like the foreigners, for he was a tremendously tall man and tremendously proud of that. To his amazement, however, the surprisingly young woman who met him had eyes level with his. And what eyes she sported! And what a face to go with them!

"Hail, King Leontes the Second," she said, speaking something that sounded like Mentulaean but with a crisper accent. "I am Shizuru Fujino, proconsular governor of Hime to Septentria."

He stared, unable to help himself. Her looks had taken some of the wind out of his sails.

"Procons-governor to *what*?"

"Septentria," she repeated, drawing out the syllables. "What you formerly knew as the Mentulaean Empire."

So that was what they were calling it? What cheek! What temerity! What southern presumption!

"I see," he said, aware he still stared but still unable to help it. His eyes dropped to roam her whole length and ascertained that her boots had no heel to explain all that tallness. "And what do you think you are doing here in my lands, Himean?"

"Paying you a visit," she said, sounding friendly. "You are now my neighbour and it seemed appropriate for peace."

He forgot himself enough to snort rudely at this.

"Peace?!" he said with an incredulous glare. "You brought an army with you for a visit!"

"Well, of course," she said, looking at him as though that did not merit explanation. "I had never been here before and had little knowledge of you to go on. How was I to know whether you would be sophisticated enough to greet me civilly or launch immediately into attack like a barbarian?"

As he had been debating that matter with himself on the way to this meeting, he cleared his throat and tried to look (sophisticatedly) nonchalant.

"Here I am," he said. "What do you want?"

"Only to say that I hope you shall be a good neighbour to my province," she told him. "We already have treaties with all of our other neighbours: the peoples of the north, the east, and the southwest. You are the only one left uncertain."

He had seized on one of the directions she mentioned and now sought to clarify it further.

"The southwest," he said grimly. "Do you mean the Mentulaean Empire's Western Frontier?"

"I mean," she said, "the Kingdom of Firens."

His fair face darkened with blood at the correction; a scowl materialised under his beard.

"You accord a measly baron a kingly title," he grumbled lowly, uncertain why he could not seem to summon up his usual roar. Something in him said the Himean would only laugh at him were he actually to shout at her-and that would be insupportable. "Entei has no right to be called that. My own wife has greater claim to what he calls his lands, as she is an actual daughter of the late King Obsidian."

The tawny gold eyebrows lifted; she regarded him with steady dispassion.

"King Entei has been named Friend and Ally of Hime," she stated. "It means he is entitled to our allegiance and support should he require it. Be warned that any action you may take against his sovereignty

will be read as provocation to Hime as well."

"I didn't say I intended any such thing!" he snapped, baring his teeth briefly. The peculiar red eyes regarding him betrayed no emotion at that either. He realised she had no awe of either his title or his presence. Was it because of what she had already done to the Mentulaeans with her army? Was it because she had the felicity of knowing she had beaten a hundred thousand with only thirty thousand?

He had thirty thousand in the force now standing behind him. Obviously more than what she had brought with her to his kingdom, but probably not enough. The army in front of him did not really look that impressive, but he had to weigh its looks against its deeds. A hundred thousand ground into the dust... What was it like to claim such a triumph? To lead an army with such power, with such ability?

Like most kings who had claimed their thrones for themselves, Leontes had a brain beneath all his bluff and bluster. He weighed all he knew of the southerners and their doings against all he knew of the former empire and its king. He studied again the woman before him, the extraordinary stretch of her from shiny golden head to leather-booted feet.

Leontes made a decision and reversed positions faster than even his Court could have expected. His Mentulaeen wife might not like it when she found out, but he had to look out for himself.

"Are you here to make a treaty with my kingdom too, then?" he asked, licking his lips. "One that will settle peace between us?"

He had the uncomfortable feeling she was laughing at him behind her eyes, though her voice was still level.

"If you are amenable to it, certainly," she told him.

"So if I agree, shall I also be named a Friend and Ally of your people?" he pressed.

Now her expression changed, seemed just a little apologetic.

"We generally name only those who have done us great service as

such," she said. "Witness another of your fellow northern kings with the title, for instance: King Kruger of Otomeia."

"Otomeia." He had heard of this kingdom many times before, of course, even if he had never set eyes on any of its territories. The late king of the Mentulaeans had spoken often of it, and none too favourably. Leontes suspected he had seen it as a serious rival to his power, especially as it was reportedly full of ferocious peoples. "The mountain kingdom in the far east, is it?"

"Quite so." She gestured to her army. "Some of their people are here right now. As well as one of their princesses, their Polemarch."

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask what a "polemarch" was, but he decided not to lest he seem ignorant. She already had him at too many disadvantages.

"Did you make their king Friend and Ally because he helped you invade the Mentulae?" he asked.

"He had the title even before that," she revealed. "We have a long history of alliance with the Otomeians."

"But not with Firens."

"No, not yet. But as you can see, that is set to change thanks to their king's new status."

He nibbled on the inside of his lip and looked out at the Himean army again.

"So what should I do," he prodded, "if I wanted to gain that status as well?"

She flashed a smile that rather dazzled him. The woman was beautiful, even if hers was a foreign sort of beauty.

And even if she was much taller than any woman had the right to be.

"You can start by proving yourself a peaceful neighbour," she said. "And by not aiding those whom we call enemies. You donated forces to that end before. There were Celsorian swordsmen among

the King Obsidian's soldiers."

He was not at all surprised by her knowledge of it, but it did grate on him to be in a position where he might be expected to make an apology.

"My late father-in-law requested that I send him men, yes," he said a little lamely. "But I had no say in how he used them."

"Indeed. Perhaps you should have been a little more discerning before you gave him that gift. At any rate, provided you do not do any more things counter our interests, Hime will be pleased to give you a treaty of friendship. Not Friend and Ally status just yet, but perhaps that may come, in time."

That beautiful smile again.

"I imagine you would prefer to have your advisors participate in drawing up the treaty," she said. "Please be so good as to send a delegation of your choice to the capital for it, being sure to empower them to sign it in your name."

"Where," he said, "is the capital?"

"Where it was when your father-in-law was still king."

She looked as though she would turn away, but stayed.

"Oh, before I forget," she said. "One of King Obsidian's sons, the Prince Calchis, has gone missing. You would not happen to have had word from him? Or had him actually turn up for a visit?"

He frowned, not having heard of this.

"No," he said. "I don't know that prince very well. I had no idea he was missing."

She took a long time looking into his eyes.

"Very well," she sighed. "I believe you, King."

He frowned at her, nettled.



"If he does turn up?" he asked. "What exactly do you expect me to do then?"

"As someone who would be a Friend and Ally of Hime?" she said. "There is only one course of action. You take him in custody, then turn him over to us as soon as you can. Otherwise, you harbour one of our enemies and will be considered similar."

"He's my brother-in-law!"

The Himean looked amused-and proceeded to demonstrate that she was not as ignorant of his own doings as she had claimed.

"I hardly think that should matter," she said, "to someone who hunted down and executed his blood brother so he could have no rivals to the kingship."

His mouth went slack; he gaped for a moment, then recollected himself and shut it.

"The men who killed him misunderstood my words," he said stiffly. "They were punished! They were beheaded for it!"

The red eyes twinkled, seemed to say they could see right through him.

"Then let us hope you do not misunderstand my words, Your Majesty," she said.

And she inclined her head, swept around and away.

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The Celsorian king's army shadowed hers until she returned to the Flundanus, right to the very place where she had built her impossible bridge. He sent her ten bags of gold with some envoys before she crossed over again. When she loosened the thongs tying one of the bags closed and peeked inside, she discovered that all of the coins were Mentulaean.

"I guess Obsidian had Celsor on a leash," Shohei said when she showed them to him. "It was because of his support that Leontes

ascended the throne, wasn't it?"

"It was a big part of it, yes," Shizuru said. "Little wonder they are using Mentulaean coinage! Obsidian must have seen Celsor almost as a protectorate. Anyway, his grandchildren shall become its rulers, unless Leontes is supplanted."

"Do we have any intention of that?" Shohei asked playfully.

"No," Shizuru said. "Provided dear Leontes behaves himself."

After crossing the bridge and returning to her side of the river, Shizuru had the army tear it down.

"But not the piles," she said. "Might as well leave them there as a reminder to Leontes and in case we need to cross the river again."

From there they beat a rapid march back to the centre, having effectively spent over two months in Septentria's northwest. She did not bring all of the legions back with her, for she installed four of them with Shohei and Zanki outside of Arvern. They would be wintering there while she marched the remaining legion, the Second, back to the capital.

They reached Gorgo with winter already nipping at their heels, every one of the men in cold weather gear. Shizuru's cousin was among the first to welcome her back and filled her in while the officers settled the happy legionaries. These were looking forward to the usual winter comforts: warm taverns and shops, pretty locals and brothels. With a winter billet at a metropolis like the capital, they were assured of a bigger selection of such comforts than the other legions.

"I've collected treaties from near every noble or petty aristocrat-magistrate left in the territories," declared Shizuma triumphantly. "You were right when you said defeating the king would take the fight out of them! There was one little oddity-a small fortress called Hapsa, southwest of here-where we thought we'd have to do a siege, as the aristocrat in charge very loudly proclaimed he was locking his gates and daring us to come and get him. But we barely even got a legion near it before the gates opened up again."

"What happened?" Shizuru asked, adjusting the girl in her arms carefully. They were going up the stairs of the imperial palace. "I have a feeling the town itself turned on the aristocrat you mentioned?"

"Pretty much," her cousin grinned. "Considering just about everyone else was getting off light for surrendering, they were not about to risk a solitary rebellion!"

"Especially not a pointless one."

"It would have been pointless indeed! Since the people of Hapsa turned over both the fortress and the rebellious aristocrat, I did little more than name a new head magistrate for them. I did the same in a few other places, by the way."

"Tell me more about them later," Shizuru said.

They cleared the stairs and she set her lover down, making sure the girl was steady on her feet. Fair fingers scraped the back of her neck in silent gratitude.

"I have things to tell you too," Shizuru said to her cousin, "about Tasgetia and Celsor."

The other's face lit up. No Himean senator had ever set foot on Celsor before Shizuru's venture.

"They said you bridged the Flundanus in ten days," she said.

"And talked to Celsor's king face to face."

"How was he, their King Leontes?"

Shizuru stopped walking and thought about it.

"I think he did not like my being as tall as I am," she decided.

"Many do not like your being as tall as you are," Natsuki murmured all of a sudden.

The cousins looked at her.

"Are you perhaps one of them, *meum mel*?" Shizuru demanded.

"No," was the candid reply. "I like your being tall."

She let a moment pass before adding, "Very much."

Shizuru laughed along with her cousin.

"You're lucky she enjoys climbing mountains," the senior legate teased. "But speaking of mountains, you have some of them waiting in your quarters, Shizuru. I've been having your correspondence sent up there, I think to your study. I daresay they've accumulated into proper heaps."

Shizuru groaned at the reminder. "No rest for the weary."

"I am afraid not. But if it helps, I sent a message to your steward the moment the scouts sighted you coming. He's probably gotten everything ready for you and Natsuki."

Retiring to their quarters, the pair found this to be the case. Hermias had prepared a repast as well as a warm bath in honour of their return. They availed of the latter first, and followed with a quick scrubdown aided by their servants. Once they were clean and fresh again they ate a little. It was some hours later that they finally repaired to Shizuru's study. It was not so much the work that they were eager to return to as the news they would glean from the waiting missives: Natsuki had her own correspondence from the capital as well as from Otomeians stationed elsewhere.

They found that Hermias had still managed to impose a sort of system on the letters. Those meant for the polemarch were ranged on a table in the middle of the room while those for the general—far more numerous—were set on a larger counter near Shizuru's desk. A quick look showed they had been lined up from left to right in order of arrival.

Natsuki settled down on a couch to look through her buckets, turning each scroll she picked and frowning when it was not what she wanted. Shizuru watched for a few seconds, then went to rummage through her own buckets. She suspected that what the girl sought

had been placed there by mistake.

Eventually she found the desired cylinder and strolled up to Natsuki, presenting it to her exultantly.

"She wrote back," she announced, savouring the flush that suffused the other's face. "I told you she would, Natsuki."

The Otomeian took the cylinder but did not open it, the pleasure in her clear even though she said not a word. The older woman bent down to peck her on the brow and bade her read the missive she had been waiting for so anxiously.

"She must have written to you soon after getting your reply," she told her lover, going back to her buckets and looking through them more carefully. She found a cylinder very much like Natsuki's and brandished it. "I have a letter from her as well. She wrote these in August."

To her astonishment, the smile in Natsuki's eyes vanished.

"August?!" came the gasp.

"Yes, you can see it on the tag. Chikane marks her missives with dates."

"But-then I am so tardy!" the Otomeian cried in dismay. "Shizuru, she will think-she will think-"

"She will think we have been marching," Shizuru hastened to reassure the young woman. "She will not think you impolite if you reply only now, *mea vita* . Chikane knows what army life is like."

The other was chewing on her lip, still downcast by this worry. Chikane's opinion of her, Shizuru saw, mattered a great deal.

"Really?" she asked again. "Shizuru?"

"Yes, so do not worry about it. Look now, I have known Chikane a long time, have I not?"

"Yes."

"So trust that I know her well enough to wager my fortune on this. Read that and reply at your leisure, Natsuki."

She went to the chair behind her desk, knowing Natsuki would want to read this latest letter herself. She waited for the younger woman to start on that before she opened her own cylinder. Out of the leathery cover slid a fat roll of finest parchment like the one Natsuki held; Chikane rarely sent letters on paper.

She checked her lover one last time before she started reading. The girl looked content. There was a lamp on her desk and she pulled it close to her own parchment.

*I am rushing a little as I write this, so pardon if my script looks hurried. I have my reasons for haste, but more on that anon. I shall try to pack all the latest news here even so. Harada-san offered to write to you in my stead, by the way, but I am the better source for some matters-besides, she is still much occupied by her household arrangements, being newly wed. And deliriously happy!*

*You shall think this a letter full of surprises, Shizuru, so I suppose we should commence with the best. The Senate voted to have a day of thanks in honour of your latest victories. The defeat of the imperial army at Berentum and your seizure of the Mentulaean capital has everyone feeling that some justice has been achieved. Hime has not quite forgotten the attempt to take Sosia Province and the slaughter of the Eighth.*

*Public sentiment was such that even the Traditionalists voted for the thanksgiving. I suspect it was also because they were genuinely impressed. You should have seen their faces when Harada-san read your booty tallies-six thousand talents from one citadel? Half the House contemplated killing themselves! They would have reported only three thousand talents and kept the rest, of course, had they been in your well-worn hobnails.*

*Unfortunately, one of our colleagues has not fared nearly so well. Keigo Onishi is probably going to be recalled from his Sicilian mission and eventually replaced. How can that be, you ask, for a man of his capability? A lot of reasons, really, but it can be distilled to two simple things: several of our more rapacious fellows want a*

*chance at his command and the present grain shortage has everyone blaming whoever is handling Sicilia.*

*I suppose this is because it is from where we get most of our grain, but Onishi-san's culpability for the famine hardly follows, does it? For one thing, the slave rebels preventing the harvest should be the ones getting the blame. For another, Sicilia is not the only cause of the shortage. Even were Onishi-san to put down the revolt in a day, the famine would persist. Ah, but you know what people are like when they are hungry. Common sense goes into hiding.*

*One of this year's tribunes of the plebs has made a lot of trouble on the subject. This fellow, Eiichi Kiyosaki, worked the people into a lather of resentment for our grain merchants. He claimed the grain shortage was really all up to them.*

*Everyone with a shred of intellect saw the falsity. The shortage is due to the drought, as well as the troubles of Sicilia, and the pirates incessantly preying on our grain ships. But that made a complicated answer of a simple question, so none of the People wanted to believe it. Easier to believe the simple answer and blame the grain merchants. Which also meant blaming the Senate, since so many of us are related to or patrons of the grain merchants.*

*Feeling was foul in the Forum, Shizuru, and the city was gearing up for a throw. Such was the agitation Kiyosaki-san was causing that some feared he would soon be calling for either knights or senators to be cast off the Tarpeian Rock! Some of our meeker senators actually fled to the country. Things came to a head in June and several of us dreamt up a way to divert the People's from Kiyosaki-san's demagoguery. The House created a special commission for a campaign to clear Our Sea of pirates.*

*You perceive why we did this: to create a hubbub to distract Kiyosaki-san's audience; to show that the state was doing something to combat the grain shortage; and to draw attention to another cause of the famine that people could curse as easily as the grain plutocrats. Besides, the pirates really have been doing a lot to interrupt our meagre grain supply. It was high time we dealt with them.*

*But when we offered the commission to our consuls, would you believe it? Both declined! Our current senior consul wants to govern Macedonia next year, and thinks the special commission will not be finished in time for him to take a province. As for his junior colleague, he has been a most vocal critic of Keigo Onishi. One guess what that one is planning; the only sea voyage he envisions in his future is the one taking him to Sicilia as the new commander against the rebels.*

*So the next logical recommendation was to make a selection from one of the praetors. Alas, there were troubles here again! Part of the difficulty is that this is only a six-praetor year. Of those, only four could properly be considered as the praetors urbanus and peregrinus have landbound duties. The viable four were further reduced to two due to another pair pleading nausea.*

*When it came to choosing from one of the pair left, we found an added headache. The best option-which is to say the one with the better military history-was found to have once been abducted by pirates himself! They held him for ransom the way they do most Himeans of good family whom they catch on the seas. Oh, he was burning to take the commission as a way to avenge that past insult, but the House refused him the opportunity. The feeling, I think, was that it was not the best showing for us to appoint an admiral the enemy once held as a victim.*

*At this point public interest in the commission had grown enough that appointment of the remaining praetor would have been a problem. It happened to be a very undersized and somewhat unimpressive member of the plebeian Kawaguchi family. Not enough clout in the House and not enough fame among the People. So the House had to look elsewhere.*

*To make a long story short, they ended up appointing someone out of office for the campaign. And now for the biggest surprise of this missive: they actually appointed me!*

Shizuru emitted a sound. When she looked up the green eyes were already fixed her way.

"Natsuki," she said. "Did Chikane say anything in her letter about



being appointed to go on a campaign?"

Natsuki denied it. Shizuru returned to her reading.

*It feels like a jest since I was one of the originators of the commission when we dreamt it up as a way to divert the People from Eiichi Kiyosaki. Oh, I believed in the significance of the problem it was addressing even then! I simply had not thought it would fall upon me to address it.*

*Well, I refused it too, at first. But only, as I explained, for some of its uncertainties. The original commission we drafted was admittedly rather weak, as we had envisioned it largely as a distraction. More fool I had I accepted it as it was, a command with a bare minimum of teeth! So I haggled with the House into giving me a better mandate than the one with which we had started. Fortunately, the People and a lot of our colleagues had gained sufficient interest in the idea to help. The result is that my current commission is now satisfyingly toothy.*

*I am to have the authority to raise fleets from all of our seaside provinces, and have been granted proconsular imperium with which to do it. My command shall extend to all ends of Our Sea and as far as twenty kilometres inland. Even more interestingly, I have been given two years to clear away the pirates. Sergay Wang himself actually suggested it... for obvious reasons, think you not?*

Shizuru could not help a dry laugh. It was indeed obvious, even if it was also cleverly opportunistic. For in contriving to have Chikane away from Hime for so long the Traditionalists probably thought they had removed her most powerful supporter. She had other known allies and friends in the House, but few were of sufficient dedication as well as clout to protect her the way Chikane Himemiya did.

She imagined they would try to bring up discussion of her province before the stipulated five years were up. The bill granting her command made that illegal, of course, but there were ways to get around it. Such as by discussing something related to it instead of the command itself. Well, she had one of the tribunes of the plebs in her pockets, so she would have someone ready to veto that. She would need another one for the next year: her agents in the city

should have found her someone appropriate by now and bought whoever it was. And as for Chikane, she had left her own mastermind to watch over her back.

*Unfortunately for our enemies, our dear Urumi shall remain in the city. As shall our tribunes of the plebs. I predict both will earn their wages in my absence. Whom did you choose from among the new candidates? They are yet candidates, by the way, as the tribunician elections have not been held yet: but I have run on long enough so I think I shall explain this delay to you in person instead, at least if none of your other correspondents does. I am putting in at Argus middle of January of next year to raise a fleet there, and I hope we can meet. I would be delighted if you can bring your Otomeian princess along, of course; what beautiful Greek she writes, incidentally!*

*Time to conclude this: I have just about everything prepared for my mission. But if our friends in the House think I shall need two years to do this task I shall shortly prove them mistaken. I have no intention of being apart from my wife so long-for without the woman, I am entirely at sea!*

Shizuru paused to smile at the pun, lifting her head when she heard her name.

"Something happened?" the Otomeian calling her said. "Tuh-to her, Shizuru?"

Shizuru set down the parchment and explained Chikane's commission. She left out the part about the woman's invitation to meet in Argus, however. She had a feeling the girl would work herself into a lather of anxiety if she told her now.

"Can she do it?" Natsuki asked. "Finish the pirates in two years?"

"Very likely," Shizuru said. "For all that she pretends astonishment at the appointment, the choice was patently good thinking. Chikane is one of the few people in the current House with a background-and a successful one!-in naval warfare. Her legateship to Suzuhara-san saw her commanding our fleets for eighteen months, and victoriously. Later admirals actually continued to seek out the crews

and captains she had in her navy. They are widely considered the best veterans to call up for naval duties-which tells you a lot about the woman who started them in the service."

Natsuki agreed. As she was getting used to the way Himean politics worked, she went on to ask another question.

"But if she takes this commission, Shizuru, what does it mean for you?" she said.

Shizuru grinned and got to her feet.

"Not much, really," she told the younger woman, and strode to the door to call for her steward.

"Tell your servants they should be packed by tomorrow, *meum mel*," she said, casting a look over her shoulder. "We need to leave for Argus in two days. I have to pick up something that was sent for me there."

# Chapter 74

## **Vocabulaire:**

- 1 . **Aedile** - A valuable magistracy or office responsible for many things including the care of Rome's public buildings, streets, games, and the state's grain.
2. **Aventine** - ( **Aventinus** in L.) One of the 7 hills of Rome/Hime, southwest of the Palatine.
3. **Canis Melitaeus** (L.) - A very old dog breed still in existence today: the Maltese toy dog.
4. **Censor** (L.) - Elected every five years, there are two of them elected to serve in tandem. Among their tasks is to monitor the list of senators and enrol new members.
5. **Consular** - This may be either an adjective or a title. If used as an adjective, e.g. "the consular chair", it modifies the word after it by saying it is "of the consul". If used as a title, e.g. "Chikane Himemiya is a consular", it signifies someone who has been elected a consul in the past.
6. **Curia** (L.) - Also **Curia Hostilia** ; the place where the Roman Senate had their meetings.
- 7 . **Equestrians** (pl. E.), **Equites** (pl. L.) - Members of the **Ordo Equester** , called "the knights" as opposed to "the senators". Those of knight rank were usually as well-born as those of senatorial rank- in fact, they were often related-but the difference was that they chose not a political career but a commercial one. One may consider them the equivalents of the modern "business sector" of the community, with the senators being the "government or political sector", for a simplified but convenient categorisation.
8. **Eri Toshino** - A senator mentioned in **Chapter 66** . For those who cannot recall, she was a praetor deputed to put down the Sicilian servile revolt using a cohort of legionaries. She faced 4,000

slaves, about half of whom were women and children, and not all of whom could fight. She lost.

9. **Extended Rights** - Taken from the Latin Rights, a sort of second-class citizenship the Ancient Romans granted valued allies. Remember that not all Fuukans (being the equivalent of Italians in the story, just as Himeans are the equivalent of Romans) are actually Himean, so the ranks of citizenship by privilege are basically thus in the country, from highest to lowest: Himean, Extended Rights, then Fuukan. For more details, see **Chapter 34**, hit Ctrl+F, and type "Extended Rights".

10. **Flamen dialis** and **flamen martialis** (L.) - In plural, **flamines** ; these were two of the major priesthoods, highly revered but also saddled with restrictions. The flamen martialis was a little freer, but the flamen dialis had no prospect of a military career. They were often chosen young and occupied their priesthoods for life. They also gained instant entry to the Senate once they took up their priestly positions.

11. **Games & celebration of ancestors** - Ancient Romans of august families often gave games to celebrate their honoured antecedents. Part of the purpose was to remind others of the prestige of their families, as well as to canvas political support.

12. **Garum** - A fishy sauce or essence very popular among the ancients.

13. **Latifundia** (pl. L.) - Singular **latifundium** ; a great estate often used for agricultural purposes.

14. **Lex frumentaria** (L.) - Plural **leges frumentarii** ; laws relating to grain.

15. **Macedonian Wars** - A series of conflicts that eventually led to Roman power over the eastern Mediterranean. The history given below is in line with what you will find in most of the history books, albeit with Rome in place of Hime.

16. **Mare Nostrum** (L.) - "Our Sea", or what the Romans called the Mediterranean Sea. Its westernmost end was called **Mare Ibericum**

*because of the Iberian Peninsula enclosing it from the north: this is now known as the Alboran Sea.*

17. **Modius** (s. L.) - Plural **modii** ; 1 modius is equal to 6.67kg.

18 . **Pindar** - One of the great lyric poets of Ancient Greece, distinctive for his powerful (even off-putting, to less serious readers) imagery.

19. **Punic** - Carthaginian, or from Carthage. The term comes from the Phoenicians, from whom the Carthaginians descended.

20. **Quaestor** - Primarily a fiscal officer. There were many quaestors at various sectors of government. The quaestor of Ostia is a particularly important position, as it manages the docks where Rome received grain imports.

21. **Sestertius** (s. L.) - A common Roman/Himean coin; made of silver. The conversion is thus: **25,000 sesterces = 6,250 denarii = 1 silver talent** .

22. **Triumph** (L.) - A parade of floats with actors depicting scenes from the campaign, entertainers,

carts bearing spoils, the army, the commander, and prisoners of war. It was a celebration of a general's victory and could only be granted if his army had hailed him "Imperator!" after the battle.

23. **Tribune of the Plebs** - Members of the **Plebeian Tribune**; to avoid confusion with other "tribunes", this office shall generally be referred to in full. Ten are elected yearly. Only plebeians can be elected into this college and only plebeians can vote for election of these officials. A tribune of the plebs could veto virtually any decision of fellow government officials (except for the Dictator). As they could enact or veto laws, they were important when it came to legislative action. Being elected as one also grants a person automatic entry into the Senate.

24. **Well of the Comitia** - The standard venue where the **tribunes of the plebs** ( s.v.) held their meetings, which were restricted to citizens of purely plebeian status (i.e. patricians were forbidden from

*attending such a meeting, and would often limit themselves to watching from the steps of the nearby Curia Hostilia).*

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## ***Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae***

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While Shizuru Fujino had been carving out her northern province, last year's senior consul had worked on regaining Sicilia. The island's servile revolt had already swelled to impressive size by the time his ships docked at its harbour. From the four thousand the slave army had been when Hime sent the praetor Eri Toshino to put it down, it had become twenty-five thousand strong.

The House had learned its lesson from the earlier debacle, however. As a result, the consular Keigo Onishi had three full legions with which to end the revolt. He did this much in the same manner he had handled his consulship: with methodical competence and a minimum of fuss. The slave army met him at a place named Scirthaea and fought hard, but lost the best of its generals. Whereupon the rebels folded and scrambled off to Triocala, a fortress-town some kilometres away.

The Himean consular did not pursue them to that location immediately. Instead, he lingered in Scirthaea with his army for one more week. After which he proceeded to Triocala to lay a siege.

"The queer thing is that it's our victory, yet they've little good to say about it!" Urumi Himemiya-Kanzaki marvelled to her cousin at the end of May that year. "You can't bring up Sicilia to a senator now without his lamenting Onishi-san's sloth in finishing the servile army. The majority seem convinced Onishi-san should have run his legions over to Triocala after the slaves fled to it. Yet when I talk to the senators whose military records I respect, I end with thinking that's not such a certainty."

Chikane smiled and indicated herself playfully.

"You have not spoken to me," she said.

Her cousin laughed.

"Because I knew I could do it any time," Urumi answered, "so I put you off for last. And yes, I *do* respect your military record, Chikane, before you ask it! So, did Onishi-san really do the wrong thing by lingering at Scirthaea instead of running down the rebels?"

The dark-haired woman contemplated the question, the fingers of her left hand toying with her senatorial ring.

"'Tis difficult to speak when I was not there, Urumi," she began. "You know the qualifiers one must make."

Urumi asked her to proceed.

"Given what we know of Scirthaea," said Chikane, "I incline to the opposite opinion from the majority. I know Onishi-san and I submit that he would not have lingered there had he thought it pointless. In his dispatch, he mentioned that he stayed at Scirthaea to clean up the battlefield and restore order to some *latifundia*. He might not have said it explicitly, but that probably meant putting down bands of rampaging slaves distinct from the servile army."

"He probably should have been explicit about it, given our colleagues!"

"He probably should have," Chikane echoed wryly. "As for fixing what farming estates he could first, it still sounds like good sense. The sooner and the more of them he could get up and running again, the fewer worries he would have about logistics. I hear he actually troubled to install new bands of farmworkers. Not such an odd act when you recall most of the crop is still in the fields. No general with soldiers to feed would ignore that. Why not put people to collecting it, then, especially when you know your enemy has retreated to a place from where he cannot access it?"

Urumi loosed a sigh and dug her heels into her couch.

"Yes, that's what many of the other military senators I've talked to said," she informed her cousin. "From what I hear, the servile general killed at Scirthaea was also the rebels' chief strategist."



Which means that their so-called slave king, Gakuto-although, yes, I hear he's very aptly retitled himself Akihiko!-would be feeling the pinch even in Triocala."

She pushed herself up to a seat. A table's offerings were within reach and she started picking again at them.

The nice thing about eating at her cousin's, she thought, was that even the midday meal was as grand as a dinner spread. Chikane's parents had employed one of the best chefs in the city because they were forever entertaining august visitors; their daughter, also a magnet for the august, continued that happy tradition. Today the kitchen had sent up sliced ostrich in a sauce of wine and garum, soft-boiled quail's eggs glazed with peppered and herby honey, a minty salad of cheese and the freshest coriander and parsley...

"The real trouble is that couch generals make up two-thirds of the senate," Urumi declared, dainty fingers still plucking. "Most of them have gained little military experience besides cadet duty, yet leap at every chance to declare how this or that battle should have been waged."

A pause to chew and swallow a quail's egg, followed by a moue of approval.

"It's not self-aware speculation, mind," she went on. "They really do believe they could do better! That's why they harp so much-they all want to be given the command instead! Onishi-san will be another victim of this, I predict. Our junior consul, Dai Yoshida, is angling to replace him. A pity if Onishi-san is actually doing a fine job of it."

Her cousin agreed.

"You say our fellows love to criticise generals," she said after, "yet I notice no one has taken it upon himself to rewrite Shizuru's battles yet."

Urumi's mismatched eyes danced at this, her face showing disbelief.

"But Shizuru-san's clashes tend towards the spectacular," she protested. "Probably because she's facing a foe that has the same

tendency."

"Numerically, do you mean?"

"Among other things, but yes, chiefly. We all do prate about our legions being worth more than a dozen foreign armies, but we still break into a sweat when we actually face a dozen foreign armies. Shizuru-san doesn't. She just shrugs off the numbers and proves what the rest of us can only say. So her victories are more difficult to criticise, because they're won in battles most of us wouldn't even dare. Whereas... well... a slave army doesn't nearly sound as daunting a foe as an empire, does it?"

"So then," her companion said, "you impute the unassailability of Shizuru's military performance to the impressiveness of her enemy?"

Another look of disbelief enhanced by a roll of the eyes.

"Oh, not only to that!" Urumi said plaintively. "She's a prodigy. That last battle alone was proof positive. You recall even the Traditionalists joined the applause when the dispatch was read."

The dispatch she mentioned was the one detailing Shizuru's battle at Berentum, against the Mentulaean Baron-General Terrigos. While the Battle of Terantrum had already been fought, no one in Hime knew about it yet-or about the demise of the Mentulaean king.

"On that note, her accounts add to it," Urumi enlarged. "It's her lovely prose, so clear and crisp, yet so exciting. Now compare them to Onishi-san's awfully prosaic missives. He lacks her talent for conveying an atmosphere, and so the opinion of him suffers further."

The older woman thought of something and said it: "I would still prefer his style to the masturbatory accounts of our other generals."

The two of them chuckled, knowing the description warranted.

"I don't mind those so much," Urumi confessed. "They tickle me, the way they leap to aggrandise their tiniest achievements. But that's another way Shizuru-san's dispatches work for her. She never actually praises herself in them. Strangely, that makes it more

instead of less obvious how brilliant she is."

"Her deeds speak for themselves," Chikane replied. "Besides, Shizuru is more the type to expend praise on others. Notice how popular her legates' names have all become."

Urumi said that was true, although she also allowed that it was easier for a commander to praise her subordinates when they had the quality of Shizuru Fujino's.

That earned a grin from her older cousin.

"Pardon, but you were not in Senate yet during her Numidian Campaign," she told Urumi. "You would not know that Shizuru *always* commends her legates in public. Her scribes will vouch for this."

"Do you mean even the less worthwhile ones get compliments too in the dispatches?"

"Yes. But she sends them home early, so we end up knowing the truth despite her praise."

Urumi grinned: "Shame that in Onishi-san's case, both the truth and praise elude our colleagues."

The other woman sat up too and picked up her goblet. A slave waiting in the corner rushed to fill it, and she smiled at the man for the attention.

"The real trouble in Onishi-san's case is what has everyone so on edge," she told Urumi after wetting her lips. "All of this goes back to the underlying crisis, which is not the servile revolt, in reality."

The other had the answer prepared: "The grain supply."

"The grain supply," Chikane agreed.

Everything had come together to distress the grain supply for the year. First the drought, then the slave revolt in Sicilia. Yet, Chikane pointed out, both of those together should not have depressed the state granaries to their current levels. Her young cousin asked what

she found at greater fault for the famine.

"You find something else at greater fault for the famine?"

"A thing we have long ignored," Chikane uttered. "Piracy."

At this point the steward of the Himemiya mansion entered the room. He apologised for the intrusion and announced the other senator they had been expecting.

"Gods' sakes, Reito, you took your time," Urumi moaned to this eminent personage. "I thought you were having your midday meal with us? We finished an hour past!"

"Ah, but the food is still here-and I have a good reason for being late," the Princeps told her as he chose the only free seat in the trio of couches. His eyes, scanning the table, lit up with naked enthusiasm. "Oh, goody! You have dormice!"

Their host reached for the plate with the plump and stuffed meats.

"There you are," she said, handing them over. "Someone might as well enjoy them."

He was already crushing one between his teeth.

"Do you not, Chikane?" he asked, all scepticism.

"I do, actually," the domina of the house admitted. "But my wife thinks them too adorable to butcher, so I end up eschewing them too out of guilt. The only reason I still have the kitchen staff prepare them is that my guests all seem to expect it."

"Thank goodness for your wife's overly tender heart, then," he said, still eating with relish. "As one of your guests, that means more for me!"

The two women were content to let him munch for a bit, seeing that whatever had made him tardy had prevented him tending to his appetite.

"I was on the Curia's steps," he revealed, "watching a very

interesting meeting of the plebs."

"Called by whom?"

"Eiichi Kiyosaki. Do you know him?"

That Chikane had once served as urban praetor showed in her response, which revealed good knowledge of the city's legal happenings.

"Not by sight before he was elected a tribune of the plebs this year," she began. "By name, though, I think I had heard of him prior to it. Is he in fact the same Kiyosaki who got in trouble over his debts not so long ago?"

"That's the one! Explains why he chose the plebeian tribunate as the means through which to enter the Senate. Cheapest way to make a splash, provided you're a plebeian. Mind you, I admit I knew nothing of him before his election myself."

Deep blue eyes flicked to their blonde companion at this and he took the suggestion.

"True, our cousin here might be better informed in that respect," he said, feeling the oil on his lips. A dig into the sinus of his toga produced a snowy handkerchief. A striking man of citified good looks, he knew it became him to be scrupulous about his presentation. Not for Reito the dishevelled coiffures or untucked tunics worn by some younger males of the Senate!

He now dabbed at his mouth while asking, "Do you know anything of him, Urumi?"

Their young cousin was frank: "A desperado."

"That bad?" Chikane said.

"He's on his way," Urumi shrugged.

"I think she's right," Reito announced. "As it is, Kiyosaki called his assembly today to discuss-what else?-the problem of the grain."

Urumi clapped playfully.

"We were just talking about that, in fact, and what Chikane perceives to be the real root of it."

Reito asked what that would be and they told him.

"Piracy *is* one of our great scourges," he said, settling himself more comfortably on his couch as he pondered the digression with sharp interest. "But no one really mentions it any longer since it's always been there. That's how it feels!"

"To us, yes," his young cousin told him. "Yet it would not be so had our ancestors only been more temperate in their time! The flourishing of piracy on Our Sea is our own fault, you do realise?"

Her two auditors asked how Urumi drew that disagreeable conclusion.

"It all goes back," she said, "to the Macedonian Wars and to Rhodes."

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South of Hime's Asia Province and northeast of Crete, the island of Rhodes lay cradled in the Aegean. The stiffest naval power there after Athens's decline, the city-state it harboured had weathered many of history's great storms. It survived the invasions of both the Persians and the Anatolian Carians. It preserved its status long after the great Alexander's rise and fall. It even negotiated much of the Macedonian Wars safely.

That last was especially interesting given that it had started one of the aforementioned wars itself.

The Second Macedonian War came in times of great upheaval. It was after Hime's victory against Carthage. A weakness had just appeared in one of the great realms of the age: the Pharaoh Ptolemy Philopator of Egypt had died in precipitous style. No one was prepared, including the abruptly-deceased Ptolemy. His legacy was a son who had only turned six.

Six-year-olds made for soft kings. A nearby king, Philip the Fifth of Macedon, was far older and harder. He saw his chance in Egypt's new boy-ruler and began seizing all Ptolemaic properties within his reach. His mad march of appropriation took him through Thrace then Asia Minor, his successes bringing him even almost to the Kingdom of the Seleucids. That this third realm feared not his incursions was owed to a treaty canny Philip had struck beforehand with the Seleucid king.

To any state around the Aegean, the balance of power had suddenly become very frightening because of three things.

First, two of the great kingdoms-Macedon and the Seleucids-were suddenly in league.

Second, the great kingdom of Macedon was very aggressively expanding.

Third, one of the few other great kingdoms that could have checked Macedon was led by a boy-king.

The danger was vast and all too immediate. Rhodes felt the threat, being one of the few other powers in the area, along with Pergamon. Banding together in a panic, both states sent envoys to the only force they thought remotely capable of helping.

It was thus that Hime entered the fray, albeit reluctantly. It was a different Hime at that time-just newly ascendant after finally defeating its old Punic nemesis, and so young that it did not yet have a single overseas province. In fact, before the Second Macedonian War, Hime had never even probed that far east. Thus the mildness of its initial response to the cry for help: all it did was send investigative envoys requesting that Philip cease besieging its new allies. Philip was a Macedonian and assuredly capable of appreciating sophisticated diplomacy. Surely he would see the wisdom of leaving Rhodes and Pergamon alone, at least?

Philip said he would leave Rhodes and Pergamon in ashes, at least.

The ensuing war ended with Philip's defeat and the inception of Himean interest in the East. One of those to have invited this new

master into its territories, Rhodes prospered with the new Aegean's politics. In fact, it used its ties to Hime to dominate the surrounding waters for over two decades.

But then Philip's heir started another Himean-Macedonian war. It was then that Rhodes made a colossal blunder no one saw coming.

Rhodes being a commercial city, it had suffered from the Third Macedonian War despite not participating in it. Conflict hurt trade and sent money into hiding. A sooner end to the war would have been ideal for the Rhodian economy. Still, the island state could do nothing to secure such an end. It was not strictly a military power, even if its ships ruled the seas. It was also not even directly involved in this new conflict.

So how could it have become embroiled in it? As with most things around Mare Nostrum, it all went back to a Himean.

This particular Himean was a senator-as they usually were-and in fact, one of very high rank. Unfortunately, he allied it to a wandering mind and unruly tongue. While conversing with some of the Rhodian high leaders during a visit to the island city, this senator enquired whether or not they were still on communicating terms with Macedon. To be precise, he asked if said terms would make them capable of arbitrating a truce between Macedon and Hime.

Now this was only one Himean, no matter his rank. Certainly his inquisition about a possible truce could not be construed as representative of the whole Senate's will.

Yet for some reason this was *exactly* how the Rhodians read it. Blinded for a moment by the circumstances, spurred by the universal element of greed, they saw in this a double-chance for economic and political gain.

So, soon after that one senator's enquiries, Rhodes sent an incredible message to Hime.

*We wish to tell the Senate and People of Hime that we are tired of this war, they announced. We will tolerate no more of these pointless hostilities. In fact, we are at the point whereat it seems*



*justified to be hostile ourselves against any party unwilling to negotiate an end to this senseless conflict.*

*To that purpose we have allied ourselves with several of the Greek states, including our neighbour Crete. With this alliance, we do promise to fight any power that refuses to discuss peace.*

It was an extraordinary message, especially from a state that was not a military power, as well as trade-dependent on the entity it was threatening. The senators receiving it had been stunned into silence, riveted to their ivory seats. They could not plumb the meaning of so daring a bluff coming from so-long-friendly an ally.

The Rhodian hope had been to force Hime into having them arbitrate peace with Macedon on its behalf, just as that one senator seemed to have hoped for them to do. This would have seen an end to the war, which was good for the Rhodian economy. But more than that, it would also have put Rhodes in a prime position for negotiating truce conditions that would benefit itself. That this was considered a feasible outcome of their message was owed to more than that one senator's idle query.

First, there was the fact that Hime had lost most of the major engagements in the war thus far. To Rhodian (and most of the Aegean's) eyes, Hime was looking a bit desperate in the conflict already.

Second, there was the fact that Macedon had continued to treat Rhodes as a friendly neighbour throughout the conflict. To Rhodian (and perhaps only Rhodian) eyes, no one was better-positioned to arbitrate a truce than Rhodes itself.

But soon after that message rang within the walls of the Curia, the Battle of Pydna took place. There Hime's legions crushed the Macedonian army so firmly that the latter's famous fighting unit, the phalanx, soon became regarded as obsolete. Macedon's king surrendered, Hime quartered his dominion, and Rhodes found itself in very bad odour with a colossus larger than its own.

The victorious colossus took revenge.

All of the Rhodian Asian mainland possessions were taken away, so the state was left with only its chief island for geographic property.

Import and export products vital to Macedonian-Rhodian trade were forbidden, crippling a large part of its economy.

Worst of all and to Rhodian shock, the island of Delos was named a free port by Hime.

This last punishment was a heavy blow. In the war with Carthage more than three decades earlier, Hime had unintentionally strengthened Rhodes by weakening its major competitor. After the Third Macedonian War, it did the opposite: it created one.

Indeed, Delos became so appealing a trade centre that Rhodes never managed to recover its former glory. This bled into its navy, which it could no longer fund as lavishly as before. Rhodian power in the Aegean was over, all because of one ill-timed bluff after decades of friendliness. Hime had taught a hard lesson-one in humility.

Unfortunately, that lesson came back to bite it.

In the days of Rhodian naval supremacy, the Rhodian ships had not only plied but patrolled the eastern parts of what Himeans called "Our Sea". Their expert patrols had been effective deterrents to piracy. The Rhodians had also applied naval law with a justice that far outshone the usual protection rackets other naval powers liked to run at the time.

With the decline of their power came inability to sustain such policing. So Rhodian chastisement by Hime started a new age for pirates-one that, by Shizuru Fujino's time, had already afflicted Hime for more than a century.

To add an extra dash of bitterness to the irony, Delos had since become a favourite port for pirates. It permitted them to sell without fear the very goods they had stolen from lawful vessels and merchant ships. This often included even the grain bound for the ports of the Tiber and the granaries of Hime.

"Such a pity we didn't let Rhodes off then with just a slap on the

wrist," Urumi cooed to her relatives. "We overdo our revenges sometimes, you know. First there was the strewing the earth of Carthage with salt bit, then this ruination of the best self-appointed police navy we've ever had around Our Sea. It makes our history look so spiteful, and us so petty."

One of her cousins lifted an eyebrow. The Himemiya back then had been among those most intent on revenge against the island; Chikane knew this, as did the other two senators in her dining room.

She rebutted: "Both of those examples were preceded by great offences."

"Oh, I know it! Maybe it's simply the situation that has me assessing the records so harshly. Anyway, I've not heard of Shizuru-san salting Mentulaean earth yet... and you must grant they've caused her great offence!"

"But it's not exactly comparable, is it?" Reito interjected. He was anxious that they should not have time to pause and recall their other relative, Chikane's late sister. The *offence* of her loss was still too raw for all of them. "The aim of Shizuru-san's campaign is for Hime to inherit the former Mentulaean Empire. We had no such aims with Rhodes or Carthage. Hence the apparent intemperance of our postwar punishments in those earlier cases."

"My point stands," Urumi insisted. "It was our own excess that led to so troublesome an inheritance. One reaps as one sows."

That reminded Reito again of the reason for his tardiness. He leapt to his feet and called to the slaves ranged down one wall, wagging the fingers of both hands to show what he wanted. They brought the washing bowl to him and he availed of it.

"Reaping and sowing," he said. "That's the heart of it! I told you I was tardy because I paused to listen to an assembly. But I think I'd rather you heard it for yourselves than have me summarise my recollections. Do either of you fancy walking down to the Forum?"

His cousin protested that the meeting was probably finished.

"Not necessarily," he objected. "It had only been convoked when I stopped to listen. I did not stay there overlong either, just enough to get the gist. I've a feeling it will not be over quickly."

The elder of his auditors observed that the plebeian assembly could not have been what had made him late to their meal after all, if that was the case.

"Oh, I had some other errands earlier too," he said in dismissal.

Urumi shrugged and called for a washing bowl of her own. It was Chikane whose gaze stayed on him; Chikane whose azure eyes started a pricking on the back of his neck. He cast his sweetest smile her way and tried to ignore the odd sensation those eyes elicited.

"Shall you not come with us, Chikane?" he asked.

"What gave you the impression I would not?" she returned.

He gestured to the food on the table and their cousin, drying hands on a towel.

"Would you not need to wash your hands too?" he responded.

She gave him another neck-pricking look; Reito felt the urge to shuffle but suppressed it.

"My hands are clean," was what she said.

She slipped her sandals on and leapt off the couch with a call for her steward, thus depriving him of the opportunity to probe her statement. She left her household instructions for what to tell her wife-herself out visiting some friends-should she be late in returning. Then she led the way out of her mansion and eventually into the street.

"So tell us," she said to him, looking less neck-prickingly penetrative since she was occupied with surveying their surroundings. "What exactly has you so intrigued by Kiyosaki-san and his assembly?"

"I believe he's working up to a *lex frumentaria* providing the poor

free grain."

To his side, Urumi said: "We have that already."

"We say that, but it's not really free," Reito answered with eyebrows climbing. "The only times when the poor actually get grain completely free is during special occasions, as charitable public donatives made by some nobleman or other to celebrate something like an august ancestor along with the requisite games."

"Or to spice up an otherwise dull triumph," Urumi continued for him, nodding. "Like Takeshiro-san and Satoyuki-san, I think? People told me their triumphal parades were so boring they had to bribe the people with free grain to get any applause going."

"Exactly. Otherwise, grain still costs the poor something. Right now, for example, those who are entitled to the grain dole get it for just over two sesterces per *modius*."

The only blonde in their trio snorted aloud, heterochromic eyes dancing.

"Practically free," she insisted. "That is less than half the market price of a *modius* of wheat during a bountiful harvest year, you know!"

"I agree-but you know how commoners are. They quibble over even that little."

Their other companion, thus far silent, chuckled low. She herself had thought it odd in the past how Hime's poorer denizens could still complain about so cheap a rate. Then she had met her wife and become more intimately acquainted with the radical economies of poverty.

*Although not all who avail of the dole's economy are worthy of it*, she allowed to herself. The grain dole, though originally crafted to support the indigent, was in fact available to every free Himean citizen. Provided said citizen was willing to take the trouble of registering, then collecting his voucher from the aediles and presenting it at the state granaries, he could collect up to five *modii*

of cheap wheat monthly.

Most who could afford better preferred to save themselves the trouble. Registering took a long time, as did voucher collection-the lines were incredible-and trading in the vouchers for grain at the state silos. The silos were also all the way up the Aventine. A long walk, another long wait, and a difficult trek back with over thirty-three kilograms of wheat as a burden.

For those with the means, much easier by far to buy from the private warehouses. Or to have a servant do the buying; those on the dole had to collect their grain in person.

Thus most of the people on the dole truly were among Hime's poorest. But there were still people from the middle classes and above who occasionally availed of it. Most of them were incorrigible misers, although some were simply out to make a point.

*Which is that they would rather lose five hours of their day than buy grain at a price they could well afford, Chikane supposed.*

"Anyway, the price itself is not the issue at the moment, is it?" Reito was saying to Urumi. "It's the scarcity, which has reached such an extreme that even those on the dole have been affected. If nothing else serves to mark this a year of famine, that should suffice by itself!"

In that he was correct, thought both his auditors. Normally, even years of poor harvests saw the citizens on the dole getting their wheat cheap. This was because the state tended to buy more grain than was needed during the good harvest years. There were still more of those than bad ones, so there was usually enough surplus to see the state silos full when times were lean.

But there had been several middling harvests before the last one, which was paltry. So now the state's silos were so low that they had not served all those on the dole this year. Those so passed over could not afford the grain being sold by the private merchants-who, given their also-low supplies, had priced their product at a premium.

The rich would survive. They could still buy grain, even if they

grumbled at its costliness. The poor, on the other hand, could not even afford a tenth of the current going rate of wheat . This meant there were a lot of hurting purses and roaring bellies on the streets.

"But as supply *is* the concern, no *lex frumentaria* can solve the problem," Chikane pointed out. "Even if it actually goes so far as to make the grain entirely free."

Reito's thick black brows wriggled: "Now do you see why I found the assembly interesting?"

They were going into the Sacra Via. A turn took them around the open Shrine of Venus Cloacina, with its once-pristine figures begrimed by years of rain and pigeon droppings. Eventually they made it up to the tall steps of the home of the Senate, the Curia Hostilia.

There were two reasons the trio did not head down to the Well of the Comitia, where the tribunes of the plebs held their assemblies. First, two of them were patricians and thus disbarred from a plebeian meeting. Second, the plebeian assembly they had come for had obviously finished. There were still enough stragglers around the Well, however, to show them many had attended.

"I told you it would be done," Urumi groaned to Reito as they went up the steps of the Curia. "All that way for nothing!"

"I'm sure these good fellows caught enough to inform us," he responded and waved to the senators at the top of the stairs.

There were eight senators in the clutch they approached. Three were no less than the heads of the Traditionalist faction: Haruka Armitage, Sergay Wang, and Chikane's former consular colleague Yukino Kikukawa. The other senators were less distinct in allegiances but had some prominent names nonetheless. One of them was of the Jinguuji clan and another was of the Ootori family. Both had blood linkages to some of Hime's most powerful equestrians.

The group made room for the new arrivals, exchanging greetings.

"You lot missed a rip-roaring meeting," Sergay told the newcomers. "It went downhill after you left, Princeps, so they ended the assembly early to forestall violence. I have a feeling young Kiyosaki wanted to go on longer, but sentiments got too high for it."

Reito lifted his expressive eyebrows at Urumi.

"He did it, didn't he?" he asked. "He proposed a *lex frumentaria*."

"As good as promised one," Sergay answered, his own sandy brows close together. "And what a *lex frumentaria* he's offering! Grain at a mere sestertius for a *modius* and all the costs to come out of the Treasury instantly!"

"And how exactly," said Chikane, "is he hoping to find sufficient grain to distribute so liberally when our agents have had poor luck all around Our Sea?"

The woman who had been her junior consul answered.

"There's the trouble," Yukino said with a dry smile. "He's claiming it's really a manufactured grain shortage and the plutocrats are just hoarding stock to keep prices up."

"And what, the piratical attacks on our grain ships have been staged as well?"

"He's claiming the pirates are in league with the plutocrats, if you please!" Haruka brayed.

Chikane looked disparaging along with the others.

"Of course," she said, "the people believe him."

"I'm starting to think he believes himself!" Natsuhiro Ootori snapped; everyone knew he was touchy because he had close relatives among the grain merchants. "What I don't understand is how they can credit his allegations. Everyone knows about the drought and the rebels in Sicilia. Yet when he speaks it's as though these facts don't exist! Everything becomes the fault of the merchants!"

"The drowning man grasps at the straw," Reito offered. "My own



questions have more to do with his motives. What does Eiichi Kiyosaki hope to gain? The *leges frumentarii* have generally been used merely as platforms for popularity. On what would he spend the popularity he collects from this, given how tenuous it is? The moment we grant him his *lex frumentaria*, everyone will realise he can't deliver on his promise because there's really no grain. What good is your popularity when the people are going to turn on you the moment you fail them?"

To that, there were no answers. The Princeps threw up his hands.

"Well, whatever his motives, I think we can all agree he's mad," he determined. "Only a lunatic would rile up a mob without any real hope of satisfying it. They won't stop at tearing him to pieces once they figure out he can't deliver on his promise. They'll go for all of us! He must be stopped, for everyone's sake."

There were sounds of concurrence.

"I couldn't agree more," Haruka thundered. She blazed her purple gaze onto Chikane's cousin and demanded: "What can we do? Can't you talk to your people about disbelieving him?"

Urumi barely stifled her grin. Haruka had been among those most critical of her use of the lower classes during her tribunate; in fact, the woman was enormously critical of it still. But this particular matter apparently had even the ultraconservative worried enough to suspend criticism.

"I'm sorry, but I doubt even I can do much," she admitted to the group. "The people are *starving*, and that always makes them less sensible. The only thing they can think of right now is how to fill their bellies, so they won't listen even if I tell them what Kiyosaki is offering is a vain solution. When you're at rock bottom, even a vain solution is better than nothing, isn't it?"

"Then what can we do?" Haruka cried, her harsh voice clanging frustration. She looked to Urumi's female cousin, lips bared in fury. "It's trouble, Himemiya! You can see it as well as I do! But we've nothing to solve it!"

Chikane smiled at the woman who so often butted heads with her best friend. They themselves did not see eye to eye often, but that was not about to stop them working together when needed.

"I think that may be a premature lament, Armitage-san." She placed a hand comfortingly on the shorter senator's shoulder. It was thick with muscle, which was no surprise: she had always known tough shoulders needed to carry so bullish a head. "I think we can begin by offering them hope."

There was a barely suppressed scoff from Sergay.

"Pardon me," he said, "but I think the situation already calls for something less abstract!"

Chikane's smile widened.

"I was thinking of something concrete, as a matter of fact," she explained. "Pray hear me out. I might have an idea, if you would listen to it."

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From that one chance congregation of senators had come Chikane's commission to fight piracy. While the kernel of the notion had been hers, nearly all of them that day had contributed something to it. She had told Shizuru the truth in when she wrote that she had not expected to be the actual admiral selected. Yet now here she was, leagues from wife and home, spending winter raising fleets all over Mare Nostrum.

"'Tis something of a relief that I can do it without worrying about the bill," she confessed to the Argus governor in January. Midori Sugiura had been prorogued yet again, practically a record: it was testament to how effectively the province functioned under her tenure as well as to the power of her many senatorial connections. A good number of the current senators had once learned their core political history under her guidance.

"I take it the Treasury has to foot it without complaint?" the Argus governor now asked this latest senatorial commander to drift north.

Chikane answered positively.

"The terms of my command are not without hitches," she said, "but I made certain at least to waive a cost limit. 'Tis fortunate the Treasury is stuffed to bursting at the moment. Moreover, the clerks are feeling generous thanks to the booty Shizuru has collected."

Midori let out a small whoop as she recalled the numbers herself. Like every other person in the North, she had been following Shizuru's exploits with captivation.

"That friend of yours is a wonder," she told Chikane. "She'll have plundered more than the cash contents of the Treasury by the time her governorship is completed. Plenty of the senators must be eating their hearts out with envy."

There was that beautiful Himemiya smile: slow to develop but incredibly rewarding.

"They never stop doing that," Chikane said.

"It's the senatorial pastime," Midori agreed. "Well, I'll grant all the help I can give to your campaign, definitely, although I don't think I can donate our current flotilla to your navy. I don't think it's big enough for what you have in mind, you see. It doesn't help that they're old. We're actually planning to replace them this very year."

"I imagine they have seen much service?"

"Oh, yes! We use them to keep the pirates off this part of Our Sea. Otherwise, the wretches would come sailing right up to our ports! They've been getting awfully bold since no one's gone after them for so long. Is it true they seized some grain ships right off the docks at Ostia last year?"

Chikane's smile took on a rueful expression. The incident had been an enormous source of chagrin in Hime, and not just because of the grain shortage. The true point of pain was that the pirates had not even had to raise a sword to achieve the robbery. They had sailed in, found ships and docks wonderfully unguarded, boarded the ships along with their own, and cheerfully sailed away.

"It did happen, in late August," she admitted. "The city was seething, more so over the ease with which it was accomplished than over the stolen grain."

"I damn well hope they would seethe," the other senator said, face nearly as red as her hair. "It's bloody embarrassing! And where was the quaestor while all of this happened?"

"Apparently at home, under the impression that the ships were due the day after."

A flabbergasted look from Midori. "He should be prosecuted!"

"He probably will be," Chikane sighed. "Although I do think he would have made little difference had he actually been there. What can one quaestor do against a fleet of pirates?"

"Yes, I guess he would just have been kidnapped himself," the other sighed back heavily. "And then we would've had to ransom him too, on top of having lost the grain. I read the Senate dispatch, so I know about the numbers you discovered. To think we've had to ransom twenty-seven senators from pirates in the last ten years alone! No one notices until the figures are totted up... and then, it just 'mazes the mind!"

"As does the discovery that only half the grain ships we send out make it back safely," Chikane said, recalling her own shock when she had ascertained these statistics. "It shows you how long overdue my commission is. Ostia was perhaps the culmination of all those years of us ignoring the issue. Though on the bright side, it added to the general support for my mandate. Besides hoping for my commission to see more foreign grain safely to our ports, everyone in Hime is currently burning to see us avenge the insult at Ostia."

"Count me among them!" Midori cried, finding that humiliation as hard to live down as the rest of her countrymen. For what was the point of being the greatest nation in the world when pirates could snatch food right out of your people's mouths? And what was the point of calling it Our Sea when those naval thieves made free to frolic on its waters at your expense?

"I said I can't give you my little navy, Chikane-san, such as it is," the Argus governor said. "What I can and will do is help you raise a better, much bigger fleet. I'll get you all the introductions you need. All the shipyard owners, the local captains, the big plutocrats who live off sea trade. I guarantee they'll fund and help you build your fleet if you get them to see that they'll benefit off it-which they will! I'll even help you beat it into their skulls, though I doubt we'll need to. Fewer pirates means safer seas. Good for commerce, and they know it."

Chikane had been hoping for this. She gave the Argus governor her gratitude and was waved away.

"Only doing what I should," the elder senator said. "I'll send you a message as soon as I've arranged a meeting with all of them, probably over a dinner or something. And speaking of meetings, I suppose you're planning to see Shizuru-chan here? I don't imagine she'd let you pass through the North without seeing her."

Chikane said that she had already sent Shizuru a message.

"I expect," she told Midori, "that she will send one too any day."

She got it the next morning from one of Shizuru's army messengers. When quizzed how far behind him Septentria's governor-general was, he said it was by three hours. Chikane went on with her work, recruiting sailors and seeking more influential locals who could contribute to her campaign's resources. She knew her friend would find her once she reached the city.

Shizuru did that four hours later. She stood on the road outside of the upscale tavern Chikane was leaving with a pair of shipping magnates and called the other patrician's name.

They strode into each other's arms, smiling so widely it hurt their faces. It was Chikane who pulled back first.

"You look better than the last time I saw you," she observed. The slightly haggard, thirsty look of years past had gone away. The Shizuru she saw now looked very fit and happy. And even golden of skin! That made sense: the younger senator had spent most of the

last year marching. Chikane supposed she herself would be seeing more sunlight than usual for her upcoming campaign.

"You look very well, old friend," she said, squeezing the sleeved arms and feeling the hard strength in them. "You have no idea how good it is to see you!"

"I know how good it is to see *you* !" Shizuru returned. She kissed Chikane warmly on the cheek and was pulled in for another, briefer embrace. "Come, where have you been quartered? We need a place to talk at our leisure and without fear of eavesdroppers."

"I suspect we are staying in the same place, in fact," said Chikane. "Did Sugiura-san invite you to occupy one of the gubernatorial palace's other guest suites?"

"My servants are moving in there this very moment."

"Then let us go to the palace. We can talk in my office while your rooms get settled."

Shizuru threw an arm about Chikane's shoulders and hugged her friend to her side; an arm wrapped about her waist in return. Many watched them as they walked, for both were extraordinarily tall and attractive women.

"I was afraid that I would not catch you," Shizuru said. "But my luck is still with me, it seems. When do you leave?"

"Not for at least a week," Chikane replied. "My legate Tamaki Fujita will manage the fleet here after I sail."

"I understand. At least it gives us ample time to catch up with each other."

Chikane concurred and enquired after the other's lover, whom she had expected to meet.

"Off pretending to be busy," was the answer.

At Chikane's quizzical face, Shizuru elucidated: "The poor girl is petrified at the thought of finally meeting you. I thought I would grant

her some time to herself first, especially as we did just conclude a journey. Let us give her an hour or so to rest, Chikane. Later I shall bring you to meet her somewhere private. She may then be less prone to her fears that you shall find her a disappointment."

"She mentioned Pindar in her first letter," Chikane mused. "Anyone who leads a dialogue with Pindar is unlikely to be a disappointment."

Her friend laughed out an agreement.

"Was it perhaps something I wrote that so worries her?" Chikane enquired, now fretful. "I strove to be pleasant without being too presumptuous, but--"

Shizuru hushed her and said it was unlikely to be anything in the letters.

"You have to keep in mind that she's very young," she said, causing Chikane to wonder if she had forgotten she was that herself. Why, Shizuru had not even turned thirty yet! One sometimes overlooked it, admittedly, because she had been in the Senate so long. Only two others in the present House had become senators in their adolescence-and unlike her no one really thought of them, for both had become senators by being chosen as the *flamines dialis* and *martialis*. The *flamen dialis* and to a lesser extent the *flamen martialis* did not have much of a political future, and hence did not matter. Whereas Shizuru would never not matter.

"Her youth makes her tender, Chikane," her young friend was saying, still speaking as though she had hit middle age herself. "She also esteems you because of who you are and what you mean to me. Personally, I doubt either of you shall find anything to dislike. But you will see for yourself soon. For now, tell me all the news. Start with this naval campaign that they have forced upon you and how exactly you came into it."

Chikane did as bidden, detailing everything she had not managed to put into her last epistle. By the time they settled in the room designated as her office at the governor's palace, she was explaining Eiichi Kiyosaki's scheme, which had been the catalyst for her mission.

"His plan had been to appear as the only hope for solving the famine," she told Shizuru as a slave served wine. The man also set a platter of pastries and fruit between them before leaving the room under Chikane's orders. "By making it seem as though he was the only one who cared enough to fight the grain merchants-the ones he claimed responsible for the famine-he also made the Senate look like an enemy for its apparent negligence or, in some cases, collusion."

"I am astounded they believed him," Shizuru said.

"So was I, at first," the other woman admitted. "Granted, it may be harder to think things through when you have to put up with turnips and rough millet instead of bread! Yet even allowing for what Reito called the desperation of the famished, it still made little sense. Until I gave it some more thought and realised exactly who the problems were: our urban poor, as always."

She lifted her cup off the table and drank from it.

"The core of Kiyosaki-san's following was made up of them," she enlarged, putting the cup back down. "For a cogent reason. No one from the countryside would doubt for a moment that there was a grain shortage. The rural peoples themselves saw the worst of the drought and its effects! They would have been less swift to credit Kiyosaki-san's allegations. It was the city folk who lacked that first-hand experience, and thus were faster to latch onto any possibility of the shortage being fabricated."

Shizuru agreed and asked her to continue.

"Kiyosaki-san's claims about the grain merchants essentially polarised the field," Chikane went on. "It placed him on the side of good and the knights and the Senate on the side of wrong. That way, when he unveiled his true aim, any protest coming from those sectors would be registered by populace as evil, so to speak, and fought by them."

Shizuru had learned some details from her other correspondents, so she filled it in: "His true aim was to get elected tribune of the plebs a consecutive year?"



"Indeed."

The two of them shook heads at nearly the same time. It was not completely unheard-of for tribunes of the plebs to seek consecutive terms, but it had happened only a couple of times before. Those precedents had also been tremendously controversial-so much so, in fact, that those twice-elected tribunes had ended their terms by being murdered.

"I do not often agree with the Traditionalists," scowled Shizuru, "but I think I do when it comes to that particular tradition! It sits ill to have a person seek a seat in the Plebeian Tribune for successive years when his chief agenda is fomenting a riot. What would he have done with a second tribunate, anyway?"

"Going from the gossip Urumi gathered, put off his creditors," Chikane revealed. "Most of us already knew Kiyosaki-san was being hounded by usurers, but he had apparently traded too with some genuine loan sharks. By this I mean the toothier species of that particular city fish."

"The ones who break your bones aside from snatching your property."

Chikane said that was it.

"Had he been re-elected, it would have guaranteed his protection for another year," she allowed. "Even our sharkier citizens have to respect the sacrosanctity of a tribune of the plebs, especially one with a big following."

"And, given that following," Shizuru proposed, "he would then have become the most powerful of the ten members of the plebeian tribunate's college. Would he have offered his legislative services to buyers?"

"I imagine so. All he needed to do was keep people worked up until the elections in July. Such was the feeling in the city that none of the other tribunes would have dared to veto him if he declared himself a second-time candidate. It would have been life-threatening to contest it, he being the Hero of the Hungry! He would then have

sailed in at the top of the poll."

Shizuru was grinning, knowing what had happened to prevent that from taking place.

"But you never even let him get there," she told her friend. "You told your tribune of the plebs to veto not his candidacy but the elections themselves."

The other woman smiled slyly.

"Well, he could not be let to do as he pleased!" she said.

Shizuru shook her head in amusement, knowing from her letters that Chikane's man had kept vetoing until nearly the end of the year-to the consternation of even the other candidates.

"And that was when the House put forward your naval campaign," she now said. "Did you also have Urumi-han's agents whispering among the people about what a pain the pirates were being to our grain ships?"

"Of course, starting with the lower classes." A blue eye gleamed, a sea in itself. "As the whispers were no less than truth, it took very little effort for it to spread. Many of our sailors and dockside workers actually know how bad piracy has become. They added their voices to the chorus of people saying it was the pirates who were truly the problem. Since this was one issue where most of the Senate was united, many of our fellows had their own agents lending support."

She tucked a lock of black hair behind an ear, smiling as she concluded the story.

"You know the rest," she said. "All of a sudden, fury at the pirates waxed and interest in Kiyosaki-san waned. I instructed Tsunekazu-san-" This was her tribune of the plebs last year. "-to continue vetoing the elections as long as Kiyosaki-san seemed likely to declare candidacy. For all the trouble he stirred up, Kiyosaki-san did not actually last that long once there was a rival story: by September he no longer had sufficient support to try standing, and so abandoned his scheme."

Shizuru hummed long and contentedly.

"So that is what has been happening," she exhaled. "I knew about your man's vetoing the elections repeatedly as well as about Eiichi Kiyosaki's demagoguery. Even so, you are never truly certain how it all links up until you talk to someone who was actually there to see it."

"If you knew about those things, do you also know the results of the elections?"

Shizuru knew what result Chikane was referring to: "I know Haruka Armitage has been elected a censor, if that is what you are asking."

"She might do well," the other said, "given her meticulousness."

"Not to mention her intransigence."

"It may be all to the good in this case," Chikane replied, suppressing a chuckle. Her young friend's face was taking on the sardonic look it often did when speaking of her nemesis. "Allow that it means we shall be unlikely to see unworthy additions to the ranks of senators during her term!"

This was because the censors maintained the rolls where all Himean senators were listed. To become a senator, an elected politician-like a quaestor, for instance-had to be admitted by the censors into these rolls.

The censors checked first that the person met all the requirements. These included a means test as well as a cursory examination of assets. Senators were required to have a yearly income of at least a million sesterces. They were also required to observe the restrictions on senatorial businesses.

By and large, however, not all of the requirements were met. Most censors were perfectly willing to overlook a deficiency if the would-be-senator came from an established senatorial clan. There were also censors who looked the other way if the would-be-senator tendered a bribe. The censor so strict as to discriminate properly was very rare.

While this allowed even impoverished Famous Families to remain in the Senate, it made it possible too for all sorts of pernicious characters to become senators. It also explained why so many senators were in debt to moneylenders: the censors were supposed to eject them from the House-it was illegal for a senator to be in debt-but hardly ever did.

"Armitage-san is not the type to wink at a deficit in any of the prerequisites," said Chikane. "Nor shall she let her fellow censor get away with anything shady, I think. Her intransigence, as you term it, may actually serve the office well."

Shizuru's eyebrow lifted, its split all the clearer against her ambered skin.

"That was what I meant by my remark," she said.

She followed by asking about the older woman's naval command and plans for it.

"I have even more legates than you do now," Chikane revealed, readily taking the change of subject. "This is due to the sheer size of what we have to cover. I know many expect me to do as my predecessors in anti-piracy campaigns by limiting my exploits to a single part of Mare Nostrum. For them, it seemed impossible to do more, so they settled for clearing just small stretches of water. But I actually worked a solution for that problem long ago. I may not have wanted this command initially, but the pirates have been on my mind for years. You recall when I was a legate for Suzuhara-san that I engaged some of their armadas."

"Yes, only your duties prevented you from going after more. I remember."

"As do I. One might say I have never truly forgotten. Hence I have long been forming, in a casual way, an idea of how to go about what I must now execute."

She paused to sip from her cup, very delicately.

"My plan is to station a legate with a fleet and militia at every region

of Mare Nostrum," she continued. "I have split up the area into twelve-possibly thirteen regions, depending on the fleets I can get."

"Twelve to thirteen fleets," Shizuru echoed. "Plus whatever fleet you intend to reserve for yourself. That shall take time to get together, Chikane."

"Yes, but less if I have my legates building their fleets all at once," Chikane answered. "I already have legates sailing to every major port in Our Sea and commandeering vessels from all of our provinces' shipyards. I have some going to inveigle fleets off our allies with coastal properties too, like Bithynia and Rhodes. Every province that already has a fleet will have to turn it over for the moment, although I am sparing Argus that measure because it would serve my stratagem to leave its fleet untouched. That way, I can station my legate for this region further south in the Adriatic and let the Argus flotilla clean up anything that slips through his blockade and to the north."

"Where will you be yourself?" Shizuru asked, fascinated.

"Once all my legates have their fleets in their regions, I shall begin working around the Mare Ibericum, in the westernmost end of Our Sea. My ships will start there, sweep eastward, and keep sweeping until they hit the seaboard of Syria and Cilicia."

Shizuru saw the strategy in an instant.

"So each time they make a break east for a safer port than the one you are attacking, they shall be running smack into your legates' navies."

"So runs the intention," Chikane told her. "I shall have land troops too, of course, though I think they shall be concentrated in Cilicia."

"Where most of the pirate admirals have their strongholds."

"Precisely. It shall take some doing to get everything in place. But it shall be done, even if I must have my officers heckle every coastal provincial governor we have into cooperation."

"You may have trouble with a few of them," Shizuru warned. She

knew the tensions that could arise when senators with *imperium* got into a question of who was the superior power. Entire legions-even entire armies - had been lost in the past, just because two overhaughty senators had refused to work together.

But Chikane continued to look sanguine.

"This is one of the times," she said, "when it is preferable to be me instead of you."

Shizuru succumbed to a fit of laughter. She knew exactly what Chikane meant by that and knew too that the woman was correct. They might be equals in aristocracy, in clout, even in political acumen-but when it came to patience, she freely admitted Chikane the better. The woman brooked lesser lights with unbelievable tolerance and was not as prone to showing up their inadequacies as Shizuru was. Perhaps as a result, most of their peers found her the easier to like of the two of them. Oh, everyone knew they were both predators! But the scent of peril stole off Chikane less. It would stand her in good stead when she haggled with the other governors.

"They shall work with me," she said simply, and Shizuru knew it would happen.

"You are right," the young woman concluded, contemplating the cleverness of Chikane's plan with delight. Hers was the pleasure of a great strategist talking to another, equal intelligence. "You *will* sweep Our Sea clean of thieves even before the two years are finished. Dearest Himeko shall have to manage without her spouse for less time than she might think."

"I bought her a dog."

Shizuru smiled at the sudden admission.

"You bought her a dog?" she near-parroted.

"A pup, to be precise. I had the idea from you, Shizuru."

Chikane crossed her legs and rearranged her tunic over her knees.

"I recalled that you had given your lover a pet," she explained, "and I

wondered if perhaps that might salve some of her loneliness when you had reason to be absent. It was a good idea."

"I see," Shizuru said. "But do you not already have pet birds in the manor?"

"Yes, but Himeko said one cannot hug them. I suppose that translates to 'they do not count'. Pray do not ask me why." Chikane shrugged, looking indulgent at her wife's little foibles. "So I bought her one of those small white lapdogs, a *canis melitaeus*. She took to it instantly and it did the same to her. As she seemed to find it satisfactorily huggable, it was a good investment."

Shizuru laughed, having no trouble imagining Himeko Himemiya with a lapdog in her arms.

"I am glad I inspired you to it then," she said. "Although it is amusing to think of Hime-chan with the same dog the snobbier ladies back home are toting. Now all you need is a spoiled brat of a child for her and she shall be the image of a proper Himean matron."

"I *am* offering to adopt your lover, whom you once called a child," Chikane reminded.

"Yes, but she is not spoiled-though she can be a brat, actually." Shizuru flashed a grin. "Did I ever write to you about how she forced me to bring her on several marches?"

Chikane asked how Natsuki had done it and Shizuru told her.

"Can you believe the impudent little monster trounced me thus?" the younger woman said as the two of them laughed after the story. "Threatening to marry someone else indeed! I should have turned her over my knee!"

Chikane dabbed at the corner of an eye, still chuckling.

"I am pleased she has sufficient courage to defy you," she said. "That takes mettle, Shizuru."

Her friend's expression suddenly softened. Shizuru said: "She actually went pale when I told her you were here, do you know?"

"That anxious! Is there aught I may do to soothe her once we see each other?"

"Just be nice. Oh, and ask her to go riding with you sometime," the other said with a wink. "She loves it and I guarantee you shall find it quite an experience."

Chikane was mystified. "But... has she not lost much of one leg?"

"Quite an experience," Shizuru repeated, which the other woman took to mean she would have to figure out the secret for herself.

Her eyes glanced to the chronometer on a console table; she indicated it to Shizuru.

"We have spent past an hour here by now," she said. "And while I am immeasurably eager to hear of your own news-such as Terantrum, which I insist you narrate to me in detail-I do think putting off our meeting further would be torture for your Natsuki. Should we not yet go to see her, then?"

Shizuru said they probably should.

"Although I do think it would be better for me not to be there," she said, and explained: "She tends to do best when she has no spectators beyond the person she directly addresses. She may feel stilted if I play a chaperone, although I certainly will join you two later. I merely think it shall go better for her if she does not have me hovering like a mother hen at the start."

A slightly smaller voice as she added: "She is also currently a little displeased with me, so..."

"Why would she be?" Chikane asked. "Did you do something to her, Shizuru?"

"I did not tell her we were meeting you until after we arrived."

Her friend laughed and assumed a reproachful expression.

"So your decision not to chaperone is really more out of self-preservation than maturity," she said. "Sometimes, Shizuru, even



you act your real age! Did you not consider that she might have wanted more time for preparation?"

"Well, I thought it better than having her worry the entire journey! Surely you can see why I would have wished to spare her that anxiety."

"I wonder. I myself am not overfond of surprises, so I understand her displeasure ."

"Even so. Anyway, you might try to speak in my defence when you get her to warm up to you."

"Why should I?"

Shizuru seemed to find the question a surprise.

"Er, because you are my friend," she pointed out, with a look that said it should be obvious. Chikane smiled serenely back. "And you know I only spared her the news earlier out of good intentions. She truly would have worried herself to perdition had she known ahead of our arrival."

Her friend took a delicate sip of wine.

"Do you remember when I instructed my steward not to accept Oogami Souma-san in the house if I was absent?" she asked all of a sudden. "It was right after my marriage and I was afraid that something unpleasant might pass should he see Himeko without my chaperonage. Rejected suitors can be unpredictable, or so I argued when Himeko discovered my orders to the household. Yet my lovely wife believed I had the measure of the man incorrect. Worse, she was angry because she said I had not trusted her enough to leave it in her hands."

She smiled sweetly at Shizuru, who stared back, mouth open.

"Do you remember how you sided with her then, *my friend*?" she asked.

"Chikane, you would not," Shizuru pretend-gasped, trying not to laugh.

"I have waited long for this day," Chikane sighed dreamily.

She only just managed to avoid the kick aimed at her foot. She traded a grin with her friend before sobering again and asking one last question about her imminent meeting.

"Have you any advice for how I should start the conversation? I would like her to feel comfortable sooner with our topics."

"Tell her about your commission." And at Chikane's amused look, she went on: "Natsuki has an excellent strategic mind and a better grasp of our politics than you can imagine. You can probably tell her the story of how you got your command and it would absorb her as much as it would a Himean senator of intelligence. You shall see it in her questions. My girl is shrewd, even if she is not a talker."

So by the time Shizuru urged her into the sitting room where the Otomeian waited, Chikane was just as eager to meet the young woman. She was wise enough to allow that not all of Shizuru's claims might be true, but she recalled too her late sister's equally complimentary letters. Was she really so impressive as both Shizuru and Suou had made her out? Or was it merely that the two giving her praise had been charmed into the illusion? For Chikane had a suspicion that her late sister had liked Shizuru's mistress more than she had actually admitted, possibly even to herself.

The room she entered was empty of people, save for a figure seated on a couch. She took her in quickly during that instant before the figure's head lifted. Oh, she *was* young! And as beautiful as gossip and supposition back home already had it. Perhaps even more so because her beauty fell short of being properly Himean. That small difference made her strange, added a suspicion of the otherworldly pretending to be familiar. A beauty, but neither comforting nor approachable. She drew with disturbance, which meant admirers would be spellbound longer. Her looks were a burden to her, then; Shizuru had said she disliked attention.

Their eyes met.

For a painful instant the wide eyes filled; the girl looked down swiftly and rubbed at them. Chikane let her be for some moments, knowing

her own throat would betray her too were she to speak. She had seen the look of recognition and understood. It had lanced through her own heart.

When enough time had passed for both to compose themselves, she came over to occupy the empty couch beside the younger woman.

"Ave, Natsuki," she said with a smile. "You said in your letter to call you that, did you not?"

# Chapter 75

## Vocabulaire:

1. **Aedile** - There were four of these: two were called the plebeian aediles and two were called the curule aediles. They were responsible for the structures of the city, among other things, but more importantly were also the organisers (and to a large part the funders, given the Treasury's parsimony) of the Roman public games. It was considered a good thing if the aediles were rich, because it meant a better chance of seeing fantastic-and very expensive-games.

2. **Denarii** (pl.), **denarius** (s.) - A Roman coin, often made of silver. The conversion is thus: **6,250 denarii = 25,000 sesterces = 1 silver talent**.

3. **Flamen dialis & flaminica dialis** (L.) - The flamen dialis is the state priest of Jupiter Optimus Maximus; his wife is the flaminica dialis. It should really be the flamen dialis attending the type of marriage ceremony Shizuru describes here, but in this text, the flaminica may assume his duties.

4. **Hyperboreans** - A mythical people supposed to live far to the north. They were also described as giants.

5. **Hypocaust** - A heating system in use even during ancient times. It relied on a furnace usually held at a lower level than the ground floor and a series of pipes that circulated the furnace's warm air around a building. More complex hypocausts even used pipes to bring the heating to upper storeys.

6. **Pontifex maximus** (L.) - The head of the College of Pontifices; high-priest of Rome.

7. **Rosea rura** (L.) - The fertile lands outside of Reate, or modern-day Rieti. This was where they

bred the best mules in Italia.

**8. NOTE on gladiatorial schools** - There may be some who have seen the Starz series *Spartacus* and imagine Republican (not Imperial!) gladiatorial schools to be as portrayed by the show. It can be dangerous to take history lessons from the television set. The description of gladiatorial schools and service *Hermias* gives below is accurate for the time period. There were some "bad" schools with poorer living conditions, but they were the exceptions. Note too that gladiators in this time generally fought exhibitions and did not kill each other. Simple moneymaking arithmetic: the cost of hiring them (the main source of revenue) would not have recouped the investment lost if a gladiator died. Remember too that people attend matches for free.

**9. NOTE on geographic adjustments** - Those paying attention to the geographic descriptions should have figured this out by themselves: most of the southern map of Republican Rome's world is intact in the story. The northern parts are those that have undergone alteration. The northern end of the Adriatic Sea is extended further upwards, for instance. This insinuates *Argus's* coast somewhere around where real-life *Noricum* was. Most of *Germania* is replaced by the Kingdom of *Otomeia*, just as most of upper *Gallia Comata* is replaced by the *Mentulaean Empire*. Substitutions are not exact, however, so do not expect, say, a *Danuvius* equivalent just because the *Danuvius* is on the Republican Roman map.

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### ***Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae***

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Chikane spent only eight days in *Argus*, but it was a fruitful eight days for her newest acquaintance. Mistress and friend had taken to each other as *Shizuru* had predicted. They had even spent nearly every moment of Chikane's free time together, discussing everything from their respective cultures' politics to the Pythagorean preoccupation with numbers and fava beans. Costly gifts of friendship were exchanged, as were oaths to continue their correspondence. Thus it was that when Chikane's ship finally sailed away, *Natsuki* joined *Shizuru* in regretting the shortness of her visit.

"Although in some respects, I am a little relieved," Shizuru confessed privately to her cousin, who had also journeyed to Argus to see Chikane. "For the way they got along, what if she had liked my best friend more than me?"

Shizuma grinned, knowing the other was joking.

"I'm relieved too, but for a different reason," she said. "Frankly, I could stand no more of them chattering the way they did. You'd think you weren't with beautiful women! All you get is mounds of philosophy and that awful arithmetician's Attic, enough to make you think you're sitting in an agora with two unattractive and gabby old men!"

Shizuru adored her lover's scholarly bent and was astonished: "Oh, but I enjoyed listening to that."

"You would!" the other said, goaded.

She had often been part of the pair's conversations, although she had also allowed them time without her. She had felt that it would further their budding friendship and might even work well for her own causes. She was proven right when, near the end of Chikane's visit, her mistress confessed that she was starting to think adoption by the woman not so disquieting.

"That is good news indeed!" she said to that. "Is it because of a conversation you two had?"

"Yes."

"Well! And what was it you talked about?"

"You."

"Oh. You two talked about me?"

"We talked of you a lot."

"I see," Shizuru said thoughtfully. "That sounds terrifying."

Terrifying discussions of her aside, she truly was gladdened by the

liking between the two. She knew Natsuki would need all the friends she could get in the future, once they finally moved to Hime. Especially after they got married, they would face social opposition the likes of which Natsuki had not yet seen. But there was little point worrying about it for the moment, save to prepare by finding more friends like Chikane.

*It would be nice if those I find are also friends in the political sense,* she thought wryly. Chikane's visit coincided with other factors that recalled to her the other part of their world she had been keeping in the background. She had spent three years just watching events in Hime and Fuuka from a distance, too concerned with her governorship to do more. Now that her province had settled down into the beginnings of peace, it was time to point her attention and abilities south again.

She wanted to start the fourth year of her governorship with a plan for extending her command. Obsidian might be dead and cremated, but Septentria was not in fact fully pacified. She knew the local aristocrats had gone quiet and seemed eager to cooperate. Yet her bones warned her not to trust in them yet, especially after their experiences with the Carsinii. Experience and military cunning told her to trust in her bones instead of the locals' promises; she needed to keep her army and command a little longer if she was to see her campaign properly concluded.

New provinces also had growing pains and flare ups-Shizuru needed to guide Septentria's people into the future or the whole would fall apart. She still had to satisfy her long-time supporters: the knights and plutocrats looking to expand trade northward. Then there was the idea she had long cherished as a way to secure the province's future: the establishment of legionary veteran communities in the land. Such communities would provide a nucleus for the growth and dissemination of Himean culture in the North. They would also make it easier for future governors to put down revolt in Septentria, for it gave them instant sources of legionaries nearby.

In order to do all of that she had to restore normal commerce and administration to Septentria's many regions while turning what had been an empire into a properly Himean province. That meant

integrating Hime into every part of Septentria's new socio-political structure. An arduous task.

If everything went according to plan, she could do it all in the time she had left. Two years was more than enough. The problem was that nothing ever went according to plan. Every smart general or politician knew that. So she would have to dicker with the Senate again to get herself prorogued, even if only one more year beyond the fifth her mandate granted. That required adding more names to her faction, bolstering the list of people who gave her support.

It was in musing on these things and other political news from Hime that she went searching for Natsuki in their quarters, two days after her best friend left.

"In the sitting room, Domina," said one of her slaves.

She stalked there and found the Otomeian stretched languidly on a couch, occupied by one of the scrolls of poetry Chikane had given her as a gift. Shizuru paused to appreciate the lissom catlike sprawl of her first.

"Can you have your servants put your things together by the day after tomorrow?" she asked. "I just finished talking to Shizuma about having her take over for the moment. I fear I shall compel you to suffer another voyage in winter, *mea vita*."

Natsuki said she would have her servants pack promptly and asked where they were headed.

"Fuuka," Shizuru said, which got her a chuckle. She kept her eyes on the girl and said it again. "Fuuka. Why are you laughing?"

The other's smile faded; bottle green eyes stared, darted away, then stared again.

"*Fuuka*?" Natsuki breathed. "Really?"

Now it was Shizuru who chuckled.

"I have been saying so this entire time!" she said, bending down to bring her head nearer the girl's. "Why, what is the matter with the



idea? I thought you would be excited to finally see that land?"

The look she got was so complicated she made no sense of it.

Eventually Natsuki exclaimed, "But how can you do this?!"

Shizuru was a little taken aback.

"How can I do... what?" she said. "I'm sorry, but what do you mean, Natsuki?"

"I mean, is it allowed of you?"

Shizuru heaved a deep breath and perched by the young woman, who was now sitting up too.

"Let me see, because I am having trouble understanding at the moment," she said deliberately. "This news seems to confuse you in some way, Natsuki. Why is that?"

Natsuki explained her confusion, at length. She had thought Shizuru debarred from returning to her home until her governorship was over. While Shizuru told her this was true, it only meant she could not return to Hime. Fuuka was an entirely different matter.

"You have to remember that one does not mean the other," she said. "I may not be allowed to enter Hime while I am still a governor, but that is only because a senator with command of an army cannot cross the city's sacred boundary, which we call the *pomerium*. This does not forbid me access to the rest of Fuuka, you perceive."

"Then," said Natsuki slowly, "you can go back?"

"Of course I can. I could have done so at any time before this, had it not been for my duties. Did you think I was stapled to the north simply because I was named governor of Septentria?"

Natsuki's face showed she had thought exactly that.

"I can actually go whenever I wish. I did not simply because I was still in a wartime province. The moment things are relatively settled-which they are right now-I can pack up and travel elsewhere,

provided my people know what to do in my absence. Shizuma can handle matters for me while I am away. It is unlikely any great emergency shall happen anyway, at least while it is winter."

She waited for a nod to tell her the girl understood.

"We are also only going as far as Ravenna," she continued. "That places me within summoning distance should I be needed. Missives sent from both Septentria and Hime shall still reach me quickly. Letters from the latter, in fact, will reach me much faster, which is partly the point. There are things beckoning my attention back home."

Natsuki was scrambling to put on her prosthetic. Her hands were so twitchy that she botched the buckle twice and finally gave it up for to call for her crutch instead. A servant ran to hand it to her and she got up. Shizuru watched, riveted, as the Otomeian limped her way nimbly to a desk. She snatched a big scroll from on top of it and just as quickly hobbled back.

She plopped herself next to Shizuru and spread out the scroll on their laps. The amused Himean helped her keep it open.

"Ravenna?" she demanded, practically vibrating. "Shizuru, Ravenna? Where?"

Shizuru pointed it out to her. One long finger rested on the town's location on the map, a point almost exactly halfway between Hime and their Atinu Base. Natsuki exhaled one of her cooing foreign sounds, unconsciously fitting herself closer to her lover.

"It is a town?" she asked, nestling deeper when Shizuru's arm went around her waist. "By water? Like Argus, maybe?"

"Yes, and yes, although its port is nowhere near as large."

"How long? The travel?"

"Not long at all," Shizuru said. "We are going by sea. It may be a little bit rough given the season, but the North Winds are blowing everything to the south. They will drive whatever vessel we board so fast that I doubt we shall spend more than five days on the water."

"So fast?" Natsuki gaped.

"Yes, if we are fortunate," Shizuru told her. "I hired the ship earlier-a good craft, still new and built for speed. We will not even need to take a second team of rowers, so we should be even lighter. That means faster travel. I would not subject you or my staff to the agony of a week at sea, for not everyone stands it easily."

In the end, they spent only three days on the Adriatic. The voyage staggered Natsuki for its speed, as she had never before seen what a ship could cover with a steady wind and a captain willing to travel straight instead of hugging the coast. She also managed to enjoy most of the journey, turning out as immune to nausea as Shizuru herself. They spent most of the voyage in the bow, thrilled by the ship's speed and the sea spray in their faces. Many in their retinue unfortunately lacked their immunity to seasickness, however. These spent the three days drooped over the side of the ship like rags hung out to dry.

They put in at the modest ports of Ravenna early and so managed a smooth disembarkation. Hired carts and carriages were plentiful in the daytime and brought them past the part of the town that stood at sea level. They headed instead to the less settled swards in the west. There one found the country villas like Shizuru's, which were only inhabited at certain times of the year. Given Ravenna's northern location and climate, that usually meant the warmer seasons, when southern Fuuka became so hot it was intolerable. But it was winter when Shizuru first showed it to Natsuki, so they had fewer neighbours than if they had come in summer instead.

The owner of the villa guided her mistress through it while their servants saw to their possessions. She took her deep into the villa first, wanting to start her tour at the master's bedroom. This was the biggest of all the sleeping areas in the villa, because the rest were only traditional cubicles. The villa had been built fifteen years earlier, before the trend for larger bedrooms had developed among the very wealthy. When Shizuru bought the property she had a contractor expand the already sizeable master bedroom to a proper bedchamber. The old room had also been traditional in that it had lacked windows: her contractor had been ordered to change that as well.

"This is where we shall sleep," she told Natsuki, opening the solid oak doors but not entering. The slaves were still busy moving furniture and items like fresh pillows. "The other doors down the wall are to guest suites and a sitting room. And out here you can see the loggia end of the peristyle immediately. The latrines and baths are on that side of the courtyard, by the way. Come and see the garden."

The peristyle garden before them was spacious and cleverly landscaped. Like most Himean villas its size, it sported a central pool ornamented with statues and fountains. It being winter, the fountains were not running and the pool was empty. Little frost crystals speckled the pool's rim.

"This villa actually has a hypocaust," Shizuru said, "as you probably felt when we passed through the atrium. But the original architect never extended the heating system to the pipes for the fountains, so at present they are not running. I wish you could have seen them in summer instead."

Natsuki ran a thumb over the outstretched finger of a marble naiad. Her eyes when she turned to Shizuru were brighter than ever.

"Even now," she said, "they are beautiful."

Shizuru extended a hand for her to take.

"If you like this, wait until I get you back home," she told the Otomeian. "I have actual bronzes from Lysippus and Praxiteles in my pool there."

Natsuki asked how she had acquired such precious artworks.

"Grandfather was a big art collector," she explained. "As was Mater, in fact. Pater less so."

"And you?"

"Well, I have not added much to their collections-though I did purchase an Appelles for the atrium, way back before I met you-but perhaps we can change that in the future."

She led her from the courtyard and through the peristyle, then toward the gallery that led to the atrium.

"Over on that side of the atrium is the *triclinium* -the dining room," she said, "and over there is a suite, the passage to the servants' quarters, and the kitchens. On this other side we have the reception room, and beside that is the study. I told Hermias to move in one more desk so we can use it together."

She led Natsuki into the large room as she continued.

"There is only one study here," she said. "But back home there are two, as both my parents were senators and often conducted business separately. I was already using Pater's, so that can stay mine when we do live there. You shall have Mater's and can have it remodelled to your liking. It already looks good, but I would rather you had something in which you were perfectly comfortable."

Natsuki looked up from the pigeonholed wall she was perusing.

"I thank you, Shizuru," she said. "But, um, why do I need a study?"

"Why, shall you not write any letters the entire time we are in Ravenna?"

"I will, yes, but... why will I need one in Hime?"

"For one thing, so that you have a room all your own," Shizuru answered. "For another, because you will need one, between your correspondence and whatever else you find to do once we live there."

Natsuki squinted and looked through the iron lattice of a window. It threw thin bars of shadow on her face.

"What will I find to do?" she wondered.

"A lot, believe me. But on that note, I was wondering if you would not like to invest in some *rosea rura* land in Reate."

Natsuki turned her way.

"Invest?" she said. "In land?"

"Yes, to start up your own mule breeding or horse breeding concern here. I know you already have one such in Otomeia, but that would make it even easier to create another here. You can replicate your Otomeian business, for the most part. Reate is the best place for that as it is the most wonderful grazing land in all of Fuuka, with the result that the breeders there turn out the best animals. I actually get mine only from them when I am sourcing mules for an army."

As she had known it would, the pretty face grew earnest.

"The mules you brought north," she said. "They came from there?"

"Yes. All are good animals, as you have seen."

She could see from the other's eyes that she liked the idea.

"Reate," said the Otomeian. "I can see this place too? Someday?"

"Of course. I will take you there myself. Not right now, though, as it is a way off from here... although it is very near Hime. Just one more reason to set up a business there. You can monitor it very easily when we live in the city."

A moment of silence as she considered Natsuki's face in the light from the window. *So beautiful!* It was five years later and she still could not get over it.

"So you like the idea I just proposed?" she said, clearing her throat. "Of setting up your own breeding concession?"

Natsuki's head bobbed thrice to show her keenness.

"Excellent!" Shizuru grinned with a little guilt. "Because I already bought one such enterprise for you and put it in your name."

Natsuki stopped her poking about the room and stared.

"But you-you put- *why*, *Shizuru*?" she blurted.

"Well, I intended it as a gift to my betrothed," Shizuru confessed.

"And while I know we are not yet legally affianced-though you should just surrender to the inevitable!-we shall be soon and you know it. I had my banker look for such opportunities early last year. After he found a good option, he sent me the details and I reviewed them. The investment was already beckoning, so I went ahead and made the purchase before your last birthday. The earlier I bought, the sooner you could see returns. And with armies being mustered all over Our Sea at the moment, you will see a lot of returns early indeed."

She smiled at the younger woman.

"I kept all the original staff," she said, "so they could keep running the business for your sake. I set one of my most trustworthy agents as overseer, though, just to be safe. I also set up an account with my bankers in your name, so the proceeds from the mule breeding have been going there since I bought it. It is your money, just as the business is my gift."

Natsuki walked over as swiftly as her prosthetic and cane permitted.

"No, Shizuru," she said, reaching for the older woman's face. "It is too generous. I cannot accept."

"All the legalities have already been settled."

"But-the profit should be yours! Let it go to you instead."

"Impossible. It is already arranged and it would look dubious if property under a foreign national's name suddenly started sending cash into my account."

Natsuki looked around her blindly, overwhelmed. Her hand worked into Shizuru's hair.

"Then," she decided, "put it in your name!"

"I cannot do that. And do not bother offering to reimburse me for it, when you do not even know how much it cost. Anyway, once we get married and share most of our assets, it would not be so great a distinction which of us actually owns it, think you not? So you might say it would benefit me even if it is supposed to be a gift to my wife."

My future wife, that is to say."

"Ah, Shizuru!" Natsuki groaned. "My people would say you should not spoil a wife thus. It makes them difficult to live with."

Shizuru chortled, knowing her people would say the same. In fact, they said it more often of wives who were considered beauties, as everyone knew beauties tended to be wilful and used to being pampered unreasonably. She doubted this particular beauty could be that way, though. Witness the difficulty of getting her to even accept a gift!

"Only think," her beauty was saying. "If after we marry, we may fight one day and you will want it back. But no, it will be in my name."

Her lips quirked: Natsuki's eyes were laughing.

"So what?" she said, playing along. "We would be married, as you said. Whatever we fought about we would have to get over it in the end."

"And if we cannot?" Natsuki murmured into her neck. "If we divorce, you will never get back the investment!"

Shizuru giggled, tickled by the lips and teeth on her skin.

"So you think," she said. "But we shall marry *confarreatio*, so the joke is on you then."

Natsuki pulled back to look at her.

"Con-confuh-say it again," was the demand.

" *Confarreatio* . "

" *Confarreatio* . What is it?"

"A form of marriage in our society, mostly practised now only by the older patrician clans."

"Why does it put the joke on me?"



"Because it is a nearly infeasible marriage," Shizuru said. "In other words, it is the most binding marital tie our society can create. It used to be absolutely indissoluble. Nowadays, there does exist a method to divorce from it. But so difficult and protracted is the rite that it becomes essentially impossible anyway. We would be married for life, Natsuki."

"You would bind me in such a contract?" Natsuki smirked.

"It would be expected," Shizuru said, looking innocent. "All the Fujino have always been married thus, so I should keep up the tradition. Even my own parents were married that way . "

"Mine were not."

"Well, that is no longer a requirement anyway. And besides, Chikane is adopting you, so you would be counted as her daughter for the purposes of Himean law. Chikane married *confarreatio* . So in Himean law, you would be a patrician whose parents had married *confarreatio* too."

Natsuki murmured the word again.

"If-if we married so," she said. "Is there a ritual? A special one?"

"I should say so." Shizuru quirked an eyebrow at the girl. "It turns the wedding into rather a production. We would need ten witnesses, as well as both the *pontifex maximus* and either our *flamen* or *flaminica dialis* . Probably the *flaminica*, as she is more inclined to showing up for marriages. So in addition to ten goggling spectators, you would have to suffer a cantankerous dumpling and a creature with a disquieting similarity to a freshwater bass."

Natsuki was obliged to hold on to her to stay upright.

"Bass?" the younger woman said, barely able to speak through the mirth. "The-the fish?"

"Yes," Shizuru said, turning Natsuki about and leading her out of their study. "Something about the eyes and her lower face-you need to see her to understand. But for now, let us see the rest of the place! I have yet to show you the view from the exterior loggia,

which is really the best part of the tour."

Shizuru's villa was on a high piece of land that overlooked the coastal lagoons. To take advantage of the elevation, the architect had incorporated a ground floor loggia on the east side of the house. As the land fell away sharply on that side, the loggia was partly supported on enormous pillars that extended some sixteen metres to lower ground. It made the loggia a magnificent promontory from which one could take in the view.

From it one saw the sweep of lower seaside Ravenna, with its ant's nest of houses rising from the lagoon. The buildings were held above the shallow waters by numerous piers and bridges. The houses thus seemed to stand right in the cerulean of the Adriatic, extending all the way to the west where they stood on land again.

Shizuru led Natsuki there through a corridor off the atrium. She guided her at first, but when the sky and sea were visible, Natsuki took the lead. She hurried to the balustrade, foot and cane clicking, all agog when she made it to the end. She stared out at the Adriatic and kept her free hand flat on the rail; it made her seem as though she would push atop it at any moment. The time of year meant it was squally and cold, but Natsuki was a princess of the even-colder north: she smiled when the wind lifted her hair.

Eventually the Otomeian had stared enough. She turned to Shizuru, who had followed and waited in silence.

"So this," she said, with a gloating air, "is the South."

Shizuru could not help it: she laughed.

"Perhaps for you, Little One," she said, putting both hands under her lover's arms. She lifted her until the Otomeian sat on the wide marble rail running around the loggia. Natsuki twisted to one side, eager to see if the view was better from this slightly higher angle.

"It only seems so since you come from the land of the Hyperboreans," Shizuru said. "The truth is that this is still very much north for a Himean."

Natsuki turned back and showed a smirk lifting her mouth.

"I know," she said. "But I am not Himean."

"Not yet."

"Mmhm."

She looked out at the sea again and said, a luxurious inhalation of air later, "This is the most south I have been, Shizuru."

Shizuru was intrigued.

"Really?" she asked. "Even in your forays before we met? What was the furthest south you had been before this, then?"

"Argus," the Otomeian answered. A sly peek: "Also, about our journey..."

"Yes?"

"It was my first time to sail in a ship."

Shizuru gawked at her. "Ever?"

"Yes." A smirk. "Also, logically, my first time to cross a sea."

Now Shizuru had a frown.

"You did not tell me!" she said.

"I tell you now," Natsuki responded, still pink with delight. She had never thought to see any part of Fuuka before the end of Shizuru's governorship, or do any of the things she had just mentioned. Not yet, anyway, and certainly not so easily. So she had good sea legs! Who could have known it? How nice it was to learn such things about oneself!

"Why tell?" she asked now. "What would you have done for it?"

"I do not know, to be honest," Shizuru sighed. "I just feel as though we should have recognised all these first times in some way. I never even imagined. So you had never been in a ship before then? What

about a boat, Natsuki?"

"Oh, yes," said Natsuki. "We have lakes too, Shizuru. I have even rowed a boat."

"Have you now?"

"I am good at it."

"Yes, I believe you would be." She sighed again, looking at her lover regretfully. "I still wish we had marked the occasion a little better, even if only for your maiden voyage."

Natsuki's eyes were on the sea again.

"You were there," she said with simple honesty. "That is all I need to mark occasion."

The hands rucking up her dress at the thighs twitched; Shizuru asked if she was finished looking.

"For now," Natsuki said.

Shizuru urged the slim legs around her waist and lifted. Natsuki looked at where she was being carried and asked what Shizuru was doing.

"Making love to you for the first time," the older woman said, "in the South."

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She woke rumped and deliciously sore much later, with the sun already beginning its plunge down the western horizon. Her lover was missing but there was a panther by the bed. It was due to its snuffling that she had woken. She spared some moments to greet it first, patting the furry jaw and pinching the thick whiskerpads so that the animal pretended to nip at her fingers. Shizuki continued to nudge her when she pushed herself up and tried to find her clothing.

She saw then the chair pulled up beside the bed. On it was a fresh dress and-this made her laugh-a very pink apple.

She dressed herself and put the apple on top of her pillow. Her leg and cane were by the chair too and she donned one and stood using the other. The bedroom doors were not shut, but not fully open either. She made her way to them with her pet padding after her.

The first person she saw gave her a bright smile.

"Dominilla," said her lover's steward. "I was just about to check if you were awake. Would you care to dine now? The Domina has eaten already, and Shizuki too has been fed."

She made a negative gesture and smiled. He understood that meant she would do it later.

"We are lighting the lamps in the villa now, Dominilla," he said. "Shall you stay in the bedroom or is there somewhere else you wish to go? I shall have the lamps lit there first."

She answered him in his mother tongue.

"I go to the loggia," she said.

"An excellent notion, Dominilla," he answered, guessing quickly at her purpose. "The houses below us should be lighting their own lamps and torches about this moment. The lights are picturesque above the lagoon's water. Please allow me to conduct you to your destination. Shall you be watching the view long, perhaps? I can have braziers brought out by the couches on the loggia."

She declined the braziers but thanked him for the thought. She let him lead the way as he knew the villa better than her.

"Hermee," she called quietly as they walked. "The Domina?"

"She is in the reception room seeing an agent," he replied, gesturing to that direction. "His name is Choei Saitou. He manages her gladiatorial school here in Ravenna."

They passed a slave with a lamp to whom Hermias addressed a quick order. He explained it to Natsuki after the other man left.

"Domina asked that she be informed once you awoke," he said with

deference.

"Shall it not interrupt her meeting?" she asked, still in his homeland's language.

"I believe she and Saitou-san have already concluded their business, Dominilla. They were only speaking of social matters by the time I left them."

They stepped out onto the loggia and towards the open end of it.

"I knew not," she said, "that Shizuru had a gladiator's school."

"Yes, Dominilla," he said. "I believe her father began it and she kept it up."

"It is permitted?"

"Permi-oh, of senators? Yes, Dominilla, it is a legal business for them if they do not run it themselves. The Domina also owns the premises of the school."

She hummed deep in her throat.

"Gladiators," she said. "Remind me, please. Are they slaves?"

"Some are," he said. "But others are freedmen. The Domina gets most of her own gladiators from the military assizes."

At her puzzlement, he said, "Deserters to the legions are offered a choice between losing their citizenship and bondage as a gladiator. Those who choose the latter are sold to the gladiatorial schools or, as they call them, *ludi*."

He stopped to call to another slave passing near them and carrying a basket. He excused himself to Natsuki, trotted off to grab something, then sent the other slave away and came back to offer Natsuki what he had taken. It was a clean wrap of finest, gauziest linen. She thanked him and threw it around her bare shoulders.

"The Domina has Saitou-san sending buyers to the assizes," he said, continuing what he had been saying. "They purchase only the

finest of the crop. These are then sent to the school here-or the one she has in Capua."

"Does it mean," she said, "she owns them?"

"Only for the terms of their service," he answered. "That is around five or six years per gladiator, depending on how often they fight."

"Five or six years of fighting. It is akin to army service."

"It can actually be a more comfortable life than that, Dominilla. The Domina's money feeds, trains, and houses them. They are allowed to go wherever they please outside of matches and training, and are never forced into more matches than they can handle. In exchange they need only perform in matches six or so times a year. These matches are all exhibitions, so they never risk anything approaching genuine injury. Their lot is even better than it would have been had they stayed in the legions and been on active duty."

"A strange reward," Natsuki murmured, "for desertion."

"Perhaps, but they do not keep most of the profits from their matches. Much of it goes to the Domina instead, as the owner of the school or *ludus*. Besides, what the Domina really wants of them is their future."

She made a sound that he interpreted to mean he should explain.

"After their time is done, she offers them a choice: they may go as they please or enlist as her trainers. If they choose the second option, they serve in either her gladiatorial schools as instructors or, if she has a campaign, as training officers in her army. They are paid very well then. The Domina also benefits by having excellent fighters-men who have spent years learning to fight so well that they can do it without harming themselves or their fellow gladiators-training her rawest recruits. Ironically, she ends by turning former deserters into proper officers."

Natsuki was looking out at the houses down in the lagoon. They were as picturesque as Hermias had claimed because of the many candles and lamps beating away the darkness: that part of Ravenna

looked like a sparkling city floating on black waters.

One green eye rolled to its corner and studied Shizuru's steward. He was standing with his slender chest out because his hands were clasped at his back.

"Will not the Domina be displeased," she said, "that you have told me so much of her business?"

His beguilingly faun-like face lit up.

"The Domina actually instructed me to do so if you enquired," he answered. "She said that every question you place is to be answered without hesitation, Dominilla. We shall also strive to grant every wish you make."

The green eye rolled away, but not before he saw it twinkle.

"So," she said, "if I wish you to jump into the sea?"

"I would be compelled to jump then, yes," he said equably. "But if I may, I would beg you not to wish that of me, Dominilla. I do not enjoy the Adriatic in winter very much."

The small dents deepened on either side of her mouth.

"There you are! And with Shizuki too."

Shizuru had found them. She joined them on the loggia and tickled the supine panther first, then came over to wrap her arms about her lover.

"Why did you not bring out braziers?" she asked her steward. "It is cold here tonight. I do not want the Dominilla to take a chill."

Natsuki explained before Hermias could apologise for the oversight.

"I said not to," she told Shizuru, who was propitiated. The latter sent her steward away with orders to prepare Natsuki's meal in the dining room.

"Was your nap refreshing?" she asked, only to feel a snigger in the



body against her. "Yes, yes, I know I wore you out right before it, but I was hoping you got to rest while you slept."

"I did," Natsuki said.

"Good. I was talking to the agent for my gladiatorial school just now."

"I know."

"Hermias told you, then?"

"Yes," Natsuki said. "Among other things."

Shizuru grinned.

"I suppose that means I need not explain anything more on that subject," she said. "Did he happen to mention what I shall be doing in the next few days?"

Natsuki asked what that was.

"Seeing people, to put it simply." Shizuru urged her to a couch nearby, one of the many for use by the villa's inhabitants when they wish to linger in the loggia. "I already told you we were coming here so I could be a little closer to Hime for the winter. This would let me tend to those aspects of my business that I have had to leave in agents' hands during my northern campaign."

Natsuki nodded to show that she remembered.

"You said," she ventured, "you might see clients?"

"Yes, as well as some of my agents and my banker, naturally. I sent messages of my arrival this morning, but they should have started travelling even before today. I sent word ahead of our ship when we were still in Argus, you see."

Natsuki nodded again.

"Most of them shall seek to see me in the mornings," Shizuru said. "Saitou-han today was an exception because I summoned him here expressly. But the mornings, before noon, are traditionally the time

when Himeans conduct business."

This time Natsuki quirked an eyebrow at her.

"This is how you say you shall be busy," she said, "tomorrow and other coming mornings?"

Shizuru said it was.

"I apologise for it," she said. "It does not mean I shall not see you at all in the mornings, just to be clear, but it does mean there may be some days when I shall be very busy during them. I have not been able to see to my clients personally in literal years. So those nearby who have an urgent need of personal attention shall come rushing here in the coming days, I expect."

"I read," Natsuki told her, "that clients present themselves to the patron very early?"

"Yes, almost the moment the sky is fully lit. My steward admits them into the atrium and they all wait until I am ready to join them there."

"So I cannot go to the atrium when they are present?"

Shizuru frowned and said she could do that if she wanted.

"I wish you would stop forgetting that you are the mistress of my household," she said. "You can go anywhere in the villa. I am only warning you that there may be a great many strangers soon coming to visit. If you have need to pass through any room they are in, you may do so without concern. If you wish to eject them from a room, in fact, you need only say it to Hermias."

The other smirked at the idea.

"I do have some requests, however," Shizuru went on. "For example, that you grant me sole use of the study when I bring some clients there. I only use the study to meet people when privacy is of the essence. The study door shall be closed at such times, so you know it. I shall have Hermias set up another desk in the sitting room so that you can do your writing even then. This does not mean you cannot talk to me, however. Should something urgent require my

attention, you can either send for me or approach me yourself."

Natsuki said she would not intrude on Shizuru's meetings.

"But," she ventured, "I want to see outside. I can explore Ravenna?"

"Of course!" Shizuru exclaimed. "In fact, I will tour you around when I can. But since I know you shall want to make some trips while I am occupied, I have some requests there as well. First, please be sure to inform me or Hermias before you leave the villa. If you have an idea of whereabouts you are headed, specify it. It will help me find you if there is an emergency."

The Otomeian said that made sense.

"I also require that you take at least four of my slaves with you," she said. "One to serve as a guide as well as interpreter, just in case. The local argot occasionally departs from the Himean you know. The other three slaves should be taken from the bodyguards and porters, and should be armed as well as cuirassed. This is in addition to any servants you may bring from your own retinue, like Zidek."

"Is Ravenna dangerous, Shizuru?" asked the younger woman interestedly.

"No, on the whole," came the answer. "Because of my gladiatorial school, everyone knows me here too. By tomorrow, the whole town will be aware in whose house you are staying, so they should bend over backwards to accommodate you if you do business with any of them. That said, I would prefer to be safe. There was a drought and famine recently and that usually sees more of the provincials turning to banditry. You should be safe provided you stray not too far from the town itself. Remember that we do not have my legions here, nor your troopers, *mea vita*."

Natsuki agreed with the conditions and said she understood.

"I may introduce you to some people, by the way," the older woman continued. "My banker in Hime, Sosius, for instance. He is your banker now too, so I think we should have a dinner with him at least."

But if you wish to speak to anyone visiting the villa even before I introduce you, be assured that you may do it. Only keep in mind that they are probably my clients and that they have never seen anyone like you."

The green eyes demanded an explanation.

"In what way?" Natsuki said. "Anyone like me how?"

Shizuru smiled helplessly.

"Well, for one thing, anyone of your beauty," she said, causing the other to flush and mumble a rebuke. "No, that is not flattery, Natsuki. Fuuka may have beauties even in Ravenna, certainly, but not of your ilk. Many here will think you exotic, so prepare for a lot of stares. If anyone goes further than staring, though, please tell me."

Natsuki nodded, still wrestling with her blush.

"Also, people will not have seen anyone before in your position," Shizuru sighed. "One who is still a mistress but-as people are fond of telling me-treated more like an actual wife. Then there is your being a princess of an allied kingdom."

"And my having a wooden leg," Natsuki continued for her, "and Shizuki and my Otomeian servants."

Shizuru looked at her closely to see if any of this discomfited her but found no evidence of it.

"I do not envy you, Shizuru," the girl said suddenly, "when you try to introduce me."

There was laughter from Shizuru at this, as she had been thinking the same.

"It is all your fault-what a pickle!" she said mirthfully. "Had you married me already, I would know better what to say. I could say, here is my wife, pay her respect, and you know the rest. But now I must figure out how to tell them you are the woman my household sees as my wife even if we are not affianced yet. And that you are the Polemarch-Princess of Otomeia, into the bargain!"

"So say only that."

"Which one?"

"The titles I have from Otomeia." Natsuki leaned forward to fix her hair for her, as a gust of wind had thrown some locks into Shizuru's face. She stroked said face afterwards. "Chikane told me the gossip is so that they will know I am your mistress from just that, anyway."

"And it does not trouble you to be seen as essentially my courtesan?"

"If it troubled I would never have been with you in the first place."

Shizuru gazed upon her dotingly.

"I do wish I could tell everyone you are my wife," she said.

"You say it is inevitable," came the amused answer. "So maybe you only need to wait."

She spared Shizuru the challenge of introducing her by avoiding the atrium most mornings. She still met some people, as Shizuru had promised. They dined with their banker one evening, for example, as well as a man Shizuru introduced as head supervisor of her foreign deposits. Here she collected some interesting nuggets of monetary information. For instance, she learned that Shizuru was preparing large amounts of liquid assets. She thought at first that it was for further investments the older woman wanted to make in the North. Listening closely told her the money was to stay in Hime however: that gave her a few suspicions about their purpose, although she decided it was better to wait until Shizuru chose to finally explain it.

She also discovered that Shizuru was moving the moneys she had banked in Asia Province. Both financiers at the dinner professed themselves worried about the unrest in that area. They also advised the Princess Natsuki to take similar measures if she herself banked there. Natsuki confessed her own deposits concentrated in the North, however, save for the new account Shizuru had opened for her with Sosius.

She also got to meet one of the managers of her new mule breeding

business. He was one of the persons Shizuru had summoned to the villa ahead of their trip. Natsuki turned the sitting room into her office temporarily as she quizzed him to her heart's content. She also looked over the account and order ledgers he brought for her perusal. Good with numbers, she saw instantly that Shizuru was correct: the business had been turning her a steady profit.

The manager himself was very pleased by his new employer. He had been concerned when told she was foreign, and had come to the summons full of misgivings. These had not been allayed by first encounter, as he thought the new proprietor too young and too beautiful to understand the trade. But Natsuki's sound business head and obvious familiarity with breeding concerns worked on him quickly. The two of them were so deeply engaged in a discussion of possible improvements to the operation that both jumped when Shizuru entered the room and announced her own business finished.

Still, it was Shizuru who had far more to deal with. The number of morning visitors for her increased daily. On the sixth day her mistress rose to see if she could arrange a trip out for herself and heard the buzzing of people all the way from the atrium.

She moved there and found Hermias passing through the curtain Shizuru had ordered strung over the entrance to the gallery. The older woman was concerned that the guests might wander towards the peristyle otherwise. That was normal behaviour for waiting clients, but she was conscious of her mistress's discomfort with strangers. Natsuki liked to read on the couches by the peristyle, and Shizuru would rather no one troubled the girl then.

"Good morning, Dominilla," said Hermias. "Shall you break your fast in the sitting room as usual?"

She nodded, then flicked her eyes at the heavy drape behind him.

"It sounds," she said, "busy."

"It is," he agreed. "A big group of them came almost at dawn. Would you like to see?"

He pulled the drape back with delicate fingers. She edged up to it and peeked through the gap. There were more than forty persons talking in the atrium, most of them snacking on fresh bread and light mulled wine supplied by the servants.

"She grows more popular daily," she said, earning a light chortle.

"These are still sparse, Dominilla," Hermias said while releasing the drape. "You should see the busier times in the city."

She lifted an eyebrow which he took to mean *How many* .

"She would have at least a hundred a day. When she was elected curule aedile she had three hundred clients coming each morning for a week. It will be worse when she returns after her governorship."

Natsuki's eyes were large as she imagined it. As Shizuru had explained to her before that the clients at Ravenna were a departure from the norm-in the sense that they all came out of need-she did not ask how her lover had managed to see to three hundred clients in one morning. She knew most of those would have been present simply to reaffirm their dedication to their patron and would have been dismissed with just a word. So her question to Hermias about the three hundred clients was concerned with more banal practicality.

"How did they fit?" she questioned.

"The Domina's house in Hime is much larger," he explained. "The atrium there puts this one to shame, Dominilla."

She shook her head.

"And all of these desire something," she sighed. "As I do."

He asked what that would be and how he could help. She told him about her intentions.

"Only to walk by the sea," she explained. "Shizuru said I would bring some slaves?"

As he had been instructed beforehand on such a matter, he said he would send the appropriate fellows up to the peristyle as soon as she wanted them. She retired to the sitting room after getting him to promise that he would inform his domina of her plans as well.

"Which of you," she asked the three Otomeian servants tending her, "wants to walk on the coast?"

All three immediately volunteered. They had all gone down to the lagoon and beach themselves, of course, during the times she released them from service. Nevertheless, a trip there during their working hours had the quality of a special holiday.

"I've been twice, myself," Zidek told her. "But I wouldn't mind going again, Princess. I should be there in case you or the girls need some heavy work done."

Natsuki eyed him strangely after the statement.

"Kavine and Therin told me about your trips, Zidek," she said dryly. "I know you want to go down to the beach more than any of us."

He grinned at the women who had told on him and were laughing.

"It's something, isn't it?" he said. "Their sea."

Their princess agreed quietly and took another bite out of the crisp roll in her hand. Her chewing paused at her body carrier's next words.

"I'm going to tell everyone back home I swam in it," the man announced gleefully.

She gazed at him and worked on the food in her mouth.

"When did you swim in it?" she asked him eventually.

"Well, I haven't yet," he admitted. "But I will later, if you'll let me."

Her stare flattened, mouth going thin.

"That sounds," she said, "like heavy work indeed."



The other two laughed again and started ribbing him. At this point her Himean lover walked into the room; the Otomeians fell silent, bowing to the woman shyly. She acknowledged them with a grin.

"Good morning, *meum mel*," said Shizuru, coming over to sit by her. "Hermias told me you plan to go for a walk. I thought I would see you before you left. Are you going down to the town or the market too, perhaps? Be sure to take some money for safety."

She dropped a purse heavy with *denarii* on the table. Natsuki demurred, saying she had her own money.

"I know, but most of it is in the Otomeian currency," Shizuru pointed out. "They accept that in Argus and Sosia, but you will have a bit more trouble using it here. Unless the currency concerned is a drachma, Fuukans are wary of foreign coin. Take mine for now and remember that you can always ask for more. You can just pay me back some other day, especially now we share a banker," she added, though she had no intention of letting the girl do it.

Natsuki thanked her graciously and asked how her business was going.

"It goes," Shizuru sighed. "Although I do have some very disgruntled Spanish clients out there in my atrium. I shall tell you about it later. First, I have something to ask. We shall be having dinner with a senator later. Would you mind it?"

Natsuki said it was fine, although she also eyed Shizuru wisely.

"This is why we came," she guessed. "To see this man?"

"He is one of the reasons we are in Ravenna, yes," Shizuru affirmed.

"Someone to buy, maybe?"

The older woman stretched her spine lazily and seemed to ponder it.

"Sosius-han seems to think so," she said, "as he arranged the meeting. I generally trust his advice on such matters, but there are things causing me to hesitate here."

"Trustworthiness?"

"I doubt that would be a problem. This senator is of a very old and respected family, *meum mel*. Were I to buy him he would certainly stay bought. Most Himeans find no shame in that. What would be shameful, especially for one with a name like his, is to betray the one who bought him."

"It is a kind of honour."

"Yes."

"Then why do you hesitate? Not ability, no? Sosius would not have recommended him otherwise."

Shizuru smiled at this perspicacity.

"No, he would not have," she answered. "And I agree in that respect. My hesitation has to do with the man's history. Let us simply say he has never been a partisan. Well, you shall meet him later and perhaps tell me what you think."

Natsuki said she understood and asked what time they would have dinner.

"I think a little early today, maybe the fourth hour after noon. The two of us should get most of our business done by the time you return. I wish I could go with you, though."

She turned to Natsuki's attendants and asked them to see if the slaves accompanying them to the beach were ready. They were, of course: she had passed them in the peristyle herself. The Otomeians knew what she really wanted, however, and tripped off to leave the lovers alone.

"Do you think," Zidek said to his companions as they left, "the princess will let me swim?"

Shizuru threw the princess a comical expression when they were alone, having caught the big man's words. Natsuki blew through her nose.

" *Will* the princess let him swim?" Shizuru teased while moving closer. She sought a lower lip and held it in between hers.

"He can do as he likes," Natsuki whispered, scratching her lover's nape with clipped nails. She repeated the motion at the sound of the other woman's pleasure. "But I will not fish out the lummoX if he drowns."

"Ah, the princess is unkind," was the answer to that. "Mind you do not get any wild ideas about going in the water either, please. Which beach is it you visit?"

Natsuki told her it was the one just north of the town. Shizuru would be able to see them from the loggia balcony of the villa itself.

"I had the carriage prepared nonetheless," the older woman revealed. "Use that to get to the beach itself. You can walk all you like once you are already at the coast. I suppose you shall pick up even more seashells?"

Natsuki grinned, having already accumulated a dozen, all of different types.

"Hundreds," she jested through another kiss. "Thousands."

"You will rob Neptune of his riches, Princess," Shizuru sighed, inhaling deeply and finally wrenching herself away. "Have a good excursion, *mea vita*, and try to think of me a little during it. Perhaps you might even pick up a shell for my sake . "

Natsuki promised to find the best shell just for her. Later she deputed her attendants to help in the search as they strolled down the shore just above the water line. She hoped to find a larger murex than the one she already had, or perhaps an intact specimen of the shell like a stepped cone glazed yellow as if by melted butter. She knew Shizuru would like any shell she brought back, but she still wanted the woman to have something better than all the others.

She walked while turning over shells in the sand with her cane. The sounds and scents of the sea were pleasant to her. They formed a good backdrop to cogitations of the kind she had.

The past weeks had given her much on which to cogitate, from Chikane Himemiya's visit to her first trip to Fuuka. So many surprises! And providentially, largely good ones. Though Chikane's visit had initially terrified her, for instance, she had found the woman a valuable fount of both wisdom and information.

Chikane had helped make more sense of her feelings about marriage to Shizuru. The woman's experience with her own unmentionably-lower-class wife had been related and discussed in unsparing detail. Natsuki knew it was Chikane's way of preparing her for what she might face did she accept betrothal. She appreciated that: it made decisions easier when you knew more about their possible consequences.

"You will not be ostracised outright, if you imagine that," Chikane had warned in Greek as impeccable as Natsuki's own. "Himeans have rather more exquisite methods of expressing disdain. They shall likely do what they did to my wife, soon after we got married. Just about every upper-class party saw her on the guest list for months, even for parties hosted by my political opponents. It was in hope of having their critiques proven by example, you see."

Natsuki had inhaled a sharp breath: "They invited her for their entertainment."

"Just so. Is it not an exquisite technique for scorn?"

"It is pathetic."

Chikane had told her most elitists were that. She had also predicted that Natsuki would at least fare better than her own wife had at situations of that sort. Someone raised to be a princess, even if foreign, would still have a better sense of how to conduct herself around hostile snobs. Whereas Himeko had been raised in such abject poverty that it had taken weeks for her to make peace with just having the use of servants.

"Those first months were hard for my poor wife," she had recalled. "They will be for you as well."

"Hardship is not new to me," Natsuki had stated.

"I know."

"What worries me more..."

"Is Shizuru? Naturally."

Chikane had said her own wife also once worried thus. However, she also clarified that her Himeko had feared only the harm that others might cast Chikane's way for their liaison. She had not feared too, as Natsuki did, the harm that Chikane might cast back.

"I am considered more temperate than your menacing lover, you see," Chikane had jested, which got Natsuki to ask if she truly was that. Chikane said she was, in the main.

"Although I remember the first time a fellow senator put down my wife to her face," she had added. "I berated him for his bad manners and took my wife home from that party. I called some friends over and we had our own revelry. It rather cheered her up."

Natsuki had thought that a very nice way of solving the situation. But then Chikane had continued.

"During our merrymaking, I made some inquiries among my guests about the senator who insulted Himeko. They revealed he was deeply in arrears. So the next day, my agents bought up every one of that senator's debts from the city's usurers. I demanded repayment of them all the following afternoon. 'Twas a shocking amount, you know. I still wonder how people can run up arrears of over two hundred talents with illiquid collateral."

Natsuki had stared at this serenely-supplied anecdote. For she understood what Chikane had not gone on to say: the man had been instantly ruined. Then knowledge of Shizuru's world had intruded.

"But was that legal of you to do?" she had asked. "When senators are not supposed to be in the business of usury?"

"It was perfectly lawful," Chikane had smiled. "You see, I may have bought all of his debts from principal to interest, but I only charged him for the principal when I demanded repayment. Not usury then, is

it?"

Oh, the woman was clever! Invested with as much resource and cunning as Shizuru, which meant one had to be truly stupid to dare her antipathy. Yet Natsuki understood that for all the fierceness of Chikane's revenge, the woman was truly more temperate. Natsuki could well imagine Shizuru stuffing a man's feet into his own throat for uttering the same insult that had provoked Chikane's reprisal.

Chikane had told her not to worry about that.

"Shizuru's temper will be tried by more than critiques of you throughout her life," the woman had declared. "Please do not concern yourself with thoughts of her losing her temper with our peers only on your account. Do you remember what I told you of her speech after one accused her of various low crimes in a Senate session? So awesome was her fury that she stilled even Haruka Armitage's tongue! They will test her often, I submit, with or without you for a wife. Why not go ahead and give her more support at home then, by agreeing to the engagement?"

Natsuki had accused her humorously of playing her best friend's advocate. Chikane had avowed it, unabashed.

"I do want my friend to be happy," she had stated. "You already make her so, but you know her-she is happiest without half-measures! Besides, iconoclast though she may be in some ways, Shizuru wants the things nearest her core to be beyond reproach. That has to do with her ambition."

"To be the First Citizen of Hime."

"Quite so. You know what it entails?"

"Some of it," Natsuki had admitted. "But surely a foreign wife is not among them."

"You forget," Chikane had cautioned, "that you would no longer be foreign by then. You would have the citizenship before you wed her, as well as membership in my family. I believe I may be acquitted of some vanity too if I tell you now that there are few families in our

society who may bestow upon you the sort of Himean irreproachability we can. You would not be alien, as such."

"But only by law."

That had gotten the older woman to chuckle.

"Which is where it truly matters, do you not see?" she had said. "Shizuru needs her wife to be legally irreproachable. It matters less what blood flows through your veins, especially given-if you would permit the concession to traditional Himean thinking-the faultlessness of her own. The procreative objection is not present either. The fact that you are both female means your children would have to be adopted, and could thus be of pure Himean blood."

"Besides," the expert on unconventional senatorial marriages had added, "you would not be the first of your kind anyway. There have been other 'shocking choices' for wives in our Senate's past. One of them was my wife, as you well know. But if you want one truly astonishing, there is Koizumi the Censor. One of the most revered senators of our history, yet he actually married the daughter of his slave!"

Natsuki had asked if a senator could marry one who technically belonged to him already, as the children of one's slaves did. Chikane had explained that the woman had no longer been a slave during the time of the wedding.

"She was manumitted first, so she had the citizenship when they exchanged vows. It caused a commotion at the time. Yet now, their offspring have been members of the Senate for three generations. Koizumi-san also retained his *dignitas* to the day he died and now lives on in history as one of the most venerated figures of our political and literary tradition."

As Natsuki had a talent for homing in on chinks in armour, she had asked if Koizumi the Censor had been the First Citizen of Hime.

"No," Chikane had answered with a smile. "Yet that had to do more with his own weaknesses than his marriage. His family was not yet of magisterial stock in his time, you see, and that is expected of the

First Citizen of Hime. Though he was a brave fighter, he was also no military genius. Again something expected of the First Citizen. Shizuru has everything he lacked and has a far better chance at the title. But the more of our laws she breaks, the harder it becomes. She has already broken an unwritten law by loving you, the way I did with my own wife. That is not something we could or would revoke! So now she asks you to marry her partly because it is the least she can do, to abide by no less than the written legislation. Our laws matter greatly to people like us, Natsuki. I submit you now know that too."

Even with that, however, Chikane had stressed that the choice remained hers. The patrician senator had exhorted Natsuki to learn all she could of the life of the Himean elite. Were she to marry Shizuru, Chikane had cautioned, she would have to take on such a life.

"You will gain many things," she had said. "Yet there are costs in return. You shall have to live in an entirely new country where your people are still rare. Your wife shall be one of that city's most controversial and noticeable individuals. You by extension shall be the same, which means there shall always be eyes upon you. Yours shall be a life where Shizuru's career shall rule every decision. You must think on these things for yourself. Have you the capacity to adapt to such a world as Shizuru offers?"

Natsuki had been pondering that herself ever since Shizuru's proposal. This trip to Fuuka had even helped: it had given her a small taste of what life in Hime would be like. People seeking her wife at dawn, company invited to dinner for political reasons. Days spent watching the Senate, huge sums outlaid to gain control of it even from afar. Wine bibbed at near every occasion, garlic and pepper never absent from the dining table.

A strange new world, to be sure. Yet not dislikeable even so. She supposed part of it was the newness: the freshness of novelty limning experiences with excitement. Would she stand matters as well once they were no longer new?

She was pulled out of her thoughts when her wooden foot caught on a depression in the sand. She lifted her leg higher to compensate.



That tended to happen when she negotiated uneven surfaces. She wondered if there was a way to put a joint between the vertical shaft and the foot part. Only a trifling range of flexion, for the sake of gaining better shock absorption without losing control.

She walked around a grey piece of driftwood. One of her escorts, high-spirited, leapt over it. She looked away with only faint wistfulness.

There had been a time when she could do that, she remembered. She had been widely praised for her agility in the past. Shizuru had used to admire her for it as well.

Well, Shizuru still admired her now-though for different things, of course. Chikane had told her they were even things more important for the wife of a senator than two whole legs. She had told her to cultivate them, especially if Natsuki was genuinely considering Shizuru's proposal.

Natsuki had replied that it was impossible not to consider it, given Shizuru's persistence.

"She speaks of it to me as though it is inescapable," she had told Chikane. "And pretends it is because of her arrogance that she speaks thus."

"Is it not?"

"Only in part. The other part is ingenuity."

In reply to the older woman's mute question, she had expanded: "If she speaks of it often enough that way, she causes me to think the same. It becomes harder to decline something to which you have already resigned yourself, no?"

Chikane had taken that with laughter and asked if she would tell Shizuru she saw through the plan. Natsuki had denied it; after all, if Shizuru enjoyed it, why take it away?

"Besides," she had admitted with some mischief, "it is working."

Whoops and mirth intruded on her recollections and pulled her once

more to the present. Her body-carrier had finally acted on the permission she had given him on their way to the coast. The rest of her escort called to gigantic man mirthfully as he swam in the blue sea. Natsuki stopped to watch as well, unable to control her smirk.

"He shall regret this shortly," she told the Otomeians still next to her.

"He might not survive to do that, Princess," Kavine sniggered.

Natsuki let Zidek do another short lap before telling her attendants that it was probably time to fetch him. They walked nearer the frothy edge of the water and called for him to return.

"You'll turn into ice, you great oaf!" one shouted. "You've dunked yourself already. Surely that's enough!"

"I want to make the most of it!" he shouted back. "We mightn't come back here again!"

Kavine fulminated before calling to him again. "Don't be stupid, of course we'll come back! Now get back here before it has to be the princess calling you."

Natsuki watched them persuade the other Otomeian back onto the beach, hugely tickled herself by her servant's brazen assertion. So it was stupid to think they would not come back, eh? She wondered if that was Shizuru's ingenuity also working on them or her own unspoken desires. Of course they would come back! Did no one doubt it, then?

She stepped to where the big man stood dripping, his body twitching all over when a breeze passed. Shizuru's slaves were snorting uncontrollably, as entertained by Zidek's folly as his own countrymen. Zidek gave the princess a shaky grin.

"I did it!" he cried, both hands held high above his head.

Natsuki smirked and started towards where they had left their carriage, handing her cloth bundle of shells to Kavine as she did so. The group followed her, the wet man in the middle grunting at every puff of wind that slipped past.

"You have General Fujino to thank, Zidek," Natsuki said, "that there are tunics and towels with us. Otherwise we would go home to tell people you died because you could not wait to swim the Adriatic in summer."

# Chapter 76

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Calda** (L.) - Warm and watered wine flavoured with spices, usually taken in winter.
2. **Censor** (L.) - Elected every five years, there are two of them elected to serve in tandem. Among their tasks is to monitor the list of senators and enrol new members. They can also expel senators from the Senate if those senators violate a requirement. Senators were not supposed to be in debt, for instance, even though most actually were. Most censors simply did not care... or were in arrears themselves.
3. **Centuries** - Banri's reference to the Centuries here is about the **Centuriate Assembly**, which marshals the people in their economic classes. Recall that Shizuru gained her current command by having that Assembly vote her into it. Since voting in the Centuries is weighted such that the upper classes always have more voting power, voting in the Centuries is basically voting done by the knights and senators.
4. **Corona obsidionalis** (L.) - Also called the **corona graminea**. The highest and rarest military award possible for Romans/Himeans, it bestowed membership in the Senate instantly.
5. **Dignitas** (L.) - A person's personal worth, his public standing, his prerogative to respect and treatment as a human being. It was the most sensitive asset possessed by a Roman/Himean. Almost anything was risked to defend dignitas, whether it be one's property, one's name, one's life, or even one's family.
6. **Imago** (L.) - A likeness made of wax and crafted as a mask, generally used for ceremonial purposes, e.g. ancestral parades during rites like funerals. They were passed down generations and reproduced a person's features with faithfulness, from their wrinkles down to the shade and quality of their hair and even their eyes' colour. **Imagines** (plural) were thus exquisitely lifelike. Banri

suggests it here as a compliment to the prospective model's beauty: he is suggesting that it deserves to be preserved for later generations' admiration. Only notable people (like war heroes, politicians who reach curule office, etc.) were technically allowed to have imagines, but it did not stop others from having them made even if they failed to qualify.

7. **Insula** (s. L.), **insulae** (pl. L.) - The literal translation is "island", but it actually refers to an apartment building.

8. **Laurels** - The reference is to victory laurels, or laurel wreaths hung about an army's standards after it has won a battle.

9. **Mos maiorum** (L.) - The established custom, tradition; the way things had always been done

and "should" always be done, according to the conservatives & the "Traditionalists".

10. **Pomerium** (L.) - The sacrosanct boundary encircling the city of Rome/Hime, which could not be

crossed by soldiers or generals for the duration of their service in a military mission or capacity.

11. **Quaestor** - He/she is primarily a fiscal officer. In service to a provincial governor, he is often the manager of said governor's funds. In extremis, a quaestor can be called upon to perform duties like leading armies, however.

12. **Subura** - One of Rome's poorer districts, known for its squalor and population density.

13. **Vir militaris** (L.) - In English, Military Man; one whose career revolves around the army. He enters the political arena by relying on the reputation forged by his exploits in the military field.

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**Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae**

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Banri Ueda was uneasy. He sat in the study of a woman he sought to have as patron yet had heretofore opposed in most motions within the Senate. Banri came from an old and noble family of plebeians with a solid tradition of conservatism. The Ueda had always been supporters if not outright members of the Traditionalist faction, which logically put them on the opposite side of change-bringers like Shizuru Fujino.

His own father, Kanetsugu Ueda, had reviled the woman. The old man had voted against the bill releasing her from urban praetor status, and voted too against the bill granting her current gubernatorial mandate. For, Kanetsugu Ueda had pointed out, a countervote was the only right act against such violations of the *mos maiorum*. Banri had done the upright thing for a son of his family: he had voted too against both propositions, much good though that did the conservatives.

This trend to conservatism was furthered by his distaff connections, for Banri's mother had been a patrician of the august Nakao clan. She was even sister to Yuzuru, the man who once paid the tribune of the plebs Katsu Hitagi to attack Shizuru in a Senate session. The same Yuzuru who lost his command after an army supposedly elected to follow his youngest (red-eyed) legate instead. Yuzuru Nakao was Shizuru Fujino's enemy to the death, which meant the rest of his family was the same.

Myriad motives of consanguinity should therefore have driven Banri Ueda to the Traditionalists. That he went to Shizuru Fujino instead was due to increasing dissatisfaction with the way the archconservatives conducted their politics. Look at the way they had resisted when Urumi Nemura Himemiya-Kanzaki had tried to resolve Fujino's controversial candidacy and election. Banri himself had seen the point behind her solution and appreciated what it meant for Hime's citizenry. Yet the archconservatives had maintained their stance against it, which meant he had had no choice save to vote as his father did. But he had not wanted to!

Banri believed in the sacrosanctity of Hime the Republic. What he was beginning to doubt was that the conservatives gave it as much thought as they claimed. When Chikane Himemiya had restructured provincial taxation they had shrieked and called it radicalism. The

same when Shizuru Fujino had instituted a pay raise for the legions. But what had tradition to do with the details of economics? Why should there not be changes to fiscal custom when even the *sestertius* had been retariffed? And why should the legionaries not get a wage hike when they had been paid the same amount for more than a century?

Even the latest cause célèbre back in the city had him thinking. It was with archconservative support that Keigo Onishi had been recalled from Sicilia and replaced by last year's junior consul. Who had then demonstrated himself a whinging *ineptus* unfit for the command he had hijacked. And now had his allies prosecuting Onishi for being the alleged cause of his failures. Shabby!

Banri began to see the virtue of change. But change of the reasonable, intelligent sort. Change made, in other words, for the betterment of Hime. His own father might have said there was no such thing: Kanetsugu Ueda had believed all change a peril. But Banri was of a different mould from his old man, even if filial piety had compelled similarity while the old man had lived. Banri possessed something his father never had too: a top-class mind chafing for stimulation.

While his father had lived, Banri passed the time as many bored young men of good family did. He indulged in a short but ruinous run of gambling and good-timing meant to substitute for more serious excitement. Then his father died two years ago and Banri thought it time to come into his birth right. He would clean up his act, find his true place in politics, and distinguish himself as a notable member of a notable family.

It did not happen thus because Pater Ueda's death revealed something Banri's old man had kept secret. What Kanetsugu had not told his son was that he himself had huge sums unpaid to the usurers. So instead of inheriting a fortune, Banri inherited more debts instead. Which gradually ate up all his assets, leaving him with only a few extant properties-all of them heavily mortgaged.

To make matters worse, Banri was desperate to marry. He had loved the same person for seven years but could not bring himself to propose yet. For the man he loved was of a situation that shamed

the debt-riddled Banri, at heart an honourable man from a proud family.

Losing the fight against compound interest, about to be kicked out of the house his parents had left him, Banri determined his only hope: he needed a patron. He picked Shizuru Fujino because hers was the name that first came to mind. Unsurprising given her current fame. And while it might have been surprising for someone of his family's tradition, it was not for one of Banri's judgement. He knew that hitching his wagon to hers was the best way to get to the top of the heap. Oh, there were rich conservatives too! But none nearly so impressive, so seemingly incapable of defeat. Banri's intellect was drawn to her brilliance. If he had to take a patron, then why not someone worthy of it?

So when he chanced upon the great banker Sosius at a party, he had been quick to take the man aside and request introduction to one of his more famous depositors. Sosius had divined Banri's purposes and assured him of a meeting. Banri had waited on tenterhooks since then, until some days ago when Sosius had invited him to Ravenna. Which brought him to where he was now, sipping *calda* and having a very late breakfast in Shizuru Fujino's study.

She returned sooner than he had expected, but long enough for him to be on his second cup of wine. She told him to stay seated when he tried to get to his feet.

"My apologies for keeping you waiting," she said, patting him on the shoulder. "All the others have gone now, so we may talk at our leisure. I presume you shall share my dinner later, by the way? I would be disappointed if you decline."

He avowed himself delighted by the invitation. She seated herself on her side of the desk and smiled.

"Neither of your late parents would have been pleased to see you under my roof," she said with just enough puzzlement to keep it courteous. "I hope you shall excuse me if I say that I find this visit unexpected, Ueda-han, though not unwelcome."



"Banri, please," he requested. "My friends call me by my first name."

The speculative look in the red eyes intensified.

"Then I am indeed honoured," she said. "But no less puzzled, I fear."

He smiled at her and came right out with it: "I'm sure Sosius already told you I'm in need of money."

"Of course," she said. "But permit me to be more specific. I am puzzled by the fact that you came to *me*. You are a plebeian of august ancestry and promising ability. If money were all to it, any of the wealthier conservatives would surely be better patrons. What I cannot quite figure out is why you approached me in particular when I seem to stand for all that you and your family have thus far opposed."

"That's true in my father's case-and possibly my mother's," he allowed. "But I wouldn't say you stand for all to which I'm opposed, Fujino-san. I see the virtue of many decisions you've made."

"Such as?"

"Such as the choice to take the question of your command to the Centuries."

"What, no outrage for my having deprived the Senate of a prerogative?" she said, grinning.

"I'd rather you hadn't, it goes without saying," he answered honestly. "But I also know the conservatives gave you little choice but to do it. What really surprises me, though, is that none of them realised you could've done much worse. You could've taken the matter to the Plebs instead, for instance, which would've been truly disastrous for the Senate."

She agreed, knowing that granting that sort of authority to the Plebs would have been deemed catastrophic by her peers.

"You voted against that motion, though," she reminded.

"And a few others, I'm sure you know. I was bound to, being my

father's son."

She tilted her head. "Are you no longer that now?"

"I still am, as we can't choose our parents," he told her. "But we can choose what we become beyond their clutches. I'm my own man now, the *paterfamilias* of my branch of the Ueda, and if you agree, I'll be your man too. In both the Plebeian Assembly and the Senate."

The manifestly aristocratic face looked interested, he was relieved to see.

"You have already served as quaestor," she recalled. "But you are offering to run as a tribune of the plebs to serve my purposes?"

"Yes, for next year, which is when you'll need me," he replied. "You *will* need me then, Fujino-san, as that's when the Traditionalists will come baying for your blood. The law barring discussion of your command will be running out, and you'll need a great tribune to look out for you."

"You believe you can be that tribune?"

"I know I can be," he said without conceit.

And looking into those strange eyes, he saw that she agreed.

"This is an attractive proposition," she said with honesty. "I believe you when you say you are your own man nowadays. Still I must ask this, I fear. What about your mother's side of the family? For I guarantee they shall have much to say about you allying with me!"

Banri's mouth quivered into a grin.

"Especially Uncle Yuzuru, you mean?" he said.

"Most especially him."

"Oh, he'll call down the wrath of the gods on me!"

"This does not concern you?"

"Why should it?"

He smirked and contrived to look impish, in spite of his face being the type that looked more at home being grave. It was the dark and peaked eyebrows responsible for that, along with the resolute and thin lips. Banri's was a good face, and in some lights, an appealing one, even. But he was aware that his attractions paled to insignificance beside his potential patron's.

"He's been calling down the wrath of the gods on you for ages," he told her. "Promising hundreds of sacrifices and honours if they see you fail. Yet here you are, a proconsular governor before you're thirty, and still-as far as I remember-undefeated in battle. I'd say Uncle's curses aren't very effective, so they're probably not worth concern."

She smiled thoughtfully, the expression extraordinarily fetching on her splendid countenance.

"I wonder how much he has spent in temples," she mused, "trying to buy my defeat."

"A fortune, I believe. He never did forgive you for what you did to him."

"What I did to him?" she repeated.

"Well, taking his army and command, that whole thing," he said indifferently.

She looked curious.

"I wonder now, Banri-han," she said. "How much do you actually know about it?"

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"How much does anyone who wasn't there know about it?" he burst out, hoping she was willing to take this particular topic further. "I know the official story, of course, which is that Uncle Yuzuru and his legates took sick in the middle of the Numidian Campaign and you took over most of their duties. Later, the Senate formalised your

appointment and elevated you to command of his army until the war ended. Thus runs the story in the Senate dispatches and transcripts."

Her queer eyes were very bright and alive, he thought. He had never before been near her long enough to really appreciate them.

"Compared to that, how runs the unofficial version?" she asked.

"Far more tortuously!" he replied. "There were talks of everything you could imagine, from insubordination to fisticuffs in the command tent. You set the Himean rumour mill afire then, Fujino-san. I don't think anyone really knew what to believe anymore, come the end of the year."

She laughed with him, remembering the improbability of some of the gossip herself. There had even been talk of her having wrested the Numidian command off Nakao and his legates at sword point. As though Himeans duelled to the death for positions! She supposed Natsuki might enjoy that version of the tale, though.

"I meant," she clarified, "how runs the unofficial version in the Nakao family?"

Banri said he suspected she had already heard it. She asked him to tell her anyway.

"Uncle Yuzuru claimed that you incited mutiny against him," he admitted. "He said you joined his command with that express purpose and defamed him to the rankers the moment you reached his camp."

Her smile grew wider at the charge. "Is this the version that says I became a legate too by blackmailing the war's commander-in-chief?"

"It is," he grinned. "It's a thrilling story, you must admit."

"Oh, I do! And I such a villain in it." She settled herself more comfortably in her chair. "Go on, it has been a while since I heard the account, and it really does amuse me."

He related the tale as much for his own enjoyment as hers. It had been the year after Shizuru's term as curule aedile, which meant her name was on everyone's lips. The war in Africa had broken out all of a sudden when the bastard king Jugurtha murdered his way to the Numidian throne. Resentful of Hime's earlier refusal to support his claim to the kingship, he now marshalled his forces against Hime's Africa Province. There was already a senator governing said province-Yuzuru Nakao, actually-but all he had under his command were three veteran legions. Numidia boasted larger armies and had gained the support of the nearby Kingdom of Mauretania as well. If Hime was to keep Africa Province, she had to send in more forces.

The Senate charged the senior consul, Rikiya Soujiro, to raise another army. He would take it to Africa and work with Yuzuru Nakao to bring Numidia to its knees.

Shizuru Fujino was just one of the senators who volunteered for the campaign. Where her peers volunteered as military tribunes, however, she audaciously sought position as a legate. And because of certain secrets she knew of the senior consul-someone her father had known well, which was probably how she had come by such sensitive intelligence-she got her wish and was appointed a legate despite being barely out of pubescence.

Nonetheless, Rikiya Soujiro had a plan to rid himself of this overambitious, unworthy legate. The moment he set foot on Africa's shores, he packed her off to serve under his junior co-commander instead. That was how Shizuru Fujino found her way to Yuzuru Nakao's army, a castoff ready to wreak further havoc in her ambitions.

She started by seducing the rankers and eventually the officers through deception. She slandered the commander and even the senior legates to all who would listen. The Fujino snake was good with words. In time, she persuaded the army that its high command was unfit to lead it.

Matters came to a head when Nakao's army marched to meet the Numidians. The army mutinied and declared itself willing to follow only the young Fujino legate. Who seized her chance and took over, only to order a retreat in a fit of nerves before finally getting up the

courage for an engagement.

After the battle, Yuzuru Nakao and his chief legates attempted to get the army back to its senses. Unfortunately, the men had taken the victory they lucked into as a sign that Shizuru Fujino was their only suitable leader. Concerned for the poor deluded soldiers, Yuzuru and his legates returned to the provincial governor's palace. There they wrote to the Senate that they had contracted a local illness and were therefore incapable of leading. This would spare the easily-tricked legions the horrific punishment for mutiny... even if it did keep the grasping Fujino in the commander's seat for that theatre of the conflict.

In spite of Shizuru Fujino's villainies, the war had thus far gone Hime's way. Rikiya Soujiro had conducted his part of it magnificently. But then fresh disaster struck: Soujiro suffered a fatal apoplexy.

His panicked legates sent to his co-commander for instructions. As the letter went to Yuzuru Nakao's former camp, it was the usurping Shizuru Fujino who actually received it. She proceeded to join her forces with Soujiro's now-headless one, thereby taking command of the entire Himean army in Africa.

The Senate had by then received Yuzuru Nakao's missives. It understood from his words that he wished his command passed formally to his young legate. That was the only way to legitimise her coup and therefore scotch the taint of mutiny from the history. So Shizuru Fujino was made Rikiya Soujiro's junior co-commander-even as Rikiya Soujiro's ashes sailed back to Hime. In short, luck and sedition manoeuvred Shizuru Fujino into sole command of a plum campaign against a foreign enemy.

The Numidians and their allies were exhausted at this point in time, however. They had been standing on their last legs before Rikiya Soujiro's unexpected death gave them a break. Still, Shizuru Fujino had the felicity of an all-but-done-with opponent; she took advantage of it by simply cleaning up what few enemy forces remained. Thus she did the least work of all three commanders but gained credit for supposedly ending the Himean-Numidian War and expanding Hime's Africa Province.

"It certainly goes down well," Shizuru said at the end of this recital. "Even I confess the appeal of having me as the antagonist!"

"You make a compelling scoundrel," Banri joked back. "So which parts are true and which aren't?"

"Are you saying you do not believe that version?" Shizuru said merrily, taking a sip of her drink. "Your uncle himself stands by it."

"Even my father thought much of it fabricated, Fujino-san," he revealed. "And you know how he felt about you! I also know Uncle Yuzuru. He's got more self-importance than sense. I wouldn't be surprised if the legions had mutinied even without you there."

"So you *do* think they mutinied."

"Didn't they? It's what everyone thinks."

She grinned at him, ruminating. The Himean-Numidian War had been the campaign where she established her status as one of the greats of Hime's military history. How long ago it seemed! A lifetime away. Yet there were parts of it she could still summon up in amazing detail. Like the interview with Rikiya Soujiro, former general and senior consul of Hime-and her father's old friend, to whom she had readily volunteered her military services.

"I know you're applying as a military tribune, Shizuru," the heavysset, perpetually ruddy man had told her back then. "But I'm not accepting you as one because you're too good to waste in such a position. I'll take you on as a legate instead."

She objected, knowing as he did that no one of her youth was made a legate.

"Especially in an army led by a consul," she said. "It would be more appropriate for your legates to have at least reached praetor in their political careers. I have only just wrapped up my term as aedile, by comparison."

"But you have the *corona obsidionalis*," was his rebuttal. "You've also been pushed into situations where you led armies, both when you won your *corona* and when you quaestored in Macedonia. Your

age notwithstanding, you have more actual experience than most of the senators at the right age to be legates. You've great ability, Shizuru, and I want to avail the army of it. That would be difficult were you a mere tribune. If I appoint you a military tribune, you will still have to answer to a legate... and that would subordinate you to someone of inferior aptitude. Besides, you must be a legate in order to do what I want you to do."

That stayed the protest in her throat and she cocked her head to show she would listen.

"I'm head commander of this war," he said, "since I'm the senior consul. But the Senate also gave me a subordinate commander in Yuzuru Nakao. By rights he should have been directed to give up his legions for my use. But his supporters worked to prevent this and managed to name him something of my junior partner in the endeavour."

He heaved an enormous sigh that made clear how he felt about that detail.

"He's useless, and so's his staff, by the judging," he stated. "Four months to take one small fortress, and not a strategically important one, even? No, Nakao won't be a help. The problem is, he has three legions. All veteran, so ones we can use. Given how short of troops we are at the moment, we even need them! What I'm afraid will happen before I get to Nakao is that his stupidity'll get those three legions killed before I can take them off him."

Her brow contracted; she saw where he was heading.

"You want to send me to serve with Yuzuru Nakao," she guessed.

"Yes. That's why I need you to be a legate. It's the only way you're high up enough to whisper strategy or tactics in his ear."

"But why not Asao Todoroki?" she demanded, naming one of Rikiya's senior legates, also a *vir militaris*. "Or Daisuke Maki, even? Either of them could do what you want me to do. Probably more effectively too, Rikiya-han, as they would not be regarded suspiciously due to their ages. Both have also been praetors in the



past."

Rikiya shook his head with decision.

"They won't work," he responded. "Nakao's one of the old-fashioned, uppity aristocrats. Neither Todoroki nor Maki is of august-enough lineage to make an impression on him. He'll likely just send them right back to me and say he doesn't want my castoffs. Whereas one can't refuse a patrician Fujino, even if one is a patrician Nakao. Oh, he won't like your youth! None of them will. But they won't be able to do a thing about it because of your name."

"Even so, they may very well try to ignore me."

"Then make it so they can't ignore you."

"But their authority will always supersede mine."

"Then make sure that's not the case when it comes to the soldiers."

Rikiya looked at her severely and frowned.

"You're good at wooing soldiers, Shizuru," he stated. "It's not just the *corona*. Soldiers find you worth following! Look at what happened in Macedonia when your general fled. Your troops didn't panic though their leader left them! They knew they still had you."

"It's because you're a commander worth your salt, you know," he concluded. "Make sure all of Nakao's army knows that. Because the way Nakao runs his command tent, you'll be on your own. Half his legates were only appointed because they're family! Not a jot of military talent in them! Make no mistake, you'll be the only chance those legions have to survive. Even Nakao and his idiot legates will be dependent on your talents for their survival."

"Surely you cannot be telling me to seize command of his troops!"

"I'm not," said Rikiya. "But if you have to in order to save them, you will."

He went on to explain how he planned to eventually get Nakao's troops added to his. And Shizuru, painfully conscious of the

burgeoning envy for her career's leaps, contemplated with a sinking heart the new leap she would have to take for Hime. Rikiya Soujiro was right: Yuzuru Nakao and his feckless legates would get his troops killed down to the last man. He needed someone with actual ability to tell him what to do and how to do it. But he would not entertain advice from anyone with a name less august than his. It left very few options for advisors, a Fujino who was also a Hanazono being one of them.

"They will hate me for this, Rikiya-han," she said.

"They already do," he replied unsympathetically. "They did the moment you won the *corona obsidionalis* in your first battle . If your father were here he'd tell you to make your peace with it. You'll always stand up and out of the crowd, so they'll spend their lives trying to cut you down to their level. Don't try to crouch down and convince them you fit."

So she had gone to Yuzuru Nakao with a directive to make her a legate. Rikiya Soujiro was right: Nakao scowled at the order but followed it. No one did turn away a Fujino, especially one with her military record and a *corona obsidionalis*.

"I applied as a military tribune to Rikiya Soujiro," she told Banri as she emerged from her private remembrance. "He insisted on taking me as a legate, however, for various reasons including the *corona obsidionalis*. Even had I sought that legateship myself, I would not have extorted him for it. He was my father's friend, something people seem to forget when telling that story."

Banri said he believed her.

"Blackmail doesn't really suit your style, does it?" he said. "Nor did being blackmailed suit Soujiro-san's-I remember him still. No one could have twisted that man's arm easily. As for his sending you packing once he reached Africa Province... I'm more inclined to think he sent you to Uncle Yuzuru to spy on him."

That got her to laugh heartily. "Something like that."

"I knew it!" He regarded her with satisfaction. "What about the rest of

it? The mutiny no one officially admits was a mutiny, for example?"

"So you disbelieve your uncle's unofficial account on that point as well?"

"Most of the Senate does," he claimed. "We just don't know how exactly the mutiny happened. Or why, for that matter."

She told him what had truly taken place. It had been several months into her service in Yuzuru Nakao's army. She had spent the time getting to know all of his officers below the rank of legate. This was not standard practice for the occupants of Nakao's command tent. Huge aristocrats with little practical experience of warfare, Nakao and most of his legates simply assumed everyone below them unworthy of notice. Only when there were orders to give did they bother remembering them, and then only as dumb creatures who moved where you wanted when you wanted it.

Shizuru, on the other hand, had seen enough action to know the value of the subordinates' respect. She committed every centurion's name to memory and made friends with most of the tribunes and even some of the legates. As she was also the first Himean to win the *corona obsidionalis* in a century, all these people were predisposed to admiring her from the start. She cultivated that admiration by doing everything the other officers would not, from taking her turn digging ditches to marching alongside the soldiers instead of riding. In no time, it seemed, admiration turned to worship.

So when the orders to march into enemy territory were issued, the whole army took notice of Shizuru's objections. Every centurion by then had learned to respect her opinions, as did several of the other legates. Suddenly people at every level doubted the wisdom of their general's plan. If Shizuru Fujino was carping so much about it, surely there was a problem?

Before the mutiny-that-was-not-called-a-mutiny occurred, Nakao had marched the army to a location even the greenest officers knew impossible to defend. He had then issued instructions that they were going to defend it anyway.

An aghast Shizuru had tried to talk Nakao out of it, had even begun

doing so on the way to the place. By the time they reached their destination, however, the general had stoppered up his ears to her complaints. So it had ended with Shizuru blatantly contesting his orders in front of the other officers in a desperate bid to get him to acknowledge the problem.

"Even his more loyal legates had grown restive," she said to Banri. "I admit partly because of my protests, which I had taken to airing before the whole army. Eventually the centurions massed together to see their tribunes, who brought the matter to the higher-ups. The decision was made to see the general all together. The goal was to convince him to retreat from the place immediately."

She winced lightly to show Banri how that attempt at reasoning had fared.

"Nakao-han declared," she continued, "that he would have nothing to do with an army that had betrayed him. So he sequestered himself in his own command tent and ordered the legates still on his side to have nothing to do with the retreat. For want of other options, the remaining officers elected me to lead it."

"Which you did," Banri said.

"Which I did, albeit not in the fit of nerves Nakao-han would claim. We would all have fallen had we stayed where he wanted us to stand, believe me."

Again Banri said he did, having read the official dispatches. No one with a shred of sense could have failed to see that their position had been untenable.

"Anyway, you annihilated an army twice your size right after you evacuated," he said. "I read that you moved just ten kilometres away?"

"Ten kilometres can make all the difference," she responded. "As you know from the results of that battle. It was only a matter of finding the right place to mount a challenge, you see."

He looked at her keenly. "Does it never worry you?"

"Does *what* never worry me?"

"Being outnumbered. I think near every battle with you commanding has seen you undermanned compared to the enemy. Then there's Terantrum." A long and emphatic exhalation to convey what he thought of that engagement. "I'd have been plenty worried, I'm not ashamed to say."

"You get used to it," she said, smiling.

"I know *you* have," he said with candid admiration. "So after that battle and your victory, Uncle Yuzuru tried to regain control of the army and failed. What happened, really?"

She ran a hand through her waving golden hair and rolled crimson eyes to the ceiling.

"He got up on a dais in his whitest toga and verbally abused the rankers," she narrated. "Your uncle did about one of the worst things any commander can do, I fear. You can call the legionaries all sorts of names-you can even call them *cunni* as a joke and they love it. But you do not get up on a stand looking like you never raised a sword in your life and then call them beggars and cowards who never should have been accepted into the military. This, after they won a great victory! Oh, that uncle of yours really did himself no favours. It was painful to see."

Banri paused to imagine his uncle doing what she described and saw it in his mind clearly.

"They didn't hurt him, though, did they?" he said.

"No, not bodily. It truly was a nonviolent mutiny."

She blew out a breath that told of enduring exasperation over those events. Banri experienced a flash of insight that said she had actually tried to stop his uncle making that self-destructive speech. So much for Uncle Yuzuru's claims that the woman had been out from the start to destroy him!

"To the legions' credit, none of them tried to throw a thing at him," she said tiredly, continuing. "Other legions might have, you realise."

But those were good troops we had in Africa-the flower of our men and women! They simply let him run on until he lost his breath, then deputed their centurions to inform the tribunes and legates that they still refused to follow him, even if they were going to be executed for insubordination."

Banri nodded, guessing: "This was when Uncle Yuzuru finally gave in. He took the legates still loyal to him and holed up in Africa Province then, while you-what? Marched to combine forces with Rikiya Soujiro?"

"Yes," she told him. "Who was unfortunately felled by his illness before we could get there. Your uncle's letters made it to the Senate and delivered his 'official' version of the story, then persuaded the House to give me a mandate as a co-commander in the war. That much was generous of him, I admit."

"They all thought you would lose your next battle, is why they gave you that mandate."

She chuckled with genuine mirth. "I know it! Unhappily for them, I am not given to losing. Otherwise, they would have stripped me of the command instantly and summoned me home for a prosecution. Not for mutiny, mind: your uncle's *dignitas* could never have suffered an official admission that his army turned away from him in favour of someone my age."

Banri concurred. "It would have killed him forever in politics had it been confirmed. Even the rumour alone did him serious injury, actually."

"True. So that was why he bothered with that fiction about him and his legates being too ill to command. We all went along with it, of course-better to spare the legionaries the penalty for mutiny. At any rate, when your uncle's supporters lobbied to give me leadership of his troops, their ultimate goal was to get me into the Treason Court. Had I truly gone down in the defeat they forecast, they could have tried me for it and sent me to exile, while having another senator replace me."

Banri moved to refill his cup but she beat him to it. He thanked her

for the courtesy and drank deeply, licking his lips afterwards.

"It's astounding," he said, "how young you were when you found yourself in sole command of a war against a foreign enemy. And how quickly you concluded it! The House barely had time to decide on a replacement for Soujiro-san before you started racking up victory after victory. It does disgust me how some of them still maintain that Uncle and Soujiro-san did all the work and you just claimed their laurels. Uncle didn't do a thing-we all know it. And while Soujiro-san *did* win two battles, they were never ones of the importance yours had once you took over. He never even met an army led by King Jugurtha! Whereas you sent the Numidian king running to save his life in three consecutive engagements, and took every citadel he had that was worth owning."

He realised the red eyes were filled with laughter.

"What is it?" he asked, whereupon she chuckled quietly.

"I simply never thought," she said, "to hear Kanetsugu Ueda's son speaking well of me."

"I've spoken well of you before, though in private," he admitted. "I had to consider my father."

"I understand. You did your duty."

"Yes. And that's that too for my mother's side of the family."

She got to her feet and towered over him-even when he stood, for Banri was of only average height for a Himean male. Looking up at her he recalled something his own father had once said of the woman. What was it? That she was "disgustingly tall"?

Well, his father had only been of average height too, so he supposed that explained the disgust. Not so much his remark about her "hideous eyes", however. Once one got over the irises' strange colour, one saw that they were as beautifully formed as the rest of her: set apart the perfect distance, thick-lashed and lidded just enough to intimate flirtation. Hideous? Even had she still been a political opponent Banri would never have called her eyes that. How

people did like to blind themselves when it came to their enemies!

She asked if he would mind moving elsewhere for the rest of their talk. He acquiesced and she led the way out of her study. She told him to bring his cup, as she did hers.

"We have been cooped up in there too long," she said, guiding him with a gentle touch on his shoulder. "There is no one we need to worry about here anyway, so we can talk by the loggia balcony. At least we can get a little fresh air for a bit, if you do not mind. I have a fancy to take in a bit of the sea breeze."

He said he would welcome it and they set forth, ambling along unhurriedly. She invited him to tell her more about his current circumstances.

"I want to get married," he said, getting a grin.

"What happy news!" she replied. "To whom, if I may pose the question?"

"Shinji Terauchi."

Two fair eyebrows shot up.

"I know," he said quickly. "You're going to ask why I don't simply go ahead and marry him. He's wealthy enough to pay all my debts, in any case. Then I wouldn't need a patron."

The eyebrows lowered just enough to ask him why he did not take that course of action.

"I can't," he said. "I can't have him think I married him for his money."

Her face seemed to soften, its beauty losing some patrician hauteur in place of sympathy.

"I suppose you would not want anyone else to think it either?" she offered gently.

"Yes, but not just for my pride," he told her. "Though I do have my



pride, it's a given. But more important is that I don't want people to think Shinji's husband only married him because of his money. I couldn't do that to him."

She brought them to some couches on the loggia. Her steward materialised out of nowhere-an excellent fellow at his job, thought Banri-and offered them braziers as well as socks for warmth. They elected the braziers, as the loggia was airy enough not to be suffocated by the fumes.

"Very well," she decided after the braziers had been lit. "Pardon the frankness, Banri-han, but does Sosius-han know all the details of your debts?"

"Yes, but I don't mind frankness, Fujino-san. I can tell you what they are, before we go further."

He heaved a huge breath and looked apologetic, screwing up his courage.

"I'm three million sesterces in debt," he said, "so I'm afraid I'll have to ask for at least that much."

"I understand," she said, not even blinking at the amount he had stated. "I shall have him move five million into your bank this week. The deposit will be managed discreetly, so no one should suspect you of taking a bribe or anything untoward. Settle your debts first, then use the remainder to start your life over. Make some smart investments, such as buying land you can rent out or even some *insulae*. In fact, I shall have my banker help you there. Armitage-han has just been elected censor, and I believe she will be unforgiving about most senators in arrears. I want your position safe in the senatorial census from now on, so you need a steady source of income. If I understand you aright, you have no intention of using your beloved's fortune to save your own status. So you shall need a little seed money."

Banri was conscious of his face glowing with heat. Up, up went the blood from his neck, creeping over both cheeks and even his ears. Only iron control stopped his jaw falling to the floor. Two million more than he had expected! He would be able to turn over a new

leaf! Able to hold up his head when he proposed to Shinji! He would be able to start his family the way an upright man should. And his new patron would see to the rest of his career, he knew that. For Shizuru Fujino knew value when she saw it and would cultivate it with all of her considerable resources.

"I'll be your man for life, Fujino-san," he promised fervently.

She told him to use her first name.

"Since we are going to be friends anyway," she teased. "I am very happy to have you on my side next year, Banri-han, although that does not resolve the problem of my tribune of the plebs for this year."

"I thought you might say that," he told her, putting his cup on a table. "I have a suggestion."

She put her cup down as well and asked him to go on.

"My friend Fumi Katou was just elected a tribune of the plebs," he revealed to her. "If you can get her on your side, she'd be an ally worth having. Smart! Young and vicious, just the type we need."

"Katou..." she murmured. "Would she be related to my legate, Toshi Katou?"

"Yes, although it's not a close relation." He called up his knowledge of senatorial blood trees-which, like that of most others in his class, was considerable. "Fumi's from the branch of the family that's mostly country-dwelling, based in Picenum. Your legate's from the city-based branch, which has produced more senators but is considerably less well-off."

"Now I see. So how do you propose to get her on my side?"

"By giving her your support," he replied. "She isn't after money because she doesn't need it. The Picentine Katou are wealthy. What she wants is to make a reputation in the office, preferably as a defender of the people and the future of the Republic."

"To make a splash."

"Precisely. Fumi's ambitious, so she'll like the idea of taking you as a patron too."

He drew one short and stocky leg up on the couch, folding it for warmth as well as comfort. A good thing he had worn his thickest riding trousers! Ravenna was cold this time of year-though he noticed that it did not seem to bother his new patron, clad only in a dress without a wrap or toga. He supposed it was because of all that time in The North. Those fabulously fit arms held nary a chill-bump on them!

"The thing is, she'll like it better if you already have some ideas to help her," he went on. "If you have ideas for laws that could distinguish her time in the office, for example. She has some of her own, I know, but she told me she's still looking for something that can light a real fire under senatorial arses."

Shizuru emitted a chuckle. "Standard aims for a tribune of the plebs, then."

"Well, that's it. If you like the idea, just tell me and I'll talk to her for you."

She had been in the middle of reaching for her cup and froze all of a sudden, arm still outstretched.

"*Ecastor* !" she exclaimed. "I know how to do it! Can you get her to see me here, Banri-han? As soon as possible."

He said he would, asking what she had come up with. She said she would tell him if Fumi Katou agreed to it, and steered the conversation to other topics. They spent the rest of the time discussing the latest news in Hime, at least until her discreet steward appeared again.

"Is it time?" she asked, to which the man answered in the affirmative. "And the Dominilla?"

"She has returned and is changing, Domina," was the answer.

Shizuru dismissed him and turned to Banri, whom she invited to the dining room.

"We shall have some company for dinner, if you do not mind," she said. "I am hosting a foreign dignitary at the moment. I shall introduce you later."

They moved to the *triclinium*, where a rich repast had already been laid out. Banri's mouth watered as he took in the plates of assorted shellfish, sweet and fat sur-mullets dusted with herbs, and large crabs piled up to look as though they climbed each other. He and Shizuru seated themselves, whereupon some slaves offered water basins for their hands. That done, they started on their meal and continued their discussion: it was on the perpetuating debacle of Sicilia and its servile rebellion.

"I know that Keigo Onishi was recalled," she told Banri. "And that last year's junior consul, Dai Yoshida, was responsible. He got what he wanted, which was Onishi-han's command against the Sicilian slave rebels. He then proceeded to bungle that command. What I do not understand is how he can argue in a court of law that his bungling was Onishi-han's fault."

Banri gulped down an oyster hastily so he could answer.

"Didn't your sources tell you what Onishi-san did when he got his letter of recall?" he asked.

"If you mean his payment and demobilisation of his legions, I know," she replied with a smirk. For Keigo Onishi's act had tickled the vengeful spirit that also lived in her. By disbanding his troops and even paying them ahead of his successor's arrival, Keigo Onishi had denied his successor their experience and talents. Nor would it be a simple matter to recruit them again. Once a legionary received his pay, he tended to steer clear of the military recruiters until his purse was empty again. Onishi's successor would therefore have to find his own troops for Sicilia... and would have to put up with raw, adolescent soldiers, into the bargain!

"While that was undoubtedly a blow to Yoshida-han-the dunderhead probably thought he could take over someone else's army without even having to ask!-the fact remains that it was legal. It is a general's prerogative to disband his troops, save if another general has requested them formally or if the Senate itself has forbidden

disbandment," Shizuru said.

"Yes, that's true," Banri said. "Unfortunately, Onishi-san didn't stop at disbanding his legions when he was recalled. Before he disbanded them, he actually set them to removing every siege tower, flattening every rampart, and filling in every ditch they had dug around Triocala."

He picked up another oyster.

"You remember," he reminded Shizuru, "after Onishi-san pummelled the slave rebels at Scirthaea, the slaves ran to hide out in the fortress-town of Triocala. Onishi-san followed them there and besieged the place thoroughly, so much so that the rebels would have perished this year had it not been for Dai Yoshida's interference."

"No doubt *he* wanted to waltz in and claim the laurels after others did the real work!"

"Onishi-san thought so too, evidently. So instead of letting someone else claim the victory he had worked so hard for, he demolished it. Ripped out every bit of fortification his army had made to ensure the slaves stayed penned in Triocala. He also sailed back to Hime with all the provisions he had gathered for his army. He turned them in to the quaestors himself and said Yoshida-san probably wanted to find his own provisions anyway."

Shizuru shook her head but looked impressed.

"Which left Yoshida-han helpless as a babe when he landed on Sicilia," she said. "No wonder he is having Onishi-han prosecuted. Onishi-han destroyed his chance at stolen glory-beautifully, I daresay!"

Banri concurred.

"And since Yoshida-san is completely hopeless," he said, "Sicilia is controlled by the servile army again. They just walked out of Triocala and regrouped after Onishi-san left. Yoshida-san wasted a shocking amount of time before he recruited a fresh army! He must have

spent weeks sending letters to the House whining about how Onishi-san should be prosecuted and demanding that the House find him more troops. Since when does the Senate have to recruit soldiers for a general they've already appointed? He couldn't be bothered to take care of it himself!"

"Well, he did get an army together eventually. How has he been doing lately?"

"Miserably, from the last dispatch," Banri grunted, tearing through a crab. "The slaves trounced him in the last two engagements he fought. So he now has a record of three losses out of three encounters."

"Is he so poor a commander? I thought the slaves had already lost their best general."

"Ah, yes, about that."

He took a drink to clear his throat, then grinned with absolutely no humour.

"It turned out the slave general had not actually died in the battle with Onishi-san," he said. "The man had only fallen from his steed. Some slaves spirited him away from the battle at Scirthaea and nursed him back to health. He has since resurfaced and resumed leading the rebels. Since the quality of his opponent is now much lower than before, he's also enjoyed increasing fame and success."

Shizuru made a face in exasperation.

"This Servile War is rapidly devolving into the farcical!" she exclaimed. "Even with the drought over, Sicilia remains our breadbasket and should be regained as soon as possible."

At that point, the most beautiful foreigner Banri had ever seen walked in. No question she was a foreigner, with that alien eye paint and the gold decorations in her hair. Nose too small to be Himean, though it was of Praxitelean straightness; enormous eyes of unnatural green set deep in the orbits; astonishingly pale skin for her hair's blackness, the only colour atop the cheekbones and the

hollows beneath them; slender jaw and secretive mouth; small but strong chin. Wonderful!

"This is the Polemarch of Otomeia, the Princess Natsuki," his new patron told him. "Natsuki, the Senator Banri Ueda."

The young princess nodded but said nothing. He spoke a courteous greeting himself, having just realised she was the savage mistress of rumour. Ah, but she was different from what he had imagined! He supposed it was because so much of the gossip emphasised her barbarity. Yet he had seen far more barbaric women in the Subura's streets. And to add, he discovered some minutes later that she even spoke marvellous Greek!

"The Polemarch speaks Himean but favours this language," Shizuru revealed. "So if you are up to it, perhaps we could use it just for this evening."

Banri's Greek had been drilled in from youth by an excellent pedagogue; he agreed.

"I had no notion you had such a title," he admitted. "Does polemarch connote the same thing among your people as it does among the Greeks, Princess?"

She said it did, then told them not to mind her and continue with what they had been discussing before she joined them.

"It was actually the Servile War in Sicilia," Shizuru told her. "You know about it yourself, even up to the part where Keigo Onishi was replaced by Dai Yoshida. You do not know yet how that substitution worked out, however."

"I can speculate," the princess answered in her fine and low voice. "I know how the Northern Mission's first substitution worked out, you see."

Banri stared at the foreigner while his patron laughed. This was no barbarian, truly!

"As it is, poor Keigo Onishi may have the worse outcome of the two of us," Shizuru said.

She proceeded to fill in their Otomeian companion with the particulars Banri had given her earlier. Banri interjected only to add another detail or two. At the end, the foreigner looked understandably appalled.

"And this shall pass?" she enquired. "Keigo Onishi shall be prosecuted?"

"More than that," Banri answered. "He'll probably be found guilty. Yoshida-san's faction is eager to pin the blame on him for their man's mistakes. The president of the Treason Court is also one of their allies-our courts have senatorial presidents overseeing them, Princess."

"She knows that, Banri-han," Shizuru said gently. "What I think the princess finds difficult to believe is that this farce of a trial is permitted to continue when we all know Keigo Onishi is the wronged man in the story."

Banri nodded and sipped at his drink.

"Quite so," he said. "It can't be helped. Because of what Onishi-san did to his fortifications and military camp, Yoshida-san's allies can prosecute him for destruction of state property. But you never know. Maybe Onishi-san's supporters will be able to get him off yet."

It was clear the princess found that as reassuring as he did. Her scowl was still pretty, though, at least in his opinion.

"Meanwhile, that incompetent is let to chase his own tail in Sicilia," the woman reputed to have taken her as a lover sighed. "What are the odds of him being recalled too, in his turn?"

"The way things are going?" Banri said. "High, I'd say. But I wouldn't be surprised either to see him come sailing back of his own volition. He never wanted to fight a war, you see, and that's what he got. All he had intended was to finish out Onishi-san's siege and then claim the victory."

"Either way, I suppose Hime can expect no grain from Sicilia again this year."



"It looks like it, so we'll have to rely on foreign grain, which has the Treasury clerks nervous. But with any luck, Himemiya-san will have cleared enough of the seaboard to help our grain ships by then."

He was about to explain to the foreign princess again whom and what he meant by that when Shizuru stopped him with a grin.

"She knows what you mean," she assured Banri. "Although I am certain she appreciates your etiquette in trying to explain."

The princess smiled shyly at him as if to support that statement. He smiled back, now even more interested in his patron's not-so-barbarian mistress.

"The Princess follows Himean politics, then?" he prodded.

"Quite a bit," Shizuru answered for her sake. "She and I even saw Chikane recently at Argus."

"Oh, right. Was she there to raise a fleet?"

"She was indeed," she told him.

From there they launched into a discussion of Chikane Himemiya's antipiratical campaign, being sure to include the princess in their dialogue out of an inbuilt sense of good manners. She spoke little herself, but evinced a mind behind that face in the rare times she did. Banri for his part had already apprehended that the dinner was a test: Shizuru Fujino had invited him chiefly because she wanted to see how he would act around her mistress.

Well, he was not by nature a discourteous man, even had he disapproved of their affair. Would she cut him loose if he chose to be uncivil? He did not put it past her. People did say she made much of her foreign paramour. One only had to watch her. Her eyes constantly roamed the foreigner's face as if trying to commit to memory every detail. One would think they were only in the first stage of their connection! Yet Banri knew they were years into it already. Shizuru's conspicuous and powerful affection fascinated him almost as much as her affection's object did, for he recognised both as genuine rarities. So it was with regret that he took his leave

of them following the meal.

The princess excused herself while his patron saw him to the stables. The slaves who had accompanied him on this trip looked warm and happy: he guessed they had been entertained and fed by her household. Very well, going from the colour on their faces.

"You are certain you shall not stay the evening and leave instead on the morrow?" Shizuru asked. "It would not put us out in the least. We have rooms aplenty."

He demurred again, saying he had already rented lodgings in an inn a little way south. He also wanted to return to the city as soon as possible, so that he could finally settle matters with his creditors. And to see Shinji, for whom he had a question.

"Besides, I think I don't want to intrude on you and the Princess," he said in a burst of audacity.

He held his breath afterwards until Shizuru smiled at him, seemingly unruffled by the tease.

"You know who she is, then?" she asked.

"I do."

"And what do you think?"

His dark eyes held hers, opening wide as a way of answering.

"I think," he said, "you should have someone make her *imago* !"

That saw both of them laughing, his patron even harder than him.

"I am immeasurably pleased by our new friendship," she told him before he finally left. "It is not just the value you promise to me, but the fact that I have been given a chance to help someone of your ability and ancestry, Banri-han. I see clearly now that Hime would have been the poorer had you been ejected from Senate due to debt! Your father might not have appreciated my intervention had he been here, but we are the living and we need to live by our own creeds. Stand by me and I shall ensure you make it to the

consulship and beyond it. Through you I promise to keep the Ueda where they deserve to be."

# Chapter 77

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Contio** (s. L.), **contiones** (pl. L.) - Preparatory meetings convoked for assemblies (like the Plebeian Assembly) to discuss any of various comitial matters, including the promulgation of laws. In this setting, 17 contiones are required to pass before the vote that decides if proposed legislation shall become a bill.
2. **Curule chair** - This is the seat magistrates with **imperium** (s.v.) used. It was foldable and had an ivory veneer.
3. **Dictator** - An office rarely granted and granted only on special occasions, when Rome was considered to be in such grave danger or facing such peril that such a political animal was deemed necessary. The Dictator was appointed by the Senate and had a fixed/limited term; he could not be prosecuted for any of his actions afterwards (all other officials could be).
4. **Equestrians** (pl. E.), **Equites** (pl. L.) - Members of the Ordo Equester, called "**the knights**" as opposed to "the senators". Those of knight rank were usually as well-born as those of senatorial rank-in fact, they were often related-but the difference was that they chose not a political career but a commercial one. One may consider them the equivalents of the modern "business sector" of the community, with the senators being the "government or political sector", for a simplified but convenient categorisation.
5. **Hispania Citerior** (L.) - Nearer Spain, one of the Republican Roman/Himean provinces. Spain was divided into two at that time, with the nearer half being called Citerior and the other Ulterior.
6. **Imperium** (L.) - A complex idea, possible to express as the degree of authority owned by a magistrate of Rome/Hime. Governors and generals have imperium, but they lose it if they cross the sacred boundary of Rome and enter the city.
7. **Latifundia** (pl. L.) - Singular **latifundium**; a great estate often

*used for agricultural purposes.*

8. **Pilum** (s. L.), **Pila** (pl. L.) - *The name of the Roman military spear.*

9. **Publicani** (L.) - *Tax farmers who make contracts with the state (through the officials called "censors") to collect taxes from a province. For a more comprehensive explanation, see the 4th paragraph in the 4th part of **Chapter 13**. Note that "parts" of a chapter are separated from each other by the breaks.*

10. **Prorogue** - *To prorogue is to extend someone's term. Therefore, were Shizuru to be prorogued in her governorship, her gubernatorial tenure would be extended beyond the original five years granted her original mandate.*

11. **Tribune of the Plebs** - *Members of the **Plebeian Tribune**; to avoid confusion with other "tribunes", this office shall generally be referred to in full. Ten are elected yearly. Only plebeians can be elected into this college and only plebeians can vote for election of these officials. A tribune of the plebs could veto virtually any decision of fellow government officials (except for the Dictator). As they could enact or veto laws, they were important when it came to legislative action.*

12. **NOTE on gubernatorial excesses** - *Again for the sceptics. Cartoonishly evil as the character of one Himean administrator seems in this chapter, most of the deeds ascribed to him (slightly modified, in some cases) were actually attested of at least one Ancient Roman provincial governor. Said governor was famously prosecuted by arguably the greatest rhetorician/advocate of Republican Rome.*

13. **NOTE on the standing courts** - *For the historians, amateur and otherwise. Anachronisms and temporal rearrangements already abound in the story. Hence the seeming error of the standing courts being age-old establishments here even if some other synchronous events (e.g. Ariobarzanes's first ejection by Mithridates, the second servile war of Sicilia, etc.) would suggest that they should not yet exist. Simply suspend your knowledge of the historical timeline, as this story is not strictly historical anyway.*

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## ***Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae***

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Thirteen days later, the villa at Ravenna hosted another plebeian senator. Fumi Katou came to Shizuru at Banri Ueda's advice, eager to see if she could build an alliance. She was just as Banri described: smart, young, and terribly vicious. She had less of Banri's subtlety and polish but that was probably to be expected. The Katou were not yet as secure in their tenure of the Senate as the Ueda. They had only entered that august body in the last century and had not yet produced a consul. Fumi was intent on changing that.

"I can't say how happy I am to be here," she told Shizuru, who found this new acquaintance bracing. All that unvarnished, ruthless energy! "I tackled Banri to the ground when he invited me. Couldn't even believe you were back in Fuuka, in fact. Not a lot of people know back home, do they?"

"No, they do not," Shizuru said. "It would have served little purpose, so I did not bother to advertise it. I am returning to my province shortly."

"Then I really am glad you saw me before you did!"

"I am gratified by your enthusiasm, in return," Shizuru said pleasantly. "May I know what could have caused it?"

"All you've achieved!" Fumi grinned wide and fiercely. As she had a chip missing from one front tooth, it made her look like an unruly youngster. In actual fact, she was around Shizuru's age, which still made her one of the younger members of the Senate.

"I'm an admirer, Fujino-san," she declared. "Long have been. Both of your politics and military doings."

Shizuru smiled back. "A bit of a surprise you and Banri-han became friends, then!"

"You mean because of how he used to vote against you all the time in Senate?" Fumi pulled a face to show what she had thought of

that. "It was his folks working on him. Oh, he's a few traditional leanings too by himself, but he's still more than your average stick-in-the-mud conservative. He'd have voted for your motions some of the time if it hadn't been for that old man of his."

Shizuru said that could have been the case.

"What did he say when he conveyed my invitation?" she asked.

"He said you might want another tribune of the plebs this year to help you with some legislation."

One word begged attention: "He said 'another'?"

"Actually, no, now that I think about it. He didn't need to. Kenichi Sasaki is yours, isn't he?"

"What makes you think so?" Shizuru asked Fumi.

Fumi wriggled friskily in her seat.

"He vetoed the bill Yamamoto proposed that would have limited prorogued provincial governors' terms to five years at maximum," she told Shizuru. "There are only two provincial governors who would have been immediately affected. Midori Sugiura-who I've heard is eager to settle down as a simple overseas senator next year-and you, because of your special mandate for a five-year command. After all, if the bill had gone through, you couldn't be prorogued any further, since your original term had already hit the cap! Everyone knows Yamamoto's in the pay of the Traditionalists and that they were really targeting you with that bill. It seemed logical that the owner of the vetoing tribune would therefore be the Traditionalists' nemesis!"

She made a conciliatory gesture with her hands.

"Kenichi-san hasn't admitted to being your man," she added. "Even so, I doubt any of the archconservatives is fooled. But that's exactly why you bought him, eh?"

"How so?" Shizuru asked, enjoying herself.

"He's an obvious man, is Kenichi-san," Fumi stated with a shrug. "Steadfast, but not a law-making genius. Actually somewhat like the tribunes of the plebs the Traditionalists themselves are always getting. No earth-shakers among them! They don't need to be when all their masters require is for them to be able to pronounce the word 'veto'. All the Traditionalists want is to limit change, of course, so that's understandable. In your case, though, you wanted Kenichi-san precisely because you wanted a tribune who'd be obvious or visible."

She gave Shizuru a gleeful look and went on: "You always wanted to get another tribune of the plebs besides him this year, didn't you? You want someone to actually pass legislation for you, but you want it done-sneakily, I'd say is the word. If the Traditionalists are focused on Kenichi-san, they might not notice that another tribune is doing your work. That might be why you didn't try to get a tribune elected just for the job either. That would mean people would know from the start which tribune you were backing... as opposed to a tribune you just bought following his election."

Shizuru chuckled and refreshed the other senator's drink.

"Not bad at all," she said of the other's deductions. "Does this mean you want to be the tribune I buy to act for me invisibly?"

"You won't need to buy me with cash per se, though I'd like to know first what law you want passed so badly this year."

"I would rather tell you after you agree to act in my interests."

"Oh, I will!" the other exclaimed, looking astonished. "Regardless of whether or not I can come up with a way to get your legislation passed unnoticed, I'd still like to form an alliance-if you'll have me, Fujino-san."

A gleaming look, sent to Shizuru in earnest.

"I could use support," she confessed. "I want to reach the consulship."

Shizuru spoke favourably: "The first of your clan. You would ennoble



your family."

"Yes, I think I can make it."

"I believe you will, Fumi-han," Shizuru admitted. "Very well, then. I want a land bill."

Fumi's excitable, mischievous face fell.

"Aahh, that'll be grim," she said, which had Shizuru smiling. "I want to make the conservatives scream, but I don't want to get killed doing it! Land bills get the Senate up in arms."

"That they do," Shizuru said. "Why is that, you think?"

Fumi threw up her hands.

"Lots of reasons!" she exclaimed. "In your case, because it means a general looking to gift her veterans with a bit of land as a pension. Those soldiers end up thanking the general for that land, even if it technically comes from the state. They become beholden to one senator instead of being beholden to Hime. And the Senate already sees you as a threat these days. What more with several thousand veteran soldiers who believe they owe you for the lands on which they settle their families? That'd be like giving you a solid pool of adherents for a private army."

Shizuru concurred and told Fumi to continue, as she knew that was not the end of it. The other, traditional objection came from the Senate's view of the *ager publicus* or Hime's public land. This was land held in a communal ownership by the Himean State and People. The government leased it to private individuals or corporations, with the rents from that going to the public purse.

"There's all the equestrians and Himean companies who make money off the *ager publicus*," Fumi said. "Hime leases tracts of it to them for a nice price and the businessmen make even more money in their turn, often by running the properties as *latifundia*. The policymakers, both among the Senate and the equestrians, don't like any law that tries to give away public land! It's not even just that the State makes money off it. It's mostly because it goes against

tradition. Some of the dyed-in-the-wool conservatives even say it's against our unwritten constitution!"

"True enough," Shizuru told her. "So what, perhaps, if the land bill I wanted was not phrased as one of 'giving away'?"

Fumi stared at her, intrigued. "What d'you mean?"

"The land bill I want passed has to do with my veterans, as you guessed," Shizuru answered. "I want land for them in the territories I currently govern and am opening up."

"As I said."

"Yet I do not actually need to grant my veterans land right now. My command is not finished, and if I have anything to do about it, will not be finished next year either. This means my soldiers are not about to be discharged soon. Hence all I really want, at this point, is to know that the land I want to give them when they are discharged is still going to be there for me to give, far in the future."

She waved her hand to forestall Fumi's protest, knowing what it would be.

"Yes, yes," she said. "I can set aside the land for them now, being governor of the province! I can nominate it as part of Hime's new *ager publicus* in Septentria and the Senate will ratify that decision without any hitches. My problem is what happens after. I need it to stay unused, even if it is part of the *ager publicus*, at least before I can get my veterans to settle on it. I want to know it shall not be bought or taken on lease by some knight-businessman with strong senatorial supporters the moment my governorship of Septentria is over."

The other woman had nodded rhythmically throughout this speech.

"That it'll be untouchable until you can push the legislation that will actually grant it to your soldiers," she rephrased for Shizuru.

"Precisely."

"I see." Some moments of silence, during which Fumi drummed her

fingers on her knees. "I see. Yes, that makes it different."

"And far more doable, think you not?"

"Oh yes." She looked up from her study of her feet, face animated. "Yes, I think I can do it! And I can even do it in a way that won't make anyone think it's you behind me. Just tell me which territories they are, Fujino-san. I'll push a bill in the Plebeian Assembly that says these unimportant, none-too-attractive lands should nonetheless be set aside and saved for Hime's future, in case we ever need them for gods-know-what-reason. When I say they should be saved, I mean just that: bound by legislation in a way that prevents their sale or lease until such time as new and specific legislation would permit it."

She actually giggled from her excitement, although her chip-toothed grin this time was more feral than youthful.

"I won't need to say much more than that, you know," she told Shizuru. "The policymakers like anything that seems to add to the *ager publicus*, even if it also makes that addition technically unusable. What matters is that it's addition, *not* subtraction ! What's more, they'll let it pass specifically because I'll seem to be stepping on your toes with the bill. They won't suspect a thing!"

Shizuru laughed appreciatively.

"It shall seem that way indeed," she said, "what with you legislating to make some tracts of Septentrian land untouchable instead of letting me grant them on lease to my equestrian clients. Yes, good thinking! The conservatives themselves shall rush to get it approved, just to annoy me."

The other senator rubbed her hands together.

"Oooh, this ought to be fun!" she hooted. "I'd still rather put something forward that'll have the House squawking. But this is nice work too. Sticking it to them without them knowing it."

"Have you any laws you yourself want to put forward?"

"I've a few," Fumi responded, and described them. As Shizuru had

suspected, they were all about righting wrongs or oversights in the state. A bill proposing stricter penalties on bribery during elections-that would be vetoed given how many senators bribed, but it would get attention. A bill banning those convicted of electoral corruption from again seeking public office-that might be allowed to pass, as it required one to be found guilty of bribery first before being subject to the punishment. A bill forbidding omnibus laws, which meant unscrupulous lawmakers would no longer be allowed to tack together unrelated matters into one piece of legislation-that would probably pass, being of patent good sense. All frank and altruistic legislation! All in keeping with Fumi's character too, Shizuru decided.

"No real zingers yet, though, as you can see," Fumi said afterwards. "Got an idea for me?"

"I do, actually," Shizuru said. "But it is not strictly legislation."

She explained what she wanted from the other woman, who listened with mounting interest. They spent another hour cloistered in Shizuru's study, after which, a couple of hours past noon, Fumi decided to take her leave. Pleased by the work they had concluded, Shizuru provided the woman with a letter of introduction to another senator: Urumi Himemiya-Kanzaki, who would be an excellent acquaintance for any ambitious tribune of the plebs. Chikane's cousin would also supply Fumi with support for the other task Shizuru had assigned her.

Re-entering her villa after waving off Fumi, Shizuru found her lover in the atrium, along with their giant cat. The younger woman stopped walking and waited for her, head held up for a kiss.

"Good?" she asked afterwards, to which Shizuru assented. She brushed her lips against the taller woman's again before pulling away. "You asked not this one to dinner."

"I would have," Shizuru said. "But she arrived so early that we finished early as well. At any rate, she was eager to get back to the city in order to prepare for our plans."

"She will be an ally?"

"Yes."

"You will tell me of your plans?"

"Don't I always?" Shizuru chuckled. "I would like to hear what you think of them, after all. But first, do you feel up to taking a walk? Not too far, only around the villa. I feel like stretching my legs."

"We will take Shizuki?"

"No, she shall only get wet outside." Shizuru bent down to scratch the panther's head. "Let her stay here and lounge! This pampered beast will only be too happy to nap as we walk."

Natsuki agreed and asked if they should go already. Shizuru advised her to change her clothing first, in favour of something more covering.

"It is cold outside," she said with a grin.

"This cold is nothing," Natsuki said in lofty dismissal.

Shizuru smothered the laughter and wondered how to tell her. She finally settled for the direct route: "Indeed, but you may want to wear a scarf or something that covers your neck and shoulders."

Two green eyes studied her face with sudden suspicion. Then the girl took the hint. She rushed out of the room, bolting for the gallery and the private section of the villa. Her pet followed her at a lope. Shizuru herself kept up a casual stroll, humming one of the tunes her buglers played on the march. A minute later, her mistress hobble-hopped out of their bedroom and joined her on the peristyle loggia. To Shizuru's amusement, all the slaves in the vicinity suddenly found reason to slip out of sight. Even faithful Hermias abandoned her, the lout!

"Shizuru!" Natsuki cried, actually shaking a little. Her face was full of blood. "You did not tell!"

"Why should I need to?" Shizuru said with authentic surprise. "I thought you would see it in the mirror for yourself this morning. A pity I overestimated your vanity. You do not look into the mirror

often, do you, *meum mel*?"

"Others have seen!" A purple look, followed by a flutter of one hand to indicate the red marks all over the fair shoulders and neck.

"Others have seen this!"

"What others? Since these are only a day old, that would only be our servants."

"Still!" A fist was shaken in the air. "Look at me!"

Shizuru hummed again and issued an apology. It failed to placate her lover, however, who noted that she still had not stopped smiling.

"Well, I *am* in a good mood," Shizuru said. "Anyway, I did warn you off from displaying them to anyone outside of the villa just now. That was why I said you should change your clothing, *mea vita*. Now forgive me if I failed to inform you properly before you awoke. I genuinely thought you would see it yourself in the mirror. Come, please, if you change now you can cover them. I want to take a walk while the sun is still high up enough to make the wind a bit warmer."

It took some more cajoling, but she eventually persuaded the younger woman to do what she wanted. While Natsuki changed clothes with the aid of her servants, Shizuru tendered a possible excuse she could give.

"I do not see why it matters so when no one else has seen or will see them," she said, watching the pale skin disappear under more clothing. "But if someone does and asks you what happened, you could always say you were attacked by lampreys while swimming."

Natsuki was still miffed and scowled at her.

"No one sensible swims in winter," she said. "I was attacked by a *senator*."

"Good luck getting redress for that here," Shizuru quipped. She threw an arm around the panther sitting on the couch with her and got a furry snuggle back. "Senators get away with murder in Fuuka, remember? Himean justice at its best."

"Justice. Hah!" A moment to fiddle with a hem. "What is the other thing? What you say could have attacked me?"

"Lampreys."

"What is that?"

"Lampreys is plural. Lamprey is the singular."

"What are they?" Natsuki amended.

"They are fish rather like eels, but they lack jaws. Round, toothy mouths, bodies about this large." She illustrated with her hands.

"They do not bite so much as suck, or rasp. Have you none in the rivers or seas of your lowland provinces?"

The other was thoughtful at this new puzzle. She taxed her servants, but the other northerners professed to being unfamiliar with the stated creature as well.

"Lampreys," she said. "I think I have not heard of such fish attacking anyone back home."

"Well, I do not think they attack people all that often, truth be told."

"And you would put the blame for your acts on them," Natsuki sighed. "I pity this fish."

"You might not if you saw it."

"Let me see it?"

"I shall send to the town to see if the fishmongers have some. Now are you done?"

She was, and their servants put their cloaks on them as they walked out. Shizuru was cautious as ever and had several brawny slaves along with Natsuki's body carrier follow them. They were far enough to let Natsuki feel comfortable with an occasional nuzzle, however.

"So," Natsuki said, once they were some metres from the villa. "Tell me of this new ally?"

Shizuru did just that, describing her conversation with Fumi Katou in detail. Before telling Natsuki about the last thing she and Fumi had discussed, however, she asked first if the younger woman recalled the issue brought forward recently by some clients from Hispania Citerior.

This was yet another of the reasons Shizuru had decided to journey south for the winter. Towards the last quarter of the past year, she had received missives from clients in both of the Spains. They had reported colossal peculations and villainies committed by the governor of the nearer of the two Spanish provinces.

A measure of corruption was expected of every Himean provincial governor, to be sure. It was one of the ways ex-praetors and ex-consuls made money for themselves after their years in office. A canny governor could pinch a little off the top of provincial moneys. He could take bribes in exchange for granting powerful entities some small favour or concession. He could be paid by Himean usurers—usually also the *publicani* for that province—to help collect outstanding sums by sending troops to intimidate debtors. He could offer communities or corporations tax exemptions for a cost. He could even sell the citizenship to rich non-Himeans, although in moderation. If the province involved had barbarian tribes, he might also fight some battles and collect booty.

The problem was that some governors did not stop at the typical corruptions. The past year's governor of Hispania Citerior, for example, had gone above and beyond his predecessors. His list of peccadilloes included such beauties as demanding more of a farmer in taxes than the man's farmsteads produced every year and condemning to death a prominent local who refused to yield up his only daughter for bedtime amusement. He pillaged works of art from a dozen temples and even from private collections. The latter he managed by having legionaries grab the object, then forcing the owner to write a bill of sale that saw priceless sculptures "sold" for a handful of coins.

Disobedience to his whims he treated with predictable malevolence. A man was scourged across the eyes—not even the back!—for voicing a critique of his administration. In one memorable case, he strapped a local magistrate on top of a bronze horse statue in the town



square during winter. This was after the town's magistrates refused to turn over a work of art adorning one of their public buildings. As the magistrate was stripped naked before being bound to the bronze horse, it took little time for the locals to cave. They gave the governor the masterpiece he coveted the moment they saw his victim's flesh start congealing to the bronze.

"The man was a rare villain," Shizuru told Natsuki. "Would you believe that during one banquet given by an influential native in his honour, he ordered his troops to purloin all the gold plate on the table before they had even finished the first course?"

Natsuki squeezed her arm and turned pink with outrage.

"But how can he do this?" she demanded huskily. "Why did no one stop him?"

"For one, because he was the governor," Shizuru sighed. "We Himeans have few checks upon governors when they are still in their provinces. It is only after our governorships are done-and our *imperium* is no longer-that we can be brought to trial for any crimes we might have committed."

There was another squeeze on her arm.

"This should not be," Natsuki muttered. "Shizuru."

"I know." Shizuru smiled down ruefully at her lover. "Little wonder I started getting letters about his doings as early as the middle of last year. More of my clientele is actually in Hispania Ulterior, but many of those knew of what was taking place in their sister province. Some have family in Citerior who have been affected by this scoundrel as well."

"Will other senators get complaints?" Natsuki asked her. "Maybe those with clients there too?"

"Yes, I expect so."

"Then how could he do this?" Natsuki hissed. "Does he not have other senators to fear?"

"Not as many as you think," Shizuru admitted. "The truth is that most senators do not like to convict their fellows, especially for things like these. That is partly because most of them practise extortion themselves, of course, although not to this degree. Then there is the fact that our ranks tend to protect each other. For the conservatives, for instance, it would generally be deplorable to see a senator convicted on charges of extortion. This is because they see it as an admission to the world that the Senate is just as fallible, as weak, as corrupt as the average man on the street."

She looked at the white-laced cerulean of the Adriatic below them and pointed out two ships scudding on it, bearing south. Natsuki watched them avidly.

"This corrupt governor we are discussing also happens to be a Sumio Fujimoto," she continued. "Brother to Nana Fujimoto, who is married to the current junior consul. One of the praetors this year is also a cousin named Minako Fujimoto."

Natsuki looked away from the ships and made a small sound of comprehension.

"Now then, a minor digression," Shizuru said. "You already know that the praetors are the magistrates who preside over our standing courts. Did I ever explain to you how praetors get assigned to specific courts?"

"Mm. You said they draw lots."

"Indeed. Well, the consuls are usually the ones who perform that lottery. It tells you which officials could most easily rig the drawing, think you not?"

Natsuki stared at her following the insinuation and guessed at it: "You mean... Minako Fujimoto is president of the Extortion Court this year?"

"Exactly."

This so incensed Natsuki that she tossed her head with a loud "Grrr!"

"So you see why our dear corrupt governor felt relatively secure," Shizuru explained. "He is very well-connected, even without all of his relatives occupying those positions this year. I do think he banked on his brother-in-law being one of the consuls for this year—a good wager, you know, since said brother-in-law comes from another august family and also happens to have a good military record. After that it was just a matter of ensuring someone sympathetic got the Extortion Court's presidency. With a cousin happily available as one of the elected praetors, well... you see where I am going. That promised him safety for this year, which is technically when he would be most vulnerable."

"Then," her still-disgusted lover offered, "why do your clients not use another court? Not every court's president is corrupt, maybe?"

Shizuru tutted a little.

"First, let us be clear that they are not all my clients," she said fastidiously, which got a brief smile from the woman beside her. "As for why the Spanish plaintiffs should not lodge their case in some other court than the Extortion one, it is because the majority of the charges fall under extortion. Were they to use another court instead, they would have to dramatically shorten the list of offenses. Even if they secure a conviction, it would then be for a much lighter penalty."

"But-but then! He shall go unpunished!"

"Indeed. Yet senators get away with murder, as I told you earlier."

Natsuki stopped walking and faced her. Shizuru ran her palms over the fine black hair, holding it out of the pretty face sulking in dejection.

"You can do nothing?" the young woman asked, her large eyes sad and confused. "You will do nothing for this?"

Shizuru smiled soothingly at her lover, whose own noble sense of honour was predictably distraught by so much wrongdoing. Oh, how she looked at you! As though you were the only hope, the one light on a dismal and dark horizon. Who could stand to disappoint anyone

who looked at them thus?

"I will do something," she said. "Some of my own clients were affected. Of course I will."

Some of the sadness in those eyes left, to her relief. A slender hand held one of her own, still stroking the dark hair.

"This is why I brought it up while we were talking about Fumi Katou," she said. "She was seeking something that would gain attention while tweaking conservative noses. I advised her that prosecuting Hispania Citerior's former governor would be the answer. But, given the man's connections, doing so in the standard procedure would be little more than symbolic. There would be little chance of getting a conviction for him in the Extortion Court, as you yourself guessed."

Natsuki nodded her head up and down eagerly, waiting for it.

"So, instead of through the courts," Shizuru said, "I suggested that she arraign him instead in the Plebeian Assembly."

The Otomeian frowned and asked if that was possible.

"The Assemblies have always had the power to hear trials," Shizuru told her. "We have not done it in a long time, is all. We established our current standing courts-the ones for bankruptcy, extortion, embezzlement, and the like-about four decades ago. Since then, practically all our trials have been conducted in them. But before that, we had *ad hoc* courts, or if a case was important enough, the Assemblies."

Natsuki asked if the institution of the standing courts had not formally removed the power of trial from the Assemblies.

"No," Shizuru said, pleased by the legal intelligence of the question. How quickly Natsuki was learning her world! "The laws establishing our standing courts actually never repealed the Assemblies' rights to hear trials. So Fumi-han can arraign Fujimoto-han there, and probably for all of his misdemeanours, if she phrases the charge broadly. Charging him with gross mismanagement and corrupt administration, for example, will let her cover the gamut of his sins

from murder to extortion. She would have had to restrict herself to only one type of crime had she used the regular standing courts instead, given their limits in scope."

Natsuki absorbed this for a moment. Shizuru pulled her nearer, enjoying her warmth through the layers of linen and wool.

"So," the younger woman finally said, "the, ah, conservatives, they cannot stop the trial?"

"Certainly not, as it is perfectly valid. Well, they could try to have one of their tribunes of the plebs veto it, I suppose. But not even tribunes of the plebs can veto trials without facing serious hostility. Especially when it is an extortion trial, which the Plebs love to watch. I also sent Fumi-han to solicit support from Urumi-han, Chikane's cousin. She will work up so much support for the trial beforehand that no conservative tribune of the plebs will dare a veto for fear of their lives. I think it safe to say the trial will happen, despite all the Fujimoto connections."

"You think he will be convicted, maybe?"

"In the Plebeian Assembly? There is a good chance of it, although it shall depend on several things. The political climate, for example. The abilities of the prosecuting and defence advocates too."

Natsuki linked their arms together again and they resumed their walk.

"Fumi Katou will prosecute?" she asked Shizuru. "She is good?"

"Yes, she will, and I admit I know not. But I have a strong feeling Chikane's cousin Urumi-han shall join the arraignment, so that should make a good case for the prosecution. Urumi-han is never short of brilliant."

"And the defence?" Natsuki asked.

"Well, I think we can take it for granted that it shall be impressive," Shizuru allowed with a twist of the lips. "Sumio Fujimoto shall get the best defence advocates he can find to speak for him. Given all the pieces of art he allegedly stole, it shall not be difficult to fund a

defence panel!"

She explained to Natsuki that advocates in Hime were not supposed to be paid for their service. Canny advocates had long gotten round that rule by soliciting "gifts" from clients instead. It was par for the course to grant an advocate some small piece of artwork that he could peddle for a cash sum later. The better and more august the advocate, the more expensive the artwork tendered.

Shizuru herself had been offered a Protogenes by one senator during her courtroom years. Despite her youth, sheer oratorical skill had made her one of the greatest advocates, hence the value of the offering. Since she had disliked that senator, however, she had declined; it contributed that she had known him guilty of all charges as well.

"Most of the conservatives will take his side," she told Natsuki of Fujimoto. "Again, for the reasons I mentioned earlier. He also has blood ties to some Traditionalists, including Sergay Wang. Wang-han will not be able to act as a defence advocate here, however. He is a patrician and will not be allowed to address the Plebeian Assembly."

"Then," she added, "there is the strength of the evidence Fumi-han can furnish. I shall send some letters to Hispania later that may aid her in obtaining all the records and witnesses she needs. The faster she gets it all together, the sooner the trial can be held."

Natsuki asked how long collecting evidence could take.

"That shall probably take two months, if she is swift," she determined, remembering her own months of research for cases she had defended or prosecuted in her youth. "And I think I have the measure of Fumi-han right when I say she shall not let the grass grow under her feet."

"Then," said her lover, "this man will pay, maybe?"

"I and my allies shall certainly do what we can to see to it."

"Good," Natsuki said simply, the word as strong as it was

meaningful.

They walked a little further before turning back, chatting on smaller matters as they did. An hour after their return Shizuru got word that the kitchen staff had procured the fish she had requested. She brought Natsuki down to the kitchens to see the lamprey. She picked it up herself and beckoned her lover nearer for a look but the Otomeian objected. The girl appeared put off by the animal's disc-like mouth and the rows of fangs stuffed into it.

"That is not a fish!" she yelped, which had Shizuru laughing so hard she nearly dropped the creature. Later at dinner, Natsuki even had to be persuaded to try the dish made from the lamprey. She pronounced it tasty enough, although her lover noted that she took no more bites after the first.

"Did it unnerve you so, its looks?" Shizuru asked the girl later in their bed, turning her over and working at her shift. "I never thought to see you quail at a creature, Natsuki."

Natsuki grabbed her hand.

"I did not quail," she snarled.

Shizuru smiled and said that was right.

"I used the wrong word," she said, freed to complete her task. She moved down for a taste of what belonged to her. "All you did was give a little tremble."

Natsuki was gasping so much she could barely speak the protest: "Did... not."

"If you say so. But you will now."

She brought her through several quakes and suffered two of her own. Afterwards she lay back on a pile of pillows and allowed Natsuki to clean the sweat off her. As the younger woman did so with her tongue, however, there was very little actual cleaning that progressed.

"We go back north soon," Shizuru told her. "So you should do

everything you want to do here before then. Is there anything I can help with?"

Natsuki paused her ministrations and hummed into Shizuru's collar.

"There is anything we have not seen yet?" she asked, which Shizuru denied. She had taken the Otomeian to see everything there was to see in the area. As for doing everything there was to do in the area, they had done that as well, with one exception. Natsuki had wanted to ride around the Fuukan countryside but Shizuru put an embargo on that. Natsuki's steeds were not with them and she did not want the polemarch trying her side-saddle mount on an unfamiliar horse. Though that had distressed Natsuki a little, she had surrendered the point: no horse could have thrown her when she was still whole, but things were different now.

"Ravenna is a bit on the idyllic side," Shizuru said. "Besides, all of Fuuka is quieter in the winter. The only significant festival at this time is the Parentalia, and as you saw, it is not exactly known for jollification."

Natsuki purred: she had found said festival interesting, even so. Parentalia was when Himeans celebrated their departed ancestors, often by making offerings of garlands, wine, and bread to their tombs. As Shizuru's family sepulchres were far to the south, she made do with an offering to a shrine she had set up within the villa. Natsuki had helped her weave the garlands and place them on the shrine. She had also let Shizuru persuade her into making a shrine for her own clan.

"Still," she said now. "It was interesting. And the quiet is nice."

"Yes, it is that." Shizuru swept a palm over a slender white shoulder. Natsuki was tracing one of her breasts carefully. "Well, I am going down to town again tomorrow. Come with me? We can have another look at the shops and the market."

"Mmhm. I will go."

Later she felt a ticklish sensation on one arm and looked down. Natsuki's head lifted and showed that the younger woman had



sucked a red mark over the taut skin of a bicep. Shizuru lifted an eyebrow when Natsuki smirked.

"Now you have one too!" she exulted, proud of the achievement. "Hrrm. You hide that!"

Shizuru studied the mark.

"Why should I?" she asked. "I care not if people see it. It looks well done, by the way. Top marks for you there, *mea vita*. "

The Otomeian was astonished.

"But it is-you will not hide it?" she asked.

Shizuru said again that she would not.

"It is not as though anyone would wonder who was responsible, anyway," she added. "If I turn up with marks of this sort, everyone knows only you could have been the cause."

"Only I."

"Of course."

The green eyes shot wide, panic bright in them.

"Shizuru, hide it!" she said, which had Shizuru gaping at her in astonishment. "You must hide it!"

" *Why ?!*"

"Because-because-everyone will know!"

"That you did it?"

"Yes!"

Shizuru gave her a look that asked what was wrong with that.

"Of course they will know! Did you forget you are my only lover?" she asked with mild exasperation. She already knew what was the problem, of course: it was her foreign mistress's prudish nature,

which leapt out at the oddest moments even at this stage. She rolled her eyes at it as the girl grabbed her arm and rubbed at the mark with a thumb as though that could remove it.

"I do not see," she sighed, "why it should trouble you to have people see such a mark of your creation. Even without seeing such reminders, a lot of people know that we sleep together! I swear, Natsuki... you can be a terrible prude at times. People know you touch me too, for god's sake. So what else do you want me to say if I meet someone ignorant enough to ask who gave me this mark?"

"Maybe," the other suggested anxiously, still scrubbing, "you can say a lamprey?"

Shizuru covered her face with one hand and cried with laughter.

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Shizuru did not stay long enough to see Fumi Katou's agrarian law go through the preliminary *contiones*. She trusted in her new ally to deliver as promised, and herself decamped with her army household to make their way back north overland.

"And just in time," Shizuru sighed, eager now to get back to her gubernatorial work. "I love the countryside as much as anyone, but were we to stay there any longer I would have started writing eclogues, by god."

A tickled Natsuki had asked if she possessed any talent for poetry.

"I compose poems about you all the time," had been the response. "I just never show them to people because your prudish taste would deem them too racy for public consumption."

Known among her peers for her speedy travel, Shizuru could have easily chosen to journey back at her usual tearing hurry. She could have left her mistress and household staff to follow at a much more comfortable pace. But Shizuru detested being away from her lover, especially if the latter would be on the road instead of stationary during the separation. So she made arrangements at first for a slower journey than normal. To her surprise, however, it was Natsuki

who demanded she change them out for speedier ones. They thus made good time going back to her province. If the polemarch suffered a little from the pace, she took great pains that Septentria's governor would not notice.

While they were still in the upper part of Fuuka, they received a missive from Shizuma. The senior legate reported that all the invitations Shizuru wanted sent had gone out. These were to the first Septentrian Conference she had arranged for April. The conference would run for a week and would be held at Gorgo, where the senior legate had been preparing for it all winter.

Shizuru had no real expectations of trouble for the conference but knew it better to be prepared for anything come the springtime. After getting Shizuma's letter she asked her travelling companion, the polemarch, to send her own. It was to Gorgo, where the Otomeian Lupine Division was bivouacked; the polemarch ordered them to meet their party at Pascera. When they arrived at the site, they found an unexpected surprise: Natsuki's fellow princess was among them.

"I've come to request release of the Otomeian infantry," explained Alyssa. "I've just received word from Rilkian-that's my sister, the regent of Valens-that the Mugilones have banded with the Helisii, the Harii, and a bunch of others to attack our lands. It sounds serious. Rilkian, you know."

"The Princess Rilkian does not often send for help," Natsuki expounded to a carefully listening Shizuru. "Her army is very experienced. They have fought those tribes, the ones Princess Alyssa mentioned, for many years."

"So I'd like to send our foot over there to help, and stay on the safe side." Alyssa faced the Himean general. "I don't think you need them here anymore, anyway. You already own the Mentulaean Empire, or what used to be that."

Shizuru agreed and asked if Alyssa would lead the reinforcements herself.

"Only part of the way," Alyssa said, her hair even yellower than

usual because she had woven large blue and red beads into some of her braids. Shizuru thought the ornamentation made her seem fiercer instead of less so. "My second, Baroness Miyu, will lead them the rest of the march. I'm only headed east to go to the capital."

"Please send my warmest regards to your father," Shizuru replied.

Alyssa asked the polemarch if she had any messages of her own to convey.

"I only just wrote to His Majesty," Natsuki answered. "Before we left Fuuka."

That got a curious gleam to the cool eyes, whose owner asked how she had liked her holiday there.

"It was nice," the other princess said, before announcing: "I rode a ship."

Two pairs of golden eyebrows arched at the abrupt disclosure. Alyssa turned out to be as tolerant of Natsuki's petty eccentricities as Shizuru herself, however: she asked about the experience with courteous seriousness.

"It was very fast," the polemarch said with pride.

"That does sound nice," was Alyssa's solemn reply. She asked her cousin to tell her about it when she returned and said a farewell. As was the custom for friends among their people, she kissed her cousin on the lips to do so. She ignored Shizuru's malignant glance after that.

Natsuki did not.

"You kiss your cousin and Chikane on the mouth too, Shizuru," she reasoned when Alyssa had left.

"My cousin and Chikane have not asked me to marry them," was the withering response.

They made it to Gorgo right before the Ides of April, which gave Shizuru only one more week before the first Septentrian

Conference. During this time she explained to her staff and legates exactly how she wanted the conference to proceed.

"The conference will run seven days," she told them. "The foremost intention is to reconcile our guests to the new shape of their future. On the first day we shall commence with a welcoming oration that I shall deliver. This shall be followed by formal introductions-announcements-of the titles and names of all those present. We can have one of the tribunes handle the list, Shizuma, but be sure to introduce the Himean officers present first. Our guests must know with whom they are dealing."

"Shall you need an introduction too before your oration?" Shizuma asked, half-teasing.

"No, I think I can manage, thank you," Shizuru replied. "Be sure to omit me from the later introductions as well. I am not officious enough to demand a second announcement of my name after having already delivered one."

"After the introductions have concluded," she continued. "I shall outline in brief what the conferences are meant to achieve. Specifically, to convey to them what we expect of them in exchange for them being allowed to keep the privileges of their aristocracy and local leadership. I shall also make it clear that the conferences are bilateral. In other words, they can use the days to lobby for certain changes or even judgements they feel would be of benefit to the province. They may ask us for clarifications on certain matters. They may even debate previous decisions I made shortly following Terantrum, provided they do so in an orderly and logical way."

"Oh, I see!" said Kenji, whom she had summoned from Atinu Camp to be part of the talks. He had brought fellow legate Toshi Katou with him. "What you want, Fujino-san, is basically a blown-up version of a town leaders' council, where the magistrates determine resolutions and bring in other big stakeholders to contribute their mite. Almost like a town senate."

"Albeit under a Dictator," Shizuma jibed.

"A Governor, if you please," her cousin said with a lift of the

eyebrow. "But yes, you are getting the idea. The high barons will function as high magistrates of their lands more publicly than ever. This conference is chiefly intended to ensure those high magistrates see eye to eye. Part of this is to distance them from their old imperial culture, take note. An empire is supposed to think as one and therefore acts as one. This was why there were members of nearly every tribe in their late king's imperial armies."

She smiled, perhaps a little mischievously and went on: "But if we get them used to thinking and speaking of themselves blatantly as individual tribes in one shared province, we may break them of the old imperial attitude faster than we could through war. With the imperial attitude will go the imperial loyalties. This will make it harder than ever for reactionary powers to foment another rebellion for resurrecting the empire."

She let them murmur among themselves before continuing.

"We shall very likely have to settle grievances too between our many aristocrats. Even if I do want a sense of distinction cultivated between the tribes, I do not want outright animosity! You are not the only legate, Cousin, who has written to me this winter of squabbles between our local leaders. Toshi-han here even said there were squabbles between those of different territories?"

Toshi said this was true.

"The baron of Asella's saying the baron of Diomatrix has moved the territorial markers between their lands," he said to the roomful of officers. "To Asella's detriment."

It was Miyuki Rokujou who answered: "What does Diomatrix say?"

"Diomatrix's baron says he only did so to make it easier to defend his land," Toshi said. "The markers in dispute used to be on a plain. Diomatrix moved them to a stream. Since he'd allied with us earlier than Asella, he's saying it was his prerogative to look out for his people while their neighbour was still fighting for the empire."

"But Asella's allied with us too now, so why not move the markers back?"

"Because Asella allied with us only after the Battle of Terantrum, which was many months after Diomatrix had. Diomatrix's lord says his longer faithfulness to us deserves at least that small expansion of land as a reward."

"It grows more complicated," the senior legate interjected, "because Asella and Diomatrix belong to two different tribal peoples of the Mentulaeans."

"Septentrians," Shizuru corrected.

"My apologies, Septentrians. Asella is a Carsinian township whereas Diomatrix is an Aexellian one. They can't go to a higher-ranked aristocrat to adjudicate the grievance because their superiors are of two different tribes."

"In fact," Toshi summed up, "if the argument is allowed to go that high, it might even blow up into a conflict between the Carsinii and the Aexelli. There's a lot of tension between their subgroups right now because of what the Carsinii perceive as Aexellian celerity in profiting from their early betrayal of the old empire during the war."

"This sort of thing is natural when a country undergoes the shift we have caused," Shizuru sighed to her officers. "Septentria and its political structures are still being reshaped. To be precise, the *superstructures* are being reshaped. It is the foundations we are seeing in this squabble, the internecine tensions that have long existed between the former empire's tribal subgroups. I predict they shall come to the fore often in the conference, especially as we have just removed the higher power that used to suppress them."

"Exposed the antipathies between the tribes, you mean?"

"And grudges that we may have worsened in some ways," Shizuru responded with a slight smile. "Territory, I think, will be the chief concern for the conference. We need to settle all these squabbles this coming week! I also want eyes and ears open to look out for guests who seem tetchy. We do not yet know if all those we set as or allowed to remain lords are worthy. We may have to replace a few more of the local leaders."

Shizuma gave her cousin an ironic eye. "You wouldn't do it right at the conference, would you?"

"Of course not." The younger patrician smiled. "I shall have troops move near such a leader's hometown, though. A legate can give him the news when he returns from the conference."

"With the threat of five thousand *pila* glinting in the background."

"Obviously," the other replied. "If a baron is difficult during what are essentially peace talks, can you imagine how much worse he might be out of them?"

She inspected her cousin's preparations herself and found very little to change. She only ordered more of the local mead and hogs, besides augmenting the list of hired staff with over a hundred local entertainers.

"We want them properly feasted," she explained to Shizuma. "While these talks are serious, we cannot assault them with grimness all of the time. Let them have entertainments aplenty in between the actual assemblies. I am told it is normal for their aristocracy too to have theatrical entertainments and singers while they eat."

"Well enough," Shizuma responded. "But why would we need so many entertainers? A troupe or two of actors would have been enough, along with a small selection of bards."

"The rest are for Gorgo's inhabitants. Let us give them a little entertainment as well. That way, they shall all look deliriously happy when the delegates start arriving. It shall give our guests a more, er, positive view of the situation."

The senior legate rolled her eyes and went off muttering about her cousin's typical flamboyance. If that was what she wanted, then very well: Shizuma would arrange a festival for Gorgo's denizens. If her cousin fancied fanfare, she who had once tended a reputation as a degenerate could supply that!

Come the first day of the conference, her cousin was both pleased and disheartened. Every tribal subset of the former empire had sent



representatives, which was cause for pleasure. What disheartened was the composition of some of the embassages.

The group from the Tasgetia, for instance, was depressingly thin. It did not have the Baron Marlus and had only two druids, neither of which was the Chief Druid Hiempnos. The delegations of the Arvetii too were mostly unimpressive, with one major city sending only an inconsequential magistrate of minor nobility instead of an actual member of the ruling clan. As the Arvetii were among the biggest tribal subsets of Septentria, the choice of delegate was significant. Fortunately, their also-powerful neighbours the Carsinii and Aexelli were better represented. However, Shizuru suspected this was also because those two tribes had axes to grind against each other.

Most of the other delegations were respectable. The peoples of the centre-the Senonae, the Movicae, and Aequani-were best represented, perhaps due to proximity: they sent their actual ruling barons or their right hands. Most of the others sent high-ranked magistrates belonging to the aristocracy.

Firens sent a single embassy because it was a unified kingdom as opposed to a tribal people owning several cities and adjacent territories. It was still a big delegation even so. Besides the Queen Azula and her supporters, no fewer than ten barons and baronesses also travelled from the kingdom just for the conference. These included the important lords Delior and Orgestes. Both had been sent with King Entei's apologies for his absence and yet another artefact-gift for his Himean patron. The two explained that the king was obliged to stay back home to repulse renewed Nervian assaults brought on by the onset of spring.

"Despite that, he managed to represent his kingdom better than some others here," Shizuru murmured to her cousin during the first feast of the conference. The two had initially been at different tables, but the seating arrangements had been discarded towards the later courses. This was when enough mead and wine had flowed to loosen up even the more rigid ambassadors. The dancers and actors had hit their stride and taken to playing shamelessly to their increasingly raucous audience. The local aristocracy apparently found it no disgrace to rise with food in one hand and pinch the entertainment playfully on the bottom with the other. The Himean

officers, most from a social class that tended to rather more controlled dinner parties, shrugged their shoulders at their guests' antics. They occupied themselves instead with heading off any brawls before they could advance.

"Firens isn't really the problem we need to address with these conferences," Shizuma told her cousin, also speaking in Greek. "It's the others who need reining in."

"Try reining them in now," Shizuru chuckled as an Aequanian delegate started a drunken chorus by the Aexellian tables. The bards nearby took up the song, which Shizuru realised was a dirty one.

" *You* wanted a festival."

"Indeed, as it works for my purposes. You should be mingling with them, Shizuma! Get them to open up. The more at ease they are, the sooner we can get to their true sentiments. Not to mention their true grouches."

"Azula says some of them will be airing those grouches tomorrow."

Shizuru looked away from her guests and regarded Shizuma attentively.

"She says some delegates from the Gannian cities accosted her earlier," the silver-haired woman explained. "They wanted to know why the old tribe of the *Mentulae* isn't represented in the conference."

Shizuru dragged her eyes heavenward.

"There has been no *tribe of the Mentulae* for centuries," she said. "Obsidian's predecessors actually spread the old Mentulaean people so far across the empire-often seeding them in positions of authority over other peoples-that they ended up identifying themselves with other local tribal subsets. More so once their old subset became the identifier for the whole nation, which meant it lost much of its value as a subgroup's title. Most of the people who used to call themselves *Mentulae* in the old tribal sense have dubbed

themselves part of the Senonae or Movicae or even the Ganni for generations."

"Nevertheless, she says the Ganni are insisting that there should have been at least some members of the old ruling dynasty present to represent it."

This time, Shizuru laughed softly.

"Every single lord with a blood link to Obsidian worth mentioning fought against us," she reminded. "The majority who survived the war were taken as captives, for obvious reasons. Do they want us to free them all of a sudden?"

"Azula says they might try to make a case for it-appealing to your clemency," her cousin answered.

"I am clement, not stupid," Shizuru responded. "I suppose they shall ask too about the royal wives and children whom we captured?"

"Of course."

"I do love how they have the audacity to raise the topic of Obsidian's surviving relatives when not a one of them even came here for their former king's funeral."

"As most of them still believe you had him killed," drawled Shizuma, "I think they weren't too keen on seeing your alleged handiwork so clearly."

"I wonder what they would say if I told them my suspicions about the assassin having been someone in Obsidian's closest circle. At any rate, I know how to deal with the question. Thank you for the warning, Cousin."

"Thank Queen Azula."

So when the Gannian embassy put the demand to her the next day, Shizuru had an answer ready for them.

"The old tribe of the Mentulae is already represented *as it currently exists*," she declared in the strong, clear voice she used for oration.

It carried beautifully in the large hall they were using. "When your previous rulers conquered your local tribes, they spread their bloodlines across yours. Many of you here are even descended from the original nobles of that tribe. Surely that should suffice, given that it reflects the state of your tribes these days."

When the Baron Aduatris of Tasgetia asked instead-with glances to the druids-about the surviving nobles related to Obsidian's line, Shizuru had an answer ready as well.

"Had those nobles been amenable to peace talks, they should indeed be here," she said.

"Unfortunately, as their actions during the war showed, they were not. Furthermore, by the rules of warfare, they are my captives. They shall walk in my *triumph* back in Hime after my governorship. This means you should not worry about their welfare for the moment, for they are housed in good comfort in Fuuka until then. After the triumph, they shall be returned to Septentria as well. You will have your kinsmen back in time, I assure you."

The baron subsided but one of the druids stood up to take his place.

"And what of their fiefdoms, Governor?" said the woman.

"What of them?" Shizuru responded, seeing but pretending to ignore the disquiet in some of the other embassages.

"You have granted many of the fiefs previously ruled by those captive nobles to other ones."

"I defeated them in war, so their fiefs were mine by conquest." Shizuru smiled at the druid, who did not smile back. "I was therefore at perfect liberty to treat those fiefs as I wished, including by granting several to others who promised to prove better partners in my governing enterprise. Those I gave away thus shall stay in the hands of their new rulers... at least, for as long as those rulers prove worthy of the gifts."

The dark expressions lessened on several faces after this assurance, but seemed to grow on a few others. Most of the

displeasure was from the tribes who had seceded later from the empire. Since Shizuru had given most of the newly-freed territories to those who had allied with her earlier, the rest now tended sour grapes over their own lack of reward.

Shizuru turned slightly on her curule chair: just enough so that it was clear to all that she was facing and addressing the Gannian delegates in particular.

"Do not forget," Shizuru said, "that I technically defeated your people in war too. I simply allowed you-and by this I mean the druids as well!-to keep your fiefs because I thought you might prove worthy governing partners over time. So perhaps you should prove yourself worthy of that trust first instead of worrying about how I have dispensed with conquered properties."

She moved slightly again to encompass all the rows of seated delegates. She let her smile vanish and felt more than saw the resultant stiffening. The Gannian druid bowed and sat again quickly.

"These are conferences held in a spirit of peace, my good magistrates and druids," she said to them. "But do not imagine that my wish for concord overrides either my memory or my steel. I remember which of you did or did not fight against me. And, at the end of the day, I am still your conqueror. I defeated the very best and greatest of your armies! Yet because of my clemency, you have not been sacked and not been sold to slavery. Because of my reason, you have kept your duties as well as your privileges and properties. All you have today, you have by my grace! As your governor, I am still the ultimate word on everything. And I am not above using my armies to enforce decisions should it ever prove necessary."

"She expects them to 'open up' after that?" Shizuma muttered to her best friend as she prepared to take over for her cousin. "The rascal has them all on edge again. Each one looks as though he just took a poker up the podex!"

Miyuki Rokujou smirked. "They'll loosen up once more come the mealtime."

"After which she shall go and give them another fright, I wager."

"It won't be necessary," said her friend. "I think they'll mind themselves a little better after the reminder your cousin just gave them."

Miyuki was proven correct. The rest of the conference proceeded with fewer questions about Shizuru's post-war decisions, although there were squabbles aplenty among the delegates themselves over those decisions' consequences. Still, the talks ran well enough for the Himean governor to deem them a success. They would definitely be repeated for as long as she had tenure of Septentria Province.

On the fourth day of the conference Shizuru retired early from the evening feast. She left the delegates and festivities under her cousin's supervision. It was to her quarters that she herself went, seeking her lover. She found the princess at their bedroom balcony, enjoying the breezes of eventide. Shizuru thought her a delightful sight, dark hair up to show her neck and her slim young body sheathed in a dress of blue and white. Two bracelets Shizuru had given her were on her wrists: wide bands of vermeil with lapis lazuli badges smoothed to reflective polish. They reinforced her already-strong air of royalty.

Shizuru joined her at the railing, leaning both elbows on it.

"Enjoy looking down on people, Princess?" she teased.

"I ask that of you, Senator, given your height."

"Indeed. What has you so riveted by the view, though?"

Natsuki shook her head as if to say it was nothing.

"How was your conference today, Shizuru?" she asked later while turning to look at her companion. The latter noted a smile in the green eyes: the polemarch had noticed the rings on Shizuru's fingers. Save for the senatorial one, all had been her gifts. Even the signet ring Shizuru now used regularly was from her.

"It was good, I think," Shizuru started. "We settled a few more disputes between barons. No one ended up perfectly satisfied,

which tells you the judgements were just."

"Or that you are very cautious."

"We have long established that. What the past days suggest is that you can be too."

Natsuki frowned: "Why?"

Shizuru regarded her with indulgent eyes.

"Come now," she said. "Surely you did not think I failed to notice those troopers hovering near me ever since the conference started? I simply did not comment on it until now because I wanted to give you time to tell me yourself. I appreciate the thought, but you should know that I am never unaware of my surroundings. Even should some fool think to threaten me in a city I fully control, I could defend myself."

A moment's silence from her companion, whose gaze had fallen to the floor.

"You wish me to remove the escorts?" Natsuki asked.

"I do not." Startled green eyes stared into hers. "I understand it makes you feel better, so it is fine... provided they remain unobtrusive. In the future, I would prefer that you told me first, though, *mea vita*. It troubles me not to be so watched over, but I like to think you could tell me all of your own concerns first."

There was a long and gentle kiss to her neck. Shizuru smiled and closed her eyes, although she did warn that she might be sweaty: the feasting hall had been warm. Natsuki ended the kiss with a nuzzle.

"I like your sweat," the Otomeian said in honest innocence.

Shizuru opened her eyes again and stared.

"I wish you would wait for me to take a bath before you say things like that," she said in a voice full of persecution. "I actually came up early just to talk, you know, though you may not believe it."

The younger woman looked puzzled before suddenly laughing.

"Later," she promised Shizuru with a rosy grin. "We can talk for now."

Shizuru surveyed her lover again with enjoyment. Natsuki prodded her into speech by asking if she had found any potential troublemakers yet among the hosted ladies and lords.

"Perhaps a few," Shizuru admitted. "Some of them tend to glower quite a bit when they think we are not watching them."

A sly peek from one green eye: "Are you *ever* not watching them?"

"Perhaps when they have to heed the call of nature," came the laugh.

"What will you do?"

"Nothing." She grinned at Natsuki's puzzlement. "I cannot really do anything until they make trouble, can I? It makes little difference, though. I doubt I shall have to wait that long after the conference is over. Perhaps a week after it, we shall see the first troubles, maybe even insurrections."

Her lover fixed her with a look of concern.

"But you said..." Natsuki said haltingly. "You said your conference goes well."

"That I did. And it does, truly."

"Still you expect trouble soon after?"

Shizuru nodded and looked undisturbed by her own prediction.

"The fact is," she told her companion, "that a peaceable province is unlikely to be a reality so soon. The only way I could ensure zero chance of trouble after the war was to literally denude the land of its people. I could do it, is the truth. Were I to have no other choice, I would do it without hesitation. But..."



Natsuki's hand found hers.

"But there are other choices?" Natsuki ventured.

"Fortunately, yes," Shizuru smiled at her lover. "It would be horrid were it otherwise. Do you realise, Natsuki, how many have already died at my hands in Septentria alone? Perhaps two hundred thousand, with even more sold into slavery far from home. That includes maybe fifty thousand children who shall never know the land of their ancestors. To fully put down all chance of trouble in Septentria's immediate future, I would have to multiply all those numbers by a factor of four, if not five, for such is the size of this land. Of deaths alone I would need nearly a million, all so I could spend the rest of my governorship in a quiet province."

She saw the girl blink rapidly at this merciless accounting.

"And it would be quiet then," she continued, "if not haunted in its silence. But the sad truth is that even then it would not last forever."

Natsuki's hand squeezed hers but the girl held off replying just yet.

"Eventually," Shizuru said, "that unsparing massacre would probably return to bite Hime. Not me, for there would be another governor of the province by then. Yet what matters it to me that it would be someone else's problem by then, the seed of wrath I planted during my tenure? For I would remember that I planted that seed. I would know I slew a million without giving them a chance first, without exhausting clemency and reason before I took to slaughter."

She smiled when the hand left hers in favour of her face as she concluded: "I believe I would not enjoy that knowledge very much, even in my later years. Better to know I did what I could to spare that cruelty first, even if it proved the harder road."

The woman chafing her cheek looked at her with something like awe.

"If those fools down there knew their luck," she said, "they would know not to try you."

"I think they would have thought it luckier not to have fought a war at

all," Shizuru joked.

"It would have come, with or without you," was Natsuki's bald snort. "You know this, Shizuru."

The Himean lifted her stroking hand and kissed it: "So I do, my smart girl."

"When I suggested them lucky it was because it was you they fought," Natsuki explained. "You ended the war fast enough that they did not suffer as much as they could have. And after it you treated them well, so again they suffered not much." She shook her head. "Now you tell me some of them will waste the chance you grant?"

"I fear I think so."

"It is so one wonders at people!"

Shizuru laughed at her lover's vexation.

"They do often cause such wonder," she said, feeling the knots in her back start to loosen in spite of their topic. Natsuki's presence was relaxing her. "Yet people sometimes cause surprise too, do they not? They might prove me wrong yet in this matter."

Another snort. "You are not proven wrong often, Shizuru."

That brought on another laugh. Oh, thank all the gods for this woman! No matter how weary Shizuru ever got, her lover always lightened her mind and body again. Natsuki was a gift straight from the immortals, most especially Fortuna. A gift she had been obliged to be away from for too much of the day. She kissed her in apology for it.

"Well, we shall see what we shall see, Darling," she said, leading her lover back into their room. The Otomeian followed her with willingness. "The weeks after the conference shall be the trial. For now, however, let us forget about these petty lordlings! I have had quite enough of them for the past few days. Tell me about your day instead, Honoured Polemarch. What of your business or pleasures did you get done?"



# Chapter 78

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Contubernalis** - This is an army cadet, normally aged 17. Here, it typically refers to a cadet from a senatorial or upper class family. Cadets of senatorial blood were often requested by relatives or friends of the family who were military officers. This kept the youths safely looked after in their first experience of war. They rarely entered battle, being used mostly as bureaucratic staff.

2. **Keigo Onishi** - A character in the story. For more on his history and trial, see the latter half of **Chapter 76** . A synopsis: At the end of Onishi's consulship he was appointed to put down the Sicilian Servile Revolt. While he was in the middle of doing that, the Senate took the command off him and granted it to Dai Yoshida (the junior consul the year after Onishi's term). Onishi followed the Senate's decree but also disbanded his army, destroyed his own camp, and denied Yoshida his resources before returning to Hime, in retaliation for Yoshida's attempt to steal his laurels. The thwarted Yoshida prosecuted him for treason afterwards.

3. **Knights** - Also called the **equestrians** (E.) or **equites** (L.), these are the members of the Ordo Equester, the plutocrats of Ancient Roman society. The knightly and senatorial families were often related, with the former choosing business careers instead of political ones.

4. **Latifundia** (pl. L.) - Singular **latifundium** ; a great estate often used for agricultural purposes.

5. **New men / new man** - A parvenu, what one would call someone just newly ascended to the higher social classes. The Latin term is properly "novus homo", and has a pejorative sense to it because of the Ancient Roman esteem for august ancestors.

6. **Tribunes** - Most of the tribunes being referred to as part of Shizuru's army are **military tribunes** . They are usually youths of senatorial family who have not yet entered the Senate themselves,

*often in their twenties.*

**7. NOTE on servile revolts** - *There is ever a temptation to see past events through a modern lens. Many tend to imagine that slave rebellions in Ancient Rome (the Servile Wars) were wars against slavery itself, partly thanks to Hollywood's usual spin on the story. In actual truth, we have no historical data to prove that those revolts were fuelled by modern emancipatory rhetoric. There may even have been more pillaging and killing than actual unfettering going on. The servile rebels killed other slaves too.*

**8. NOTE on the Otomeian polemarch's role in promotions** - *Some of it may be gleaned below, but more information can be found in **Chapter 73** . Hit Ctrl+F and search for "Before the creation".*

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## ***Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae***

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Shizuru's prediction was a week off. The first insurrection took place more than a fortnight after the Septentrian Conference. While the report of it did draw a frown from her, it initially got little more. The incident was confined to a single city and not a very important one either. It was also in the deep south and fenced by Firens and some of Hime's very first Septentrian allies. Therefore, unworthy of much alarm.

What later heightened Shizuru's concern in the incident came to her attention through the gossip grapevine. Something of an irony, perhaps: she had the news of the insurrection first of everyone in the capital, thanks to the legate dealing with the incident. That was Seigo Ushida, assigned to the southwest territories among the peoples of the Roscii, Trocarii, and Padurci.

A military man of significant competence, Seigo sent her a speedy courier the moment the city rebelled and another after he began siege. Shizuru read through his messages and decided to leave the matter in his hands. She was still engaged in more demanding

tasks, specifically ones that would knit up a new structure for Hime's latest provincial possession. Her legates had to be capable of solving minor problems by themselves if she was going to get her true work done on schedule.

For six days she held to her resolution and gave the defiant city of Durigala no more thought. Then six days after Seigo's missives, the regular couriers delivered letters from his army to the capital. While these bundles naturally included messages of a military nature, there were also private letters among them.

Literate Himeans loved to write. One of the most popular hobbies for the upper class was in fact simple correspondence. Even those among the common people who could write often did-and given Shizuru Fujino's insistence on her troops being taught their letters, that meant a lot of her rankers wrote as well.

So various members of Shizuru's army were constantly sending out and receiving dispatches. They wrote to people back home, naturally, but also wrote to fellows in other camps. The Septentrian Province was so large that months could pass before friends stationed in different regions met again. This was why people in one part of the army were always writing to and getting letters from people in another part of it.

Shizuru herself got an update from Seigo Ushida with the regular mail. It told her that he was making good progress and would break Durigala very soon. Such was his ability that the impression was shared by most of his officers. At least, Shizuru gleaned as much from the members of her staff who corresponded with members of his.

She also gleaned, however, that there was a detail in her legate's account that did not match up with his underlings' narratives. She discovered this while listening to two of her own subordinates chatting in headquarters, two days after the mail's arrival.

"What did you bet on the pot for how long before Durigala falls?" one tribune asked the other. It was common for the officers to gamble among themselves on topics like the length of time a town could last after it had been invested. "I put it down for twenty-five days myself.

Now I'm thinking I should've bet lower."

"I bet just a day earlier than you did," the other tribune answered. "Why do you want to change your bet, though?"

"I got a letter from Ryuichi," was the reply. "He says Ushida-san already got them on their knees only a few days in. He's also sent for the hostages we got from that city. He'll get them shouting for surrender soon, I tell you."

"He might not be able to break them that easily."

"I think he will. Ryuichi says Ushida-san's keen on making an example of Durigala's town leaders, which means the siege will have tightened up even more since we last heard of it."

"Well and why shouldn't he make an example of them?" came the response. "These barbarians need to learn that they can't just break treaties whenever it suits them!"

*True, though it hardly encourages their fidelity to call them "barbarians",* thought their leader, still eavesdropping as she finished off a letter on a wax tablet. Afterwards, she smacked the back of her hand on it so that her signet ring struck the wax and left an impression. She handed the tablet to a waiting clerk.

The two tribunes were still chatting in low voices to each other.

"Of course these barbarians need to be taught a lesson!" one of them said. "But it's not the breaking of the treaty that has Ushida-san so irate, Ryuichi said. It's that they had their heralds shout out insults against him when he had his own heralds call them to surrender."

"Oh, that!" the other tribune said with a short laugh. "Miyumi wrote to me about that too. Said Ushida-san was hopping mad! Don't know what could've possessed the Durigalans to carry out such an affront. Even if they say they've been mistreated badly, that's no way to secure a future in case your standoff fails, right?"

"Well, Ryuichi said it was done just to spite Ushida-san," was the sigh. "They were angry with him themselves for his recent treatment."

Claimed it was why they rebelled in the first place."

"Still, it's not smart to antagonise the opponent when you're the clear underdog in the game."

This was when their listening commander saw fit to interrupt them.

"Pardon," she interjected, calling their names. "I could not help but overhear your dialogue."

The two stopped setting up their desks and stood perkily to attention. Most of the tribunes vied with each other to be noticed by their awesome general. Competition to get assigned to her staff was already rough, so those who actually won a place were enthusiastic about seeing to her needs. That included filling her in on the latest army gossip if she desired it.

"You said that the Durigalans rebelled out of dissatisfaction with recent treatment," their commander said. "From whom did you get that information, precisely?"

The two exchanged looks and revealed their sources.

"Ryuichi Yoshida and Miyumi Takashi, Fujino-san," they said. "They're tribuning for Ushida-san."

"Both of them said it was the reason for the rebellion?"

"They claimed so, Fujino-san."

She looked thoughtful.

"Could you tell me exactly what they said?" she asked the two pre-senatorials, both of whom were in fact a scant two years younger than her. They obliged her in that as well as her next request, which was to send her way any other tribune or officer who had just received a letter from Seigo Ushida's army. There were a few more of these and she questioned each one as he reported to her desk. After talking to the sixth such person, she switched to riding togs and had her cousin take over.

"I am riding to Durigala," she told the woman. "If I get everything



done quickly I shall return around the middle of next month. Would you try to keep up what I have been doing, Shizuma? My staff will help yours find their places and Aisuka-han can tell you everything to do with my schedule."

There was a short pause as she seemed to recall something and though it worthy of a remark: "Keep an eye on the aristocrats some of the tribes left behind here after the conference, by the way. I do not want them getting up to trouble in my absence."

"Very well. What of petitioners you are supposed to meet? Shall I see to them for you or push back the meetings?"

"If you think you can see to them, do so. If not, push back the appointment. I trust your judgement, so do as you will."

"How cavalier! You know several are claiming knowledge of some insidious plot against us, right?"

Shizuru's face took on a wry look.

"I also know those plots are claimed to be by their enemies," she said. "In most cases fellow lords whose territories are conveniently next to the informant's. Old imperial politics in a new Himean province, Cousin. They are trying it out on the new regime to see if they can profit from working on our paranoia."

"I shall set them straight, never fear."

"Good, you can hold down the fort for me." A heavy sigh as she came to what she would miss most. "Look after *her* too, of course."

"Did not need to be said." Her older cousin eyed her critically. "Why do you need to go to Durigala yourself, Shizuru? Seigo-san can surely manage the rebels well enough for you. If it has to do with the gossip that the Durigalans rebelled out of mistreatment, what difference should it make now? The ram has touched the wall. Surely you wouldn't reprieve the city's leaders, especially as they've actually assaulted legionaries in their rebellion?"

"Of course not," Shizuru answered. "But I do need to scrutinise the rumour. You are not the only one who shall be setting people

straight shortly."

She set out from the capital with a small army of cavalry. Some tribunes and legionaries-the best riders of their legion-served as the Himean complement of her guard. The rest were all Otomeians of the Lupine Division. There were a hundred of these and they had been handpicked for the mission by their polemarch. If Natsuki had been permitted her true preference she would have demanded that her lover bring the whole division along. As Shizuru wanted to travel quickly, however, she made do with sending just a tenth of the whole.

As well this was so, because they travelled faster with fewer animals and riders to consider. Their progress was a smooth one, for the rebellion at Durigala was truly isolated. The rest of the former empire was quietly trying to settle itself into the world's new rhythm. This meant no armies impeded Shizuru's journey on roads that her own legions had built. Nor were there bandits to reckon with, as these were often made up of deserters to the imperial troops. Like their former comrades who had stayed in the service, these had long since learned to leave anything in a Himean mail shirt and helmet alone. Especially when accompanied by blonde giants on horseback!

When Shizuru reached Durigala, the siege had already finished. Seigo had broken the city in the second week of besieging it. He told her how it had all worked out as they toured the walls.

"They couldn't have lasted long from the start," Seigo explained as they walked on the battlements. He was especially voluble because he was pleased with the siege's quick resolution. "They hadn't really planned for a siege when they rebelled. It was all done on impulse! So they didn't even get to hoard food in advance. That's how I knew I could break them in just two weeks. All it took was to let them starve a little. The hostages I sent for never even made it here before it was over!"

"Where are those hostages now?" she asked, which he had not expected to be her first inquiry.

"Still on the road, I suppose," he answered. "I'll send a missive to

have them conducted back to where they were being housed."

"You might have done that as soon as the siege was concluded," she said, but lightly enough so that it did not sound too much like a rebuke. "That would have spared them the discomfort of further and unnecessary travel."

He stared at her with a look of astonishment. Who cared about Mentulaean hostages' comfort in such a situation?

"It slipped my mind," he admitted without regret. "I'll get to it right after this. Anyway, after the Durigalans surrendered, I had to separate all those instrumental to the rebellion from those who had been mere sheep following orders. That way I could be sure of avoiding any more rebellious shepherds. All the magistrates of the city were replaced. I also got my replacements from lesser aristocratic families. Family loyalty made the old leading families suspect, I thought."

She nodded, which he took to mean he should continue.

"The rebel leaders I took captive," he said. "I sent them all under guard to the Atinu Camp. They went with hostages I got from the new leaders installed in Durigala. As for the townsfolk, I kept in mind what you told me in your missive: that unless I could prove they'd all participated in the rebellion from the start, you'd want most of them spared but still taught the lesson. So I took all those of fighting age and did a decimation."

That got a lift of the eyebrow from her. Decimation was one of the punishments the Himean army used on its own members: typically for cases of either mutiny or desertion. A large group of offenders would be sorted into groups of ten or dectets. Each dectet would perform a lottery wherein one offender's name would be drawn out of the ten. That offender would then be executed by the other nine, often by being clubbed to death.

It was a horrible way to die, but also a horrible way to live. One remembered one's executed comrades and the way their bones and skulls felt under the clubs. No one truly "escaped" a decimation in that sense. It was why it was reserved for the worst military crimes

that could be committed. Shizuru herself had never found occasion to order one.

"You have been thorough," Shizuru said to her legate.

"I thought you'd like things settled cleanly," he said with an attractive smile: it displayed his teeth, which looked bright against his naturally honey skin. "It was just a trifling incident anyway. We've no casualties except the few soldiers they managed to rough up a little before shutting themselves up in their walls. You didn't need to come here for yourself, Fujino-san."

But his commander was on the crusty side, it seemed, for she responded to that with a cool remark about being the judge of her own needs.

"So now several hundred Durigalans are dead, battered to death by their own," she summed up. "Their former leading nobles and city magistrates have all been sent away in manacles. Another treaty has been struck with new head aristocrats, who have yielded us even more hostages."

He asked if she had any complaints about his performance.

"Only the fact that an insurrection happened in the first place," she decided.

"That's... not really something you can lay at my feet, General," he replied, baffled. "I didn't put it in their heads to make a stand that required me to besiege them."

She kept on walking, leading them to a stretch of wall that was unmanned. There she stopped and looked down at Durigala outside the walls. Nearly all of the structures there had been torn down or damaged during Seigo's siege of the place. She surveyed the wreckage clinically.

"You may not have put the idea of it in their heads," she said. "But you have contributed to the issues that made the idea possible. Did you really ransack the locals' houses under argument of seeking hidden weaponry?"

Seigo's soft brown eyes went large at the question. There was no alarm accompanying his astonishment, however: he knew his actions were still defensible.

"I received tips in each case," he told her in a voice oozing with sincerity. It did not fool Shizuru, who had once been a courtroom advocate and had therefore cross-examined dozens of witnesses and defendants already. Forensic experience had taught her that the guiltiest perjurers *oozed* sincerity.

"They said," Seigo argued, "that all those Durigalans I raided were holding secret caches of weaponry on their properties. Given our policy of local disarmament, I had to act on that intelligence."

"Our policy of local disarmament only applies to caches significant enough to present a threat," she replied to that excuse. "Not a measly pair of sword-and-shield sets or a clutch of daggers that look more like kitchen knives. Our policy with informants is also to act with circumspection. Not to trust every snitch who comes whispering in our ears. And most especially not to trust those who have been proven wrong before, as some of your informants seem to have been given the scantiness of the weapon caches your raids have actually discovered."

He seemed to have diminished slightly, she thought after this. She knew he was drawing himself in and preparing defences. He was obviously wondering how she could have known about the details she had just given, considering her recent arrival.

The truth was that she had only delayed her appearance at his camp: she had in fact reached the area earlier. His own lookouts had found her but got orders not to report her advent. She had also charged them with fetching several of the centurions she trusted most in Seigo's legion. These had ridden out covertly to meet her squadron and had been put through a careful debriefing. They were not her first sources of direct information, however.

Before going to Durigala, she had stopped by another city on the way. It was ruled by one of the high barons of the tribal subgroup called the Trocarii, to whom the Durigalans belonged. The man had been shocked to find his new Governor-Conqueror suddenly on his

doorstep, but had been wholehearted in accommodating her requests. That included relating to her the Durigalans' call for assistance in reducing the raids conducted on their homes and warehouses.

"I actually did petition Legate Ushida, Governor," said the Trocarian baron to Shizuru during their talk. He was anxious that she should believe him, for he had a sharp fear of her and her army. "As I understood from our recent conference at the capital, the legate was our administrator in this region. Hence it was him we approached. I didn't bring it up at the capital because I thought it really was for security purposes. Even when we talked to the legate he told us he had no choice but to conduct the raids, as he'd received intelligence claiming the affected properties to be holding contraband war materiel. I didn't really know what more to do after that. I was afraid I'd be accused of rebellion myself if I tried to take the matter further. And I would never rebel!"

"You acted rightly," Shizuru soothed the baron. "Did the legate tell you from whom the intelligence was coming?"

"No, Governor, although I did ask. He said he had to protect his informants."

"I see. And what do you think of the owners of the searched properties? I am trusting you now to give me an honest opinion, Baron, so please be truthful. Do most of them strike you as the type to be holding on to significant amounts of contraband?"

"*Some* might be, Governor," he said after a long pause to think it over. "But I wouldn't say most. A few of the properties raided were actually owned by some of the most peaceable of our local aristocrats. At least, that's what I would think. I couldn't say for certain, I'm afraid."

She thanked him for his candour.

"Please avoid mentioning this interview with me to others," she told him. "As Legate Ushida himself said, one does need to protect one's sources. I do not think he would be too fond of you if he learned of this meeting. Do you understand me?"

The baron agreed passionately and promised to hold his tongue. Before Shizuru left his city, he also brought her a few of his own people who had experienced the searches themselves. Several were affluent natives with businesses that would prosper under Shizuru's plans for the province. This meant they had greater interest in seeing the country peaceful than in fomenting further resistance to Hime.

She thought of that now as she spoke with her legate, who explained his actions.

"I'll grant my informants haven't always been on the spot," he said. "But I believed it safer to search instead of doing nothing, Fujino-san. If I wasn't lucky enough in the searches to find the caches, I had to take what weapons I did find anyway, or risk looking like I was persecuting the natives for nothing. I had to act on the intelligence I received! We didn't always find the arms, yes, but it's not easy finding things others intend to keep hidden."

"It might have helped had you known what you were actually searching for," came her response. "I think your people got arms confused with art. Why do I hear that some of the searched houses had items of value missing subsequent to the events?"

Her fellow senator was indignant and professed his innocence.

"If they're claiming we took them, it's all lies," he told his commander. "They probably just couldn't find all their things where they used to be after we did our searches. Though it may not seem like it now, Fujino-san, I turned each place upside down during investigation. If we left a mess they had to clean up afterwards, what of it? That was their problem to deal with, as are any missing artworks they say we could've taken. The savages probably just misplaced them themselves! Or worse, they could've hidden them away and blamed it on us out of revenge."

"Indeed?" she said. "I would suggest you stop giving them cause for revenge then."

He looked confused. "Do you mean I should stop all security searches?"

Her response was prefaced by a look that communicated the subtlest bite of contempt.

"It does not entertain me," she informed him, "when people are deliberately obtuse. I mean that you should exercise greater discretion in which information you act on. I learned you have conducted dozens of searches by now, yet only discovered a handful of contraband for all that effort. This suggests you have been wasting not only your own time but that of my legionaries, who could be doing more constructive work than terrorising mostly innocent people."

"I think," he hazarded, smarting enormously from her words, "that Durigala's revolt just showed they aren't 'mostly innocent people', Fujino-san."

"So you believe most of the townsfolk had truly been hoarding secret caches of weaponry?"

"Yes, as you can see from the amount of weaponry we gathered after the siege was over!"

" *Non sequitur*. That does not prove most of them actually contributed to those arms. For all you know, the entire hoard could have come from just a single Durigalan who shared it out during their standoff. Even were we to assume that most of the Durigalans had participated in the concealment of weapons, that would still not say they had always intended on using them against us. Nor would it say that most individual Durigalans held arms in sizeable enough caches for them to be considered contraband. Do you know the only thing that the hoard you collected actually says? That you have been vastly ineffectual at unearthing hidden weapons in the area."

He bit his tongue to avoid retorting to this fresh reprimand. What could he even say to that face anyway? How unfriendly she could look, for all of her celebrated beauty! Had she been some lesser senator he might have dared to challenge her for the admonishment, but she was a patrician like him... only with much better blood. And blood mattered a great deal.

"When you wrote to me about the rebellion," she went on, "you told



me it was simply out of the typical unrest when a new regime and an inability to accept change. What everyone else has been saying, however, is that the Durigalans rebelled because of what they perceived as mistreatment. And whether or not you spirited away the items said to be missing, you appear to have indeed mistreated the persons themselves."

He tried to protest that he had not actually harmed anybody during his searches but was waved off for his pains.

"Turning over someone's house violently is harming them!" she bit back. "You cannot ransack quiet peoples' properties on the say-so of every informant who dins in your ear! This is not how we do things in my province. We maintain equipoise between confidence and paranoia. We do not strike up treaties of peace and friendship, then proceed to walk all over the self-same treaties ourselves."

She exhaled wearily and lifted the queue of hair from her nape. The back of her neck was sweaty from the summer heat, and she found herself eager to conclude this conversation so she could wash her face. Seigo too looked to be sweating, although she was uncertain how much of that was due to the weather instead of her.

"It is true they are people we have conquered," she said to him. "But now, they are also subjects of our great Republic. Contrary to most of our fellow senators' interpretation of that status, it does not mean we have the right to rape them and their land at will. It means they are also under our protection, even if they are under our authority."

She bored her gaze into his, wondering how much of this was truly sinking in. He was listening to her, that much was obvious, but that was because every bone in his body was shrieking alarm at the peril her eyes were communicating. Could lessons like this truly be learned in fear, she wondered, and was annoyed anew by the fact that she even had to act the schoolmaster.

"Do not embitter people we must bring into the Himean provincial fold gently, if firmly. Perhaps you are right and they have been hoarding arms with intent of using them against us. Perhaps you are even right in claiming they accuse you of stealing valuables out of vengeance."

In spite of those allowances, her next words were stern: "Even then you would have inconvenienced my governorship, and I will not have that. I would have no choice save to assign you to other duties that would divorce you from the army."

She paused to let that sink in, knowing he would despise the idea. Seigo was not a man who did as well behind a desk as he did in a command tent.

"Perhaps," she enlarged, "you would become a sort of logistics legate based in Argus or Sosia, seeing to the brass tacks of the troops far away from the actual field. Neither of us would enjoy that very much as it would preclude opportunity to use your best talents. Yet it would be necessary because my plans for a settled province do not admit the sort of unrest you seem to have elicited."

The dread on his face said everything. She finished in a milder voice than before.

"I gave you command over this place to ensure its peacefulness, Seigo-han," she told him. "You managed the siege of Durigala efficiently, and that does please me. But as I said from the beginning, I would rather there had never been a need for siege at all. Keep in mind our dialogue today whenever another of your 'informants' comes again. I want no more indiscriminate raids. Otherwise, you and I shall have even more words, and they shall conclude far more unpleasantly than they will now."

And that would have to be that, she thought on her way back to the capital. She would allow him to retain command of the Seventh because he did command it effectively. But any more errors like the raids on the Trocarii and he would truly find himself relegated to a clerk's desk. What *was* the matter with the man that he had thought it permissible to pillage the locals under such flimsy pretences? Those people were members of a Himean province now! Many had even allied with her before Terantrum.

The trouble with her fellow senators, she decided, was that they were not very educable when it came to regard for provincials and foreigners. The provinces were just there to be milked, not tended and made fruitful; the people in them were pawns for senatorial

pleasures. Just think of Hispania Citerior and Sumio Fujimoto! And perhaps ninety percent of the provincial governors they sent out from the Senate each year!

Her legate probably did not even understand how much trouble he had caused her. She would have to orchestrate a formal trial for the Durigalan leaders, especially as they were already operating on the assumption that peace was the norm now. The outcome of the trial was inevitable, of course. They had broken a peace treaty and tried to kill legionaries and nothing could change those facts. But what a farce to have to condemn people who had been helped into their crimes by her own legate!

By the time she returned to Gorgo, she had made a decision: Seigo Ushida would not be asked to stay on next year. What a pity that the man could general! He was truly competent in that arena, so she had thought he would at least exercise more caution than he had in his attempts at self-enrichment. Indeed, he had seemed to control himself quite well before this. But she could not spare time to keep an eye on him for the remainder of her governorship. A little corruption she could have forgiven, but not the sort that led to cities rebelling. Her fellow patrician would learn that soon.

Her cousin greeted her return with more upsetting news, though not for Septentria. Their senatorial colleague, the respected consular Keigo Onishi, had been convicted at his trial.

"Can you credit it?" Shizuma scoffed, only of casual acquaintance with the man herself yet outraged by his fate. "The worst of it was the sentence the court pronounced. They did not stop at fining him his fortune and thereby stripping his poor children of their inheritance. They actually stripped him too of citizenship and exiled him from Hime and Fuuka! To what depths have we devolved when even our most promising members are booted out of the land? He nearly concluded the war in Sicilia had it not been for the Senate's meddling-and here is his reward."

"Ye gods," Shizuru breathed as she fell into her chair and looked stunned. "I had not thought the court would actually go that far."

"Believe it! Onishi-san apparently quit Hime for Smyrna the moment

his trial was over. His brood saw him off and people say it was tear-jerking. His youngest is only five."

Shizuru shook her head. "So are Onishi-han's children now to be beggars and orphans just because one incompetent wanted to blame his failings on their father?"

"Not exactly, for their father's wits extended to providing for that, thank goodness."

Upon Keigo Onishi's return from Sicilia, he had apparently moved all the clan assets out of his ownership. A truly able if understated man, he had cherished no illusions of getting away scot-free with his vengeance. He had upset Dai Yoshida's plans so badly that he fully expected retribution upon his return. And as he had not tried to conceal what he had done-how satisfying to have punished Yoshida so blatantly, though!-they could triumph if they brought him to trial.

Thus knowing his position vulnerable, he had chosen to secure his children's futures instead of his own. Even in the middle of his prosecution, Keigo Onishi had already been a pauper: this was because everything he could give away had already been legally transferred to his offspring.

So while the Yoshida clan did succeed in exiling their enemy, they failed nonetheless to confiscate his fortune for the State. In effect, they left his brood with the means to continue the Onishi family's future. The children were devastated by their father's exile, but had inherited much of his strength. The two adolescents had already taken public vows of revenge against Dai Yoshida. The youngest, the only daughter, was too small yet to know exactly what had happened. All she understood was that she no longer had a *tata*.

"I got the news from their late mother's friend, who is a relation of our own mothers," Shizuma told her cousin. "Chikao Shimizu-san, to be exact. Do you know him?"

"A little, but go on."

"He wrote to ask if we could take on another *contubernalis*, even if the war does seem to be over. At least the eldest of Onishi-san's

children can start his career properly if we do, although he would already be past the proper age. He was supposed to have volunteered for one of the other governors-or even Chikane's naval campaign!-last year, but his father's troubles engaged their family at the time. The lad is already late by a year, Shizuru, and it would be a shame to make him wait another. Shimizu-san says he has much of his father in him."

"Of course we can take him on," Shizuru said feelingly. "Send a letter for him as soon as you can, Cousin. Unless you already have?"

"I already have."

"Excellent. I think my staff is full right now, but I can make space for him if you do not want him seconded to duties with you yourself."

"Oh, I'll accommodate the boy. It's a disgrace that the House allowed this to happen to their father. What are the others about that they couldn't stop it? What about the Princes?"

"It was not for want of trying, I wager," Shizuru answered. "The problem is that the Yoshida are a powerful clan with a lot of powerful allies right now. Especially among the knights in the city, who make up the juries in our courtrooms. And you know how reliable knight juries are!"

"Bribeable down to the last man," her older cousin sneered. "Damn them all! You're right, the Yoshida would've bought every one of the jury members. Onishi-san's own knightly support is in the provinces, and so would have been slower to act. Gods, but I feel for the man."

"A gross miscarriage of justice," her young cousin nodded, before asking what had become of Dai Yoshida himself.

"Did your correspondents say anything on how he has been doing in Sicilia?" she asked.

"He's no longer in Sicilia," Shizuma said with an acrimonious smile. "The Senate replaced him too after he lost yet another engagement. Even with all their clout, the Yoshida couldn't possibly have kept the

commission for him after four straight losses! Serves the fool right, I tell you, even if I want those wretched slave rebels done in already. Do you know what they've done over there with the farm workers Onishi-san installed in the *latifundia* he repaired? They've abducted them and turned them - *not* into more servile rebel warriors! - but into slaves for themselves! Only their idea of slavery is not very Himean. They reportedly keep them chained at all times, as though they were wild dogs."

"That island is a madhouse," Shizuru scowled. "Whom has the Senate sent to replace Dai Yoshida over there, then?"

"Ah, the only possible good bit in this battery of bad news. They sent this year's junior consul, which they probably thought a deft touch of irony. Yoshida was also a junior consul when he stole the command from right under Keigo Onishi, after all."

To her surprise, that news seemed to please Shizuru very much. Shizuma could also read her cousin well enough to know that whatever about it pleased her, it was not actually to do with the fate of Sicilia and its servile war.

"So Nana Fujimoto's husband is away from Hime for the rest of year, eh?" the younger woman mused aloud, which had Shizuma sniggering uncontrollably into a hand. "Hm? Why do you laugh?"

The other woman shook her silver head and continued to chuckle.

"It's just," she said in a strained voice, "that sounded more like something I would say. Why the interest in Nana Fujimoto and her husband being away? Should I tell Natsuki about this?"

Her cousin rolled red eyes but grinned back.

"Do not get me in trouble with her, for god's sake," she replied. "No, it has to do with another Fujimoto, in fact. If you cannot guess yet, that means what I am thinking of has not yet happened. It should very soon, so you shall know presently."

She returned to their true topic: "At any rate, you are right about the new commander against the slave revolt being better. I only hope

they shall allow him to do his job without replacing him in the middle of the action again."

"We can hope," the other woman sighed, wondering what the aside about the Fujimoto meant but knowing Shizuru would not tell her. The wretch enjoyed her surprises a little too much! "The Sicilian farce has gone on long enough. Almost the same length of time as our war now, and the opponents there are mere slaves on one small island!"

"It may be as good an example as any of what happens when the House interferes often in matters of command," Shizuru said, knowing the five-year security of her own mandate had allowed her to wage her own war with superlative efficiency ever since the Masashi debacle. "No doubt my own mail will tell me more on the topic when I go through it. Now what about over here, Cousin? Any news worth mentioning while I was away?"

She did not ask about Natsuki because she had already seen her. The young woman had been her first stop, not even her senior legate or her staff headquarters. So now she waited instead to be informed about the local happenings in her absence.

Shizuma's expression had transformed at her last question. From the grimness over Onishi's fate and Sicilia's future, it went into a giddy amusement.

"Do you remember," she asked Shizuru, "what you said about watching the representatives some of the nobles left behind after your conference?"

"Indeed," Shizuru said curiously.

"Do you remember too," Shizuma said with a twinkle in her eye, "the friction between the Arvetian and Aexellian nobles at the conference? You said it was due the to the former's concurrence with their other neighbours the Carsinii that the Aexelli had been too quick to betray the empire for personal gains."

"Of course. I presume this friction came to a head?" she asked her cousin, interest piqued by Shizuma's pink cheeks.

"It did, though not in the way you might have expected," said the senior legate. "We both know these people's lingering delegates have stayed here more to keep an eye on each other than to actually get contracts or concessions established. Well, they knew it too. I suppose it was inescapable that they would have it out at one point or another, yet the way they did it was a genuine surprise."

It seemed that the Aexellian and Arvetian aristocrats in particular had been compelled to suffer each other's presence in close quarters last week. It was during a dinner party held by one of Gorgo's chief plutocrats. Shizuma being the senior legate, she had naturally been invited along with some of her officers. Thus when the two Septentrian tribal representatives clashed, she had front row seats to the spectacle.

"This was at the end of the dinner, when both had drunk enough to loosen their tongues," she narrated to Shizuru. "The company was talking about the future of the former empire and our Arvetian had just delivered a tipsy speech about the crucial part his people had to play in it. Our Aexellian had been fidgeting all throughout that speech and gave his retort as soon as it ended. He accused the Arvetian of missing the point of the conversation, which was that *every people* had a crucial part to play in Septentria's future. Whereupon our Arvetian aristocrat eyed his corpulent opponent sourly and proclaimed that the man had nerve to talk about missing points when he couldn't-he said this exactly-even reach his penis to ensure his piss's accuracy."

Shizuru laughed, calling up an image of the enormously fat Aexellian in question and understanding why the Arvetian's rude jibe was apt. But Shizuma told her the Aexellian had offered a retort that had nearly knocked over the Arvetian with rage.

"He said," chortled the senior legate, "that our Arvetian's wife reached it easily enough for him."

"Good gods," Shizuru chuckled after most of their laughter had worn itself out. "Is this when they got into the real fisticuffs? I doubt anyone could have taken that insult without throwing a punch."

"Oh, did they ever go at it! It was brilliant. Neither man's a warrior,



you see, so they went about the business in the most unorthodox manner. A lot of slapping and wobbly punches with some odd contortions of the body in the middle. I can't describe it, even. Let's just say I wouldn't have been surprised had there been licking! In the end, the Aexellian won the day. He just sat on the Arvetian until the other stopped wriggling."

"Most dignified," Shizuru said amidst giggles, still trying to imagine a fistfight so inept it could have included licking. Licking!

"No one can be dignified in a fistfight. I wish you could have seen it. It was-delightful! You'd never seen two worse pugilists put up a better fight, Cousin."

Shizuru laughed again and asked what had happened to the contestants when the alcohol had fled both their systems.

"What do you think?" Shizuma said. "They hate each other even more now, so the whole city's absolutely dying to get them together at the dinner table again. No fewer than three of the local bigwigs have thrown parties trying to get both to attend. Unfortunately, the two seem to have sworn off all liquor, so they've been holding to their tempers better. Not that it's stopped the native bookmakers from taking wagers on who shall be the next fight's victor. My money's on our Aexellian friend. He makes an unlikely boxer just to look at, but that fat really does serve him well as padding."

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Yet neither the Arvetian-Aexellian match nor Durigala seized the army's attention that season the way one Otomeian did. The members of this people stationed in or near Gorgo were occupied by organisational matters all of the spring and summer. Most important of those matters, for most of these fierce people, was the promotion or creation of officers.

Position in the army influenced one's social prominence in their world. It tied into the fact that most of the higher-ups in their military structure were people of elevated rank from the start. That was because the higher offices were afforded only to their nobility, just as political offices in Hime went only to the senatorial families.

Yet like Hime's senatorial families, Otomeians had a way of taking in New Men. New aristocrats were created every now and then by the crown, for example, usually as a reward for notable service performed. Most often, that service was performed on the battlefield, given the nation's esteem for military talent. In order to qualify for such a reward, however, the Otomeian involved had to be of at least officer's rank. Otherwise, a promotion to officer's rank might be the reward offered instead.

Position in the army command was therefore important for ambitious Otomeians. Even without seeking such a high prize as elevation into the aristocracy, the common people already viewed promotion to officer as a huge step up in social status.

So when it seemed the former Mentulaean Empire was quiet enough to permit more bureaucratic business, interest in the promotions swelled again. The Otomeian polemarch was sensitive to her people's desires. She issued notices to those leaders whose commendations had been marked for consideration.

These were actually commendations submitted the previous year. Events had intervened such that the polemarch had only managed to confirm a few promotions before her trip to Fuuka. Inborn chariness caused her to perform investigations first into most of the persons being recommended. Only after that did she feel it possible to determine which endorsements merited escalation to a deciding conference.

The leaders who had submitted the endorsements would bring themselves and the prospective new officer's other direct superiors to the conference. There they would debate with the polemarch the qualities of the man or woman being promoted. They typically advised the subject too of whether or not they had received notices for such a conference. Hence the warriors knew beforehand if their promotion had a chance or not.

There were thus some anxious warriors as well as downcast ones in Gorgo that summer. Yet even the latter were not too put down by the denial. Most soldiers could be recommended twice before finally being granted a promotion. It was only those who had been denied twice or more who were truly dejected by the news of the latest

refusal.

One such warrior was Bemys, a trooper of the Otomeian cataphracti. As might be expected of a member of this force, he was among the largest warriors of his already-large people. Bemys had hams the size of tree trunks and shoulders that could seat a grown woman. Nor was all that size just for show: Bemys was a great fighter too, and feared nothing on the field. He had downed dozens of men in single combat and participated in the slaughter of more in actual battle. Not once had he been given anything approaching a life-threatening wound by an enemy. If anyone was ever meant to be recommended for promotion as an officer, most of his comrades thought Bemys was it.

*If*, that is, Bemys had not been afflicted with a great flaw to go with his great blessings. The trouble was that Bemys was known among his peers as a hothead. Bemys was quick to pick up a fight and slow to abandon it. Worse, he had a tendency to talk back to officers when in his moods. This meant the last two commendations submitted by his commander-the Baron Eilren-had not even been granted conferences by the High Council.

Chastised by two successive refusals, Bemys had finally paid attention to his superiors' counsel. Which was to get a better hold of himself and to resist getting into brawls so often. At twenty-five and twenty-nine that had not seemed feasible. But now he was in his thirties and still just a common cataphract trooper! For someone of his size and obvious capabilities, he should have been promoted much earlier into one of the captains. Time to take the matter more seriously, thought the desperate Bemys, for he was no longer as young as he had been.

He kept close watch on himself for several years and found it easier than ever before. He chalked it up to a heretofore unearthed virtue of patience, failing to see that it was actually more because of occupation. There had been so much to do in the last three years that had barely found time to get into trouble. Oh, he had the occasional brawl here and there, but it was rare and still within the permissible rate of occurrence for most soldiers. And he had managed to avoid getting in trouble with the officers too! For the most part, at any rate. Sometimes, they simply needed a little

assistance from their more experienced subordinate.

Immensely satisfied with his recent performance, Bemys had asked his baron to give him another shot at advancement. The man had agreed, for he was proud of the improvement in one of his best fighters. He sent a rare third recommendation in Bemys's honour to the new arbiter of promotions, the polemarch.

To Bemys's shock, the recommendation was denied yet again. But how could that be when he had already corrected the only real objection to his advancement? And this was his last chance, at least unless he managed some unbelievable feat that gained him a fourth commendation. And how often did things like that happen? Only twice in the last ten years!

He knew who had spurned his latest commendation, of course. It probably added to his fury since he had never been asked to join her old elite division. Bemys told anyone who asked why he was not in the Lupine Division that it was because he preferred the cataphracts. He said it so often that he managed to convince even himself of it over the years. The truth he had forgotten was that he could not perform one of the feats considered necessary of a Lupine: to fight effectively on a horse in gallop and without holding on to the reins.

Well, her rejection now called up all his outrage at that earlier slight. Not enough that she had once deemed him second-rate: now the polemarch had compounded her insults by finishing his hopes for an officerial career. And for what reason? Was he not one of the longest-serving warriors in their forces? Had he not gained decorations and honours aplenty for his feats among the troops?

The only conclusion one could gain, he announced, was that the high command—most especially the polemarch—would not promote him because of some grudge, or perhaps because of his common birth. But what had become of the Otomeian army that its elements should now be raised or lowered based on personal issues? What had the world come to when a man could no longer raise his station in the military by fighting well?

His temper might have run itself out had been given some other duty to keep busy for a while. Unfortunately, these were quiet days in

Septentria Province, and the people still up for commendation were also yet awaiting the results of their conferences. Every one of them who was given good news only worsened Bemys's temper. He would see this man promoted-and know he could best him in less than five seconds. He would see that woman advanced-and know he could outstride her without any difficulty. The bitterness only worsened. Hence in a mere three days after learning of his rejection, he got up enough indignation to actually confront the polemarch.

He found her in the middle of seeing more officers for the promotion conferences. She had just concluded one such meeting to the apparent satisfaction of one jubilant trooper-now a captain, the lucky sot!

"Why was my commendation denied a conference?" he asked, having marched up unceremoniously to the centre of the throng.

There was a moment's astonishment at the rude demand. One did not interrupt one's superiors in the middle of business and certainly not in such a tone as he had. When the surprise was broken, some of the officers asked Bemys what he thought he was doing.

"I'm asking her why I was rejected," he barked back. "I have a right to know, don't I?"

"No, you don't!" retorted a cavalry officer, looking like he wanted to kill Bemys right there and then. "Your superiors made a decision and all you need to do is accept it, Idiot!"

"Oh, is that so? You're my superiors?" Bemys jeered, getting even angrier. He had duelled and killed people for calling him worse. "I could whip the lot of my superiors with one hand tied behind me! So I think I deserve to know why I wasn't even considered when so many weaklings get to become officers of the army!"

There were shouts of outrage at this and the already gathering Otomeians pressed closer to Bemys and the woman he was confronting as a result. There were some Himeans too in that crowd-most were visiting the auxiliary camp on army business-and these also moved nearer to see what was the cause of the spreading unrest. The polemarch herself looked annoyed and raised her hand

for silence. It took a while, but with that many officers in the crowd, the order was eventually enforced.

She met Bemys's greyish eyes with her green ones.

"You ask why I denied you promotion?" she said.

"Yes!"

She fixed him with an expression that communicated the answer: *look at what you are doing now*. So speaking was her face that he felt his own suddenly scalded by a blush. Something in her countenance had forced him to remember all the recent times he had spoken less than politely to his officers. But that was normal, was it not, when you knew better than your own superiors? Was he supposed to have pretended to be a military dunce when the truth was that he was a better leader than his actual leaders were?

So Bemys told himself, trying to outstare the green-eyed officer currently glaring his way.

"You've no cause to deny my promotion," he declared, with just a touch of insecurity in his voice. She apparently heard it, for she had an answer ready.

"Some captains told me you spoke back to them," she stated.  
"Cause enough."

He set his jaw and tried again to outstare her, willing the blood to drain from his cheeks.

"Which captains?" he asked.

The strange green eyes finally left his, but only to roll around.

"You know," she said. "Do not pretend otherwise."

He blinked rapidly, because he did know. It was on the tip of his tongue to profess the contrary but she spoke again before he could do that.

"You intrude on your betters, so go," she said with lofty impatience.

"You will be punished later."

Bemys flushed even redder at the dismissal, his lips curling back from his teeth. Even the Baron Eilren did not speak to him that way!

"Who's going to punish me, then?" he demanded. "All I did was ask why you lot won't give me what I deserve! How long have I fought for the kingdom without being given my just reward?"

"Your reward," said the scowling polemarch, "was given to you in the form of spoils. As for promotion, you may cast off all hopes of it. This show ensures you shall never be promoted. I shall see to it."

The promise got his grey eyes bulging, the cords of muscle on his neck popping out as his temper went.

"You'll see to it, eh?" he brayed, grinning nastily at her. "Oho! Is that a promise?"

"Yes."

"So now a cripple gets to say which warriors can or can't be promoted!" he bristled, putting on his ugliest expression. Several Lupines nearby growled at what he had called their erstwhile captain. "Oh, piss off, you mongrels! You lot don't scare me! I'm as good a fighter as any of you and you all know it!"

"Is that a challenge?" one Lupine captain demanded, pushing his way to stand beside the polemarch. "Because I'll take you on, Bemys, to see if you can prove it."

But a new thought had entered Bemys's increasingly desperate, enormously angry mind at this other Otomeian's words. He barked a strange laugh now and turned from the man to glare again at their highest-ranked superior in the area.

"It's a challenge, all right!" he crowed, pushing his chest out and visibly swelling in size. "But not for you, Lickspittle! The one I'm challenging to a duel's the polemarch!"

There was an outburst of sounds and movement after this, with a voice several recognised as the man's baron yelling for him to shut

up. Bemys ignored that call along with the others threatening to attack him, however, and repeated his audacious challenge. The mad idea in his mind grew larger and firmer. Why *should* he not challenge the polemarch? According to the rules of their world, would that not grant him an even greater promotion than the one she had denied him? Duels had long been fought among their people over disputed positions. It had been a long time since the last such challenge, of course, but that only indicated to him how slow his countrymen were. Someone should have thought of this before! Especially with a polemarch who could no longer fight at her top condition.

He bellowed his challenge to her again, demanding that she face him as a true officer of their army would. The noise escalated further, with more and more of his countrymen crowding in. The Lupine captain who had threatened him earlier advanced, as did some other officers.

Before they could actually come within fighting distance, however, the polemarch's voice ordered them to stay. She stepped out from behind the men shielding her, her gait measured because of her leg and cane. She held the other hand up again and waited patiently for the crowd to quiet. She dropped her hand to her side and-encouraging sight to Bemys!-seemed to tug a little anxiously at her dress.

"Bemys," she said, once she could speak again at normal volume. "You wish to duel me?"

"Haven't I said so?" he roared back, standing with legs wide apart. "You rejected my promotion, which I deserved, Polemarch. Now, I'm going after it myself. So face me! If you're truly worthy of your title."

"When do you wish to fight?" she asked, hushing the officers protesting frenziedly around her with an irritable snap. "You have a preference?"

"No! I'll take you on anytime and anywhere!"

"Anytime and anywhere?" she echoed, sounding very calm.



"Yes!" he blasted back.

"You are certain?"

"How many times do I have to say it? Anytime, Polemarch! Anywhere, I'll take you on!"

"Then," she said, "now."

She flung out her hand in a sweeping movement that propelled the dart in her fingers at him. The shard of metal was so fast all he could do was blink at its approach. It sliced through the weak obstruction of the eyelid before parting the cornea underneath, cleaving both the grey iris and the lens, then demolishing the rest of the vitreous orb until it finally struck bone and was arrested.

Bemys screamed.

In the supervening confusion, several of the Otomeians drew weapons-though all who did so faced the wounded man instead of the polemarch-and the Himeans in the area started yelling, some rushing off to get legionary assistance. Bemys covered his ruined eye with a hand, the other going to his sword.

But his assailant was not finished. She had another dart in hand and cast it again his way. This latter projectile appeared worse-aimed. It touched his neck on the side opposite the destroyed eye and kept going, sailing past to eventually strike the wall of a shed. He roared again at this second wound nonetheless, spittle flying from his lips.

The polemarch eyed him indifferently and called to the other Otomeians gathered around.

"Take him to the surgeons," she said. "Now, or he will die."

Bemys barked incredulity at her order. The dart in his eye was still lodged in, and the blood and watery jelly leaking onto his cheek made him a ghastly sight. Nevertheless, he was upright and had his sword now in hand.

"Die!" he roared. " / will die? It'll take more than a blind eye and scratch on the neck to down me, you treacherous bitch!"

"That scratch is killing you," was her answer. "If you want to live, go now to the surgeons."

He roared again and made to charge, but was halted by several of his countrymen stepping in front of his target. Most but not all were from the Lupine Division, and they brandished their own weaponry in his face. He laughed again and without humour at this. The sound was huge but hollow.

"Too cowardly to fight now I've my sword, eh?" he yelled in full-throated disdain. "Step out from behind those bastards, Polemarch! Face me in a duel, damn you!"

More people only got in front of her at this statement, although she did push one aside so as to address the man again.

"I already defeated you, Fool," she said. "Stand down and go to the surgeons. Is it not enough?"

She named one of the barons nearby and repeated her earlier order.

"Take him there, I said," she said briskly. The baron roused three of his men nearby and advanced on their bleeding comrade. He fought them off but stumbled to his knees on the tenth swing of his sword. They bent over to seize him and divested him of the blade.

To Bemys's surprise, he was too lightheaded to get up without their assistance. His opponent had been right: the scratch on his neck was killing him. Her dart had caught him at an oblique angle that sliced open the smaller of the two jugulars on that side. The steady stream of wetness down his collar and chest had been his very life-force leaching away.

His captors bore him off to the surgeons in haste, practically carrying him so that his feet dragged on the ground. The crowd let them pass, still chattering amongst themselves, until the polemarch's voice lifted itself from amidst the gabble once more.

"Baron Eilren!" she called. "Biorix, Siguilse, all of you step forward!"

All three were there and fought their paths to the centre of the mob. They stood to attention and looked apprehensive, for they knew

exactly why she had called them up.

"You three are Bemys's direct superiors at the moment," she observed. "Baron Eilren, you recommended him for a promotion thrice, having resubmitted the proposal after it was denied the first two times. The first rejections were not by me, as I was not yet polemarch. Is this so?"

"It is, Polemarch," he said painfully.

"This man you recommended to be an officer," she said in mordant tones, "challenged to a duel not only your polemarch but also a person with only one leg."

She lifted the hem of her dress to show off her wooden prosthetic in case any of them had forgotten about it. They had not. The three officers in front of her glanced at it only once, then fixed their gazes into the middle distance, jaws held tight.

"I see now, Baron and comrades," she said to all three of them. "That such behaviour is what you deem appropriate to our nation's officers. Otherwise, none of you would have permitted Bemys to cherish more hopes of being part of command. Shall any of you challenge me too in turn? I wish to conclude all my duels before night-time. Come, let us have at it."

Such was the sarcasm in her voice that all three flinched at the invitation. They had flushed to the roots of their fair hair the moment she called them out. Now they bowed their heads to show recognition of their oversight. The Baron Eilren in particular loudly denied intent of challenging her himself. It was truly anathema, and not merely because it would have been disgraceful for a challenger given her handicap: she was also a princess of the blood and, as she had pointed out, their very first polemarch. One did not duel persons of her ilk-unless of a similar social rank and under far greater provocation than Bemys had claimed during his own shameful performance.

"I had no idea he would do that, Princess Natsuki," Baron Eilren avowed, his face wrenched into a tight grimace at the situation into which his subordinate had placed him. "On my sword and my title, I

swear I had nothing to do with his challenge. I would have challenged him myself had he told me beforehand."

She regarded him crossly, unmoved.

"Maybe," she pronounced. "All the same, insubordination arises when officers do not have their men under control. Perhaps you three need lessons in how to command others. We shall review your competence later."

The Baron Eilren flushed even redder at this haughty putdown, delivered to him by a girl twenty years his junior. He had the good sense not to reply save by murmuring another apology, however.

The polemarch ignored him. Natsuki's mind was on something else already: something of greater importance than this petty tragedy she had been forced to enact. She issued a quick directive to some other barons and officers to clear the area, then turned to look at the Lupine troopers all around her.

"Zofel-and three of you, come with me," she said to them. "The rest, go about your business. I am fine. And none of you do anything rash. If Bemys dies, it will not be because one of the Lupines attacked him in the surgical tent."

She waved them away when several pressed for inclusion in Zofel's group. She then beat a path out of the mob. Because of her wooden leg her walk turned jerky when she rushed, which was why she tried not to rush too much. The impending crisis required her to put her self-consciousness on hold, however: she started a bouncy almost-jog that got them quickly away from the area and into the cavalry stables. There they found their mounts, which they rode out of camp and into Gorgo itself. It was a short ride given that the camp was right by the city. They had to dismount again near the town square, however. The roads after that were too crowded to permit comfortable passage for their horses. They left the beasts to some other Otomeians they saw there and continued on foot.

"Lift me," Natsuki demanded when her group came to a flight of steps. Two of her companions did as ordered, each man taking an arm and side of the waist. She resumed her jerky hobble as soon as

she was set down again and instructed them to clear a path for her through any crowds they might encounter. After a while her companions realised they were heading for the royal palace, the gubernatorial seat of the province.

"Princess Natsuki," said Zofel, striding along next to his polemarch. "Are we going to tell General Fujino of what happened?"

Natsuki shook her head and looked perturbed.

"She may already know," she said.

Their group pushed past busy shoppers on a street and got a chorus of hollers and complaints.

"Then why are we going to the palace?" Zofel asked after that.

"Because," Natsuki huffed, "she *may* already know."

She asked to be lifted over another set of cobbled steps on the path.

"Touch her not if she gets angry," she told them when they were close enough to look up at the red flag waving from a centre tower on the palace. When the Himean commander was absent, that flag would be taken down. "Never touch her. Even if something happens or if she pushes me."

"Would she push you?" a shocked Zofel asked, his face speaking for all the members of their group.

"Not deliberately," Natsuki answered. "But even then, touch her not. Even should we appear to struggle."

Zofel exchanged looks with the others and said, "We could help you, Princess Natsuki, if you're worried she'll do something impulsive. You know we'd be gentle."

"I know," Natsuki agreed. "But she will not be. To anyone besides myself."

They entered the palace with a nod to the legionary guards, whom Natsuki noted to be unexcited by her appearance. That gave her

hope that she had beaten the news to her lover. In reality, though, she was just a little bit short of that goal. She found the Himean commander at her staff headquarters just as the woman was getting the news from a tribune. The man had been one of the Himeans who had witnessed the incident, specifically the first parts of it. Shizuru was already on her feet and moving around her desk though the man had not finished his tale. She looked up and saw Natsuki come in; she ran towards the younger woman, pushing the tribune unceremoniously away.

"What happened?" she demanded, taking Natsuki by the shoulders. Natsuki's companions stepped away warily as Shizuru turned the polemarch from one side to the other. "Are you hurt? What is this about a duel? Kusakabe-han said someone challenged you!"

Natsuki settled her hands over the ones on her body. She held them tight to try and calm the older woman, whose eyes still darted all over her with alarm.

"I am fine," she said, trying to smile. "I came here to tell."

Shizuru glanced at the Lupine troopers standing by one wall, then back to her.

"Tell me now," she said, her tone making it clear that Natsuki should take it as an order.

The polemarch launched into a rapid narration of the incident, trying to hasten it to the point where her antagonist had been wounded and lugged off to the surgeons. Unfortunately, she only managed to finish with Bemys's declaration of willingness to fight her at any time when Shizuru wheeled about and made for the doorway. Natsuki seized the older woman by the arm to prevent this abrupt exit and dug in her heels. To her dismay, Shizuru barely seemed to register her imitation of an anchor.

She was towed three steps forward before the woman finally stopped walking.

"You stay here," the Himean said expressionlessly, plucking Natsuki's hand off her sleeve. She tried to stride off again, but

Natsuki quickly threw an arm around her waist. Again Natsuki was towed forward by a force she could not have resisted even at the peak of her physical fitness. Had she not been so worried she would have found it humbling.

Shizuru stopped again just after bringing the two of them out into the hall.

"I told you to stay here," she repeated, trying to get the arm holding her back to let go. Natsuki felt the scarcely controlled rage in the woman's fingers and knew she would lose this battle unless she tried something else.

She dropped her cane with a clatter and threw her other free arm around Shizuru too.

"Shizuru, wait," she enjoined again, practically kissing her lover's nape. Stiff muscle shifted under her fingers and she held on tighter, hoping the woman would not decide to just march off with her thus attached like some sort of tick. "Wait! Shizuru, wait. I need you to talk with me."

Shizuru stopped moving long enough to spin around. Natsuki's arms loosened but squeezed again in an instant. She looked up at the taller woman and found her voice drying in her throat.

"I will talk with you later," a soft-dangerous!-voice said. "If you let go of me now, Natsuki."

Natsuki found it in herself to shake her head.

"I have to take care of something first," Shizuru said, again with soft and slow menace.

"I already did!" Natsuki cried, before lowering her voice again. "He is felled. The surgeons have him. I tried to tell you."

That seemed to release some of the tension boiling in her lover's body. It did not relieve hers. She was aware that this did not settle Shizuru's anger, and that she had only bought herself a little more time to argue her own preferred resolution for the case. She was also acutely aware that this whole scene had been played before a

captive audience: her skin felt the many eyes boring into them from Shizuru's office as well as the hallway.

The Himean commander's entire staff had dropped what they were doing the moment they heard the tribune's panicked report earlier. Then the Otomeian princess had shown up with her entourage; they had immediately frozen in hopes of being allowed to see what would happen. Now most remained stock-still at Natsuki's glance, although several did seem to tilt very slightly forward. It was an attempt to catch the words of their general and her lover better.

Natsuki's own accompaniment had moved nearer during her struggle with Shizuru but now watched helplessly. She was glad they had at least recalled her orders. The whole wing of the palace seemed to have gone utterly silent, however, and she knew it would take little time for this to be added to the latest army gossip. She had to get Shizuru to herself.

"Please," she repeated, pressing herself once more to the other woman. The knowledge that people could see her doing it coloured her face, but she could feel the waver in the body against hers and so persevered despite the embarrassment. "Come to our quarters with me. I will tell all. Please, Shizuru? Will you come now?"

The other spoke a single word to this request: "Felled?"

"Yes, felled," she repeated against Shizuru's cheek, both tantalised and alarmed by the warmth radiating from it. "He is no danger now. Please, will you come with me so I can tell?"

It took only a few more tender pleas from her before Shizuru relented. Both the room they had left and the hallway were utterly still during their exit: the only movement came when one of Natsuki's troopers retrieved her cane and handed it to her as they passed him.

Although both of them knew the way to their destination, Natsuki steered her lover by keeping a hand on the woman. She knew Shizuru was far from calm just from the way she looked, as well as the fine tremble that would not leave the Himean's fingers. She felt it even when Shizuru carried her up the stairways of the old imperial stronghold. How stiff it had become, that long neck she loved for its



grace!

When they reached their quarters she took Shizuru to their bedroom with a shake of the head to an alarmed-looking Hermias. They left him out in the hall without a word, although he shut the bedroom door for them. There she sat on the bed and was made to deliver the full story to her rigidly listening lover.

When she was done, Shizuru made for the door. Natsuki shot up from the bed so fast she staggered into the woman. She grabbed her to avoid falling down.

"Wuh-wait!" she cried out. Shizuru turned around to help her regain her footing and Natsuki clung to the Himean anxiously again. "Do not leave so, Shizuru."

The older woman guided her back to the bed.

"I was not going to-I was only going to call for Hermias," she explained with a frown. "But I suppose he is just outside the door anyway. Hermias! Come in!"

The door opened and Hermias's epicene countenance appeared, rather less peaceful in its cast than usual.

"Domina, Dominilla," he uttered with faint apprehension.

"Send someone to the army surgeons," she said, holding up a finger to Natsuki to prevent an objection. "Tell them to monitor the status of the Otomeian soldier named Bemys. Report to me as soon as there are major developments."

Hermias bowed and rushed off to see to her orders. He shut the door behind him again.

"As you see, I did not order him killed yet," Shizuru announced to the room.

Natsuki questioned the last word.

"Yet? You will order it later?" she asked, and got an instantly affirmative response. She stared at her lover in a tizzy of concern.

"Do not do that! Please, Shizuru!"

Shizuru stared back. "Do not punish a mutinous soldier with the prescribed penalty?"

"He was *my* mutinous soldier, Shizuru."

"All of you are *my* soldiers, Polemarch. I outrank you all. Never forget that!" Shizuru swallowed a growl, hands flexing at her sides. "I am having that fool decapitated if he recovers from the wounds you gave him. After he has been flogged. As for his direct superiors, they too shall be chastised."

Natsuki protested swiftly that she had already done that. Or begun to do it earlier, she explained when that got her commander to pause for a moment.

"They have received already the first punishment. I shamed them before the others earlier."

"You shamed them?"

"Yes." A short and thinking pause. "I pointed out their failure as officers before the others. It is disgraceful for an Otomeian to be scolded so, Shizuru. They were very, um, very hurt! Shamed!"

Shizuru's jaw was clenching hard again. Natsuki cast about for more but the woman beat her to it.

"Perhaps shame is some penance!" she snapped sarcastically. "But it does not satisfy, *mea vita*. "

"I will do more later, Shizuru," Natsuki promised. "I will take care of them."

But Shizuru shook her head, lips curling back over her teeth.

"They failed to contain an unreliable, insubordinate element," she said with tight control. "I cannot accept that in officers of my army. So I claim the right to chastise these idiots in the appropriate manner."

Natsuki asked uneasily what was the appropriate manner. As soon as the other got out the first syllables of "flagellation", however, she cut her off with an incredulous cry.

"They were not even the insubordinate ones!" she rebutted. "They only overlooked one who was a problem."

"And tried to have him promoted."

"Yes, but still! Please, Shizuru. Be reasonable."

" *Reasonable!* "

The word exploded from Shizuru in a shout. She sucked both her lips in at Natsuki's flinch and strove again to rein in her hugely frayed temper.

"First you tell me that I cannot inflict the traditional punishment for insubordination on that wretch who had the temerity to challenge you to a duel," she ground out, every word a sliver of broken glass in Natsuki's ears. "Next you tell me I cannot censure the people who made his temerity possible either. Are you telling me next that you control my army in my stead, Natsuki?"

Natsuki shook her head frantically.

"I plead with you, Shizuru," she said, finally apprehending how best to get through to her paramour. "I can censure them myself. I do not tell you buh-buh-but I beg! If you censure them it shows only that you control the army-which all already know. But if I censure them it shows that I control the Otomeian auxiliaries-which I must remind all now, after what Bemys did. I ask you to give me this power because my position suffers if I do not do it."

Her heart lifted when that finally sparked a calmer light in the red eyes. They still glared; those hands still shook; that tall body still dominated the room. But Shizuru had listened to her passionate plea and now stood quietly in consideration. Natsuki resisted the urge to slap herself on the forehead; she should have essayed that line of argumentation earlier! The easiest way to get through to the Himean was when something was for Natsuki's sake, not her own.

Perhaps this way she could be prevented from venting her spleen on Bemys's poor superiors. Even if they deserved some punishment for failing to have reined in the man, they did not deserve to be flayed to ribbons, which Shizuru would very likely want!

When Shizuru spoke again it was with a somewhat calmer tone: "And Bemys? Can you give me a reason not to execute him if he survives?"

"Because if you do, it will seem like you do it because I asked." Natsuki put all her heart into the next words. "It will seem as though I could not finish the task. If he lives, I can finish it still by sending him to Otomeia in shackles and reporting his actions to the High Council. That will prove I finished him myself, even if I did not kill him in our fight. But if you do it, it will be as if I lost the duel and you took over. So please, allow me this and do not kill him. Fuh-for me, I ask?"

She saw the faint sag in the other's stance afterwards and wanted to sag herself: she had prevailed. Her frustrated lover put a hand up to massage golden brows in a rough gesture that lacked her usual grace. She shaded her gaze in the process and Natsuki waited for those wondrous eyes to show again.

When that happened, she received a furious stare from them.

"I did not drag you back from the grave only for curs to throw you back into it," her lover snarled with deep vexation.

Natsuki pushed herself up off the bed. She came nearer her lover and reached out tentatively for one of the clenched fists. She found she could lift it and coaxed it open.

"I am not in the grave," she murmured pacifyingly. "You see? I have no injuries, even."

A kiss to the horned palm in her hand got her a murmur.

"See, Shizuru," she repeated. "I am unhurt, no?"

"You could have been hurt," Shizuru remonstrated, brow crumpled.

"No, I could not," Natsuki replied, knowing what her lover needed to

hear. "While you look out for me, that will not happen."

"I was not there earlier." Shizuru sounded unhappy now; Natsuki inched closer to her. "How was that 'looking out for you', *mea vita*?"

Natsuki told her there had been Himeans aside from the tribune who had reported the event to her. She reported-truthfully-that several had gone to run for help in breaking up the fight. Those who stayed had also moved nearer her with a view to being part of her defence.

"They did it because of you," she told her lover, whom she tried to soothe further with gentle strokes on the shoulder and arm, with touches of the nose to the collar. "And your tribune came to inform you as soon as he saw, remember? They knew what to do. Even when you are not there, you look out for me. I am glad for it, Shizuru."

The body in her arms was loosening further. She guided it to the bed and made it sit down, after which she settled herself upon its lap. She wrapped an arm around her lover again and resumed the caresses with the other.

"You always protect me," she stressed, speaking the words into the older woman's ear. "Like my troopers and all my own officers. And see? I am safe, Shizuru."

Shizuru regarded her with a strange expression. Natsuki realised the woman knew what she was doing but was too fascinated-and affected-by it to interrupt. She did not protest even when Natsuki's fingers pinched her on the lip to get rid of her already-diminished frown.

"You really felled him?" she eventually sighed.

Natsuki smiled with a little pride and confirmed it: "I really felled him."

"He might survive, you know."

"He will still be punished." Natsuki looked the older woman in the eyes. "Shizuru. You do not trust me?"

"I do! Of course I do." Shizuru's hand grabbed hers. "But-my god, Natsuki! How would you feel in my place?"

Natsuki agreed. She would have cut the man open had it been Shizuru he threatened.

"So I am very grateful," she said. "I ask much of you, I know."

Shizuru nodded to that, because it was true in this instance. She let Natsuki's caresses continue, however, somehow stilled by them in spite of the rage.

"Keep him well away from any of my armies should he live," she said later. "My hand shall not be stayed a second time."

Natsuki said again that she would ensure the man's relocation if he survived. Her lover looked at her in a way that said her next words should be taken in earnest.

"If I see him again, I will tear out his tongue myself." Shizuru's voice was soft in her ears. "Only after that will I execute him in front of the entire army, *mea vita*. And I shall not flog and decapitate any longer. I shall flog and crucify, and have it done by inches. Nor shall his knees be broken to spare him the misery of a slow death on the cross. Even your king could not stop me from doing this if I see that man again."

"If we see him again," Natsuki agreed, soothing the monster once more with a kiss, "even His Majesty would not try to stop you."

# Chapter 79

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Hannibal's trick with the snakes** - A tactic employed by the Punic Hannibal in one of his naval engagements. He launched hundreds of clay pots at enemy ships from the Pergamenes. When the pots broke on the ships' decks, they were revealed to have been stuffed with live snakes. It caused chaos aboard the Pergamene vessels.

2. **Insula** (L.) - Literally "an island", although it can also mean "an apartment building".

3. **Mare ibericum** (L.) - The Alboran Sea, or the westernmost end of **mare nostrum** (s.v.).

4. **Mare nostrum** (L.) - "Our Sea", which is what the Ancient Romans called the Mediterranean.

5. **Tuatha** - The pantheon of the Celtic/druidic religion.

6. **NOTE on the barge** - The one described by Shizuru actually existed. There were not actually that many men per oar, by the way: the number in its name is taken instead from each "column" of oarsmen. Even so, it was a colossal vessel.

7. **NOTE on Chikane** - For the historically-savvy readers. While some circumstances do seem to liken her to Gn. Pomp. Magnus (vis-à-vis Shizuru's ostensible Caesar), there need be no fear the situation shall turn out similar. That would be too predictable. Anyway, there are few worse analogues for Chikane Himemiya than *adulescens carnifex* himself. Pompeius Magnus was rather a boor.

8. **NOTE on the events in Asia** - While the essentials of the history have been kept, some things have been changed, especially the timeline. It has been sped up a little, for instance, in the succession of rulers to Cappadocia.

**9. NOTE on the Extended Rights and Fuukans** - Another reminder for those who have forgotten: within this story, read the Himeans as Romans, the Extended Rights holders as Latin Rights citizens, and Fuukans as Italians. That also lists the citizenships in descending order of prestige. Even if Roma was surrounded by Italia, it was not Italia, and its people certainly not Italians. Romans- and frankly, even the Italians-believed that being Roman was better, for a very long time.

**10. NOTE on geography** - A reminder that only locations north of Hime/Rome have been altered. All other locations-like those in the east and Asia, e.g. Bithynia, Cilicia, Pontus, etc.-are as in the Roman Republican maps.

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## ***Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae***

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Bemys did perish, which should have finished that chapter of the Fujino Campaign. Yet the incident did not die with the mutineer: the rest of the army resurrected it doggedly. From the handicapped underdog's triumph over a hostile colossus to the winner's entreaties to her vengeful lover, the story had all the qualities of top-shelf chatter. Thus, for at least a fortnight afterwards, both legions and auxiliary continued to chatter about it.

"Which means," Shizuru's older cousin sighed, "that all of Hime will know the story come the next mail packet for home."

"Is that a problem?" Miyuki asked. "It's not a disgrace as far as army anecdotes go. It might even serve your cousin well, given how repeatable it is as a tale. Yet another reason for people to have her name in mind."

"I know, and I don't think she comes off badly," Shizuma replied. "She wanted to defend her lover, thwarted though she was. It's as justifiable as it's romantic, which makes of Shizuru a heroine in this story."



"But?"

"But I wonder if it's wise to let our polemarch come to certain senators' attention yet again."

"You mean... because she's a foreigner?"

"That ship sailed long ago, Miyuki," scoffed the senior legate. "It's more what she could drive my cousin to do-or to not do!-that would be of interest to some folk."

Through it all, the business of shaping Septentria went on. Shizuru even managed to hold the first civilian assizes since the empire's subjugation. It was a vital part of the changeover into a Himean domain.

Himean governors served as the judges of their provinces. They did not settle every dispute, as smaller cases went to the local magistrates. Nonetheless, a good many plaintiffs always believed their cases big enough to be in the gubernatorial docket. Even once a case had been decided at a lower judicial level, there was always a possibility of appeal to the governor if one party was determined-or affluent-enough.

Assizes could thus be a time-consuming part of a governor's duties. To lighten her burden, Shizuru assimilated some of the old empire's judiciary strata. She had explained it during the first Septentrian Conference. Ruling barons were allowed to hear cases as they had during the empire, as a fief's head magistrate. Provided they settled matters in a manner they could explain were she ever to question them, of course.

There would be some changes to the old procedures, such as when a case's penalty involved a pecuniary fine or property confiscation. She disallowed the nobles from pronouncing the decision in such cases: they had to make use of their town council or other local magistrates as a jury panel. That way, ruling barons had some checks on their powers-and could not arbitrarily levy fines or seize properties through the courts to enrich themselves.

There was also a different procedure for the gravest crimes, those

meriting either exile or capital punishment. The same for cases that crossed two lords' areas of responsibility. For these, the magistrate presiding over the hearing had to be vested with gubernatorial authority. When Shizuru was within an area, that would be her. Otherwise, she was empowering her legates to hear such cases in her stead.

Naturally, there were special exceptions for Himeans and members of the army. Any case involving a soldier had to be dealt with at military assizes.

"As for Himean citizens, they must be granted a full trial," she told her legates. "Furthermore, it must be one conducted in the Himean manner."

That was no surprise, but the next statement was.

"This applies too to both Extended Rights citizens *and* Fuukans," said their general. "For all judicial purposes, I require that Septentrian authorities treat civilians of these citizenships as they would actual Himeans. That means referring the matter to a Himean magistrate in a Himean court of law."

Her legates exchanged glances until one finally said what all were thinking: "But that's odd, Fujino-san! I grant they deserve a little distinction too, especially those with the Extended Rights. But why make them legally equivalent to Himeans in formal procedure? They're not our equals, legally or otherwise."

She nodded but looked as though she thought the contention irrelevant.

"Nonetheless, in this matter and under my governorship in Septentria, they are," she said. "Oh, later governors can pick at the niceties of citizens' and non-citizens' judicial entitlements! For now, all I want is a working system."

Her sharp look caused all of them to stiffen. It was clear she thought the topic a waste of her time.

"Just to remind all of you," she said, "none of us know yet if I shall

be prorogued. This and the next year may be all I have left to discharge the rest of my duties in this province. It gives me a tight timeframe for building the foundations later Septentrian governors will have to use. I cannot reconstruct an entire country's administrative framework and pick at all the minutiae too! And how do we know that conflict with the locals is entirely finished? Look at what happened in Durigala, which showed us how many arms are still abroad in spite of our efforts at disarmament."

Thus reminding them of the graver concerns at the moment, she added one more stinging note on the subject of Himeans and non-Himeans.

"I should remind you of something else," she said. "The fact is, most northerners still cannot tell the difference between a Himean, an Extended Rights citizen, and a Fuukan. Even the Otomeians cannot, and we have been fighting side by side with them for years! Granted, most of our own troops in this campaign have been Himean, so the distinctions have not been urgent. But the legions we levied later have had some Extended Rights and Fuukan citizens among them. The First and the Second, which are the legions we recruited last in spite of their names, are in fact almost entirely non-Himean! As you can see, however, I have treated them as equals of our other legions throughout the war. As have both our allies and enemies, who would not understand the particularities of 'southern' citizenship anyway. To them, we are all Himeans."

Her officers strove to look impassive, but still showed faint distaste or discomfort in many cases. She understood why this mattered to them, of course. In some ways, it also mattered to her, she who was a Himean of Himeans. But this was not the time for the topic to become a bottleneck for the rest of her activities.

"One day, even people in Septentria may understand enough to draw the difference," she finished. "Until then, you shall have to suffer being practically indistinguishable from the other peoples of Fuuka. Why should it matter anyway, when once a litigant has been granted a Himean trial, the judge will obviously be Himean himself and thus be capable of observing the judicial distinctions that you advocate?"

The short-lived revolt of Durigala gave her an opportunity to demonstrate how trials should work. She carried out a hearing for the rebelling aristocrats much the way it would have been done in an actual Himean court.

She did not empanel a jury, however. When asked about that, she replied with juristic erudition that it was unnecessary. The defendants were not Himeans and therefore not entitled to the exact trial procedure as conducted back home.

They would have been Extended Rights citizens had the revolt happened much later in her tenure. That was since Shizuru's peace terms with the locals would grant Extended Rights citizenship to all magistrates after a year of their faithful service in peacetime. Shizuru set the peacetime period to be counted from the year of the first Septentrian Conference. This put the Durigalans squarely out of the qualification period, and thus precluded them a fully Himean trial. The governor decided a single judge-herself, in this case-was sufficient.

"This is still a military trial conducted under the authority of this province's governor," she explained. "I only dressed it up a little, but there is still a mail shirt under the toga."

Prosecuting and defending advocates were selected from among her legates. She made a point of assigning the better speaker to the defence. This was because nothing the defending advocate had to say could affect the outcome.

Everyone knew that the Durigalan nobles were guilty of having broken a treaty with Hime, the new master of their domain. There was no getting around it being legally high treason. Hence, in spite of an outstanding defending speech by Miyuki Rokujou, the rebelling leaders were inevitably convicted and sentenced to the only penalty for their crime.

However, Shizuru also used her gubernatorial powers to reprieve them from execution afterwards. Using her supreme authority within the province, she commuted the sentence to flogging, the loss of status and property, and permanent exile from Septentria. *Some justice*, she thought furiously, knowing she could not lighten the

sentence under any circumstances. It still rankled that they had been prodded into it by her legate, whom she wished she could horsewhip down a good Himean road for a kilometre.

"He will be gone at year's end anyway," her lover told her as she gnashed her teeth over it.

"Indeed, but that does not change the Durigalan nobles' fates," Shizuru murmured.

"It changes not their desecration of a treaty either," the younger woman said wisely. "Your legate was stupid, but still they should have tried to see you first. They could have gone higher than even their tribe's high barons when they sought help against him."

"If you mean they might have sought help from me, they could have thought Ushida -han was already acting on my orders, so I was also a lost cause."

"No. They were in an empire, so they know of, of, ahh... of levels of authority. They know officers do not act only on a superior's orders. Anyway, you were just to them even after their revolt. If they had done it to their old king he would have tortured and killed all of the Durigalans without a trial, no?"

"I do not think it fair to use that man's reign for comparison," Shizuru answered, jaw unclenching nevertheless.

"Still. You did what you must, and it is finished. Soon your legate will be the same."

Shizuru knew they were wise words. Seigo Ushida would be packing his bags come winter and she could take satisfaction then in his premature exit. She could not put down the truth of his embarrassing and barely-disguised booty raids in the dispatches, however. Her senatorial opponents would not spare a second on excoriating the man for provoking the first attempted revolt after Septentria's conquest. No matter how Shizuru told the story, it would be she the conservatives impugned, not her importunate legate. So no revealing the connection between the sudden, much-too-early revolt of Durigala and the rapaciousness of Seigo Ushida!

In August, she had concluded enough important cases for her to leave the assizes and capital. This time, her journey took her to the province's southeast corner for an engineering project. This was the construction of a better bridge replacing the old one on the River Atinu's south end.

The new structure would be as large as the one locals regarded as the main crossing. That was the bridge guarded by her twin-camped Atinu Base, further north up the waterway. It was therefore a statement as well as a significant upgrade to commerce for the south banks of the river. It proved that the Himean governor was intent on doing what she could for southern Septentria-despite Durigala.

The truth was, Shizuru's improvement of the province's southern region had to do with more than the natives. The bigger allotments she wanted to pension out to her veterans were situated there too. Her planned soldier colonies would fare better if the bridge she was building was finished. They would have easier congress with the nearby Himean provinces, whether for trade or security.

This was why the new bridge had to be a lasting one. That meant more work, proper tongue-and-groove carpentry. No makeshift bolting or ropework in this case! It also demanded good masonry: Shizuru wanted stone piers.

The way she designed it, the new bridge could still be torn down should military exigency ever demand demolition. Yet the stone piers would stay up long afterwards. This would make throwing up a new deck to reconnect the banks faster.

*For a Himean army*, she amended, having come to disdain the quality of Mentulaean army engineers-when they were even present.

While she oversaw the work on this latest project, other plans for Septentria's future happened elsewhere. At the same moment that she organised her bridge's pile drivers, the Chief of the Druids organised a dinner with two clandestine guests. Had Shizuru even the faintest rumour of this gathering, she would have abandoned her construction to race to Tasgetia in the northwest. But she had no inkling and thus was content to focus on her construction over the

river.

"So she's in the south again?" one of Hiempnos's guests said of Septentria's governor. "What's she doing there this time?"

"Our man at the capital says she went to build another bridge on the Atinu," Hiempnos answered. "At the crossing by the lands of the Marianes and Cruteni tribes."

"Why? There's already a good bridge right there."

"I suspect she may be enlarging it, or something to that effect," was the older man's guess.

"That sounds like a waste of time."

But the chief druid was contrary to this dismissive opinion.

"If I have learned anything of the woman, it is that her efforts are never inconsequential," he cautioned sternly. "She must have found something inadequate about the old bridge if she decided to create a new one. By that, I mean she found something inadequate for her purposes. Remember that she troubled to construct roads even when the war was in its first stages. You too laughed at her then because you deemed our existing roads sufficient. Until she used her new roads to march her armies all over our own country faster than we could. This is not a woman whose least deeds should be discounted as mere whimsies, My Prince."

Prince Calchis took the reproach calmly, knowing Hiempnos was right in advocating wariness of this Himean's doings. What a force of nature she had proven to be!

"I hear she's been doing a lot of other things for the south," he said as a way of acknowledging his mistake.

"Yes, she has."

"I suppose it's smart of her to pay so much attention to that region," the prince determined. "It's always been our weakest, loyalty-wise. They're the ones who switched over to their side earliest. I think we'll have the most trouble convincing them to switch back to us too,

aside from the Aexelli."

The third member of the group spoke up in agreement.

"The southeast peoples are almost certainly lost causes," came the words. "The Mariani, Cruteni, possibly even the Aequani. Most of them weren't even represented in the Royal Court, if you recall!"

"What if we promised to fix that?"

"Wouldn't work. Remember what they told our father's father when he offered them positions in Court?"

"To stuff his positions up his arse," Calchis grinned wolfishly. "He made them pay for that."

"So he did, but it didn't get him what he wanted. He only offered those positions because he wanted them to give him more soldiers in exchange. They refused, he lost his temper, then what actually happened? He didn't get soldiers and even lost more in waging war on the lords who'd given him cheek. He didn't get the lords' loyalty either, which was what really mattered. He made them pay, yes, but so did they make him."

Calchis nodded as his sister went on.

"Anyone north of them ever since, they tend to see as an enemy," Faris said. "If we're to have any luck in the south, Brother, it would probably be nearer the centre or centre-west."

"That's right next to Firens," Calchis said with a sharp look to his sibling. She met it without a flinch.

That was normal, really. Faris always looked straight in your eyes to convince you of her authenticity. It had been a good trick in the Royal Court and had served her well even outside of that cesspit of intrigue. He liked it himself, as he always felt more comfortable with people who stared him straight in the face.

But this time the face giving the stare was not the one it had always been. He felt again the small start she had given him only hours earlier, during their reunion. It was because his sister looked very



different from her old self. Both of them did.

They had been dodging Himeans and their informants for over a twelvemonth already. Shizuru Fujino had put out word that there would be a reward for the person who turned them in. There were to be titles and land to the obliging traitor and even a Himean citizenship. Many former Mentulaeans had by now gained a notion of the power such citizenship held both in the north and beyond it. It would be very tempting for those with dreams of travelling elsewhere and those who had never been high up the social ladder to begin with.

Yet even with that bait, the siblings knew catching them would not be easy. Most of their peoples would not give them up, even outside of the famously-loyal Ganni. There were myriad reasons for this, including the fact that Calchis and Faris were among the most esteemed of their sire's offspring. This was because they did merit such esteem, given their abilities, but it was also because of their old machinations against the late king.

When Obsidian had still lived, their plan to oust him had included wooing the nobility. Once their father was killed, they would have needed the nobles' support against their rival siblings. The druids had contributed by building the pair's reputations even among the more remote peoples and aristocracy. That counted for a lot, despite the druids' relative loss of power over the years. These holy men and women might not command lords any more but they still went everywhere and had access to many ears. Add to this the power of blood: Calchis and Faris's lineage gave them links to many of the nobles who had survived the invasion of Hime.

To be sure, all this did not guarantee Calchis and Faris anything like instant allegiance. What it did guarantee was a kind of fidelity through kinship. They could safely expect most of the remaining high barons to help them stay hidden, even if those high barons had also pledged fealty to the foreigners hunting them down.

The real danger came from the lower classes. These always held ambitious elements ripe for disloyalty. Some among them would sell Calchis and his sister for less than a talent, hence the precautionary disguises the siblings had assumed after Terantrum.

That was the last time they had seen each other prior to this meeting. It was when they had decided too which peoples each would take in secretly canvassing support for their goal.

This was still as it had been before the death of the old king: to repel the invaders from the land as a united and imperial nation. The difference, Calchis and Faris told their auditors, was that the renewed empire would now be commanded by one worthy of the title.

The new king would be a man who had once given the empire its greatest military victories. It would be a man who would correct his ancestors' worst political mistakes. Under King Calchis, those formerly overlooked would finally be honoured. Under the new regime, prosperity would be shared with all the proud tribes of the land.

So did the two siblings promise dozens of high barons who listened thoughtfully. For that was all they needed to do, said the crafty speakers: listen and think on it. Let it sit in your mind for now. No need yet for big decisions! Think first if you prefer to live the ways of your people or the ways of the foreigners. Because at the end of the day, they still only see you as a barbarian to reshape in their image. Whereas we see you as our folk, share with you the same blood and bones under the skin.

Over a year had passed of them spreading these words in the most secret meetings. Over a year of skulking and conspiracy that let them grow accustomed to their new costumes. Costumes worn that long sank into the hide. So when they came to Tasgetia at Hiempnos's behest and beheld each other again, both were so comfortable in their new skins that each marvelled.

Calchis had grown his curling hair longer. Where he had once preferred to keep it militarily neat, he now allowed it to straggle over cheeks and shoulders. He also cultivated an unkempt beard that obscured much of his jaw. His clothes were not poor, but nor were they rich. They were not even soldierly. He dressed like any of the small farmers that tended modest plots in the land of the Ganni.

Even the way he moved was altered: he had less of his past

swagger, having decided that it got him too much attention. He was still a big and fine figure of manhood, but his yearlong disguise had nonetheless imparted something new to him. Archdruid Hiempnos, seeing him again, realised that the year of being a wanted man might have actually granted the prince a tempering improvement. It had made him more comfortable with restraint than ever before.

As for Faris, she had eschewed her old vanities. Her once-luxuriant hair had been cropped to a mere thumb's length. She had lost all her sparkling jewellery. Without the elaborate face paint and rich clothing once favoured for members of the Court, she had become almost unrecognisable-even to the aristocrats with whom she had grown up. She had even taken to sunning herself at every opportunity to encourage her skin to darken.

And inside, she was changed too, Hiempnos mused. Hiempnos thought that it disturbed Calchis, who looked on his sister as the rock of his existence. Rocks changed slowly through the ages. When that pattern was broken, it was usually through violence, like the blow of a stone-cutter's chisel or the cataclysm of an earthquake. Did Calchis see in his sister's alteration the former or the latter? And could he make his peace with it?

"How can we convince people near Firens to throw in with us," the prince was asking, "when doing so means getting on their powerful neighbour's bad side in the process?"

"I've been thinking about that," said Faris. "What if we could remove Firens?"

"I don't see how," Calchis grunted. "But I suppose we can wish!"

The Kingdom of Firens gave him a headache because it could not exist if there was a Mentulaean Empire. This made the Firensii natural opponents to any re-establishment of imperial authority. True, Calchis could ostensibly get Firens on his side by promising them autonomy. But even if Calchis were to make that promise, not one Firensian would believe him. Nor would he believe himself-giving up Firens was not an option and would never be.

So much did Calchis remind his co-conspirators on the topic.

"The Firensii can't be swayed to our side, no matter what we're offering," he stated baldly. "The only thing they want from us, after all, is the very thing we can't offer! That makes coming over to us an unattractive option for the peoples right next to them. Tribes like the Roscii and Padurci would see allegiance to us as an instant liability. To their immediate west is Firens and to their immediate east are the southern peoples you yourself described as lost causes. They'd be sandwiched in between Himean allies!"

"Not if we get enough of them in on it," Faris countered. "You have to remember that Firens is surrounded by opponents too."

She proceeded to point out the fact that Firens still had to contend with the often-hostile Kingdom of the Nervii to its west. On its north side, it was neighboured by the Mentulaean tribes of the Ganni and Vanati, both of whom sympathised with Calchis. South, Firens was safe, as the most rugged of the Caledonian Alps lay there. But east?

East it might be weakened, at least if they could get some of the tribes there to defect from Himean allegiance.

"We need to remind people in the south of that," Faris concluded. "Because if the Roscii and Padurci tribes come over, Firens will then be surrounded entirely by hostiles! That will give us an opportunity to finish them off before going after the Himeans. A destroyed Firens would only make the throne that much closer. It would also be an attractive thought for some of the smaller tribes, I think, as they could stand a chance to inherit some Firensian territories afterwards."

The old bullish look in Calchis's eye: "I'm not giving up Firens."

"I'm not giving up Firens either!" Faris smiled at her brother. "I just think we can 'lend' a little part of it to our allies, like the Himeans did with that territory they peeled off the Carsinii. What are they calling it again, Hiempnos?"

"Pascera, I believe."

"That's it. Still a Himean property yet leased out to their allies indefinitely. It's a sly piece of work and I don't see why we can't copy

it."

A snort: "Doing things the Himean way now, are we?"

"Only where it's of help," she replied. "Who says we can't learn from our enemies? I guarantee it will go over well. Besides, any new allies we make down south would be only too eager to expand into Firensian territory once they learn of our agreement with the Nervii."

There was a lift of the mouth under the dark beard. Hiempnos too was inspired to compliment her again for this particular achievement.

"It truly was an excellent move, Princess Faris," said the druid, "to broker a marriage between your brother and a daughter of the Eastern Nervii's foremost baron. I still regret I had not thought of it."

She acknowledged the encomium with a smile, knowing her achievement would serve them greatly. As of the moment it was still secret, as the Nervian baron had understood the siblings' need to stay hidden. Yet it was already as good as done, for it would be too beneficial to either party to be broken off.

It meant the Nervii on the border of Firens's territories would keep attacking Firensian lands for as long as Entei's "kingdom" existed. They would do it to oblige both Calchis and their own lasting feud with Firens. Only once Calchis returned Firens to the empire would they break off hostilities. That was because a Nervian baron's grandchildren-the eventual children of Calchis and his future bride-would then be in line to the throne of the restored Kingdom of the Mentulae... which would naturally include Firens.

There had actually been a previous marriage alliance brokered between the Mentulae and the Nervii. It had failed to secure peace because the woman Obsidian had married had been a niece of the Nervian king. High up the Nervian royal ladder, yes, but entirely unrelated-and thus, devoid of influence-to the warlords of Nervia's east. Since those were the barons constantly raiding Firens on their own initiative, the marriage proved ineffective at ceasing hostilities. Thanks to his sister, Calchis had made a better match than his father, politically.

"The trick," Faris told her auditors, "is to weaken Firens irreparably. I've an idea that will make use of more than the Nervii too. I just want to remind you first that the real hurdle isn't Firens anyway. What I keep telling you, Brother, is that it's *that woman*. Where Firens just offers a hedge, she's a citadel wall!"

Hiempnos said nothing but looked as though he agreed.

"She's also the harder target to go after first," Calchis rebutted, albeit without expectation of settling the argument.

"If you really want to better the odds," his sister maintained in hortative refrain, "we have to get rid of Shizuru Fujino."

"That *is* what we're trying to do here!" Calchis said.

"No, it isn't," she retorted. "We're trying to get rid of the Himeans. Shizuru Fujino is just one Himean. However, she's the one who's a real obstacle to all of our schemes. And I tell you, Brother, that we need her gone!"

"That is why we need to drum up support to raise more armies," Calchis said with the sort of patience he could not have granted anyone else. "The more of the tribes and lords we get under our banner, the better our odds of finishing off that woman when we take her on."

But Faris shook her head emphatically at him.

"You're missing my point," she said. "It doesn't need to be on the battlefield if it's just one person we're trying to finish, does it?"

The other two stared at her with sudden interest.

"You mean an assassination?" Hiempnos ventured.

"Why not? We're not strangers to that. The Tuatha know how many of our own forebears were finished by it!"

Calchis harrumphed softly, but his eyes were alive with thought.

"It's not a bad idea," he said with a glance at the chief druid. "The

question is how to do it."

"Could we maybe employ some kind of poison?" Faris suggested, excited by his interest. "I'm sure we can get someone close enough to tamper with the woman's meals. She's made our capital her home. Surely that gives us a way in, since we know the people and place better."

Calchis spoke out in agreement, saying he knew just the right apothecary to supply the poison they needed. Before the two could continue their scheming, however, the chief druid arrested them.

"I'm not sure it would be a wise route," Hiempnos warned. "It would be harder than you think."

"I'm sure we could manage an assassination!" Calchis scoffed, having ordered them before.

"I'm sure you think you can," the older man retorted. "What I doubt is that it would work. The woman is surrounded by loyal people and probably has her own countermeasures against infiltration. I have it on authority, for instance, that they tested the food during their first banquet in the capital. Besides, there is another objection."

"Which is?"

"Her mistress may be a sorceress."

"What do you mean?" the siblings said in unison, with a choreographed lean forward. How like twins they were, thought their old tutor, who was very fond of them.

"This is the Otomeian princess, isn't it?" Calchis said, getting a nod. "What makes you think that of her, Hiempnos?"

"Several things," the other said. "Her command of that animal, the black lion I told you about, is one of them. Even our greatest forest druids have never tamed such a predator that way! Further proof of this power over faunae is her horsemanship. Remember, she rides though she only has half of one leg."

"So it's true?" Faris asked with huge interest. "Fujino's mistress is a

cripple?"

"One of her feet is wooden, but you would not call her a cripple," Hiempnos said to that. "As I said, she can still ride, and even does it better than people with both limbs! I saw her myself, sitting on a beast with legs over one side and as relaxed as if she were on a bench. The animal bearing her moved perfectly, even galloped, and she never fell off. But when she dismounted, we saw she was not strapped down. Like the giant cat, the horse simply did what she wanted."

The siblings looked at each other, wondering if such sorcery could be feasible.

"Her title suggests her specialness as well," their old tutor continued. "Her people esteem her oddly for a nation that prefers warriors. Her handicap means she cannot fight, yet they grant her one of the highest offices of their people. In fact, only she bears that title, 'polemarch'. There must be something special to her for her to have been accorded such an honour. She even looks like a sorceress, if such a thing could be. I met her eyes once and her eyes were not human."

"Nor are Shizuru Fujino's, I hear," interjected Faris, having heard much on her journeys about the brightly crimson eyes of their enemy.

"And *she* conquered our land in just a handful of years. Does this not say something?" Their old tutor peeked out, reminded them of something in their people's lore: "It is said the Tuatha put some creatures in our forests to command the rest, and that these creatures could be told from the mundane ones by their eyes. Where you expect to see brown, for instance, you see a blue so pale it is nearly white. What if such is true of people as well? Shizuru Fujino's eyes are the colour of blood aflame. And her mistress has eyes the hard-yet-clear green of an emerald. Are both mere coincidences? Or are we overlooking some sort of warning? I do not know, I cannot be certain. And yet, it seems better to err on the side of wariness."

His auditors looked simultaneously dismayed and fascinated.



"If this is right," Hiempnos concluded, "poison is not a possibility. At least, it is not a smart one."

The siblings understood. If that mistress was truly a sorceress it would be better not to bring poison into the equation. Sorceresses had peculiar knowledge of arcane cures and antidotes. She might counter any toxin they got Shizuru Fujino to ingest, and a failed poisoning attempt would only harm their cause. Eliminating the obstruction to that attempt-the witch mistress herself-was not an option either. Hiempnos told them that character was heavily guarded. Their sources in the capital also claimed that she had felled a literal giant without needing to draw a sword. More sorcery at work!

"Regular assassinations are even harder to pull off than poisonings, though," Calchis said with a frown. "Or are they? What do you think, Hiempnos? Can we give Shizuru Fujino a little kiss on the throat?"

He drew a finger over his own neck. The chief druid sat and mulled that over for a moment, his lined old brow gaining a few more wrinkles.

"Do you remember what I told you about her being descended from their gods?" he asked abruptly.

Calchis frowned in confusion before gawking at the other man.

"Esus save us!" he cried at his old tutor, who somehow got even more wrinkled. "You believe it yourself, Hiempnos?"

Hiempnos's blue eyes seemed pained. Faris said nothing but looked interested.

"Even if it's true, she's not a god herself," Calchis said, unable to believe he was having this conversation. Hiempnos! Archdruid of their faith, yet he believed their enemy was some sort of divine being!

"Surely she can be cut!" he declared. "A blade can still bleed her."

"She *can* be cut," Hiempnos spoke up. "Indeed, My Prince, I myself saw that she had her share of scars. The woman is mortal."

Nevertheless, I do not believe an assassin could do her in."

"But why? Because you think she's truly descended from a god? Or because her witch mistress would prevent it?"

"Perhaps and perhaps," Hiempnos said gravely. "But if I were to answer that question honestly, I would simply tell you that every part of me says it. You would have to meet her to understand. She is not the sort of woman one imagines assassinating or being assassinated. How to put it... Do you recall your great-grandfather and the length of his reign?"

"I should think so. The man stayed king well into senility!"

"He was also one of the most intemperate of the empire's rulers. He ordered more beheadings and public slaughters than your father did. Indeed, even his family suffered. Your own grandfather despised him."

"We despised our own father," Faris interjected.

"And you killed him," Hiempnos told them. "But no one ever tried to kill your great-grandfather, or not that way. The chief druid of his time records no assassination attempts on him. Certainly the atmosphere of fear woven by his intemperate punishments could have contributed to it. Yet my mentor, one of the leading druids at the time, endorsed it as more a quality of the man himself. Not a man you thought of assassinating once you looked into his eyes, he said. I did not understand back then. I never did... until I met Shizuru Fujino."

The siblings' faces darkened as they listened to him.

"And even if you truly wish for a more practical opinion," Hiempnos went on, "I would still counsel against the course for other reasons. She has too many people surrounding her, including that witch mistress, and is also a famous warrior herself. They say she fought in the very front lines with her men against your brother Artaxi, at Argentum. She suffered no grave injuries even then! Your assassins would never get close enough to achieve their purpose... and if they do, would probably fail. Again we would have alerted her too early of

our intentions then, which would only confound our cause."

Calchis blew out a loud and exasperated breath at this judgement.

"Which brings us back to the earlier plan," he said.

"To wait for her governorship to end," Faris stated.

"Or," Calchis offered, "to do it near the end of her governorship. By that time, she would have settled into thinking the empire peaceful already, giving us at least some preparatory advantages."

He could see she liked this option less. He knew why. It was the change in her: subtle but irrevocable, following the Battle of Terantrum. Not from killing their father! She had seen to that task without a worry, and even reported it with pleasure. But the battle itself had affected Faris deeply where the patricide had not.

"I'd still rather wait for her to be replaced by some other Himean governor," she said now, confirming his thoughts. He had known she would push for the option that avoided facing Shizuru Fujino. Whatever she had seen at Terantrum, it had loosened the foundation of her confidence. It was doubly alarming to him because it was not only confidence in herself that had been altered. He had seen it the moment they saw each other again after that battle; heard it when she said the deed was done but they should not celebrate.

"There's never been an army led that way," she had told him. "You don't know, Brother. You can't imagine it."

He supposed not, for it truly beggared his imagination. Even with his father's recklessness, how could an army of a hundred thousand led by five seasoned generals have lost so spectacularly? All he had expected was for the imperial army to take heavy losses, yet to prevail in the end. Well, they took heavy losses, all right! Oh, for a glimpse of what had taken place at Terantrum!

Ever since then his sister had insisted on avoiding a confrontation with *that woman*. When Shizuru Fujino had returned to the northwest for Tasgetia, Calchis had seen a chance. He had hatched

a plan to raise a Gannian army to surround her unsuspecting forces. Not to be: Faris had sent him a druid with a shrieking objection.

Even if he managed to raise an army larger than the one Shizuru Fujino was carrying, it did not assure victory. It did not guarantee either the ability to carry the rest of the conquered empire with them. Besides, what of the rest of the Himean legions? There was no assurance their response would be to pack up and run away! Too many uncertainties, said Faris, whose message adjured him to wait another day.

Too many protests, thought Calchis. And for a battle that they could have waged on their home turf, against a surprised enemy. That was when he had seen the change in his sister unclouded.

Faris now doubted him. His loyalest adherent no longer trusted in his ability on the battlefield.

When he had spoken to their old tutor of this last winter, the chief druid had cautioned him not to take his sister's fears as cause for mistrust. In fact, Hiempnos had said, they were proof that Calchis should now trust her even more. This had shaken Calchis even further, for he had gathered what Hiempnos would not say: that the druid agreed, to some extent, with Faris's concerns.

Difficult at first to know that the two persons who believed in him most now doubted. Such was the hurt that he had sent no messages to either for a full month. He had not spent the month sulking, however: his clandestine journeys continued through the land that was his birth-right. This way he continued to gather adherents as well as information. It was a task begun even before his father's death, the moment he dissolved his little army near Tasgetia to save its warriors.

At the time, he had only thought to hasten the enemy's clash with his father by deferring his own resistance. After the king's army won, the arrangement was for Faris to assassinate their sire. It would have been the perfect time for such a coup, for the king's guard would have relaxed due to the victory celebrations. Their father feared that Fujino woman! So for her to be defeated would have occasioned such revelry that even the king's most earnest retainers

would be drunk. That made Faris's task easier, after which Calchis could step in and take over what remained of the king's forces.

Well, Terantrum had changed the plan.

Throughout his journeys after that battle he had sounded out his people, from the smallest lords to the most powerful barons. Were they likely to side with him or the Himeans? Were they for restoration of their great empire or knuckling under to the invaders?

Had they enough grit left to fight for their nation, Calchis demanded, or were they content submitting to foreign powers?

It was during his investigations that he managed to make peace with Faris and Hiempnos's seeming defections. Every people he visited seemed to have been cowed into meekness by Terantrum. It all went back to that one battle! Where, he learned, the enemy had not even lost a tenth of its number. Implausible! But if so, truly cause to reassess his own talents.

Because Calchis was naturally brave, he did not spare himself the awful questions. Could he have won Terantrum in his enemy's shoes? No, he did not think he had it in him to work such a miracle. He lacked things she had, he mused, and those were things he had to consider.

He did not have her head for battle, which was nothing short of genius. He did not have her armies, whose discipline seemed inhuman. Though he had seen his share of challenges, he also did not have her uncanny equanimity against terrible odds. She dared battles even when abysmally outnumbered, something all his military learning had taught him never to try.

Though he had heard she was even younger than him-not even thirty yet, if one could credit that!-he suspected he also lacked her slipperiness. Hiempnos himself had warned that the woman was worryingly cunning even off the battleground. The archdruid said she ran rings around you in conversation as well as she did around your armies.

A quicksilver woman, Calchis thought, struggling to describe this

daunting character. She would slip through your fingers when you thought you had her in hand. And she did not just slip away peacefully either, unlike that magical liquid metal: she turned in her escape and clawed you so fast you never even saw it. That was what she had done to his father and his hundred thousand. Terantrum again-it all went back to Terantrum!

Shizuru Fujino was an unnerving foe. Unnerving enough to make even him doubt himself, now that he was being awfully, painfully honest. That did not mean he was giving up. It only meant he had to change the way he fought the war against her.

The crucial point of doubt, as far as he could see, was whether or not they could defeat the woman in actual battle. Therefore, why not try to avoid meeting her thus? Why not seek out a method of fighting that limited her chances to outmanoeuvre and outstrategise him?

For instance, he had realised that one of her army's advantages was its speed. No Mentulaeen army could ever match up to that, but it did not need to, really. What they needed to figure out was how to stop her from marching in the first place. His father's generals had tried to do it by using small pinning armies. But what if what kept her pinned was less about her defence than her offence? What if what stopped her from marching was her own strategic need to take a place that could not be taken?

If you could pin her like that, you could win half the war. If there was no one in the empire to equal her generalship, the chances of there being anyone in Hime to do it were just as low. Even her own subordinates would fall short of her level. And if indeed she could be pinned, those subordinates would give him better odds: they could be defeated one by one.

This was only one possibility for his approach. He would continue to puzzle out the problem now that he had a better grasp of his opponent. The truth was, the prospect of taking on someone like Shizuru Fujino electrified him in some way. He was stretching himself and discovering new strengths, new ways of seeing war. Perhaps in facing someone of her calibre he would ensure a place for himself as the greatest of the land's emperors. Sometimes, the greatness of the enemy made the greatness of the champion.

"Well, there's only one more year to go after this one," he now told his sister and former tutor. "After that, Hime will send someone else to take over as governor, and our case will be better. Isn't that what you told us, Hiempnos?"

"Yes, that is how they work," said the chief druid. "But we do not know whom they would send. It might be someone skilled at generalling too, My Prince."

"But not like her," Faris said, before Calchis could say it. "They will never find another like her, Hiempnos. She's the one who makes the difference."

"Then," said Hiempnos, "perhaps we should plan for our muster that year, at the earliest?"

"It's possible," Calchis decided. "I still want to collect as many allies as possible. We can actually raise an army already, you know, and not even one made up only of Ganni. The problem is that it still won't be large enough to offset the foreigners' organisation. We want as many as Father had! Only, we'll be smarter about how we use them. That's why we need to work even harder to get people to pledge to us this winter. It's our good luck that our enemies have been strangely merciful. Provided a place surrenders, they don't purge it of its able-bodied. There are still so many soldiers left for our use! An oversight on their part, but we'll be sure to take advantage."

His companions issued agreement and he addressed his next words to his sibling: "Where do you plan to go next, Faris? Are you going to head to the Nervii again?"

"A little detour down south first, to get a feel for the sentiments of the tribes there," she told him. "Are you heading northeast again to the Arvetii?"

"Yes, Baroness Sedulia's been working on convincing their neighbours, the Carsinii. They've been very slow to join our coalition considering how many people they used to send to join the imperial armies."

"You can't blame them. The Himeans struck them hard."

"Which is why I gave the baroness's idea a hearing."

Hiempnos reminded the two to see the local lords too before they left the city again. The Baron Marlus and other Gannian nobles were the most loyal to the siblings' cause, but it never hurt to remind them why they gave that loyalty.

The two agreed to the suggestion.

"What about you, Hiempnos?" asked Calchis then. "How goes it with your druids and their mission?"

"Good," their chief ally said, face suddenly transformed by a smile. "My people tell me they've even managed to get at least the leaders of the Senonae and Aequani to start questioning whether the Himeans or you offer the better future. Nothing set yet. But they are asking questions."

That got his two auditors to smile back even more broadly. The nobles of the Senonae and Aequani controlled large territories in and near the empire's centre. Their high barons even lived within marching distance of the capital, which was itself filled with their people.

But Hiempnos had even more heartening news for the siblings.

"The Trocarii are also starting to split, by the way," he revealed. "The last word I had from there said half the Trocarian leaders are now in our camp. Perhaps we may tip the balance soon. That might work out for your scheme isolating Firens from its allies, Princess Faris."

The siblings were astounded. Calchis demanded to know how Hiempnos's druids had managed the feat. The Trocarii were not a numerous tribe and thus not a priority in terms of gaining manpower, yet they were important. They were among those to have gone over to the foreigners without fighting them. For them to defect would serve as excellent propaganda. It might make it easier to convince the other tribes in that area to join their pact, regardless of their treaties with the Himeans.

"It took less effort than you think," Hiempnos revealed. "The Trocarii



were not pleased by what happened at Durigala. The fact that the legate responsible has not even been punished has many of them questioning the Himeans' promises. Do you know what I think has pushed matters in our favour? The fact that no one paid the Trocarii much attention during your father's reign!"

"Well," sighed Faris, with an upturn of the eyes that invoked her old Courtly manner, "they *are* bumpkins from a backwater. Beyond notice, in the usual way of things."

"Yes indeed, and fortunate it was for us. You see, even if they did not get the best of what was to offer in your father's reign, nor were they abused and stolen from the way that legate did under Shizuru Fujino's aegis. I told my druids to promise them justice by retrieving their exiled comrades and granting all their current high nobles positions in your future Court."

The two praised him for his handling of the situation.

"It was a good solution," Calchis said with a brisk nod. "Although I've no idea how we'll find the exiled Durigalan lords, I have to say. Even if we did know, getting them back seems impossible."

"It *is* impossible," Hiempnos replied, with a lift of his grey brows. "But the Trocarii need not know that, Your Highness. All they need to know is that you are willing to provide them true justice from a kinsman and Mentulaean, not some southern visitor."

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In the meantime, the great obstacle to imperial restoration focused on her bridging project. Eager to complete it, she stayed onsite daily until the gloaming prevented further construction. A fortnight into the development, all that was left was half a day's work on the deck. The next afternoon would see the bridge ready for traffic.

She bid her officers a good evening and retired to her tent, where a pale woman waited.

"Reading still, My Polemarch?" she said, upon seeing her lover on a couch with a scroll and a five-flamed lamp on a stanchion beside

her.

"Working still, My Commander?" was the Otomeian's response.

Shizuru came up for a kiss and said that she was done for the day.

"I would rather not risk work once the light is almost gone," she said. "Anyway, we are nearly finished. Have you spent all of the time reading since you left me?"

Natsuki smiled with sudden shyness.

"I had the troopers run drills too," she said. "And I walked."

She whipped something out from behind the pillows. It was a thick bouquet of flowers tied together by twine.

"I found earlier," she said, handing them to the older woman. "So I picked. Pretty, no?"

"Very pretty," Shizuru said, pleasantly surprised. "Where did you find them? I hope not too far from camp?"

"No... and I had some of the Lupines," the young woman said, heading off the query about an escort.

"That is good. And these really are beautiful. I like the colours."

There were mostly violet blooms in the bunch. Natsuki smiled again, less bashfully than before.

"I know," she said.

"Did you pick them just for me, Natsuki?"

A nod. Shizuru gazed affectionately at her.

"Thank you very much, *mea vita*," she said. "I adore them. See how they brighten up the place! Perhaps Hermias can put them in some water when he comes."

She had only just said this when her steward announced himself behind the curtained entrance. Shizuru bade him and the other

slaves enter so they could set up her bath. She yielded the flowers to Hermias and slipped through the curtain herself.

This brought her to the section of the tent used as her study and headquarters. She glanced at her desk to see if her scribes had left any urgent notes for the day. On the way back she paused at another table, where resided a miniature model of the bridge they were constructing. Sculpted painstakingly out of clay and painted to realistic colour, it was so detailed that it even held a working miniscule crane and tiny pile drivers.

These small-scale reproductions were typical whenever her army had an engineering task that looked complicated. That included bridge building, big sieges, heavy fortification schemes, and more of the same. Three-dimensional models of these helped members of command better understand what the engineers had to deal with. It theoretically prevented them issuing orders that would contradict the engineering section's needs.

In Shizuru's case, she did not need the models. She had always ordered them done up anyway to help her officers. Later she had also discovered another reason for keeping up their use: Natsuki loved the things. Twice already Shizuru had found the Otomeian moving the functional pieces and taking them apart with dainty fingers. Interestingly, she always succeeded in putting them back together afterwards. Shizuru suspected her lover had a natural aptitude for mechanics. The girl had even figured out how to operate the legions' artillery without instruction.

She smiled when she saw that the miniature crane had already been placed by the last section of deck on the bridge model. She knew who had put it there.

When she returned to her private quarters, her flowers were already in a container of water. She moved them next to their bed. Then she sat on a stool by Natsuki's couch and waited for the washtub to be filled.

She sent her servants away for the actual bath. Natsuki too offered to help her with her ablutions, but was denied: Shizuru could see that the polemarch was already clean.

"I do not want to soil you," she said. "Please talk to me instead."

Natsuki came up to the tub anyway, and settled on a stool the servants had placed by it. Again Shizuru protested, conscious of the clean and cool scent so near her own unwashed one.

"Really, *mea vita*, you do not have to wash me," she reiterated.

The younger woman agreed and said she would not. She leaned her head to Shizuru's.

"I will touch only the mouth," she announced.

After a while Shizuru grumbled at the torment.

"Oh, run back to the couch!" she ordered. Even the hairs on the back of her neck were stirred by what the other had done to her lips and her tongue. "You only get more wicked over time, you know."

Her companion laughed and went off obediently, having already claimed the triumph. Shizuru imagined she would have skipped had she still been able.

"Is that Chikane's latest letter?" she asked, starting on her bath with fresh energy.

"Yes." Natsuki pointed to a desk with other scrolls. "Yours is there."

"From where is it this time, our friend's letter?"

"This is from buh-Bithynia," Natsuki replied, speaking the name of the place tentatively. Shizuru assured her she had pronounced it right. "You have ever been there, Shizuru?"

"Not yet. Do you know where it is?"

Natsuki did, as she had searched for it on one of the maps. It had become one of her favourite things to do: poring over Shizuru's charts of Mare Nostrum and tracking Chikane's progress.

It was possible because Chikane sent letters at nearly every harbour. Given the roving nature of the woman's command, the

correspondence was currently one-sided. Even so Chikane kept it up, writing epistles for both Shizuru and Shizuru's lover whenever time afforded. Considering how much she had to do and all the other missives she had to write-she was writing to Senate too, for example, as well as her legates and certainly her wife-both her recipients in Septentria greatly valued her unstinting communications.

The letters for Shizuru were often about the other senators she met on her travels or about her campaign. The ones for Natsuki were about the sights and people of the latest locale where she found herself. Sometimes these were short, given how busy she was, but were nevertheless full of warmth and colour.

To make up for the shorter letters, she sent little packages for her best friend's lover and own would-be daughter. Thus far she had sent a copy of a rare book from Macedon, a large curved dagger from Thrace called a "sica", a snake-headed bracelet from Galatia, and most recently, a very eastern-looking necklace along with a pristine set of tetradrachms from Bithynia. The tetradrachms exhibited the finest Hellenic style in their portraits of Bithynia's rulers: the oldest coin had the face of the first Nicomedes on one side and the goddess Bendis on the other. It was very old, Chikane wrote, and now quite rare because the later rulers had replaced it entirely with their own currency issues. She thought Natsuki would like the coins as tokens, and she was right.

By the Galatian bracelet Shizuru was joking that she might suspect Chikane of stealing her lover were she a lesser woman. Natsuki had reminded her that she was the one who wanted them to get along.

"Not more than us!" had been Shizuru's shammed lamentation.

Her next stop, Chikane wrote to Natsuki, might be Cilicia, then Crete followed by Cyrenaica. Most of her legates had already begun organising their fleets, and had obtained promises of cooperation from the coastal provinces' governors. After her stop at Cyrenaica she thought she would be ready to commence with her grand strategy. This meant sailing all the way back west with her best armada to clean up the Mare Ibericum.

"I wonder," Natsuki mused after relating this to her lover, "what it is like, a sea battle."

"Wet," Shizuru proposed. "And probably very salty."

" *Shizuru.* "

"Well, I am not really the best source," Shizuru said, scrubbing busily. "Practically all of my battles have been on land thus far. What I do know, I get from uninvolved observation or others' accounts."

"But you ever want to?"

"Do a naval battle, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I do. It would be interesting to see how I fare in the water. I always wanted to give Hannibal's little trick with the snakes a try. Although that would only be an option if you had no intent of boarding the enemy ships, perhaps."

Natsuki plopped back to lie on the couch.

"Is it common to board, Shizuru?" she asked.

"I believe so, though you should ask Chikane that. For my part, I think boarding would be common because it would yield larger gains. You would have the chance to take the opponent's vessel as a prize, along with his cargo and crew."

Her supine companion said that made sense.

"I wish," she sighed afterwards, "I could see a sea battle. Someday."

Shizuru smiled, finishing her wash.

"You would like to see one?" she said. "Or do you want to participate in one?"

Natsuki said she thought she would prefer to see instead of participate in this case.

"Afraid you might fall into the waters and get wet after all?" Shizuru teased.

"What if the ships sail to me?" came the glower. "I cannot swim away fast anymore, with my leg!"

Shizuru laughed, squeezing out moisture from her hair. She got out of the tub and stood on a mat, letting her body drip the wet onto it. She could feel the green eyes running over her frame.

"Actually, Natsuki," she said as she dried and dressed herself, "even people with both legs would not be able to evade a ship. It would likely still hit them were they in its path."

She saw the haze of memory in the other's eyes and knew Natsuki was thinking of their journey to Ravenna the previous winter.

"Yes, it is very fast, a ship at full speed," mused the Otomeian. "What ships will Chikane use for her fleets, Shizuru? The big ones?"

Shizuru told her it depended on what she thought were "the big ones". Chikane would likely favour triremes. She could guess that from familiarity with her friend's own military exploits. Shizuru had once devoured the dispatches describing Chikane's naval engagements. She had been much younger then.

"She tends to agile naval tactics," she told Natsuki now, "but is also of the cautious type who wants marines aboard her ships. The trireme permits her both, so I think she would favour it. It is also common, so raising fleets of it would be easy."

It was indeed one of the most popular ships for states maintaining navies. The trireme had-as indicated by the name-three banks of oars on either side yet was still light enough for manoeuvrability. At over thirty-eight metres in length, it was also an impressive warmaking galley. A decked trireme could bear fifty marines comfortably.

The other common war galley, the smaller bireme, had no space for naval soldiers. Sometimes it was even left undecked and thus carried only professional oarsmen. Its attack was mostly restricted to

ramming other ships using its broad beak. When handled by a good crew, it could be very effective at causing damage that way. Unfortunately, it was also a fair-weather vessel, prone to slewing out of control when the seas turned rough. Triremes tended to be wieldier.

"Although, of course, they cost more," Shizuru told her keenly listening lover. "Not that it should be a problem for Chikane's campaign, especially as she plans to deduct the cost of levied fleets from the provinces' tributes for the year instead of demanding money to be sent out by the Treasury. Typical of her good thinking."

"Yes, a good idea," Natsuki agreed, sitting up again. "But Shizuru! These ships."

Shizuru stifled a chuckle at the other's excitement.

"What of them?" she asked.

"There are bigger ones, no?" said Natsuki. "I think I read there are even bigger than, um, than triremes."

Shizuru sat next to her on the couch, having finished putting on a tunic.

"There are indeed," she agreed, and relinquished the towel in her hands to her mistress. Natsuki wanted to dry her hair for her.

"Tell me," the younger woman said. "These big ships... did we see any at the harbour in Argus last time?"

"We may have, but I cannot recall, *mea vita*. Most of the Argus war galleys are in fact triremes, however. That much I know."

"Tell. Tell of the bigger ships?"

Shizuru had a suspicion that her paramour was so enthusiastic because she was still thinking of ships as big toys that always cooperated. Little more than fast craft to ride for one's fancies, basically. That was probably because her only sea voyage thus far had been done at remarkable speed. Natsuki did not yet know how troublesome ships could be in either poor sailing conditions or when



they suffered an unlocateable leak.

Shizuru humoured her anyway. She spoke of bigger ships like the quadriremes and quinqueremes, logically the next sizes in the series. They had a misunderstanding when Natsuki said she could only imagine how tall such ships' sides must be. Then Shizuru realised the girl's misconception and went to correct it.

"Those polyremes are not named like the bireme and trireme, though it seems like it," she told the Otomeian. "The bireme gets its name from having two banks of oars, yes, just as the trireme is named for its three banks. This is not the case for the bigger ones."

Once one passed the trireme, polyremes' names no longer depended on the number of oar banks. The fact was that no galley could hold more than three banks of oars per side. To put even just one more bank of oars beyond that number was physically impossible.

Hence ships bigger than triremes took their names from the number of men per oar instead. A quadrireme, for example, had four rowers per oar. Yet it still had only three oar banks per side.

The name still served to indicate overall ship size. Triremes-also called "threes"-were bigger than biremes or "twos". Quadriremes or "fours" were bigger than both. Quinqueremes or "fives" were bigger than all of those others.

Size in a ship did not necessarily mean warfaring improvement, however. The Rhodians, for instance, tended to stick to lightly-built triremes themselves. And they were still high-unbeatable on the water.

"So you can expect Chikane to levy a fleet complete with sailors and officers from them," Shizuru told her lover. "No Himean admiral bypasses Rhodes! Fortunately, it has learned enough by now to give us what we want when we demand it... most of the time, anyway."

To further illustrate the fallacy of ship size being equivalent to naval power, she told Natsuki of the great barges she had seen in Egypt. This was when she had visited that land briefly near the close of her

Numidian campaign.

"The royal Egyptians use large, multi-hulled craft on the River Nile," she related. "They basically join two galleys together with a large deck spanning the gap between them."

She held Natsuki's hand palm up horizontally and ran a finger on either side, from little finger to wrist, then from thumb to wrist.

"Imagine your palm is the deck," she said. "The parts I just stroked are where the galleys go, connected by the deck. The result is a single vessel with more than one hull."

Natsuki's wondering murmur told her the image she had conjured up was exciting. She gladly answered the younger woman's next question, which was about the size of the largest barge she had ever seen.

"I had the good luck to see Ptolemy the Fourth's barge," she revealed, easily recalling her own astonishment at that vessel in spite of the years. How her whole company had stared when they had set eyes on that particular craft! It had been like seeing an *insula* moving down a stream.

"They called it a 'forty'," she said to her engrossed auditor. "And would you believe it actually looked like it deserved the name? It was only a little weathered by the time we saw it-the later Ptolemies had been fairly conscientious about its upkeep-but it remained the most impressive ship ever built, I think. A full hundred-and-thirty metres from bow to stern! You could have mounted more than a legion's complement of artillery on its deck and been left ample space for marines."

Natsuki was amazed and asked if it had ever been used for war.

"I do not think so, which brings me back to my original point," Shizuru told her. "Any admiral will tell you that the bigger ships actually tend to be worse in combat. The Egyptian barge I just described would have failed in a heartbeat in actual warfare. It could not have evaded or chased down smaller ships ramming its sides. And as for bringing it out into the open seas? An instant disaster.

No, Dear, the really large ships are just for display. Chikane herself will tell you that if you ask her."

Soon after, she summoned Hermias and the servants back to take away the washtub and serve a late dinner. Only after that did she settle down in bed with Natsuki curled up at her side.

Well-fed and comfortable, she decided to open Chikane's letter. It was rather longer than the one the woman had sent to the polemarch. She supposed her friend had a lot of political news from the east.

*Greetings this time from Bithynia, my friend. I am here to acquire ships from King Nicomedes. Like most sovereigns, he claimed inability to accommodate my demands at first. Like most sovereigns, he also changed his tune after we had a little conversation.*

*Unlike most sovereigns, however, our dialogue was not of politics or state matters. King Nicomedes was far more interested in learning how I tended to my skin. The king laments that his own grows drier daily and blames it on the region's troubles-which could desiccate most hides at the moment, I shall admit.*

*I told His Highness that if he wore less face paint, it might benefit his skin by permitting it to breathe. In truth, however, I think no amount of respiration can make a difference. His Highness is already some sixty years old, although he dresses thirty years younger. I was mum on that fact throughout our dialogue, as indeed I was on the fact that he paints his lips the wrong colour.*

*After our lengthy and curiously enjoyable chat, I convinced him to grant me a fleet. He convinced me in turn to stay in the palace, having taken a fancy to my skincare expertise. I admit I am tended very considerably, and the company is rather good. The king may have his peculiarities but he is a truly warm person. As is his wife, who dons less face paint than her husband.*

*My campaign's preparations still go well and my tasks remain mostly logistical at the moment. Nonetheless, I learned here that one of my legates has already had a brush with the foe. Nagato Fune-san, specifically, whom I sent to Rhodes to levy a fleet of crewed ships.*

*She was supposed to deliver them to me for use in my personal fleet, and she ran into a pirate admiral shortly after setting out for this.*

*The pirate she met is one who has pillaged many of our ships over the past ten years. It was Eurybatus himself, one of the scourges of Our Sea. It speaks to the success of this outlaw on our waters that he did not even hesitate at the sight of a Rhodian fleet. Fune-san tells me he made straight for them, which was his first mistake. One does not attack a Rhodian navy head-on, unless one is certain of outmanoeuvring them.*

*Fune-san and the Rhodians whipped Eurybatus. I told you his first mistake was in taking on the Rhodians directly. His second was in taking on Fune-san. She commands on water as well as any Rhodian admiral-no question how her family got their name!*

*Now for a brief naval lesson that may or may not be needed. You told me to presume you knew little of naval warfare when I wrote of my campaign's battles. Even so, I am aware that you have more knowledge of naval combat than most who have never actually participated in it.*

*You have seen a Rhodian flotilla fight before. This tells me you know of their ships' and crews' agility. I know not, however, if you have ever seen them execute the manoeuvre they call "sailing through the enemy".*

*Assuming the opponent's fleet has the classic line formation, it necessitates each of your own ships sailing towards them as if to ram them head on. The true goal is to sail through the gaps between the enemy's ships, however. Once past, your vessels must turn swiftly and thus have the enemy's sterns at their mercy. Anything from boarding to ramming or even shearing off the enemy's oars with their beaks becomes child's play.*

*As you may imagine, this move requires the utmost skill and speed. There is a moment right before your ships enter the gaps when they are vulnerable to myriad perils. But the best of the Rhodian crews practise this manoeuvre hundreds of times before they use it in battle. For her engagement with Eurybatus, Fune-san had them*

*demonstrate the fruit of all that practice.*

*Eurybatus limped his way home at sundown minus a sunken vessel and with nine others damaged. Fune-san also captured one of his quinqueremes as well as a quadrireme and their crews. As for my Rhodian fleet, my legate delivered it to me intact! I am keeping her in charge of them as my personal fleet's second-in-command. She has more than proven herself worthy of it.*

*I intend to exploit the Rhodians' abilities to the fullest once I start sweeping out Mare Nostrum's rubbish. I shall have to combine them with some of my other ships, of course. The Rhodian ones are only partially decked. Not ideal for bearing marines or boarding, and I still do want good soldiers sailing with my fleet.*

*As you guessed when we met in Argus, however, I am eschewing the corvus. This boarding bridge can be a boon, admittedly, when the enemy has inferior or no marines on its vessels. After all, it turns a sea battle into a land one by creating a bridge between galleys.*

*All one has to do is get close enough to the enemy ship and winch the corvus down until the free end hits the opponent's deck. The device's beak makes it impossible to dislodge once there, so you effectively get a gangplank wedding your ship to the enemy's. Marines can just run from your deck to theirs. A handy way to solve the problem if your infantry is stronger than your actual navy.*

*The difficulty is that the corvus is too heavy and destabilising. Its weight slows vessels too much, while the height and width of its plank in the vertical or unused position affect the ship's agility in a strong wind. Some of our previous admirals risked it because they were still uncomfortable with true naval warfare. I like to think I am not so handicapped. Anyway, I hardly used it myself when I was legating for Suzuhara-san, so my tactics have never been dependent on it.*

*Most of my ships are going to be triremes.*

Shizuru paused to chuckle quietly at this confirmation of her guess to Natsuki. How well she did know her friend!

*It means extra work every night for my crews-triremes have to be dragged out of the water regularly, to avoid them getting sodden-but it is manageable. I recently got twenty large and sturdy quinqueremes too, but not by asking. They were sent as a gift by none other than King Mithridates of Pontus! He sent them with a fulsome letter packed with rhetorical stylings that I misdoubt the king ever learned from his pedagogue. Someone certainly wrote that letter for him.*

*Why did I not succumb to the blandishments of our lovely and generous Pontic king? Oh, you would not either! Mithridates is the slaving wolf decked out as a lamb. I submit wolfishness would be necessary to hold on to kingship in a place like Pontus. The standard method of succession seems to be patricide or matricide in that realm. Even so, Mithridates is doubly dangerous compared to his forebears. That is since this particular wolf slavers over all he surveys... and standing in Pontus, you can survey nearly the whole region.*

*You recall how, before your second Mentulæan Campaign, the old king of Cappadocia suddenly died of what had seemed a trifling illness. No sooner had his last breath evanesced than there was suddenly a new king on the throne. It was a boy supposed to be a half-brother, sired by the late king's father in his dotage. Although if anyone counted the years right, the late king's father would have had to sire the boy beyond his death for it to be true!*

*Well, it was Mithridates of Pontus who gave that boy the crown of Cappadocia. He marched his army into the country, put the boy on the throne, and claimed he was the lad's protector. What else could the Cappadocians have done other than kneel to the boy-king he was forcing on them? Theirs is a poor land without a permanent army. They had to acquiesce.*

*Shortly after Mithridates and his army left, Cappadocia revolted. The natives knew the lad was a Mithridatic puppet! They said the boy-king had also a distinct look of Mithridates himself... who is rumoured to be his real father.*

*The Cappadocians deposed their puppet boy-king and installed a distant nephew to the old king instead. This distant nephew is the*

*Ariobarzanes who has been staying in Fuuka.*

*Just to remind you of how he got there, Mithridates deposed him against the Cappadocian people's wishes. Our Pontic lord marched his army back to Cappadocia when he learned his son-oh dear, did I say "his son"? I meant "his charge", which makes little difference!- had been ejected.*

*That is how the boy-king ended up in Cappadocia again and the rightful king Ariobarzanes came to Senate for help. He knew Mithridates would kill him if he returned to his throne without our assistance. Which we obviously owe him, otherwise Mithridates of Pontus shall keep expanding and threaten not just our allies but our own province in Asia. For why else has our garrison in Asia Province been strengthened over the past years if not for the unrest this despot is raising?*

*So you comprehend why I am wary of this eastern tyrant in spite of his overtures of friendship. Before you ask it, I still took his gift of vessels. I might as well, especially before he learns of the Fuukan galley sailing this way. I just learned of it myself from one of my legates: it bears none other than King Ariobarzanes of Cappadocia. Senate has decided to reinstall him in his throne, escorted by one of the praetors. I wager King Mithridates might not be so keen to give me ships after that happens.*

*Now I come to what may be the most interesting news of this letter. I already had some bits of it before, but hesitated to write until I knew more. What has prodded me into revealing it now? It was the deputation King Mithridates sent to present me with the quinqueremes.*

*Most of the members of that delegation were high lords and ladies of Pontus. Therefore, they were unknown to me until then. But in the middle of them was a face that I recognised in spite of its owner's new oriental garb. It was your absconded cousin-by-law, Tomoe Marguerite!*

Shizuru's head jerked in surprise. Now there was one name she had not expected!

*I quizzed her on her presence, and she claimed to have struck up a friendship with the Pontic king during her travels. He asked her to accompany his deputation, as she would have better knowledge of Himeans than any member of his Court. She was there, in effect, as a sort of advisor-although the topics on which she advises Mithridates may not be as diplomatic as she asserts.*

*To explain why I say this, I must return to the "bits" I mentioned earlier. They came to me in my passage through Macedonia and Greece. During my stops in those areas, I saw some retired senators as well as former colleagues (exiles, that is). From them as well as some locals, I collected strange rumours about your cousin.*

Shizuru gave a soft laugh that held no amusement. Strange rumours about Tomoe? Those had been around even when the woman had still lived in Hime! Inevitable, what with her deceitful nature and fondness for studying noxious substances. It was out of pure scientific curiosity, she had claimed, though her smarter auditors had found that poor reassurance. Scientific study presupposed some measure of testing and experimentation, after all, and one did hear such stories...

She would have massaged a temple but found the hand not on the scroll restrained. Natsuki had fallen asleep holding on to it.

She found her smile again at that and returned to Chikane's script.

*It appears that, contrary to the usual style for senators abroad, she has spent the past years renting cottages in the Grecian countryside. An odd choice given how we senators always tend to gravitate to more civilised society. Yet she insisted on staying outside the urban areas, in spite of receiving invitations from other Himeans in such places.*

*As far as I can gather, she has been staying in or near small villages instead. I suppose one might argue that the rural quiet sets a more relaxing pace. What concerns me about this trend, however, is that most of the villages she has stayed in seem to have seen bizarre cases of sickness.*

*Three persons suffering prolonged attacks of hallucination at one*



*place, two dying of sudden convulsions at another. In one village, wholly a quarter of the population succumbed to an enteric fever that only ceased when they changed their source of water.*

*A number of our overseas citizens know her interest in apothecary studies, which is why they marked the synchronicity later. Not even to ascribe culpability to her, by the way, which is understandable-one hesitates to think something so depraved of a fellow Himean, especially when on foreign soil. Most were only thinking of asking her for an opinion on what medicaments could have alleviated the locals' illnesses.*

*I hope you shall forgive me if I say the better question might have been to ask what substances would have achieved those illnesses. The stories paint a suspicious portrait of her, Shizuru, which is only worsened when one considers what she did to you in the past. And now, she has suddenly materialised in the East! As advisor to a king who is himself hugely suspect. How I wish I could stay long enough at one port to get a letter from you in response to this one! For I have a feeling you share my suspicions of both of these odd characters.*

Chikane's feeling was correct, thought a disturbed Shizuru, especially when it came to Tomoe. Oh, she believed Chikane's suggestions! Tomoe had very likely played a part in all those inexplicable illnesses among the Greek provincials. The wretch must have been experimenting with her precious distillates and exotic powders again!

Shizuru had long thought Tomoe a little unbalanced. This was even before the woman had wronged her by conspiring to remove her from the first Northern Campaign. Now, however, she believed her earlier assessment had erred on mildness. Tomoe was very likely on the brink of lunacy. Especially after everything that had happened.

People getting sick, people dying in hideous circumstances. All because of one woman's malicious interests. A woman who, in spite of it all, was still legally family to her and Shizuma. Distasteful! It was such a repulsive connection on any level. One that she still felt transferred some of its taint on her. But what more could she have done to distance herself from it other than what she had done in the

past?

A hard thought intruded at that question. Should she have finished Tomoe properly back then? In allowing Tomoe to go into a sort of voluntary exile, she had technically passed up a chance to prosecute the woman. Had Tomoe been prosecuted successfully, her exile from Fuuka would have been enforced by law. Since it was not, she still had the option to return at some point in the future, perhaps when enough persons had forgotten about her old crime. And perhaps if she accumulated sufficient fortune in her wanderings to exchange silver handshakes with some influential Himeans.

Shizuru shook her head and put Chikane's scroll down. She hoped her friend would steer clear of that woman. Especially after the stories from Greece, Shizuru would trust nothing she loved within a metre of Tomoe.

Amazing that she had only heard of the woman again now. Was that an indication of how preoccupied she had been with her governorship? Or of Tomoe's growing artfulness? Either way, she doubted Tomoe's own news of her was similarly sparse. The Septentrian Campaign ensured that Shizuru's name would have been the talk of senators even outside of Fuuka. Tomoe probably knew more about her doings than Shizuru knew of Tomoe's at the moment. That was a disadvantage.

The woman was an enemy now-of that, Shizuru was certain. But was she an enemy who would dare another confrontation? She hoped not: the woman's travels seemed to be taking her further east, fortunately. Pontus might as well be a world away from Hime.

Yet what was that she liked to say herself? That the world was getting smaller?

She inhaled sharply; a tug on her thumb. Natsuki had squeezed her hand, moved by a dream. There was a crease to the white brow and Shizuru reached over with her other hand to stroke it away. She kept it up until the young woman's face was peaceful again.

Shizuru's own was not. An uneasy question had come to mind: had Tomoe learned yet of Natsuki? If she had news of the Northern

Campaign, that was probably included. Shizuru refrained from telling her inamorata this, but the girl was perhaps the most famous mistress of any Himean senator at present. And if she was talked about thus in Hime and Fuuka, she would be talked about thus too in other places with Himeans and Fuukans.

Oh yes, Tomoe Marguerite probably knew of Shizuru's lover. Not a good thing, especially if Tomoe Marguerite still cherished hopes of someday returning to Hime. That was because Chikane was right and Shizuru had her own suspicions. One of them-practically a certainty-was that Tomoe would despise the Princess Natsuki's existence.

# Chapter 80

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Aedile** - An office often occupied by senators in the early stages of their careers. Aediles are responsible for various things, from Rome's buildings to organisation of the public games.
2. **Curia** - In full, **Curia Hostilia**, or the place where the Roman Senate held its meetings. In relation to the **Well of the Comitia** (s.v.), the Curia was supposed to be close enough that people standing on the steps of its front entrance could see and hear whatever happened in the Well. As the Well was recessed (lower than the ground around it) and the Curia elevated (set on high foundations), the Curia's steps literally overlooked the Well.
3. **Curule chair** - A backless folding chair with crossed legs and an ivory veneer, used by Roman senators who were in curule offices, i.e. magistrates holding imperium.
4. **Condemno** (L.) - One of the standard options for jurors or voters in a trial: "I condemn."/"I find (him) guilty."
5. **Corona obsidionalis, corona graminea** - The 2 names for the highest military decoration awarded to an Ancient Roman. In this story, only 7 Himeans have ever merited it. In Rome's, the number goes up to 8: Augustus Caesar is excluded from the count because his crown was never won in battle. Like many other decorations given to Roman Emperors, it was purely honorary and granted by cronies/politicians, not the soldiers... which made it arguably worthless by comparison to the 8 crowns won by genuine military heroes.
6. **Forum** - The Forum Romanum, or the centre of public life in Rome. One found in/around it such buildings as the **Curia** (s.v.), **Well of the Comitia** (s.v.), Domus Publica, Regia, and the chief temples.
7. **Himean Games** - Hime's equivalent for the Roman Games, or the

## ***ludi romani.***

8. **Hispania Citerior** (L.) - The nearer of the two Spains, with its more distant half being Hispania Ulterior.

9. **Imperium** (L.) - Essentially the degree of authority owned by a magistrate of Rome. Army generals and provincial governors also have imperium.

10. **Knights** - Also **equites, equestrians**, or **members of the Ordo Equester**. These are the businesspeople of Rome, often as wellborn as the senators and even related to them. A knight chose a commercial career, however, whereas a senator chose a political one.

11. **Lictors** - An Ancient Roman public servant removed almost entirely from use in this story. In this setting, they are available only to magistrates with **imperium** (s.v.) and can be called upon to help the magistrate discharge his or her duties.

12. **Pascera** - A location granted to the Otomeian auxiliaries under an indefinite lease, as gratitude for their efforts in the war. First mentioned in **Chapter 71**.

13. **Plebeian Assembly** - One of the main gatherings of the Romans when called together to deal with state and other matters. The Plebeian Assembly may be called into gathering only by a **tribune of the plebs** (s.v.) and is made up only of plebeians (see the note on **plebeian vs. patrician**). Voting in the Plebeian Assembly is done within **tribes** (s.v.).

14. **Plebeian Tribunate** - The other name for the office occupied by the **tribunes of the plebs** (s.v.).

15. **Plebeian vs. patrician** - The patricians descend from the original blue bloods/nobility from the time of kings. The plebeians are everyone else, regardless of wealth or social status.

16. **Sumio Fujimoto** - A character in the story. Last year's (as of this chapter) governor of **Hispania Citerior** (s.v.) and accused of a massive list of crimes by the province's inhabitants. See **Chapter 77**

for more details. Hit Ctrl+F and search for "The past year's governor of Hispania".

17. **Shizuru's 'undercover' land bill or agrarian law** - A bill Fumi Katou brought to the Plebeian Assembly; it claimed to "bank"/tuck aside some of the Septentrian territories for Hime's future. In reality, it was intended to save those territories from interested knights or senators so that Shizuru could legislate to pension them out to her legions after the war. Only Fumi and Shizuru know that. See Fumi and Shizuru's conversation in **Chapter 77** . Hit Ctrl+F and search for "The land bill I want passed".

18. **Tribes** - A political category for the Romans, who divided all of their citizens into 35 tribes. Tribal membership is dependent on one's antecedents, e.g. the child of a family belonging to the tribe Stellatina would be a member of Stellatina as well. **Note that this usage of the word tribe is exclusive to the Himeans in the story** . Note too that when Himean tribes are voting, the winning side needs at least 18 tribes (the majority for a total of 35) voting for it.

19. **Tribunes of the plebs** - Members of the **Plebeian Tribunate**; ten are elected yearly. Only plebeians can be elected into this college and only plebeians can vote for election of these officials. A tribune of the plebs could veto virtually any decision of fellow government officials (except for the Dictator). As they could enact or veto laws, they were important when it came to legislative action. As seen in this chapter, they had other powers within the **Plebeian Assembly** (s.v.).

20. **Well of the Comitia** - A great sunken area in the **Forum** (s.v.) where the **Plebeian Assembly** (s.v.) held its meetings.

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## **Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae**

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Come October, Shizuru had more on her mind than the sudden reappearance of Tomoe. Her correspondents in Hime wrote that Fumi Katou had arraigned Sumio Fujimoto in the Plebeian

Assembly. According to her sources-who included Fumi Katou herself-the charges laid were for extortionate administration and gubernatorial corruption.

Fumi had spent a lot of time preparing for the case. Shortly after securing the passage of Shizuru's 'undercover' land bill in March, she had sailed for Hispania Citerior to do research. She went armed with two assistants and numerous letters of reference. These came courtesy of Shizuru's clients and agents in the Spains. Recent acquaintance Urumi Himemiya-Kanzaki had contributed something as well. It was a letter of introduction to the present Hispania Citerior governor, a family friend.

Fumi herself obviously donated effort to the cause, but that was not the end of her investment. It cost money to do case investigation, especially at the pace that she set. The fastest gigs had to be hired for transport, numerous palms greased to speed up the release of documents. Some informants' tongues were unlocked by money and some witnesses even required financial assistance to journey to Hime.

Fortunately, Fumi was wealthy. The Katou-a knightly family-held goodly properties in their home territory of Picenum, and the rents from these sustained Fumi comfortably. It little troubled her to spend coin on cherished projects, and a trial that so clearly demanded justice was very much cherished. This combined with the other tools her allies had put at her disposal: when she returned to Hime in August, she bore masses of evidence.

She could have arraigned Sumio Fujimoto right then, and indeed had to fight her own impatience not to do it. She chose to wait instead for late September. It was a choice made in cognisance of the city's socio-political calendar.

September was the month of the Himean Games. Organised by the curule aediles, they featured lavish pageants of showmanship and sport. There would be chariot races, extravagant parades, musical presentations, and plays galore. If the aediles found the purse for it there were even gladiators' matches and novelties like contortionists and sword swallows. Generally speaking, the aediles found the purse for such exhibitions. In fact, the more money they spent on the

games, the better for their careers.

This was because the aedileship was one of the ways young senators garnered public attention. The other way was to enter the Plebeian Tribune and stir up a ruckus, but that option was obviously open only to plebeians. Unless a patrician was lucky enough to earn a rare distinction very early-as a certain famous senator had by winning a *corona obsidionalis* -the only way to match the noisy tribunes of the plebs was to become an aedile and give great games for the people.

Hence the simple formula: the better the games given, the more popular the aediles. Superb games could get a young senator's career off to a fine start. Superb games cost, however, and certainly more than the public funds allocated. Which meant that many a young senator finished his aedileship up to his neck in debt, having borrowed heavily to plump his budget.

On the brighter side, the rest of Hime could enjoy the aediles' efforts for free. Watching the many entertainments of the Himean Games cost nothing, and many aediles even strove to offer free refreshment. Most of the money spent by the spectators was consumed by gambling.

The games lasted fifteen days from early to middle September. This month was therefore when the city was at its fullest. Rural Himeans flooded it then and joined the city's permanent inhabitants in clogging up the roads, eager to enjoy the extravaganza.

Thus when Fumi set Sumio Fujimoto's trial for late September, she did it to play before a Forum packed with more observers than usual. Much of the crowd from the games remained and thought it fun to stay a little longer for a final spectacle.

For a spectacle the Fujimoto Trial would be, Fumi had guaranteed everyone.

It was titillating from the start due to its being carried out in the Plebeian Assembly. It had been a long time since the assemblies had heard a trial, for the reasons Shizuru had detailed to her foreign mistress in Ravenna. The permanent or standing courts had taken



over practically all juridical business since their establishment. Now Fumi was reminding Hime of the assemblies' judicial power.

To add to the titillation, it would be a magnified extortion trial. Extortion trials often got the most attention among Forum frequenters. This was because they offered a rare chance to punish the highest members of society. That they also rarely ended with convictions did not matter. There was always the hope, the tiny chance of seeing a hoity-toity senator slapped with a terrible punishment.

Other factors contributed to the excitement. Like the defendant's name, which belonged to one of Hime's most famous clans. Or the early rumours of his transgressions, supposedly so vile that they had caused near a dozen of Hispania's temples to curse him.

Finally, there was the penalty Sumio Fujimoto would face if convicted. Fumi Katou had declared at her arraignment that she would follow the Extortion Court's maximum penalty. That was two hundred and fifty percent of the amount extorted.

The total value had to be calculated to include the price of misappropriated objects. Because the charges against Sumio Fujimoto also included lasting and incapacitating harm to certain victims, the amount was padded by the estimated damages owed to some unfortunate locals of Hispania Citerior.

In the end, the base sum was set at an incredible thousand and five hundred talents. Which made the final penalty three thousand and seven hundred fifty talents. Even for a Fujimoto, absolutely unpayable! In sesterces, it totalled over ninety-three million!

"It's the trial of the year, if not the decade," pronounced Chie Harada to fellow senator and plebeian Mai Tokiha. The two were pushing their way into the Well of the Comitia with several burly attendants. Even with these slaves' help they found the going slow and difficult. There were so many attendees in the Well that they were jammed all together, a farrago of people from every social stratum.

"I know you're coming to vote as well," Chie said to her companion. She was practically shouting, but it still seemed a modest volume

compared to the buzz of the crowd. "Are you leaning to any side in advance, Mai-san?"

"Honestly, I'd like to hear the trial first," Mai called back. "Although if the rumours I've heard are proven true, I'm going to be voting *condemno*. Did you hear the one that claims he sought to rape a girl within her father's house right after the father had thrown him a banquet?"

"Yes, by the gods! It makes the gorge rise, doesn't it?"

Chie stumbled into one of their escorts and flinched at his potent smell of garlic. All the bodybuilding professional bodyguards and gladiators smelled like that, so it was no surprise. They chewed garlic whenever they could get it because the raw herb was said to enhance one's musculature. But good heavens, how the odour made one wish there were muscle-enhancing olive oil instead!

She righted herself and leaned in to her companion, who was talking about the crowd they had entered.

"It seems nearly every plebeian senator's present," Mai observed. "There are faces here we never even see the rest of the year!"

"Most of them are here just to vote to absolve him, you know."

"Yes, but with this many people, nothing's for certain," the ginger senator said.

She knew most of the senators present would be voting to liberate Fujimoto regardless of what happened during the hearing. It did not matter if he was guilty, and indeed a good number of them believed him to be. All that mattered was that he was a fellow senator, and the Senate closed ranks when one of its members was endangered. Especially if said member was endangered by the common people!

"Reito-san says the Fujimoto actually dispatched people to drag even doddering and sick clients out of bed to help in the vote. Some even had to be helped to walk here."

"When did he tell you that?" Chie asked, so quickly that the other senator blushed. The question was innocent, however, as was made

patent by the short-haired woman's next remark: "I suppose the Princeps has informants all over the place, so I shouldn't be surprised he heard of that before I did. Still, it tells you how concerned the Fujimoto are. Along with the rest of our fellows."

"There's a very real possibility they won't carry the day," Mai said, eyeing the anxious looks on their colleagues' faces. "They're afraid."

"They should be," Chie returned. "Even the knights are split on the issue. Those with alliances to the Fujimoto will obviously vote to absolve. Yet there are many knights indignant at Fujimoto's treatment of even some knights in his former province. He crossed a line many senators don't even dare to tiptoe."

" *If* the allegations are true."

"Oh, come, Mai-san! You know he did it," the other woman cried in exasperation. "It's no secret what sort of man Sumio Fujimoto is, not among our fellows. This is just the public airing of a bad character we've known about forever!"

"Still, Chie-san," the other said, twisting a little because she wanted to be just. "We have to give him a fair hearing. It's unfair to condemn a man before a trial."

"Tell that to the people Fujimoto condemned during his governorship. I hear he accused people of crimes just so they would pay him something to retract the accusation. Convenient when you're also the chief judge of a province, isn't it?"

The defendant's advocates were already on the rostra. All were of superb oratorical ability and impressive lineages. They were also of conservative backgrounds, for obvious reasons.

Unfortunately for Fujimoto, however, one of the best conservative speakers was unable to act as his advocate. Sergay Wang could not address the Plebeian Assembly, as Shizuru had told her mistress months earlier. A patrician, he had no choice save to watch the proceedings from the Curia's steps overlooking the Well of the Comitia.

When all participants were at their places, the trial got underway. It seemed to hit a snag early when two conservative tribunes of the plebs stepped forth to interpose their vetoes. That was resolved thanks to the audience, in no mood to be cheated of entertainment.

When the conservative tribunes opened their mouths to veto, they were drowned out by a roar. Before they could raise their voices again, angry hands hauled them down from the rostra. Hundreds of other hands passed them around until the shocked tribunes finally emerged at the very edge of the mass. There they were seized by a dozen rough fellows who would vanish like bubbles at the conclusion of the trial. These bore the tribunes off to the cliffs of the Capitol, still roaring all the while: again the noise prevented the manhandled pair from making their vetoes heard. Once far enough from the Well of the Comitia, the abductors ringed the two tribunes and detained them for the rest of the hearing.

Thus freed to commence her proceedings, Fumi Katou began her prosecution with a warning glance to her remaining fellows. Two others were on her side, including the tribune everyone knew to be Shizuru Fujino's. The rest of her tribunician colleagues were either conservative or middle-of-the-bench. These took heed of what had happened to two of their fellows and let Fumi go on with her trial.

It was as great a spectacle as the crowd could have wanted. Sumio Fujimoto's corruptions had been so flagrant that the prosecution's evidence appalled even his supporters. Witnesses of impeccable station were produced to relate stories of atrocious villainy. Devastated youths produced legal wills that Fujimoto had contravened by confiscating their inheritances. Farmers brought ledgers showing that their former governor had compelled them to sell produce to him at a quarter of the price. Then even more witnesses came to attest that he had resold that produce at a criminal profit. The friend of the father who had been executed for defending his daughter's virtue wept so piteously on the rostra that she fainted.

There were even two men and one woman who slipped off their tunics to display backs covered by crosshatched cicatrices. They had been scourged since they would not pay the arbitrary fines Fujimoto had demanded of their farmlands. It made matters worse

when all three provided irrefutable proof of their status. All were Himean citizens! And no Himean citizen-save those in the army, or those convicted of the gravest crimes-could be subjected to the whip.

An especially interesting addition to the witness roster was an actual prince from Mauretania. Fumi introduced him by explaining that Mauretania was an African kingdom that had helped win the Himean-Numidian War years earlier. She left out the fact that Mauretania had *initially* sided with Numidia in that war. The upper classes and politically-informed already knew that: the lower classes did not, as they were always a little sketchy on international relations unless the subject was the chief antagonist in a Himean war. Hence the crowd, mostly made up of middle and lower classes, were predisposed to looking favourably on the prince up on the rostra.

His testimony shed further light on Fujimoto's avarice. The prince had recently visited Hime to convey Mauretania's latest tribute and remind the Senate of a request his father had made to it. In aid of getting that request granted, the prince had also brought on his ship a gigantic golden candelabra studded with gems. It was to be offered as a gift to the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Hime.

His vessel was driven to Hispania Citerior's ports shortly after setting out by squally weather. Hispania Citerior's Governor Fujimoto had invited him and his retinue to a feast, as indeed was customary when hosting royals from allied kingdoms. One of the prince's men let slip during the dinner that they were bearing a wondrous gift for one of the great temples of Hime. Fujimoto, instantly intrigued, requested a quick look at the treasure. In the manor, he argued, he could also help them keep it safe from pirates or bandits, thanks to his troops.

The prince acquiesced and brought the artwork to the governor's palace. When it came time to set sail again, however, he could not retrieve the candelabra. At first, his servants were merely delayed and dismissed by the governor. When he himself attempted to come for the treasure, Fujimoto responded by flat out requesting the object. The prince demurred, saying the candelabra was his father's gift to the god Jupiter, not to a provincial governor.

This was when the governor had the prince and his retinue ejected from the island. According to Fujimoto, who kept the candelabra, Mauretanian pirates had just attacked Hispania's ports. This meant the prince could be considered an enemy of Hime if he stayed.

"But there were no such pirates," the prince asserted loudly on the rostra, booming his voice so that the whole Well of the Comitia could hear his indignation. "We have been fighting pirates too all this time, so why would our kingdom be considered in league with them? We have even contributed a fleet to Commander Chikane Himemiya's campaign just recently! We were accused only so the governor could steal the artwork he wanted! He stole it not even from me but from Hime's great god, Jupiter Best and Brightest, to whom it had already been dedicated by our own religious! The man would tempt the wrath of the great god himself!"

The crowd was already flogged to outrage by the litany of excesses. At the tale of this fresh sacrilege, it experienced a shiver of superstitious fear. Even some of the senators in the Well exchanged appalled glances.

Come the time for Fujimoto's advocates to speak, they were barely audible above the hundreds of voices abusing the defendant. Only the consular lictors, dispatched to surround the accused man, prevented the spectators from going at him with their hands. It was clear by then where most of the watchers' sympathies were.

Fujimoto's supporters did not give up. They heckled the prosecuting tribune of the plebs so much that she could barely say a word towards the end. As it was during the moment when the prosecution was supposed to call for the voters to decide the case, the crowd itself was incensed by the deferment: they wanted to see this drama come to its conclusion. In their anger, they shouted at the hecklers on the Curia. After some senators shouted back, it turned into a fracas.

It only ended when the unrulier elements of the mob began pelting the senators on the steps. They used only clumps of earth and soft foodstuff, so no one got hurt at first. When the more hot-headed senators retaliated by lobbing back the items from their higher position, however, some ruffians actually had the nerve to launch

hardier missiles.

This evacuated the steps of the Curia, especially when a turnip struck Natsuhiro Yoshinaka-not even a Fujimoto supporter-and nearly sent him tumbling off his perch. Some of the other senators bore the disoriented man off into the shady retreat of the interior Curia. His aghast wife, a plebeian, was trapped in the crowd within the Well of the Comitia.

Deprived of her noisiest hecklers, Fumi proceeded with the trial. The Fujimoto supporters within the Plebs were actually easier to manage. This was since they currently stood cheek to cheek with those most eager to convict the defendant. It made them easier to cow into silence, which Fumi did so she could call for the voting.

The ballot went very quickly and with a clear direction. Fujimoto's supporters lost hope with each successive tribe's announcement of its result. Most of the audience was so far against the defendant that all was concluded by the nineteenth tribe's decision. Sumio Fujimoto, former governor of Hispania Citerior, was convicted.

*It was a great coup, Fumi wrote to Shizuru . Even greater as the arrogant boob actually thought he would get off! He didn't even salt away his misbegotten valuables, which demonstrates the degree of his delusion. It's perfectly normal for a defendant to send some precious possessions overseas, along with his bank account's contents. Most senators do it to ensure the State won't grab their wealth if they get convicted, especially if they think there's a chance of losing at court.*

*His own advocates told him to do it, some told me after. Fujimoto didn't listen because he thought I had no chance of winning. How he could have thought that is beyond me: with his record of evildoings and in the Plebeian Assembly? But then, many of the things the man did are beyond me. I don't think we'll ever know exactly what sort of madness gripped that one's mind.*

*We won't be able to get anything like the amount I stipulated for his penalty. That's why he's going into exile after all: there's no other choice now that he's been saddled with an impossible obligation. Near four thousand talents-it's a sum even the Treasury would cry*

*over. Fujimoto's definitely crying about it! His house and everything in it won't even come to six hundred.*

*That's with the artworks we found all over his atrium and garden, by the way. We won't be including the artworks from Hispania Citerior in the auction. Those are going back home, where they belong; we're arranging their transport using the money we get from the sale of his property. We haven't recovered the candelabra for the Temple of Jupiter yet, but it might turn up in his country villa, they tell me.*

*This won't render him completely helpless, you know. My sources tell me he had a little money banked in Greece, so he'll still have some cash left over. He's not nearly as rich as he used to be, at least. It will also take a long time before anyone here forgets his misdeeds. I hope it's ruined him forever, politically... although we both know that's rarely a sure thing.*

*Still, I hope what we've achieved is some consolation to your clients and the people of Hispania. It's been a personal triumph too, as it turned out just as you said: I lit a conflagration under so many senatorial asses that no one will be likely to forget my name in the next few years. Some Traditionalists are going around actually wagging their fists in my face! It's great fun, especially when you count that those fists would have long connected did they only know my recent agrarian law was on your behalf.*

"So on the whole, not too bad an outcome," Shizuru told Natsuki, having read out Fumi's account of the trial and its proceedings to the younger woman. "My clients from the Spains also wrote to me in thanks. It is a pity we cannot turn back the clock on the many depredations of that man. Nevertheless, this at least shows our provinces that we do not always ignore their complaints. It was high time, given that so many of the last extortion trials saw patently bad men and women being acquitted. We have had some rather bad provincial governors in the past decade."

"They should send more governors like you or the governor of Argus," Natsuki said, to her amusement.

"I am complimented, as Midori-han would certainly be," Shizuru said. "But you do realise that the moment I lay down my



governorship, there shall be people trying to prosecute me? Not so Midori-han, who does not have many enemies."

Natsuki was astonished and barely registered the note about the Argus governor.

"Prosecute you!" she said, sounding offended. "For what? You have done nothing!"

"Nothing prosecutable, at any rate," the older woman said with a grin. "But that does not matter to people with an axe to grind against me. Recall what happened to poor Keigo Onishi. He was guilty of the main charge against him, yes, but that was insufficient for them to have levied the sentence they did. My fellows have no compunction about bringing enemies to trial and destroying lives on the slenderest of legal pretexts."

"No," Natsuki whispered. "They cannot do that to you."

"And they shall not, believe me. I would not let them."

Shizuru reached out to calm the disturbed young woman.

"I only meant that they would try," she explained, pressing the smaller hands. "Which is part of why I need at least one more year here in the North. Another year would allow me to shore up more safeguards against my enemies' machinations. But do not worry so, Natsuki. I promise I can take care of myself. Otherwise, I would never have asked for your hand in marriage. What would be the point of asking a woman to marry you as a Himean if you are about to be exiled from Hime, after all?"

The green eyes searched hers for assurance. Shizuru held still and laid herself bare to them.

"At any rate," she said, when it seemed Natsuki had found what she was seeking, "I am confident we shall not have to worry about such things for at least one more year past the next. Do you remember the senator with whom we dined at Ravenna? Banri Ueda, that is."

"Yes."

"He has been elected at the top of the poll for next year's Plebeian Tribune."

"He will be their president?" At Shizuru's nod: "He can do much for you in that office."

"Indeed he can," Shizuru agreed, pleased as always by her lover's ever-improving grasp of Himean politics. This pleasure was augmented by the Otomeian's next question.

"We shall go south again next year, Shizuru?" she asked. "To keep an eye on Hime?"

"We may have to," Shizuru told her. "Would it be an inconvenience?"

A slightly crooked smile peeked out.

"I want to see Ravenna again," Natsuki admitted.

"Then I am glad. It all depends on what happens in the next few months. Not only there but also here. We still have fires to put out in Septentria."

That was since tensions between the Carsinii and Aexelli had roared out again. They had been temporarily quieted by the Septentrian Conference, but were renewed by a summer of suspicion. It was all due to strange things that had happened soon after their nobles returned from the conference.

At first, it was only small movements in the boundary markers for some unfenced pastures. Marking stones and posts were found moved a foot from their original positions. The farmers and overseers of the affected lands scratched their heads over the changes, but merely moved them back in the morning. The next day, however, the stones would be moved again.

Then it was no longer just the unfenced areas. In one case a whole line of wooden fence was discovered torn out in the night. When the owner of the land erected a makeshift replacement, it was torn out too the following evening. And surprise, surprise-resituated a foot beyond the original border.

It worsened enough that farmers started waiting for the culprits in the dark. And then the first casualties came, for the culprits were apparently more dangerous than simple vandals. They were large bands who beat the farmers to within an inch of their lives. One farmer's son died.

It was noticed by then that all the cases involved Carsinian territories adjacent to Aexellian lands. It was also noticed that the markers were constantly moved into the Carsinian side. Which meant that the nightly movements always enlarged Aexellian landholdings at the expense of Carsinian ones. The popularly-drawn conclusion as to the culprits' identities was therefore inevitably accompanied by Carsinian indignation.

"Of course the perpetrators are Aexellian!" one of the leading barons of the Carsinii spat to Shizuru when she came to adjudicate. "Who else stands to benefit from diminishing our lands while increasing theirs? We have territories next to the Arvetii too, and even the Leucones. Notice that none of our people in those fiefs have suffered any of these night raids!"

"It's because," an Aexellian baron said, getting to his feet, "your people aren't interested in making the Arvetii or Leucones look like outlaws!"

"It's because only the Aexelli are outlaws!"

"You mean only the Aexelli are *being incriminated* by outlaws!"

Shizuru silenced both with a crisp call for order. She was in her curule chair on a small dais, the leading nobles of the Carsinii and Arvetii seated in rows on benches before her. They were meeting within a large hall put up inside the Legate Keigo Kurauchi's camp. Shizuru's own camp was currently in Pascera. She had ridden from there to hold the current assembly.

"Please maintain decorum," she said as the barons quieted. Both continued to shoot daggers at each other. "Now to return to what you were saying, Baron Epodorus, you believe it is the Aexelli by the affected lands who are responsible for these incidents. Correct?"

He affirmed it.

"Your contention is that they are the only ones who could benefit from the boundary movements, yes? It has been noted. Have you any other cause to accuse the Aexelli, however?"

"Only the fact that the *cunni* already did things like this during the war!"

That set off another round of outbursts from the Aexellian delegates, whom Shizuru again called to order. She levelled a cool look at the Baron Epodorus, however.

"When I called for decorum, that involved a request to retain propriety," she told him. "Since we all effectively speak the same language, please assume that I will understand most vulgarities you might spout. Another one of those and you shall be booted out of this hall, Baron. Now if I am understood, let us return to the topic. When you say the Aexelli did things like this before, could you be more specific?"

The man chewed on his lips first to avoid releasing another vulgarity; the red eyes were telling him not to test her.

"I mean what the Aexellian baron of Diomatrix did to the Carsinian baron of Asella," he ground out, bringing up the old dispute. It had been settled during the Septentrian Conference, but its resolution continued to have reverberations. Shizuru knew this was because of what some of the tribes thought it suggested.

The dispute began thus: Diomatrix's baron had expanded his fief into the baron of Asella's during the Himean-Mentulaean War. One of the very first to go pro-Himean, he claimed the expansion was done to improve his defensive position against his pro-Empire neighbour, the Carsinian Asella.

Asella later turned pro-Himean too and when the war was over, sought to restore the old boundary between it and its neighbour. Unfortunately, the latter refused to return to the old markers. Diomatrix's baron said his expanded land was his rightful reward given that he had been allied with the war's winning side much

earlier.

When the quarrel had been brought to Shizuru in the capital, it had been the rallying point for animosity between the two tribes. It embodied all of the chief resentments between them.

The Carsinii were still sore about their neighbours' quick tergiversation in favour of the invaders. They were even sorer that their neighbours had used that choice to fare better than them in the war's aftermath.

The Aexelli, on the other hand, were angry with the Carsinii for their constant disparagement of them as traitors. It was easy for the Carsinii to say that, they argued, because the Carsinian lords had been favoured by the late king of the empire. The Aexelli themselves had been far less favoured: they had always intermarried and traded too much with the peoples on the other side of the Atinu boundary. This had made their lords a little too prone to arguing against conflict with those on the other side of the river. Not a good argument to make with the Mentulaeans kings, who generally favoured expansion. It had seen more and more Aexellian lords kicked out of the Royal Court over the years, their places filled by-among others-more nobles of the Carsinii.

The way in which the land's new governor would settle the Diomatrix-Asella dispute was therefore important. It would tell the former Mentulaeans how she would treat them under her tenure.

Did she decide in favour of Diomatrix, it said she would reward those who had been first and truest to her cause-to the detriment of the rest of the people now under her administration.

Did she decide in favour of Asella, it said she would preserve the order of the land-and ignore the fidelity of those natives who had aided her most.

It was a neat cleft stick for the governor, who appreciated the myriad significations her decision would have. In the end, Shizuru decided in favour of Diomatrix, saying its firmer and longer loyalty to her did merit a prize. However, she clarified that this was not the only reason for her judgement. She also explained that the new division

of territory made far more sense for the province.

The former boundary, she said, was actually less practical in its placement. The new border was little more than four metres from the first, but it fell on a stream instead of on land. With it, both fiefs would be granted access to a single run of water from opposite banks.

This would allow Asella to retain usage of the watercourse it had long claimed as its property. Yet it would also give Diomatrix the same usage from now on. This would improve Diomatrix's yield given that it was a pastoral settlement. Its herders had previously been forced to either go to a water source farther away or pay Asella a tithe for using the nearer stream. Now they would be able to access the nearby water without incurring added costs. For a governor seeking to resurrect local economies, that was a desirable outcome.

Nevertheless, she did not grant Diomatrix its new water source free of cost. Asella was now as much under her protection as Diomatrix was. It was also not even one of the Carsinian towns that had broken their treaties in the war.

Hence did Shizuru demand that Diomatrix's baron deliver to Asella one herd of livestock in exchange. The herd had to number either three hundred sheep or two hundred cattle, all of good condition and to be delivered within three years.

She admitted it was not equal in value to what Diomatrix was gaining, for the stream whose ownership it now shared with Asella would double its farms' productivity. Nonetheless, the difference in value was to be considered the reward due to the people of Diomatrix for their loyalty.

After her decision, however, Shizuru took great pains to warn that this reward was unique to the situation. It should not inspire any more Septentrians to tinker with other borders, she cautioned, unless they wished her to pay them a visit with her legions.

It was as fair a resolution as one could make while still securing Himean strategic interests. Unfortunately, it did not please everyone.

The Carsinii in particular were disparaging about the verdict. In spite of their governor's words about it being a unique case, they saw it as an invitation to other Aexelli to test the waters. And now, here they were with proof that their fears had been accurate!

"When the baron of Diomatrix successfully claimed more land from Asella," said Baron Epodorus now, "he set an example for many other avaricious lords in the area! Mark my words, if we hadn't discovered the moved markers ourselves, you would be seeing a dozen Aexellian lords right now claiming the same privileges Diomatrix's baron did."

"I doubt it," Shizuru said. "Kurauchi-han tells me there have been no such petitions to him either."

"That's because we *did* discover and move the markers back!"

"Not necessarily," she answered. "It could just as easily be because they never intended to make such petitions. After all, their cases would be different. Both Diomatrix and Asella verified that the markers between them were moved during the war. The cases you mentioned are after it, as everyone agrees. Even the Aexelli we have here today say it. Furthermore, the border changes made by the perpetrators, whoever they are, make little practical sense. I would obviously have no reason to legitimise them as I did Diomatrix's case."

That calmed Baron Epodorus somewhat, as it did the other glowering Carsinii. Shizuru continued while she had them all quiet and thoughtful.

"The trouble is, Barons and Baronesses, we have no certainty of the culprits' purposes," she told them. "You allege it is the enlargement of Aexellian territory at the expense of the Carsinii. Yet as I have already pointed out, there is no way such enlargement could gain my approval! You recall that I expressly forbade unsanctioned tinkering with boundaries following the war. Had the Aexelli truly been the perpetrators, they should have known first suspicion would fall on them! Therefore, they should have known that they would be the ones courting my displeasure. I do not think they-or any of you-would be so foolish. None of this makes sense."

"Yet," said another of the Carsinian high barons, "there can be no other explanation, Governor."

"Of course there can," she said with a hint of exasperation. "We simply do not see it yet."

"Although I do wish we could see it already," she said later to the legate she had stationed in that area. "Have you had no luck yet with your investigations?"

Keigo shook his head and looked simultaneously annoyed and contrite.

"It's not even for want of informants," he groaned. "Just about everyone in the affected areas wants to inform us! The problem is that their information isn't worth a dented sestertius. All they really want to say is what they think happened, not what truly happened. And what they think is that each other did it."

"The Aexelli think the Carsinii are responsible, in spite of the injuries to the latter's farmers?"

"They say it's probably a scheme by the higher-ups, so the little folk wouldn't know. They're claiming the Carsinii are doing it to make them look bad and bring up Diomatrix and Asella all over again."

Shizuru rolled her eyes.

"I do wish they would make their peace with that already," she said.

Keigo grinned: "So do the Aexelli, being the winners in that quarrel."

"What intrigues me," she told him, "is that you have not caught anyone in your traps yet. You have been setting legionaries in wait along several of the affected lands since the first casualties among the Carsinians. Yet every single night your legionaries waited, no one showed up and no markers were moved."

He grimaced, having been disappointed by his own failure to catch culprits.

"It was odd that they chose to stop their night raids then," he said.



"But I promise we hid the legionaries well, Fujino-san! Even sent them in leather cuirasses so there'd be no glint off their mail shirts. As for their helmets, we took off the plumes and smeared them with tar and mud. We chose good hiding places too. The farms' owners helped us."

She eyed him interestedly, tapping a finger on the desk.

"The farms' owners," she repeated. "Only the Carsinii were aware that you would be there, then?"

"Yes, we had to tell them so they'd be sure not to post men of their own that night," he answered.

"Curious, is it not? The night you lay a trap that only the farms' owners know about, no culprits show up."

Her legate looked alert.

"Surely you don't think it truly is the Carsinian landowners doing it after all?" he asked. "I know they've been difficult throughout the war, but I'm not sure even the Carsinii would go to such lengths to get back at the Aexelli. Some of the people who were beaten up by the culprits were even related to the landowners, Fujino-san. In fact, our one casualty was the son of a landowner himself!"

"Even so, I would not discount it," she replied. "But no, truth be told, this does not have the feel of the Carsinian landowners about it. That does not absolve all the Carsinii, mind you, nor does it exclude the Aexelli themselves. If I had to be honest, it all reeks of some other malice, however."

He asked her what she meant.

"I mean that you should set up your traps again," she said. "But this time, tell absolutely no one about them. Contrive to have the landowners away or busy when you do it. Or simply let them be if you see them setting up their own guards for the evening. Just be sure they do not detect your legionaries."

"But who do you think we're looking for? Do you have a suspicion about the culprits?"

"Not their precise allegiances or identities," she told him. "Rather, I believe that we are being duped into thinking there are only two possibilities. For instance, we think now that it must be some of the Carsinii because they are the only ones who could have known of your clandestine operations. Yet that is a lie, is it not? The truth is, there may be a third party with agents among the Carsinii too. What if it is that third party, unknown to the two we have been focusing on, who is actually responsible?"

Keigo nodded slowly, studying the surface of the desk as he mulled this over.

"I'll set it up tonight," he said, only for her to tell him that was unnecessary.

"They shall not do it tonight," she said with a laugh and getting to her feet. He did the same and followed her to a window, where she looked out at his camp's streets.

"There are a good number of locals in here," she noted. "Mostly prostitutes and camp followers, am I right? Companions for the officers and legionaries?"

"Yes, that's what they are," he said, colouring a little because he himself had several 'companions'. They were not prostitutes, but neither were they acknowledged and exclusive mistresses the way her Otomeian was. Still, he enjoyed them and thought they enjoyed him as well-which they did, since Keigo was as generous with gifts to his women as he was nice-mannered to them. He was a quaint-if-foreign change from the big-headed lords some of them had used to serve, was their consensus.

"Should I ban them all from entering camp, General?" he asked with a measure of tension. He was anxious that she should not find anything to criticise in his conduct. Archconservative though his family was, he had come to realise that no general the archconservatives could offer was worth her thinnest bootstrap. No archconservative-rather, no other Himean!-could have pulled off Terantrum! And he had been part of that battle because of her. He would have that for the rest of his life because of her.

What could any of his brother's Traditionalist fellows offer to compare? The truth was that he did not even like most of the archconservatives, who liked to push and pull his poor older sibling to go whichever way they pleased. Well, he supposed Shizuru Fujino had her own technique for doing that. But she did it so much more smoothly. He relished legating for her and did not want the adventure to be over too early: as indeed some were whispering Seigo Ushida's would be soon, thanks to the part he had played in inflaming Durigala.

She turned to him again.

"No, that is fine," she decided. "However, I do think we should take a little more care in organising the trap for the 'boundary adjusters'. Tell nobody of the next one you set, Keigo-han. Do not even discuss it with your staff. Simply tell the officers and legionaries you are going to use that you need them for some other duty that evening. Then, when it is time for them to go, reveal the actual plan."

He nodded but flushed a little as he saw the direction of her thoughts.

"I don't tell the women warming my own bed about my orders, Fujino-san," he said humbly. "I swear it. I don't tell them anything about the army."

Her face showed astonishment; she moved to his side and placed a warm hand on his back.

"I never thought you had, Dear Fellow!" she said. "I confess I was thinking more of your officers themselves. Some of them talk, you know, especially when they are relaxed and have partaken of some wine. It means some of their bedfellows get to learn of things they should not be learning. Do you know, in my first spell in the army, there was a tribune whose favourite whore could recite the command's strategy better than the actual legates? Not all officers are as prudent as you are, and that was my concern. Believe me, it was not you I was thinking of just now."

He smiled a little, relieved that she had not been suspecting him of such carelessness. He let her lead him back to his seat.

"At any rate," she went on, "we should take further precautions. The camp followers are only one possible leak for this information. Do not tell the locals either when you organise your traps from now on."

"Even the landowners?"

"Even them. It matters not if they post their own guards on the night you set up your traps again. Try to avoid them then. Choose only those legionaries with a talent for stealth and you should still manage quite well."

"When should we do it?" he asked.

"When the incidents start up again-the landowners shall be certain to file reports when that happens. Until then, resume with your normal duties. You will actually have to trick the perpetrators into thinking you have relaxed your vigilance over the matter."

"So I should withdraw the soldiers I put at the borders to prevent more of the incidents?" Keigo asked her. He was referring to the visible security details he had posted, not the hidden units sent at night to lie in wait for the perpetrators. When the latter had failed, he had taken to stationing the former instead to assuage landowners' worries.

"Yes, but not immediately. Do it a week after my departure. I wager nothing shall happen in that time, so you can simply throw up your hands at the end of the week and say you are giving up because it is a waste of manpower. The incidents should start up again soon after that, I suspect."

"I'll be ready for them then, Fujino-san."

"Try to take them alive," she said. "Otherwise, we may never get to the bottom of this mischief."

From there she rode back to Pascera with her horsed escort. Along the way she admired the look of that region of her province. Farms were growing grain and foodstuff again, livestock ranging over the fields. And there were civilians on the roads once more! Proper civilian travellers and merchant trains, not the refugee caravans of

before. The former empire was starting to regain its footing. How pleasing to see that after so much effort, Septentria was heading more or less where she wanted.

Absent little bumps on the road like Durigala or the Carsinian-Aexellian feuds, of course.

When she entered her own camp next to Pascera, one of the first things she saw was her mistress coming to greet her. The younger woman was smiling.

"At least one of us seems to have had good news," she said, kissing Natsuki on the cheek and getting kissed shyly back. "Shall you tell me what causes your smile, *mea vita*?"

"You," Natsuki said playfully.

"That is a good answer," Shizuru replied. "What else, besides me? Is it something to do with the auxiliary at Pascera?"

Another bright smile, which said Shizuru's guess was right.

"What is it, then?" she asked, letting her lover lead her to their tent. Legionaries and tribunes alike offered salutes as they passed near, and she smiled at her subordinates.

"I want to say," Natsuki told her. "But I also want to keep a secret."

Shizuru made a comical face at the odd declaration and asked if this was the girl's way of warning her to prepare for another Bemys. It made the latter laugh.

"If it were another Bemys," she said, "I think I would not smile."

"True, I think you would not. So what is it that pleases you so much and which you are tempted to both keep to yourself and divulge?"

"Something new with the horsed archers," Natsuki revealed. "I ordered it long ago, and today-today I saw it done. It was good."

"May I see it too?"

Here Natsuki hesitated again.

"It was good," she reiterated. "But I think, Shizuru, when you see it, I want it perfect."

"Ahh, I see now. You meant earlier that you wanted it to be a surprise once they had perfected it."

"Yes," said Natsuki. "That."

"Then how about you tell me a little about it but save the actual exhibition for when they come up to your standards?"

Natsuki thought it a good compromise. She explained that she had begun forming the idea a long time ago, when they had besieged Lasandre Citadel. The water convoys Shizuru had arranged to deliver refreshment to her troops then had made an impression on her.

"It was so, ah, so *organised* a way to supply soldiers in battle," she murmured with admiration. "I had never seen such before."

"Indeed. And this inspired you."

"Yes. I thought, why not do something like for other troops? Like archers."

"You wanted water convoys supplying your archers?" Shizuru asked, a little puzzled. "For... the summer heat in these flatlands?"

"No, no," said the other woman, amused. "I wanted convoys, yes. But not for water."

"Not for water. Then what-oh!" Shizuru said, and actually stopped walking for a second. Natsuki grabbed her hand and tugged at her so she would walk again. "Oh, I see, *mea vita*. Yes, I see. Very useful."

She squeezed the hand in hers and looked down at the girl with obvious awe, guessing aloud at Natsuki's scheme and getting confirmation.

"It is brilliant," she pronounced afterwards, speaking with such sincerity that the other blushed. "I do not say it just to please you. I even wish it had occurred to me. I mean it."

Natsuki thanked her and said she knew that. Another thought came to Shizuru and she aired it.

"Is that what you have been doing with the horses we seized from the enemy cavalry?" she asked. "Nearly all of them have been brought to Pascera, I know."

Natsuki said this was so and that the riders of the convoy were the Otomeians' own servants and non-combatants. Again Shizuru praised her, citing her use of such resources as further proof of wisdom.

"I cannot wait to see it when you deem them ready for viewing," she said. "I am sure it would prove enormously useful too in actual battle."

"I think this too," Natsuki said, sighing. "But here too I am, how do you say again... of two minds."

"How so?"

"I want a battle to prove my convoys work," she said. "But I do not want any more battles for us in your province."

Shizuru chuckled wryly.

"Well, I feel the same way," she said. "Although I do think that there are others here who seek to push us to the less peaceful of those options even now."

Natsuki asked her what she meant.

"I have some suspicions about what is going on between the Carsinii and the Aexelli," Shizuru answered. "But come, we are at my tent. Let me explain it to you inside."

They paused as the older woman addressed the duty officer outside the tent first. She asked if any visitors had come seeking her. He

gave her a list he had taken down and also specified which ones had chosen to make do with the legate she had left in charge. Said legate was in the tent with her staff and updated her on all that happened during her brief absence. In return, she related to him and her mistress what had taken place at Keigo Kurauchi's camp. She left out her instructions about another trap, however. While she trusted Kenji enough to let him in on it, she preferred to do so without the rest of her staff there to hear.

"I'm inclined to believe it could be the Carsinii themselves," Kenji said after the story.

"Hmm. You do not think it nearly as obvious an answer as saying it was the Aexelli after all?"

"Do you?"

"The Carsinii were never happy with my decision to grant more land to Diomatrix," Shizuru said. "Everyone knows that because they were so public about it. This makes them easy scapegoats for the present situation."

"True. But then, they're also afraid you'll whip them even harder than Zanki-san and Shizuma-san did before the Battle of Terantrum. Making the Aexelli look like the criminals here does give them a better bargaining position than before, and without exposing themselves to your wrath."

"It could be," she said. "But it could also be someone else. Whoever it is, they seem to be encouraging dissension between the tribes. This does not bode well for our hopes of a peaceful province, does it?"

"It's still better than dissension between the tribes and us," he grinned.

"Given that we are administrating the province, it may very well come to that too," she replied, with a glance to her lover. "And you, Polemarch? Have you anything to add to this?"

The polemarch's eyes were narrow as she answered in Greek.



"Only that to speculate without evidence can prejudice an inquiry," she stated.

Her auditors exchanged looks quickly. Kenji was one of the few officers who dared to start conversations with Natsuki, so he did not find her academic response startling. Even so, it required him to stifle a chuckle the way his general was now doing.

"Well, I cannot put it better than that myself," Shizuru decided after a pretended cough. "So then. We shall wait and see what comes of Keigo-han's investigation. Until then, the polemarch is right and we *should* belay the speculation. I admit they have not been very trustworthy throughout our acquaintance, but it still would not serve for us to be so quick to demonise the Carsinii and presume them the source of every problem in the region."

# Chapter 81

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Censor** - *The censor is a senior magistracy in Rome available only to consulars (people who have served as consul in the past). Two censors are elected every five years and they deal with such matters as the inspection of the Senate's list of members. Censors were supposed to ensure that senators followed the laws pertinent to their lifestyles, one of which said that senators could not be in debt. Many senators were, of course; most censors simply ignored that.*
2. **Equestrian** - *Or knightly, as in the **Ordo Equester** or Rome's mercantile class. One of the requirements for entry into the ranks of the knights was an income of four hundred thousand sesterces per year (as a minimum amount). The applicant had to go to the **censors'** (s.v.) tribunal and furnish proof of such an annual income in order to be accepted.*
3. **Jupiter Feretrius** - *The aspect of the great god that presided over the creation of various contracts, like treaties. Rome's treaties with foreign nations were regularly brought to its temple for storage.*
4. **Sagum** (L., s.), **sagi** (L., pl.) - *A thick woollen cloak that the legionaries used during wet weather, with a circular hole in the middle through which the wearer inserted his head. The oils in the wool helped it stay waterproof but contributed to the unpleasantness of its smell.*

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## **Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae**

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Keigo's net did catch some of the perpetrators, but not alive. The people they encountered the night they set their trap were not only numerous but armed. Some had even come wrapped in light

armour. What should have been a seizure turned into a scuffle.

Even so, the better-prepared legionaries carried the day. It was their only misfortune that the opponents were determined not to be taken captive even if they could be bested. Most managed to slip away in the darkness and those who did not fought so hard that the legionaries ended up killing them in the contest.

"I should have sent Yuuki-han and her group," Shizuru lamented after getting the news. "She and her people are more used to such tasks. They might have captured some then."

"Or she could have killed them too," Natsuki said, wrapping her arms around the older woman's neck and speaking from above a shoulder.

"Yes, but I think they would have had a better chance at getting us someone to interrogate."

"Even then you would not be sure you could trust the captive," the polemarch said. "Even if you torture, people can lie. More here, when there are many possible suspects. So, many lies they tell can seem like truth."

"I suppose that is true," Shizuru sighed. She leaned against the back of her chair and into the embrace coming from behind it. "At any rate, no use repining now! We have lost our chance to grab any of the culprits. They shall not return any time soon after that incident. I can only wait on Keigo-han's investigations into the identities of the dead men. But I confess I am not optimistic."

Her legate had called in locals to look at the bodies, according to his dispatch. Unfortunately, no one yet had claimed to recognise the corpses, and there was little time for viewing before those started to blacken and putrefy. Shizuru initially considered sending a rushed order to her legate that he should preserve the heads in resin of cedar, but realised they did not have the aforementioned resin on hand. A great pity this time, she told her lover, that they were not campaigning in Egypt instead!

Attempting to trace the corpses' gear was a dead end too. The

swords they had been using were common among the locals and even their armour-rough leather lamina stitched together-was plain and easy to come by.

"What's done is done," Shizuru decided. "At least I can give the culprits one more little scare before they get away with their trick, however. Our upcoming march through Carsinian territory and to the River Holmys should alarm them a little."

"So you do think they are from the Carsinii themselves, Shizuru?"

"No, *meum mel*, I am still uncertain. But they are definitely from the area. Whoever these people are, our march might give them added cause to rethink their little tricks for at least a couple of months. Everyone seems to behave better for a little while after they catch sight of me with my soldiers."

The march to the northernmost of the former empire's big rivers was a trek she had been planning for some time. Her goal was not actually the river itself. She merely wanted to go over that watercourse before fall's end.

In so doing, she would reach the former empire's so-called Northern Frontier. She had not yet had opportunity to see it, especially as it had been insulated from much of the war. This was thanks to her destruction of the bridges on the River Holmys when she had first pushed into Obsidian's lands.

Her intention then had been to separate the Prince Calchis's army-campaigning there at the time-from the rest of the imperial forces. The downing of the bridges had forced the prince to go the long way around to return to the empire's heartlands. In so doing he had pulled all imperial troops out of the Northern Frontier. This left the territory again to what the Mentulaeans had deemed "insurrectionist tribes", really the place's long-time inhabitants.

As the Himeans had maintained control of the River Holmys throughout the war, opportunity to take the fighting north of the waterway never presented. This had been in keeping with Shizuru's strategy both for the war and its aftermath. The peoples of the Northern Frontier were opposed to the empire, so she had

considered it a friendly territory in her calculations. There was also the alliance its peoples had struck with the Otomeians: an alliance made at the instigation of the latter's polemarch.

Now that the war was over, she wanted to formalise Hime's own alliance with those communities. The accords between them had been informally struck by one of her legates the previous year. This was when she had sent him to rebuild the bridges on the Holmys. As a governor bearing proconsular *imperium*, it was her task to draw up the official treaties succeeding her legate's casual accords. It was her treaties that would be sent back to Hime and nailed to the walls of the Temple of Jupiter Feretrius.

For her march she brought the Third and First legions. The latter had been called up from the south and replaced with the Twelfth at that post. Her forces had gone down by a legion since the Second was no more. She had taken it apart to distribute its members to those legions that had suffered the most casualties in the war. That included the valiant Ninth, which had lost more than a cohort at Terantrum.

Even after the redistribution, most of her legions remained understrength. On the positive side, all of them were now heavily blooded. That included the troops of the First, who were nonetheless children compared to veterans like those of the Ninth and Seventh. Recruited later than the other soldiers, most of the First's rankers had only just turned nineteen. Shizuru herself teased them about it on the march to the Holmys boundary.

"They tell me you gave the Carsinii a beating last year!" she called. "You actually gave some of the empire's best fighters a run for their money! Is that true or have my legates been telling me tall tales? I swear most of the boys here must have only begun shaving, and your girls look like babies!"

They roared back that the story about the Carsinii was true and protested that they were not babies. She grinned along with them as she continued the ribbing.

"Really now?" she yelled. "You still look soft and pink to me! Can you prove you can keep pace with my veterans? Or would you like

me to hold your hands first?"

Whereupon they would roar again in voices full of mirth, say they had already proven it in the war but would prove it again without her holding their hands for them.

"Excellent!" she cried out. "Because I'm going to wear your feet out until you can feel them no longer! You are babies yet until you have gone through one of my marches! Babies yet until you have covered as many leagues as my veterans! That's what you signed up for when you signed up with me-days on end of walking with just the occasional fight for excitement! Ah, but each occasional fight will be something like Terantrum! Now do any of you smooth babies have a problem with that and want to run home to your parents?"

They roared that they did not, and that they would prove themselves equal to anything she would ask of them. After a few more good-natured jests, she would move on to the next cohort.

"They are good troops, very willing and energetic," she told her lover later. This was when she had returned to her mount and rode next to the polemarch again. The latter had asked what she thought of the youths of the First, all of whom still stared starry-eyed at their commander. Shizuru knew it was because this was only their first time working directly under her. In time, their gazes would soften a little, but their regard for her would also be greater. That would be after they had the full measure of themselves as legionaries of Hime and of her as their general.

Until then, they would still be just a little prone to giddiness in her presence. Sometimes, when she talked to them, their voices would hit higher octaves than normal. She would see the polemarch smirk then, out of the corner of her eye. She knew Natsuki was amused by her effect on the soldiers.

*She does not realise she unbalances them even more, she thought with her own smirk. They stare at her too when she passes. They know who she is to me-she is a princess-she is our northern auxiliary's highest officer. They know she has a giant shadowcat for a pet and can ride better than any Himean in spite of being wooden-legged. They know she killed a man who by our standards was a*

*giant and did it despite her impediment. They know she does not talk to most people. If she spoke to one of them they would probably reply in gibberish and confound her.*

The young woman of her thoughts was saying the First looked enthusiastic.

"It might be because this is their first time marching with me," Shizuru proposed. "They are still eager to prove themselves under my direct inspection, which is as it should be. I was right to let Zanki-han blood them against the tribes of the northeast. I worried about it a little, at first."

"Why?"

"Because I usually prefer to blood all of my recruits myself. That is the only way you can be assured of it being done right. But I am glad I trusted my legate. Zanki-han did it well enough to see that their first battles gave them a lot of confidence. That determines their future as soldiers, as you know."

Natsuki fixed onto the senior officer mentioned: "The troopers tell me she was good too with the cavalry, that legate."

"Which is why I let her have the rest of the horse back then," Shizuru responded. "Her previous general had praised her for her talent with cavalry, so I knew from the start that she would be getting much time with your people. It is not a common talent among us, you know-skill at commanding the horse."

"I know," said the Otomeian. " *You* are special."

Shizuru smiled.

"Thank you, although I truly was thinking only of Zanki-han just now." A sudden sobering. "The peoples north of the Holmys have no cavalry themselves. It is one of the reasons they fared so badly against Calchis when they first attempted to meet him in the battlefield, was it not? I recall you told me they were trounced by his troopers."

Natsuki said this was right, having gathered the information from her

own agents years ago. That had been when she intrigued with those tribes on behalf of Otomeia and her lover's campaign.

"They were better later," she said. "When they saw they did not need to fight on the field."

"When they switched to guerrilla methods. It makes sense."

Shizuru gestured ahead of the marching column, to the land towards which they headed.

"A lot of copses spread out over the land," she said, "and wooded terrain as well as streams breaking up the greenswards. I am astonished they did not turn to such tactics immediately. Surely they should have known they would be overwhelmed on even ground, given the disparity in forces. What they faced was an imperial army."

"I think," her companion ventured, "they wanted first to defend their towns. So they tried first to fight plain battle."

"Generally not a good idea for people in their situation. They should have taken what they could from their own settlements and retreated into the woods at the first chance. Towns can be resurrected; human casualties cannot."

She let Natsuki murmur agreement before she spoke her next words: "I know that far to the north of this is the forest of your true people, *mea vita*. I refer of course to the Black Forest of the Ortygians. Before one reaches that, are there any other peoples of significance? Any great tribes or nations to look out for?"

Natsuki denied it, explaining that they were mostly just distributed over small towns like the ones on the northern banks of the Holmys. Woodland and wetland divided them, she said, which made large urban polities a little challenging to develop. Some of the peoples were part of tribal groups, like the Corosians with whom she had struck up an alliance for Otomeia. Even in such cases, however, they still lived in townships scattered over a largely unsettled area. This was the case even as one progressed north, all the way to the Black Forest.



"But," she qualified, "if you go far northwest around some mountains, there are-is a numerous people there too. A different people from these we see here. They even speak a different language."

"Where northwest?"

"Very far north. As, um, around as far north as Ortygia. So, west of the Black Forest."

"I see. Mountain people then, like the Otomeians?"

But Natsuki denied that.

"They live next to mountains too, yes," she said. "But not in them. Their mountains are south of them and separate them from here-from where we are now."

"How do you know of them, *mea vita* ?"

A sudden smile.

"I used to be of a different people, a very far northern people too," she reminded.

Shizuru chuckled and said that was so.

"Also, my true people, the Ortygians, knew them," Natsuki expanded. "I think we sometimes traded with them."

Shizuru asked her to go on.

"I do not know so much," confessed the younger woman. "Even my people did not see them so often. It was not often the westerners left their land, I think. The mountains were too difficult and the passes to their east, to our forest, were not easy. They sailed more than travelled overland, since my people said they lived by the coast. Also, the things they traded were mostly things from the sea. My father said-"

A sudden stop; Shizuru regarded her worriedly.

Natsuki forestalled the older woman's concern with a light smile. She continued what she had been about to say.

"My father gave me a charm with shark's teeth many years ago," she said. "He said he bought it from the westerners. That was the first time I saw shark's teeth, so I remember."

Shizuru said those fishes' choppers were indeed worthy of remembrance.

"But there," Natsuki said with a squint. "Those western people must have taken them from their sea travels."

"Do you remember what they called themselves?"

But her lover could not remember, and apologised. Her people had preferred to refer to them as "The Westerners", she said.

"Do not worry about it, the name matters little. Anyway, they must not be given to venturing south, as you say: I have heard nothing of them before this. Are they numerous? Organised?"

"Yes. And yes. They had chiefs, but not kings. I never knew what they called them too," Natsuki admitted, having only dredged up all this information from hazy childhood memories. "It is only what my people used to say that I tell you now. I do not think they are seen much out of their land. Their land is hard to reach."

"I see. At least that means Septentria will also be hard to reach for them."

The Otomeian's head came up at these words.

"You look for possible enemies of the province?" she asked Shizuru, who answered positively. "I do not think enemies will come from the north, Shizuru."

"Nor do I," Shizuru answered. "These peoples in what Obsidian called the Northern Frontier are too disparate and disorganised. You tell me the same goes for the tribes even further north, save those supposed seafarers northwest. No real threats to Septentria in this direction, if that is so."

"Your threats are south of here, to the west."

"The Kingdom of Celsor or the Kingdom of Nervia?" asked Shizuru, one neat eyebrow lifted.

"What if I say 'the Tribe of the Ganni'?" Natsuki teased.

"I would say you are suspicious as ever, *mea vita*," was the reply.

"Although I admit I share some of your suspicions."

At the first town they reached they found the magistrates of other nearby settlements. These had hastened to meet the Himean army at its first stop. It was to be expected, they explained to Shizuru later, because of what her conquest of the Mentulaean Empire had done for them. Finally they could live without fear of that monster they had once called neighbour!

"When you first started your invasion, we actually hoped to send you soldiers," said one of the leaders. All of them could speak what they called 'Mentulaean' (to the Himeans' amusement). "Prince Calchis made that impossible. The man devastated our population! We've lost maybe half of our fighting folk just fighting him and most of our towns and villages. We've rebuilt, as you can see, but things won't be the same for a while. They were comprehensive in their destruction."

That they were, Shizuru decided. It was true she had seen evidence of life springing back up throughout the march: obviously-new sheds and houses, freshly planted fields, budding gardens. Yet those had come hand in hand with other signs of recent desolation. The new structures stood atop ground that was still burnt black. Gutted ruins here and there, some reduced only to charred foundations.

But Shizuru knew that perhaps the most damaging effect had been on the population. Most of the people they had seen in the fields had been either very old or very young. The able-bodied, the true workers and crofters of the land, had been reduced sharply by the imperials. They had been killed as rebel soldiers, captured as slaves, drafted into imperial service, and so on.

In that respect the Mentulaeans had fared better. She had left all the

soldiers of demobilised armies where they fetched up, and had not tampered with the populations of most places that surrendered. Most of the former empire's young adults and adolescents remained once they chose to be peaceable. Here in the north, what adolescents were present had clearly just entered pubescence in recent time. It would take some years yet before the young ones could grow up enough to take the missing adults' places. Until then those who remained would have to pull double their weight.

"You have been at war a long time," she said.

"Too long," said someone. "Obsidian always regarded us as part of his fief. We never did, and he knew that. There were a few years where he left us alone, probably when he was too busy dealing with his own challengers at home. But whenever we 'disobeyed' a royal edict or did something he thought contravened his supposed authority over us, he'd remember to send another army over to put us down."

"He could never finish us completely, since we'd retreat to the woods and even further north," one woman expanded. "They'd burn what they could and go home, calling it a win for them. We'd just come back and rebuild. As you can see, we know how to do that. But it's happened too much of late and it's taken a toll."

"Especially under the last of their leaders with whom you reckoned. What trade is recorded between your communities and the others in the region seems to go from sparse to non-existent in the last five years," Shizuru observed with interest. "The hostilities with the Mentulaeen Empire probably gave you little time to advance your communities and develop commerce, then?"

There were grumbles of agreement at this reminder of what the late Obsidian's empire had done to prevent them from flourishing as they should.

"Sometimes, it didn't even leave us time to plant a crop," one man with a heavily scarred cheek said bitterly. "The quietest our land has been in many years was during your invasion! When you cut them off from our lands by destroying the Holmys bridges, you forced their prince to march his army out of here and keep it in the empire. Your

control of the river forced their commanders to deem this area outside of their manoeuvring space... and also an unlikely source of resources. It was a time of relief we sorely needed. We're deeply grateful, General."

"I am glad we could have helped you in some way, then," Shizuru said with a smile. "I had heard of some of the actions the imperials took against your people and been disturbed."

"You can say they were disturbing," said one man in a flat voice. "Our village wasn't part of the rebellion so we welcomed the imperials when they demanded hospitality. We thought friendliness would keep our skins safe. Better we had gone down fighting, turns out. That prince of theirs decided we were all potential rebels and our homes potential hiding places. So the day he left our village he had his soldiers herd the whole population into our biggest buildings. The meeting hall, some houses, even my house, the granary. They locked them up in there. Then they torched everything."

He nodded impassively to the man beside him, who had placed a hand on his arm. Shizuru doubted he felt the comfort all that strongly, given what he must have been reliving.

"My son and I survived because we were out hunting," he said. "My wife and my daughter..."

The man who had patted his arm spoke up when he trailed off into silence: "The empire dealt with us very harshly, even when we dealt with them peacefully. We've all lost people."

Shizuru nodded at this, knowing no commiseration she could speak would make a difference. Better she got to their business instead, to give them something else on which to think.

"We aim to be better neighbours," she announced. "All those of you here to represent their villages shall get treaties of friendship from me. That would make your peace with Hime official. Taken with the treaties most of you already have with the Otomeians through the polemarch-" A short bow to that young woman, beside her. "-I believe that should render your futures rather safer than before. For one thing, we now control the old imperial territories. For another,

there are no other threats to your homes from elsewhere, I think. Not from the north, for instance?"

They denied it, just as she had expected.

"We trade with the other towns and settlements north, for the most part," said one magistrate. "And beyond that is land few here would venture into, and from which hardly anything ever ventures out. West are just impassable ranges and east is the Black Forest, where no one lives and which is said to be endless, running all the way to the land of the gods."

Shizuru was conscious of Natsuki's mute delight at hearing her old home described thus. She could practically feel the young woman smiling, although she knew that if she actually looked, the smile would only be in the green eyes.

"*Is it* endless?" she asked the man.

"Who knows?" he said with a shrug. "No one's ever gone in and tried to find out. Myself, I think it does end, but how far away that end is, no one knows."

Another of the northerners took up the topic.

"They say only the Ortygians used to know how far it went," he said, "because they lived inside it. Aside from them the only others who ever entered the forest were some old tribes that used to live north and east of us. They did it to kill the Ortygians, so the story goes."

"I know it," Shizuru said, with a sharp glance at Natsuki; the polemarch looked tranquil. "There is no need to recount the tale for me."

"Well, then you know even those other peoples died out anyway. The few who did come back weren't enough to restore their old tribes, and as they tell it, they never even found the northern limit of the forest either. All those people are long gone now. I don't think anyone's been in it in years since."

He shrugged and concluded: "It's not a forest for people anymore. Honestly, I don't think it ever was."

The others agreed, all murmuring that the forest had been empty of men for years and for good reason.

"Whatever lives there now, it's not mortal," one of them pronounced in suitably haunting tones.

From there Shizuru worked her way with the army as far north as she was able. She followed the upper Atinu so far she wondered if she would reach its headwaters. She worried at first whether or not she would be able to supply her army in a place that had been so damaged by her conquered foe. She did not know how much of their normal productivity the reconstructed settlements had regained.

Her worries were for naught. The peoples of the land, knowing the Himeans had freed them of a great menace, sold what grain they could offer to the southerners without needing to be pressed.

They were determined to recover from their ordeal, even if only just out of disdain for their old oppressors-whom they now delighted in seeing as oppressed themselves, even if the Himeans still treated them too kindly, in their opinion. It would not have troubled the Northern Frontier's population if Shizuru had chosen to rape and torture all the Mentulaeans she conquered instead of coolly governing them.

Still, a subjugated Mentulaean was one less invading Mentulaean. The Northern Frontier's peoples knew enough to show their gratitude to their Himean visitors. They also agreed to participate in the Himean governor's plans for regional development, although not without some objections.

"You want us to trade with the empire?" the elder of one town said. "With the Mentulaeans themselves?"

"It is no longer the empire," Shizuru said gently. "It is now a province of Hime, and called Septentria. Even its people are now called Septentrians."

"Changing their names doesn't make them less Mentulaean!" came the heated response. "These people burned our homes. Raped our families! Slew our children!"

"I understand," Shizuru said, holding up a hand to silence the others about to produce their own outcries of resentment. "I am not asking you to trade with them right now. I was asking that you consider reopening trade relations with the province in the future."

"What difference does it make to the past?" one woman growled. "Our people are dead and the people you want us to trade with still killed them."

"*The Empire* killed them," she replied. "Prince Calchis, to be precise."

"And where do you think he got most of the troops he brought here?" someone else answered. "The people the Mentulae call the Carsinii! Those horse-fuckers who live right across the river! Along with the goddamned Veromandae! And the Lenapii."

"And even the Arvetii, I know," Shizuru said, intrigued that even these peoples referred to the former Mentulaeans by their tribes. "Yet these are all your neighbours even now. If you are intent on hating them to the end of your days, that is understandable. It is also your prerogative. It would make life uncomfortable for you, however, given how close they are to your homes."

"We'll stand that discomfort," said the elder stonily.

Shizuru nodded, doing it with enough gravity to show she respected their sentiments and decision.

"As I said, that is both understandable and acceptable," she replied. "But in the future, your descendants may decide otherwise. Our own nation, Hime, was crafted out of resentment and strife. I only remind you that there are many ways of dealing with a noisome neighbour. In our case, we conquered it to add to our properties in the north. In your case, why not take advantage of it to enrich yourselves?"

Before they could hurl retorts again, she held up a hand: "Do not worry about it if you wish not to trade with any Septentrian at this time, as I have been saying. If any of you ever does change your mind, however, please seek me or the next governor for help. For my part I promise to give you such attractive terms that you shall



find yourselves benefiting greatly from the commerce. I also promise to grant your convoys safe passage to another part of the province if you find the tribes nearest the Holmys truly offensive."

She listed some examples to illustrate: "The territories of the Aexelli and Leucones, for instance, are just south of the Carsinian ones. I know those two other tribes did not donate soldiers to the army of the Prince Calchis, for their soldiers were typically drafted for engagements east and south instead. Those peoples were also among the first of the locals to turn against the empire, and thus our first allies among the Septentrians. They fought the Carsinii too."

As they moved even more north the communities tended to get rougher and smaller. They were all still friendly, however. Shizuru continued to pick up treaties and learn more about the northernmost part of the Himean known world.

At some point, the legate marching with her asked why she had not charted the Northern Frontier as part of Septentria.

"Why don't we include it in the province, Fujino-san?" he asked in genuine curiosity. "I don't think the locals would complain, even. That's how grateful they are to you for ridding them of Obsidian and his brood. Even if they don't like being lumped in as part of Septentria with their old enemies, we could grant them some relative autonomy in exchange. Or even much lower taxes than the former Mentulaeans. It would set them apart from them and give them a nice sense of ascendancy over their old foes."

"Not bad ideas were I inclined to that action, Toshi-han," his commander replied with admiration. "I believe they would enjoy that."

"So why not offer it to them and enlarge Septentria? I think they'd buy it if we promised them lasting protection as Hime's provincials. They'd know too that we wouldn't allow internecine conflict in the province."

"So they would," she agreed. "But I do not think going further up is all that wise for us. Logistically speaking, the Holmys is a perfect natural border. We can supply any legion very easily south of it."

North of it, the challenges start to mount thanks to the lay of the land and the brokenness of the arable terrain. Not a lot of grain can be grown here, so armies larger than the one we now carry would struggle."

She breathed in the scent of wet grass as they talked, along with the malodorous aroma of over eight thousand wet *sagi* nearby. She flicked the tail of her own *sagum* to whip moisture off it; it had rained earlier and beads were still rolling down her face and cloak. Under the *sagum*, however, her body was dry.

"There do not seem to be any threats north," she said, still tasting the rainwater on her lips. "One of the biggest motivations behind our annexation of the empire was the threat it posed to both Upper Fuuka and our provinces Argus and Sosia. If there are no equivalent threats further up, I see no reason to tax Hime with yet another administrative burden. Perhaps the next governor will feel differently. Even so, I say let him have the worry about whether or not he wants to expand there. It shall be his decision."

"Whoever he is, he'll be an oil lamp to your Alexandrian Pharos, Fujino-san."

The metaphoric comparison provoked a gale of laughter.

"I thank you, Toshi-han," she said. "Although I do think that unkind to my future successor."

"Do you really think you won't be prorogued?" he asked, having worried about it ever since her remark on the possibility before the Durigalans' trial. Like the rest of her legates, he knew how he felt about that.

The Fujino Campaign had enriched not only his bank account but also his Self. He had experienced and done things as her legate that he had missed out on in his younger years within the Senate. He felt more alive and alert here than he ever had back home! Look at him marching on his feet now just like the rankers, for instance: even his grizzled old body felt stronger than ever. He feared that ending the campaign now-and seeing what had happened the last time they replaced her, he knew a new governor for Septentria would mean

that-would end his revitalisation as well.

She studied him covertly and saw the worry he tried to conceal.

"I think it is a possibility, that is all," she told him. "I still do think I have a good chance of being prorogued, however, for I am not yet without my allies."

"Or schemes?" he said, grinning.

"Well," she grinned back. "I hope I am never without those!"

"Your opponents aren't ever without them either. I still can't believe the archconservatives tried to pass a law limiting prorogued governors to a cap of five years for their terms."

She chuckled a little and asked him what he thought of that attempt to curtail her plans.

"Desperate," the older man sighed. "It's not understated at all, is it? They should've known you'd have a tribune of the plebs ready to veto."

"Indeed, but I suppose they had to try. You know how it is-one never knows what Fortuna will grant on a lucky day! I also have a feeling they were only testing the waters when they had one of their tribunes of the plebs propose it. They wanted to see who would respond or cry foul to it, I mean. Perhaps they even hoped I would be desperate enough to respond with a bill seeking prorogation as early as that."

"More like you to unveil it all next year, if you do have your own plans." He eyed her keenly. "Who's your tribune of the plebs for next year, Fujino-san? I know you already have one, given how important next year is for your command. Yet I haven't heard anything from my own sources back home about you backing anyone. That means you've been keeping it very quiet."

"And shall keep it very quiet a bit longer," she smiled at him. "You shall find out soon enough, Toshi-han. I daresay it may prove interesting. In fact, I am certain it shall be that to some of my enemies, not least to dear Haruka Armitage... who has been

revelling in her latest office, I hear."

"They say she's cracked down viciously on indebted senators," he said, although he was silently dying to know who her tribune might be. He knew better than to ask again once she had already declared an intention to keep it secret, however. "Chika Futaba wrote to me that Armitage-san has booted out some thirty Members of the House since being elected censor."

"Virtuous of her, is it not?"

He shifted a little. Toshi was loyal to his commander yet also unable to deny admiration for Armitage. The latter truly had her own share of greatness given that no other censor had dared examine the senatorial rolls for almost two decades. She could not be bribed or intimidated into letting unworthy names enter those or the equestrian rolls either. She might be the most discerning censor they would have elected in twenty years!

"It's not the easiest task, I imagine," he settled for saying to the woman that censor loathed.

"No, it is not," Shizuru agreed. "At any rate, I cannot complain of her purge of the Senate. It is true we have had too many unworthy names in the House for too long. Besides, she may be of help to my plans in some small way soon, with her activities. How that would vex her!"

They stopped talking at the splash and pound of hooves on wet grass. The polemarch of the Otomeians had ridden up with two of her people. Both of these hung back as their superior brought her horse carefully to the Himean general.

"Ave, Polemarch," Shizuru said to her.

The raven-haired woman reached out: there was a folded cloth in her hand. She gave it to Shizuru.

"Thank you, Natsuki," Shizuru said, patting her face with the dry towel. "Did the rain get you?"

The polemarch gestured to her grey cloak. Its furred hood had been

pushed back yet remained visible. Her face and hair were silky dry.

"Good, but please take cover if it rains again or more heavily. You can still get wet then. Unless you would consider adding a *sagum* to your rain gear, to cover your legs."

The polemarch's face was disdainful.

"That!" she sneered. "It smells of dead sheep."

"But at least you would be dry top to bottom," Shizuru countered.

"Ah well, never mind if you cannot bear it. But mind what I said about going for cover if necessary."

A nod; the polemarch galloped off.

"It *does* smell of dead sheep," Shizuru admitted to Toshi, who was still chuckling.

"Mine does, that's for certain," he said. "Although yours doesn't seem to stink as much, General. How is that?"

"I have my people stuff it in a bag full of herbs," she revealed. "Besides, it is new. Yours looks to me as if it has been with you since the beginning of your military career. That is one *sagum* worthy of respect!"

He confirmed this proudly.

"The good ones last forever," he told her, before asking why she had needed a new one. "Did you lose the old one, Fujino-san? Or damage it? I know a good vendor whose *sagi* never tear apart if you need a name. Ligurian fellow, of course."

"All the best *sagi* come from them," she agreed. "No, the old one was actually intact. But I buy a new one as soon as the current cloak's stink begins to overcome my staff's packing herbs. As you can imagine, that means I go through a great many of them in a single campaign. Call it an eccentricity."

He laughed and asked what she did with the old *sagi*.

"I give them over to the army's supplies," she said. "Every now and then, a legionary either forgets his somewhere or sees it damaged beyond repair. They can give him one of my old cloaks as a replacement when that happens. So as you see, the spares are not entirely wasted."

He agreed and continued talking with her until their next stop. Later in the conversation he reminded her of their previous subject, which was Haruka Armitage's doings. Though he pressed her on how those could be of aid to her schemes, she would say no more of it, to his disappointment.

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The Northern Frontier was a wet land, Shizuru mused as they progressed in their march. It was not merely the season responsible for it either. The further north her army went, the heftier the construction of the local houses. They tended to be rough and none-too-attractive, but were extremely thick-walled and thick-roofed. The natives too certified her suspicions: they said the land tended more to damp than to dry, especially with all the streams and patches of marsh running about. Rainfall was regular and could happen even during the warmer times of the year. Then it would usually snow in winter, which only added to the slush.

She guessed it contributed to the Northern Frontier's challenges for inhabitants. All that wetness made for agricultural trials. Moisture was good for growing grain, yes, but too much of it spelled problems.

She had heard the farmers on her own lands complain when Fuuka suffered from a surfeit of rainstorms. They said it degraded their crop to the point of it being near-unsuitable for baking, though none of them could tell her why. They had demonstrated the point, however, by showing her loaves baked from wheat that had been rained-on several times before the harvest. The loaves had been flattish and of poor quality. They had caved in on themselves even within the oven.

Yet grass in this land was abundant and apparently sweet: the auxiliary's beasts certainly never seemed to tire of it. The natives

had their own livestock, but one could not really call them herds. They tended to be of only a few animals per group. Shizuru suspected their recent conflict with the Mentulaeans had severely abridged local herd numbers. That was if the locals had ever owned any great number of cattle in the first place. Natsuki told her this was such wet land it was a wonder if most hooved beasts did not eventually suffer from footrot.

When the last two villages with which they struck treaties were just a little more than nascent settlements, Shizuru knew her army would soon have to turn back. There were no more diplomatic gains to be had further north, she suspected... unless she actually dared something like trying to pass the alps that separated the sailing tribes' lands from the ones she had already traversed. Not a good idea, especially in winter. She would also have no real notion of what she was up against until she reached it.

Still she pressed on. She wanted to at least see the forest of Natsuki's ancestors before she had to return to her province. To do that she had to work her way even further up the Atinu and forded two of its northernmost tributaries. All the while, she marvelled at the land's increasingly dark greenness and isolation. The peoples they encountered now just lived as individual families or extended clans. They were a little wary of the Himean legionaries at first-most had heard of but not seen them before-but they regarded the Otomeians with rather more favour. They were fellow northern peoples, after all, and while not common, still familiar.

And then, seemingly out of nowhere, they had it in sight. This far north there was always a slight mist over the ground, but in the horizon before them was suddenly a fog that was a distinct body in itself. It stretched over the vista like a low and gigantic cloud dragged to the ground by its own weight. Within that cloud was a wall of tall shadow, so thick that each tree composing it was barely distinguishable from the others.

She called the column to a halt and told the officers to water the men and the animals. They had stopped by a stream and the usual order immediately set in. Buckets came out for the troopers and grooms to bring water for their beasts. The officers directed where and when each century could drink or wash hands and faces. The

centurions watched the whole business like hawks: a single foolish man deciding to relieve himself in the water could ruin things for everyone else downstream.

Shizuru herself set about issuing the usual orders before she took her break. When she was done she paused for a moment to gaze out at the sight she had marked as her destination.

"So that," said the legate at her side breathlessly, "is the Black Forest."

"I daresay it is, Toshi-han," she replied.

"We're the first Himeans to have seen it in more than a generation. Just think of that."

She nodded. A quick clap on the back for her legate before she went off, walking down the line to try and find where the polemarch had stopped. She exchanged words with some of her officers as she went and listened to their jokes on the wetness of the march. She told them not to complain as they were all due for baths anyway, which had them laughing in response: everyone knew she always smelled sweetest in the command because of her own obsession with cleanliness.

Finally she saw her mistress: the polemarch had stopped near the rest of the auxiliary with her little band. She stood next to her two horses and was waiting for their grooms to return with buckets of water. The beasts she waited with were impatient. They whickered with lips held to her head.

She was appeasing them with honey cakes purloined from yesterday's dinner when Shizuru reached her.

"Here, you glutton," she was saying to the black stallion, which frapped its nostrils happily as she offered up the morsel. "You great pig on stilts."

The stallion devoured the cake down to the last crumb. When it finished, it blew to her, its huge head down so that it could push at her shoulder. It knew she had more, and Natsuki clucked at its



wheedling.

"A great pig," she repeated, to Shizuru's amusement. She divided one of the two remaining cakes and let him munch it down. She handed the rest to the more patient horse, whose electrum head had been wagging gently as it waited.

"She is a good girl," she said to Shizuru, finally acknowledging the older woman's quiet presence. "She has better manners than Niger."

As if to prove it, Aurea rubbed her head more gently on Natsuki's than the stallion had. Shizuru chuckled at the difference between the two animals, both of whom were obviously smitten with their owner. Their heads stayed near hers, velvet lips occasionally nibbling at her pale skin as she hummed to them.

"Niger *is* a warhorse," Shizuru told the polemarch, smoothing a palm over the silvery gold flanks on the mare. "Whereas you raised Aurea here for parades and pleasure rides. Surely that accounts for the difference in etiquette."

Natsuki pointed out that Shizuru was a warhorse herself, yet never gave others cause to question her manners.

"I was raised for parades too, in a sense," Shizuru answered, withholding a jest about pleasure rides because Natsuki's grooms had returned. "While they are being watered, will you walk with me a little?"

They set off and of one accord moved nearer the tributary, both looking at the blackwood in the distance.

"Sometimes," Natsuki said while walking, "I think, 'it is good I go in battle no longer'. Because of my horses."

Shizuru's eyes went to her.

"Is it because," the older woman said, "you feared for them?"

Natsuki said she did and confessed it had long been one of her weaknesses. She knew cavalry warriors had to make their peace with the idea of their steeds being hurt from the start. She said she

knew that, but had found it difficult.

"Back then, I used to wonder," she admitted. "How much longer will I have Niger? Or when Albinus was still mine, how long before an arrow finds him? When you raise a horse for war you know it will die one day in a battle. But after you raise the horse that knowledge does not come easy, I think. You wonder why you raised it only so it could fall. Sometimes I think we are the real animals. We take them away from their green fields, we force them to meet the blades and-and the blood."

Shizuru was a little moved by this speech, for whatever reason. She took her time replying.

"You love your horses, *mea vita*," she said.

Natsuki nodded.

"So now," she said, "it is one good thing from this. My horses will have better lives and maybe some peace. While it lasts."

Shizuru said nothing, still watching her.

"I am fine, Shizuru," the younger woman announced all of a sudden.

They stopped walking.

"Good," said Shizuru with a smile. "I wondered."

Natsuki simply smiled back.

"Do you..." Shizuru twitched her mouth a little ruefully but proceeded. "Do you actually want to see it?"

"I see it now," Natsuki pointed out, flicking her eyes briefly towards the forest.

"That is not what I meant," Shizuru chided her.

"I know," the other said. "And I think yes, but also no. You know how that is?"

"A little. I understand."

"So either way, I will not mind. Anyway, it does not matter."

Shizuru asked what made her say that. Natsuki laughed abruptly and tipped her head to one side in a jaunty movement that said they should look behind them. Shizuru did and laughed as well.

She supposed it was due to both her nature and her lover's history that she was so enthralled by the idea of entering that strange woodland before them. Shizuru loved *terra nova*, experienced few of the misgivings others did when facing alien landscapes, and possessed besides the unquenchable curiosity of a voracious intellect. The thought of seeing the Black Forest of Ortygia was thrilling to her, even if the looks of it stirred awe too. It was yet another campaign into foreign territory and just another challenge for her to master.

But her people were different. The legionaries looked at that prodigious expanse of forest and felt only hair-raising terror. It was understandable, for it was like no woodland they had ever before sighted. Even the dense breadth of Septentria's sacred forest, the Ruviccan of Tasgetia, looked friendlier by comparison.

This new forest was so thick no one questioned the origins of its name. Deep within that dark woodland it looked near night-time. How great were the trees shading that place! Shizuru had never seen trunks stab so far into the sky. For them to be so tall at this distance, she estimated most to be hundred-footers. And this was only for the parts they could actually see. Most of the forest melded into a blue-black gloom through which there were occasional obscurities, individual trees briefly separate from the many.

*This is from where my girl comes*, thought Shizuru, herself a little impressed by the odd darkness of it in the distance. It was high noon and the rest of the land showed green and sparkling under the sun. Not so the Black Forest. Fitting, in a way! Natsuki might as well have walked straight out of a legend to go from the looks of her old homeland; she might have been a creature spawned out of shadows and born of the bluish northern vapour.

She looked to her side and found the polemarch watching her with one of those enigmatic smiles.

"That was Ortygia, *meum mel* ?" she asked.

"It is the Black Forest," Natsuki corrected. "It is of Ortygia, yes. But if you mean Ortygia the City, it is much deeper in there, Shizuru. What you see is only the border of the forest."

"The border," Shizuru echoed. "Is the city itself so very far still?"

"Yes." And with a wider smile: "Farther than your legionaries would ever be willing to march."

Shizuru turned around and saw again the anxiety on the faces of her officers and rankers. It was clear they were praying to the gods that she would not take it in mind to lead them into that strange woodland.

She did not think they would refuse her if she insisted. But she was not in the habit of leading horrified soldiers to places even she had never yet seen or scouted in advance. She knew how to put enough sinew in a legionary to stiffen him against gigantic armies and unexpected battles. But to stiffen him up against inchoate creatures as much a product of that alien mist as of his nightmares?

"They do look anxious," she joked to her lover.

"They should be," Natsuki answered in earnest. "Dangers are in there. Even the beasts of the Black Forest are giants. Your men will not like to see such great bears and wolves and oxen."

"Ah, the aurochs."

"And harsh boars hungry for blood. There is also the mist, always, and the forest cover."

"It does look dense. Is it why they call it the Black Forest, *mea vita* ?"

"Mm. In there, always it is dusk."

Yes, the interior of that forest clearly saw little sun. Perhaps that explained Natsuki's striking colouring, thought the older woman. Had any of the Ortygians still been exposed to the sky with any regularity? Most of their congress back then would have been with the Otomeians too, and Otomeia itself had a shaded sky that seemed perpetually cloud-covered. A life spent under the cover of giant firs and spruces and pines, under greyish heavens. Even the darker-haired Ortygians would have been pale as ice.

Said her own ice-skinned Ortygian: "People would get lost fast. One cannot follow even the path of the sun within the Black Forest. The land too dips and rises. It only seems to be flat when you enter."

"A formidable set of natural barriers," Shizuru mused. "They must have helped to safeguard Ortygia."

"It was safe," her lover said. "For a while."

Shizuru reached out. Natsuki accepted the embrace, despite the people watching them.

"I think," Shizuru said a few seconds later, "I have never seen trees of such size. Are they as large as they seem from afar?"

She heard the smile in her lover's voice: "Larger."

"And I suppose they are as big-footed as I am?"

That got a laugh. Natsuki pulled back enough so they could look at each other.

"Yes, the roots are big too," said the younger woman. "And some of the trees around the city had trunks more than twice as wide as you are tall, Shizuru."

"They must be ancient!"

Natsuki looked contemplative.

"My people said they were there before us. Some said they were there before all people," she uttered, before looking up at Shizuru and fixing the older woman with emerald eyes. "I think... I think it

could be so. The greatest trees there are not ones that grow fast. For them to be-to have become so wide and tall, I think maybe they must have been there before the gods made men."

Shizuru agreed that it was not implausible.

"I am glad I finally set eyes on the Black Forest, though," she said afterwards. "You have no idea how long I have wondered about it. Not merely because it is from where you hail, you know. Even before I met you I already wished to see it."

Natsuki nodded.

"At least you have seen it now," she said. "But you cannot enter. Your people will stop you because they have not your courage."

"What makes you think I am not quaking in my boots right now?"

One of those dark and husky laughs that elicited a shiver. Oh, how well even her voice fit her old homeland!

"If you do, it is in excitement," Natsuki said. "You have not your people's fear of the unknown, Shizuru."

"Oh, I would not say that. The prospect of the truly alien does sometimes awe me."

"But it never overawes you. That is the difference."

Shizuru looked around to see her people's apprehensive faces again. No, they truly could not press on. The legionaries would be too affected by their superstitions and fears to be of much use in there. What if they ran into enemies? Even just one of the giant beasts Natsuki had described would likely start a panic. Besides, she had to consider the supplies: there were no guarantees that they could support themselves in that forest.

She hailed a tribune nearby and sent a message to her legate. The officers would get the troops back in marching order so they could all return to the province.

"I am sorry, *mea vita*," she said to her mistress, who regarded her

evenly. Her own eyes returned to the forest, as wistful as they were hungry. "Perhaps we can properly see your old home another day."

Natsuki smiled.

"Be not sorry, Shizuru," she said, and moved closer so she could tuck herself into Shizuru's smelly *sagum* .

## Chapter 82

### **Vocabulaire:**

1. **The Eighteen** - *The most senior and influential members of the Ordo Equester, or the knights of Ancient Rome. Remember that the equestrians/knights made up Rome's business community.*
2. **Mare clausum** (L.) - *Literally "closed sea", or waters where navigation was forbidden. The winter months tended to be the most perilous when sailing the Mediterranean's waters, so the sea was considered "mare clausum" by the more risk-averse captains (such as those in commercial vessels) then. The Ancient Roman interdiction was neither formal nor truly enforced, having come into being only to protect seafarers themselves.*
3. **Mos maiorum** (L.) *Tradition, the way things are done, and the way things have always been done.*
4. **Quinquereme** - *A ship with five men per oar and three banks of oars.*
5. **Testudo** - *The "turtle" formation, wherein legionaries interlock shields closely so as to present a wall of defence to the foe. It is typically used to protect soldiers against archer fire.*
6. **Triclinium** (L.) - *The dining room of an Ancient Roman villa.*
7. **Trireme** - *A ship with three men per oar and three banks of oars.*
8. **NOTE on Iemasa Yamazaki's act and on heads of the family** - *The act ascribed to Iemasa Yamazaki was actually performed by one of the Fabii Maximii during the late Republic: as in Yamazaki's case, it horrified his countrymen. While the heads of the family did have many powers over their family members, there were nonetheless limits. In this text, heads of the family (who may be either male or female) are generally indicated by the surnames used by the family members. For example, since Chikane and Himeko both use Chikane's surname (Himemiya) instead of Himeko's, the*



*materfamilias of their family is Chikane.*

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## ***Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae***

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Early January they were at Argus again to make their winter trip to Fuuka. Shizuru had led the First and Third's march back south after the excursion through the Northern Frontier, but she had left them in Toshi's command upon reaching the bridges at the Holmys. There she broke off with part of the cavalry to make her way to the Himean port province. She found it in a dither of preparation, stirred by the looming advent of Midori Sugiura's replacement.

"It seems strange to think of an Argus that does not have you as governor," Shizuru said. "Since my first mission here, you have been a fixture!"

"Which is why it's time to let someone else take over," Midori replied. "Seven years! Any longer and they'll accuse me of wanting to be made permanent. Or worse, setting myself up as a petty queen in one of our most prosperous provinces. Next thing you know, I'd be ousted only by death or some enterprising descendant. Since I have no descendants, that leaves only one unpleasant option, doesn't it?"

Shizuru chuckled at her levity.

"I do not think anyone would ever accuse you of regnal pretensions," she told the older woman, who sometimes cleaned her own bedroom and study because she thought it quicker than ordering the servants. Shizuru doubted Midori Sugiura had ever put on a queenly air in her life.

"Besides," she added, "you had the job so long because many wanted you to keep it. Everyone knows you served Argus well, Midori-han, so I cannot see you going back to Hime and finding anything but commendations and welcome."

"I won't be going back yet, actually."

"You have grown fond of this place, I suppose," Shizuru offered.

"I have. But it's also because my replacement will need a little assistance-as will the locals, who have to adjust to a new hand now."

Shizuru asked who the succeeding governor was.

"Mahiro Moto."

"Last year's urban praetor," Shizuru observed.

"That's the one."

An assessing look came to the older woman's face as she proceeded to deliver her impression of her successor.

"Polite and proper," she said. "Like all of his family-you know how they are. He wrote me a very flattering letter about my governorship, then asked me if I would be willing to advise him for the first months of his. It's part of why I'm not leaving for Hime just yet. That, and the fact that I really do regard Argus as my other home now. I've put down roots in this place, and they go deep."

"And Hime?"

"Hime has my heart. Always will."

Shizuru said she understood. Then she asked: "Do you think he will be good for Argus?"

"I wish I knew," the older woman sighed. "He seems to have had a good performance as urban praetor. Seems like an able man. Probably practical too, since he didn't scorn to ask me for help. He'd like to make me his gubernatorial legate, which would end in me doing the work I've always done while he gets all the credit, doesn't it?"

"Would you agree?" Shizuru asked, already knowing the answer.

"Definitely not. As I told you some time ago, what I look forward to the most after my governorship is the peace and relative freedom.

All I'll do is be a sort of consultant to him, but certainly nothing that binds me into even more administrative service. Still, it betrays good sense on his part to have asked in the first place."

Shizuru concurred.

"And on paper, everything holds up, doesn't it?" Midori continued. "Good family name, good political career-they say he acquitted himself well during both his quaestorship and aedileship too, I asked some people-he even has a good military record. He looks all right."

A shrug of the shoulders as she concluded: "But no one really knows how they'll perform as a governor until they do it."

"How are his finances?" Shizuru enquired.

The hazel eyes meeting hers gleamed with faint derision.

"Gods, but you like to hit the jugular," the older woman smirked. "Well, I won't deny I asked around myself! And the answer was fine, although he does have some debts. They say they're not unreasonable, however. His creditors aren't dunning him either, since he does look like a good prospect, all the more now he's been posted to Argus."

"That is well," Shizuru determined. "He would have less need to enlarge his purse drastically, if so. It lowers the risk of him raping the province."

The other nodded, but looked none too sanguine.

"Don't we all rape our provinces, with or without drastic need?" she asked in a brooding tone.

Shizuru's bisected eyebrow ticked up.

"You did not," she pointed out to her fellow senator, who responded with an ironic look.

"Nor did you!" Midori sighed. "I hear you're even waiving taxes to the end of your term?"

"Septentria needs some economic relief."

"So it does, but it's nonetheless admirable. Still, here's the truth: we may desist from corruption all we like but those after us will do it anyway. And when a province hasn't been raped by its governor for a long time, it becomes even more vulnerable. The next corrupt governor will milk it dry, down to the very bones! Don't get me wrong-I don't begrudge a governor making a little on the side. But to treat a province like one's personal larder? Our colleagues do it with impunity because they know the odds are against them getting punished. Extortion trials only work so often; cases like Sumio Fujimoto's are the exception. And with courts that are famously susceptible to politicking and bribery, can you blame the avaricious governors for being unafraid?"

Midori smiled weakly and looked into two curious red eyes.

"It will happen to Septentria too," she predicted. "Certainly, in fact! Whoever takes over after your term will be doing it chiefly in anticipation of sucking the old empire dry. There's only been one governor before them, after all! Given that it's been you too, there'll be even more chances for your successor to rape the place, since you'll have scorned to do it in your time. And he will rape the place, regardless of all your measures to protect it past your tenure, and ignoring the example you set. It makes you think about why we still try to set the example, aye?"

A faint crease appeared between Shizuru's brows.

"Because the knowledge that someone else shall commit a crime in the future is paltry reason to commit it in advance and in his stead, I think," she said.

"Oh, god's sake, I know that!" Midori said impatiently, frowning as well. "I just meant that it makes you wonder sometimes *why we bother*. I spent seven years making Argus the best port province it could be under my hand. I think I succeeded, and I even have the ledgers and witnesses to argue my case. Even with that, whenever I reflect that some governor after me can and probably will run the province to the ground again, it makes me wonder a little what it was all about. Things never last."

She shook her head as if to shake away the melancholy of those thoughts as well.

"I'm being maudlin," she said. "Excuse me for that! Even a scholar of history can get a little bogged down when thinking about its cycles. Let's talk about something else. Tell me what you saw on your march to the far north."

Shizuru acquiesced and described the journey, but privately ruminated on the older senator's words. She understood what Midori had been saying but disagreed. She herself would never wonder about the purpose of all her efforts for Septentria, although she saw why someone such as Midori would wonder it of her own achievements as a governor.

Midori Sugiura was a born mentor and caretaker, so she had approached her governorship much as a mentor did a new apprentice. Argus had been another youth in her guidance, ready to be steered gently down the path. She had enriched it the way a good mentor did, offering it all the benefits of her wisdom and experience. That she did not take advantage of it was because she was intrinsically honest and had come to love the place. No good mentor despoiled a child left in his care. And a good mentor always wondered what would become of the child once it passed from his authority.

Shizuru was not quite so benevolent. It was true she too wished to enhance those under her power, to better their lives. Yet the greater consideration for her was self-directed. Her *dignitas* forbade an avaricious governorship because such a governorship would tarnish her self-image. Even had she been impoverished, she would have desisted from raping her province simply because it would have been unworthy of her pride and abilities. What would it say, after all? That she could only make her fortune at the expense of those in her care? That she was so deficient of talent that there was no other way left than an elevated form of banditry? How beneath her that would be!

Midori Sugiura was right about something, however: *things never last*. Not that this still presented a problem to Shizuru. The good she herself had done for Septentria might not survive all the governors to

follow her. But the knowledge of that good? That would endure, not only for others but for herself. She could look back on her work in years to come and know she had given her best. Anything less would make the remembrance a misery.

"Which it shall not be for Midori-han," she told Natsuki after informing the younger woman of the impending administrative changeover. "So well has she managed Argus these last years that the locals themselves are aghast at her 'retirement'. Moto-han has much to live up to. I myself hope he comes up to scratch, being that he shall be one of two other governors near us."

"But why is she even replaced?" Natsuki asked. "If you say she does so well still."

"Because it was high time, she said so herself. You know the standard is actually for our governors to have only one year of tenure. Perhaps two or three if they are prorogued."

"This is why sometimes, kings are better," said Natsuki.

"Do you think so?" Shizuru answered with a smile. She might have been descended from kings herself but she was born Himean. No part of her would espouse a view of monarchies as preferable to the Republic.

Still she softened her disagreement for her royal lover's sake: "I suppose it seems that way if you get a good king and he remains so throughout his lifetime. But that is not always so, is it? People change, sometimes get corrupted by power... and kingship tends to be absolute power. Besides, for every good king, you get nine mediocrities. Out of the nine, you might even get two or three horrors. Imagine if they all ruled as their characters dictated, throughout their lifetimes."

Natsuki pointed out that she had said "sometimes".

"Also," the girl said, "are not your magistrates this way too? A good consul comes and is followed by some who are forgettable. Or even stupid."

Shizuru said this was so.

"Yet the difference is that they last only a year each," she cautioned. "So though that shortens the amount of good each can do, so does it shorten the bad. And more importantly, they can be prosecuted after their terms. An important check on all powers of authority, the knowledge that they can be called to an accounting. The only exception is the Dictator, but we hardly ever create the office, and even it has an expiration date on its term."

Natsuki hummed, but had one last remark.

"You said to me before, Shizuru," she said, "that your checks on authority rarely work because the senators protect each other."

"Indeed," Shizuru replied. "But it is far better than having no checks whatsoever. Sometimes it works and sometimes it does not. I would still prefer a system that tried instead of giving up altogether."

A sentiment she repeated in another form to her northern intelligencer, Yamada. She had summoned the man to meet her at Argus before she made the seaward trip to Ravenna. Her question, as he had known it would be, had to do with the royal siblings they still hunted.

"You are telling me you still cannot find a trace of either of them?" she asked him.

"Not with reliability," Yamada replied. "We hear sometimes about this or that sighting, someone who looks like either the prince or princess, but when we follow it up, it just turns out to be that-a lookalike. It only makes sense, you know. If they're really still in the country, they'd be less likely to look themselves, wouldn't they?"

"They would be in disguise, you mean," she said, agreeing.

"Exactly that. We'll keep following up on what we hear, though. It's just that it's harder than it ever used to be. Ironically enough, it's even harder than it was during the war."

She asked him to explain.

"The Mentulae did suspect you might have spies about the land while the war was going on. However, their suspicions tended to fall on the obvious choices back then. Foreigners, you know, and people who were totally new. As if they thought you'd be so callow as to send in the obvious types. That's part of why the king ordered the lords to execute every 'southerner'-they use that word like a curse-they found in their fiefs right before your invasion. He said he was weeding out the spies and traitors early on."

Shizuru told him to continue.

"Well, during the war I think they came to see just how many spies they missed. Too many times of you getting the drop on them! So now they're treating more people with circumspection. That includes the itinerants, which means most of my people, given our work. Anyone who didn't live permanently in the old empire or anyone without perfectly solid, pure-blooded Mentulaean roots."

"Which leaves us empty," she smiled wryly, "given that you use only those with either mixed or non-Mentulaean blood in them."

"It's the best way to avoid the issue of loyalty to the Mentulaean people cropping up."

"I know." She quirked an eyebrow. "What about the local informants, however? Is our reward not adequate to tempt them?"

"Oh, it is!" he cried, himself a little envious at the inclusion of Himean citizenship in the reward. He had only procured his own citizenship from her by promising her cause priority in his services. A steeper price by far than the simple delivery of one of Obsidian's last fugitive whelps, in his opinion.

"The real problem is that the rabbits we're hunting are foxes," he told her. "I think they're not revealing themselves to just anyone, if they're revealing themselves at all. Safest way to keep a secret-

"Is to tell no one of it. Just so."

She considered the matter for a moment, then concluded with agreement: "Yes, the pair of them are foxes. Whoever knows their



whereabouts at the moment is unlikely to be someone tempted by our offered reward. I would guess the chief of the druids, as well as some high barons-particularly those of the Ganni. What need would such people have of the lands and titles, or even the citizenship we would serve up as a prize?"

He had another suggestion: "Why don't we question one of the probable suspects? A little interrogation, perhaps?"

She knew what he was suggesting by "a little interrogation" and demurred.

"Certainly not," she said. "We are technically at peace now and to subject any of them to torture absent due cause would be savagery. Besides, any information we could get that way would be of little use. Whatever they could tell us would probably only say where and when they last saw our two runaways. As we have already agreed the pair are foxes, I doubt they would yield practical information about tracking them to others. As for descriptions of their appearances, who knows how long those descriptions would remain current? The two might very well change disguise every new moon!"

He asked what she wanted him to do.

"Only keep at it," she said. "Eventually, we might find a bit of gold in the gravel."

Although the chances of that were not too high, she admitted to herself as she strode back to her quarters. Calchis and Faris were being too careful to trust anyone questionable with their true identities. All she and her intelligencers could hope for now was that one of them would slip up by accident. Not a great strategy, but for lack of better alternatives, the only one she could employ at the moment.

She returned to the sitting room given over to her use and pondered a new question: was she placing too much stock in the missing prince and princess? They were of Obsidian's blood and therefore possible threats to the conversion of the province, yet they were also only uncrowned escapees now, devoid of even an army to support any claim they could present. Hime owned the old Mentulaean

Empire already; Hime ran Septentria. Why then did that voice in her head tell her to keep looking for the siblings and not rest until she could pack them off into comfy incarceration?

She surfaced from her thoughts when lips settled on her nape.

"There you are, *mea vita*," she said, turning her head to find the other's mouth: Natsuki stood behind her. "I just got back myself. Come and sit with me."

"How was it?" Natsuki asked.

"About what we expected," was the answer. "Still nothing on the prince or princess. The prey is too smart and the locals are too wary."

Natsuki pointed out frankly, "Durigala did not help."

"No, it did not."

"What does it mean for you?"

Shizuru smiled.

"It means," she said, "that in addition to ensuring I keep my province for a little longer, I shall have to ensure I keep all of my current legions too."

An interested look from the girl.

"You think something will happen," she said.

"I would not say that. Let us say, rather, that I suspect it better to be safe."

Natsuki had an odd expression on her face. Shizuru asked her what it was.

"If you keep the governorship," said the younger woman, "do the legions not follow?"

"Not necessarily. They could reduce them by arguing the lack of

exigency, for example, as they did before. Do you remember it? When they replaced me with Takeda Masashi."

"Yes, but I thought... because now you are a governor."

"No, that grants me no exception, especially after my initial five years are done. They can say the war is over, which it is, you know. And of course, they may cite the everlasting argument-to reduce the State's costs."

"You enriched 'the State' by thousands of talents, Shizuru," said Natsuki with palpable scorn. "It can afford to pay your legions."

"Indeed, but no matter. They shall say we need to save-which means *hoard* -that money for the future instead of spending it willy-nilly on soldiers that are unneeded. Besides, they can always use the recent drought as another reason. They would have had to buy grain from overseas and at greater cost to the Treasury than usual."

But the other was well aware of the effects of the past drought, and not just from Shizuru's talks with her either. Chikane too had filled her in on it during their brief week together.

"But they bought only little," she now said shrewdly. "The drought hit most lands around Your Sea, I know, so there was little for sale. Even without your spoils and the higher grain prices, Hime's Treasury is still full."

Shizuru grinned.

"Well, but you are better at reasoning than most people, Natsuki," she said.

"And you are better at scheming than everyone," was the returning compliment. "You are prepared?"

"I have plans in motion. I shall be strengthening my position in the Senate shortly, as you shall see when we go to Ravenna. Have you prepared your things and staff, yourself?"

Natsuki said her people would be ready to leave early on the morrow.

"Good," said Shizuru. "It is a pity we are only sailing as far as Ravenna, though, as I imagine you would love to see one of Chikane's fleets. The one stationed further south of the Adriatic is rather a large one too, and would impress you."

"I am impressed already, Shizuru," Natsuki said. "But more by Chikane than her ships."

Shizuru felt the same. It had taken her best friend the better part of a year to get all her fleets together, but following that, the campaign itself had proceeded at astonishing speed. Shizuru herself was renowned for her alacrity, yet had to applaud her friend's efforts as they bore fruit: the Himemiya Campaign was turning out an object lesson in military efficiency and organisation. Come January, Admiral Himemiya had already cleared the entire western half of Mare Nostrum.

*One good thing about facing an opponent that has been given his head too long, she wrote to Shizuru, is that he has forgotten what to do when someone reins him in. These pirates have not faced an experienced, powerful foe in decades. They have made a career of boarding and capturing merchant ships and simple transports. But my triremes are too fast to board and the rest are packed with marines. I even told the captains of the latter to let the pirates board them, actually. The outlaws come to regret their audacity quickly.*

*Most of them now choose to flee. It troubles me not because, as you know, one of my legates is always waiting at all avenues of escape. It surprises the escapees, who have usually worn themselves out in flight by the time they meet those other armadas. We have taken many ships thus. A pity I cannot crew them to add to my forces, but then the Treasury would probably bleat again about the sailors' salaries if I did.*

*I took a most fascinating prize myself recently, when I met the pirate admiral Agatharcus. His pride and joy was his personal vessel, a quinquereme he had embellished to meet his ideas of a flagship. My people assured me that I would know it the moment I saw it. They were right.*

*It had timbers of brightest blue with a vivid yellow rail. The sail was*

*adorned with the image of an azure horse rearing on the canvas. At the sides was a row of gilded shields, and at the bowsprit was a gilded horsehead. A proud vessel with all the flamboyance of the Ptolemies; how it flashed above the cerulean sea! I told my captain to make for it the moment the rest of our fleet had cleared a path.*

*The vessel's crew put up a miserable fight when we boarded. They were greatly distraught by the fact that they had to fight at all: it seems they had never been compelled to perform a defensive action on that ship before our assault. We also discovered then that the shields decorating the sides were purely ornamental. A single plank of plywood in gold foil, brittle as a wafer.*

*I simply did the usual when boarding large and decked vessels. This was to have the legionaries fight to occupy one end of the craft, then form a testudo facing the other end. From there all they need to do is advance with shields and spears held tightly in formation.*

*You can sweep a ship's worth of corsairs from bow to stern in this manner. If they try to fight back, the marines can simply do short charges at every third or fourth step. Done right, this battering attack can knock a surprisingly thick crowd off its feet. One officer is sufficient to time and call out the charges in between the paces.*

*It took only a few minutes for the pirate crew to discard arms and cry surrender. When we inspected the ship at our leisure, we found a surprise. Agatharcus had gone further in ornamenting it than we had first thought. To the stern end of the deck was even a canopied structure with a literal throne. Made of gold-inlaid ivory and carved wood, if you can credit it! Set upon a dais with fine marquetry that some kidnapped master artisan must have been compelled to lay! He even had a cedar-panelled and tapestry-swathed cabin at the stern. Not even my own flagship is so well appointed.*

*Agatharcus himself was swathed in Tyrian purple. It was not the genuine article, for no one would risk wearing that aboard a ship. The material would be ruined very swiftly by rain and seawater. Nonetheless, what our pirate admiral wore was a good imitation. He even conducted himself rather loftily in the surrender. A brigand prince, although his tongue betrays him: his Greek is of the common cant, and bears the burrs of the countryside even when he essays*

*more refined diction. I appreciated his dignity, however, and treated him to a cordial dinner. Afterwards he was conveyed to Hime with the other pirate commanders we have already taken.*

"They will be held like your own prisoners?" Natsuki asked after Shizuru read this out to her. She knew that Shizuru's prisoners of war were kept in separate locations to await the day of her return. "Are they to be executed afterwards too, Shizuru?"

"Yes, they will be held thus, and yes, the pirate captains and admirals will be," Shizuru said. "They shall probably meet their ends very soon, in fact, given how fast Chikane is working. She did say she wants to be home as soon as possible."

"Your prisoners are luckier that way, no?"

Shizuru considered that view of things.

"I suppose so," she said, "though some might say otherwise as they consider the anticipation of death worse than the event. Besides, some people dislike long confinement. Remember, people like the Princes Artaxi and Hanu have been sequestered to the villas where they are kept. They can walk the grounds, yes, but only under heavy guard, and they cannot address anyone outside of the villa. The day they finally leave those places is the day I return and send for them... and then they shall have to die."

"It is more comfortable than a dungeon," Natsuki insisted.

She knew that Shizuru had even troubled to ask both princes if they wanted to send for companions. Hanu had asked for two of his wives and their children. Artaxi had asked for a cousin and a friend. These had been conveyed to them.

So Shizuru's money now paid for the hosting of those people as well, and provided for nearly every comfort her hostage households requested. Natsuki knew the only request she had thus far turned down was from the Prince Artaxi, who wanted more slaves to serve him in his villa. As the man had requested "young and handsome" ones, Shizuru had known where that particular demand was headed. He and his cronies had already been caught in the act of

tormenting one of the more attractive slaves serving them. Shizuru sent a warning that she could have him transferred to a hovel surrounded by guards and no servants.

A thought suddenly demanded to be spoken: "If you catch the Prince Calchis and Princess Faris, will they be executed at your triumph?"

"The prince, certainly, as he was one of the commanders in the war," Shizuru said. "The princess shall be spared, however. Unless we discover something that links her directly to the massacre of Himeans under her father's aegis, anyway."

"And then what will you do with her? After your triumph?"

"Continue to keep her in Fuuka until the magistrates in the town hosting her have decided she is no longer a threat to Hime. After that, she shall be free to go where she wishes."

Natsuki was puzzled and did not hide it. "She can just pretend that!"

"Pretend? Oh, that she is no longer a threat?"

"Yes."

"True," Shizuru said, in a voice that said it little mattered. "But her guardians shall be looking out for that too, of course. Well, it is fine even if they do not notice a deception on her part. Our former captives are typically none too keen on provoking us again."

"You do not think you should execute them, just in case?"

"No, Your Bloodthirsty Highness," Shizuru teased. "That is not how we do things, we Himeans."

"This I see," said the princess, unflustered. "Chikane too, with her pirates."

"Ahh," Shizuru exhaled. "So she did tell you of her transplantations."

"Yes, but only a little."

Natsuki urged her lover to lie back. Once that was done, she pulled the Himean's feet onto her lap. She knew Shizuru liked her massaging them and it was the least she could do for making the older woman read aloud to her yet again.

"You will tell me what she wrote to you, maybe?" she said as she pinched the fair heels.

"If you wish. Now let us see, it was around this part-here," Shizuru said, and proceeded to read out the relevant paragraphs in their friend's letter to her.

*You may have heard by now of my relocations. I know the expectations are for me to either execute or sell the pirates I capture into slavery. Indeed, that was my original intention. However, I have been discovering things that caused me to change that sentence, at least for some of them. I am still performing the expected punishments, but I am also sparing others. These are being conveyed far inland into new and small settlements. All of these communities are distant from the waters. There they can start new lives, rough though it may be at the start.*

*Why such mercy, you wonder? You see, a number of the corsairs we found were formerly farmers, shepherds, town labourers, and tradesmen. In short, they used to be honest workers, some even of Himean or Fuukan stock.*

*It was poverty-and even more recently, famine-that drove them into their new and deplorable line of employment. They explained as much when they surrendered their vessels and even led us to their small coastal settlements. Most had families, which would have starved had they not exploited our own sloth in patrolling our waters.*

*One cannot but look at so many persons and see a waste of humanity and resources. We know that the poverty they describe is real. Many in the provinces have been on subsistence living for generations. There are not enough jobs to sustain our small folk because most businesses are now powered by slave labour. There is little land for them to try and farm because the best tracts have gone to the big estate owners. This is true not just of Hime but of nearly every other state around Mare Nostrum.*



*We have not led these people into piracy, so do not think me blaming their wrongdoing on the rest of society. People are responsible for their own choices, and the decision to be a pirate is a choice still. Even so, we have made the situation such that piracy was one of the few choices left for their survival. We cannot turn away from that truth, even if we cannot condone the crimes.*

*So wherever pirates surrendered themselves and their ships without a fight, I practised mercy. Several of the provincial governors have already agreed to go along with my resettlements. The important thing is to keep our captives far away from the sea, so only locations far inland have been selected. It shall be a struggle at first, no one doubts it. But given that the alternative is execution, many of them are eager to take on the challenge.*

*I have some going to the area north of Sosia, so you may have opportunity to see for yourself how my little resettlements come along. As you see, however, I spared your province the experiment. Septentria is yet too young for me to prevail upon its governor to introduce yet another foreign element to it.*

"I think she was too kind," was Natsuki's view of the situation.

Shizuru was unsurprised: she knew her lover's disdain for thieves. The Princess Natsuki had a good nature and could display a startling ability for sympathy considering her lofty social status. Yet when it came to what she termed "the ignoble crimes", she showed nothing save steel.

"I wonder," Shizuru said. "Personally, I approve of her clemency, as I do agree that most of these people might never have become pirates had circumstance not pressed them into it. It is not as though one can watch one's loved ones starve with composure, Natsuki. These people too have families, as she mentioned. It could be they were only trying to support them."

"Could be," said the young woman. "But not all those with poor families become pirates. And not all pirates have families."

"Then what of those who do? Perhaps some people's circumstances narrow their choices."

"Yes," Natsuki said. "But it does not change that it is a choice, as Chikane said. And those who steal once will do it again."

Shizuru chuckled at the younger woman's hardness on the subject.

"I wonder what that says about the stickier fingers among our senators," she said. "At any rate, part of the reason she showed some such leniency was so that she could use it to bargain, *mea vita*. Chikane mentioned it in another part of this letter, which I have not read out to you yet. Several of them offered her crucial information that could help her capture the ones still at large. This is significant given how cleverly hidden some of the pirate towns and strongholds are in places like Cilicia. Half a dozen other admirals have tried to find some of those hideouts in the past, only to give up and proclaim them undiscoverable. Safe passage for informants who can reveal those locations seems reasonable."

"Then she must be merciful, I see," Natsuki said, somehow still communicating her opinion that their friend had been too lenient.

"Yet you still disapprove, hmm?"

"Of the bargain she made? No. It is practical."

"But?"

"But a thief shall be a thief," came the verdict, spoken suddenly in Greek for precision. "Sooner or later he will find another reason to justify stealing when opportunity tempts his avarice or sense of convenience. Each time he does it, the bar sinks lower. One day he will find there is no bar any more."

From that stance she would not be budged, to her lover's amusement. Perhaps to appeal to these condemnatory inclinations, Shizuru read out to her another excerpt from the Himemiya Naval Campaign. This tale was not from the chief admiral herself, however, but from Chie Harada, also following the antipiracy commission's dispatches back in Hime.

Chikane's personal fleet apparently encountered another of the big pirate admirals in late autumn. While she did sink many of his

vessels, neither the enemy admiral's capture nor defeat fell into her hands in this case. According to Chie, the laurels were claimed instead by an unexpected third party.

It transpired thus: Chikane's ships had swiftly engaged and overcome the pirate vessels. The enemy admiral, losing all hope, had broken away from his fleet to escape. Bad luck pursued him, however. His sturdy quinquere me had gone no further than a cable's length when another ship collided with it. The culprit was one of his own ships, and it had struck his vessel on the stern in its haste to flee too. It rocked his flagship in a shower of splinters and knocked him off his deck, right into the water.

The pirate admiral was a veteran of naval warfare. The first thing he did after falling in was to kick arms and legs energetically so he could knife deeper into the sea. His burst propelled him both downwards and away from his own vessel, into safety. A blow from the oars could have killed him; contact with the hull would have scraped the flesh off his bones. It was only when his lungs could take no more that he swam up and broke the surface.

The nearest two ships narrowly missed him, but not the shark that had been cruising nearby. The grey monster was drawn unerringly in by the gash on his arm. That wound had been opened when he caught on a part of the ship's rail. The red ribbon it issued gave the grinning beast something to target: the animal seized the injured limb and shook the arm free to slide down its throat. That this did not sate it was made apparent when it grabbed the admiral's body and swam away with the man shrieking, a trail of blood and human excreta behind them.

One of Chikane's legates had been in the trireme pursuing the fleeing pirate admiral. Witnessing the unenviable conclusion for the enemy commander, he prepared his crew to ram the flagship again. Not that it was necessary, he reported to his own admiral later, because the pirate crew was too shocked by its leader's fate to escape.

The pleased legate was able to direct several of the triremes following him to board and capture the enemy flagship. Still, it was a pity they could not deliver the pirate admiral to Commander

Himemiya, who wanted all of them taken captive. He wrote an account to his wife afterwards, including a line all Hime was quoting by December: *Sometimes the shark steals from the eagle.*

"There now," Shizuru concluded for the Otomeian. "I suppose that violent conclusion appeals to you, what with your dim view of these naval brigands. A shark is as bloody an executioner as even you could wish."

"Could be," the other grinned. "But the shark too was a thief. Chikane should have captured and sentenced it for cannibalism."

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They spied no sharks on their own southbound voyage. This disappointed Natsuki, who had a fascination for the many denizens of the deep. Sharks in particular amazed her, because she said their design seemed devoted to a single imperative, which was to consume. She knew they often followed ships in hope of getting scraps, so she spent the journey scanning the ship's wake for their giveaway dorsals. When she lamented her failure to spy one to her lover, she was told it might be due to the season. Even the two-legged versions of those beasts tended to be absent at this time, Shizuru jested. That was because commercial vessels rarely voyaged in the cold months. Even the sharkiest merchantmen respected winter's *mare clausum*, fearful of losing goods to choppy waters.

"Although those who need to travel only a short distance still do sail," Shizuru explained to her companion. "But only if the wind is with them, as you might have seen from the few vessels that sailed with us. At this time of year, only north to south is possible. Heading the opposite direction on the Adriatic right now would be murderous on oarsmen. And kill those in our staff susceptible to seasickness, I wager."

Their own voyage was again short, thanks to these conditions. They arrived at a villa already prepared for their advent this time, as Shizuru had sent half of her staff ahead of them. These travelled days earlier and thus had time to settle everything before their domina came with the rest of the retinue.

It made for a much more comfortable welcome. Shizuru and her mistress were able to spend the day of their arrival and the day after that in lazy relaxation. The third day in Ravenna heralded a headlong plunge back into business, however. On that day, they were paid a visit by their Himean banker. He came saddled with news and ledgers for both of his clients.

"Fujino-san had her servants summon me from the city the day they arrived," he explained to the Otomeian polemarch. "So I set out for Ravenna even before your ship docked. I brought a copy of my ledgers for your account, Princess Natsuki. I think you'll be pleased by what you see."

Natsuki thanked him and took the documents.

"There were several big orders for mules recently," he said. "One of them was even for the latest Sicilian campaign. Your establishment filled a number of these orders. Please do ask me anything that requires clarification."

She nodded. But then she held the papers uncertainly until Shizuru assured her that it was perfectly proper to inspect them right there. They were having drinks and a light noonday meal in the villa's *triclinium*, and Sosius was their only guest. As he had come for the express purpose of seeing to his clients, it was not untoward that they conduct business as they supped.

While the princess read her ledgers, Shizuru addressed their banker again.

"I know you have both bad and good news for my own accounts," she told him. "Let us start with the bad. So the House actually had the temerity to issue a decree forbidding tribunes of the plebs from vetoing discussion of the provincial commands?"

Sosius's face fell and he confirmed it.

"So Katou-san's letter did reach you in time," he said.

"If you mean the one she sent north, no, it did not," she informed him. "However, she had the good sense to send a duplicate of it to

this villa, just in case I missed the other one. At any rate, when exactly did this take place? All I know is that it was towards the end of the previous year."

"Just two weeks before the new magistrates took office," he answered. "They did it in an impromptu House session, called by last year's senior consul."

"Did they buy him?"

"Undoubtedly. The only senators given proper notice were those attached to their faction or those they had already inveigled into voting as they wished. The meeting was so poorly attended there were just enough to make a quorum!"

Shizuru shook her head.

"Fumi-han wrote that she and Kenichi-han dashed to get there," she said, "but they were obstructed by some bully boys from entering the Curia."

He heard the unspoken question: "Oh, they're both all right. Only a little scuffed... and I think both of them lost their togas."

"Good, but it was still a disgrace."

He agreed aloud. Trying to obstruct a tribune of the plebs from screeching his veto in the Well of the Comitia was one thing. Trying to obstruct a senator from simply exercising his right to attend a meeting of his peers was another. No senator could be deprived of his right to observe a normal House session! In fact, no citizen could be deprived of the right to observe such a session either. It took the game to a whole new low, as far as Sosius was concerned. But then, this new decree did that too.

"The only tribunes of the plebs in the meeting were conservatives, so naturally, no one vetoed the motion. And the ones who did vote against it during the division were in the minority."

"Which let them pass that ludicrous decree in the blink of an eye."

Sosius murmured an apology. He told her some other senators had

been upset by the strange decree and questioned its authors in the following Senate session. As said session was already led by the new senior consul-herself an archconservative-the questioners got nowhere.

Shizuru took a deep breath and lifted her eyes to the ceiling.

"I wonder," she mused loudly, "at their desperation to put me down. This was no elegant bit of political magic. It was a blow with the thick end of a ham."

Sosius folded his hands together.

"I believe they felt that subtlety was no longer necessary," he ventured. "After all, everyone knows their battle with you will be the event of the year. This muzzling of the tribunes of the plebs is just an opening salvo, seen that way."

The crimson eyes swung down to meet his brown ones angrily.

"What it is," Shizuru snapped, "is grossly unconstitutional! How can they actually expect such a ridiculous decree to hold? The only exemption to the tribunate veto is the office of the Dictator, and we do not have a dictator right now! Or do the Traditionalists mean to say that the Senate currently exists under a dictatorship? Of whose, I'd like to know, as that bunch of baboons could never countenance anyone in that position!"

"Is there no possibility it will be deemed valid?"

"Certainly not! Their beloved *mos maiorum* itself contravenes their bizarre decree. Armitage herself should have seen that, the hypocrite! That decree's only purpose is to try to cow the tribunes of the plebs this year. It makes me wonder how even the conservative tribunes of the plebs agreed to it. What sort of fool allows a few small men and women to abrogate the rights of the Plebs by reducing the powers of their representatives?"

"The excuse they give is that it's only a concession on one unique topic," Sosius told her. "Most of the Plebs can't really be affected by a discussion of which senator gets to govern which province next,

after all, so they say it doesn't make much of a difference."

"A soft answer for soft heads," his auditor sneered. "What is to prevent later senators from extracting further concessions on topics that may be of more moment to the welfare of the Plebs? Oh, but the stupidity of people astonishes me each time!"

She shook her head and exhaled slowly, trying to control the irritation. She asked her banker to move on to the good news already, to give her a reprieve from her foes' "moronic plotting".

Sosius acquiesced, relieved to be able to move on to better subjects: "Ah, on that front, it's very good news indeed. I'm happy to say your foresight has paid large dividends, Fujino-san-yet again."

"I could not have done it without the excellent people helping me," she said in tribute to him.

A grin lit up the banker's round face, whose unassuming looks masked a commercial insight and influence that even The Eighteen held in high esteem. Sosius was short and inclined to corpulence and dressed just like any other middle-class merchant in the Forum. But when the man snapped his fingers, thunder boomed over Hime's markets.

He came from a clan of formerly foreign bankers that had served Hime's upper class for generations. Shizuru's family was among their oldest clients-had been clients even before they attained their wealth, in fact. Sosius's predecessors had taken only respectable depositors, and depositors as respectable as the Fujino, paltry though their holdings used to be, had nevertheless represented a strong endorsement.

The association had truly served his family well, Sosius now reflected. Today the Fujino account was not only respectable but also fat with lucre and its owner had become his biggest depositor. Association with her had also brought his business other large accounts as more of Hime's rich saw how well he served her needs. All of which meant that he was heavily invested in Shizuru's continued success: this was why he put himself at her disposal in a way he did not for any other.



"Conditions were much as you predicted they would be, Fujino-san," he now told her. "It was indeed a buyer's market. Yet you were the only buyer truly taking advantage of it. I doubt anyone else saw it coming and thought to get ready."

"It helps when you know the quality of the person on whom you are staking things," she smiled back.

"Ah, Chikane Himemiya-san. Yes, she was an excellent wager from the beginning."

Pride in her friend swelled: "She always is."

She could see that her lover had ceased perusing her account books and now listened to them instead. The young woman had the cat's look of alert intrigue on her face, her green eyes cool and calculating.

"Well, leave us not keep the polemarch in suspense by speaking so vaguely," she told her banker, who glanced at the polemarch too once she said this. "How many senators has my money bought over the past year and were any of them difficult to attain?"

"I understand Harada-san will be coming over this week to fill in the non-fiscal details," Sosius responded. "But as of now, I'm pleased to tell you that we've already secured twelve senators, all chosen with the care you demanded. Our collection includes, as you had hoped, this year's junior consul, Osamu Himura. He was the most expensive of the lot, of course."

"Of course," Shizuru laughed dryly. "How much did Himura-han charge, then?"

"Fourteen million."

She looked pleased.

"I expected him to charge more," she said.

"As did I," Sosius smiled back. "I expected him to solicit as much as twice that amount, in fact, so I met him with every expectation of going into heavy negotiation. But he asked for only twenty, so I

worked him down to fourteen."

"Is his purse so low at the moment, then? He was not even one of those I expected to be too deep in debt."

"What may have given us the advantage in his case was his anxiety to close on a purchase," Sosius told her. "He had his eye on a fine house just recently put on the market-Rieko Oshiro's old house, in the Carinae, if you know it."

As Shizuru knew the mansion in question, she nodded to show her understanding. The old Oshiro house was a grand edifice, besides being located in one of the more fashionable addresses of Hime. Osamu Himura, eager to upgrade from his old house now that he was consul, would have been anxious to grab it before other savvy house hunters put up their bids. That meant full payment in cash.

"He needed your fourteen million to replenish his coffers enough to buy comfortably," Sosius went on. "Not that his accounts were empty! It's just that he needed to defray some of the costs from his bribes, you see."

Shizuru asked if he had bribed a lot.

"I would say the usual amount for a consular candidate," was Sosius's reply. "The competition wasn't too stiff, especially since there were only two or three others among the candidates who also came from Famous Families. Of them, one was the archconservatives' bid, Ayano Utada."

"Whom they got elected as senior consul."

"They lobbied very heavily for her," said the banker. "It was clear from the start of the voting that she would be occupying the senior chair. Himura-san's relatively easy-going reputation might be what swung him into the junior seat after that. The rest of the 'serious' candidates were on the crotchety side, and deemed less attractive colleagues for Ayano Utada-san. One, Eimi Fukui, is just naturally contrary. As for the other-well, would anyone have seriously voted for Iemasa Yamazaki? The man would have been a consul beyond the pale, even for the archconservatives!"

Shizuru agreed, being familiar with the history of the senator in question. Of an enormously old family, Iemasa Yamazaki was also of enormous peculiarity. He had shocked all of Hime eight years past by condemning his son to death for supposed immorality. The rights of the *paterfamilias* were his justification for the act, which was nevertheless viewed with horror by the rest of the Republic. Even the stiffest conservatives no longer sanctioned the right of a head of the family to execute dependents! Even Haruka Armitage, staunchest of Traditionalists, had blanched bone white upon hearing of it.

Iemasa Yamazaki's wife had taken their remaining children and flown to her relatives for sanctuary. This had not prevented Yamazaki from publicly declaring that such lack of respect only showed the moral decay of society. His demeanour showed everyone the truth: that he genuinely believed himself in the right of it.

Pressure from his wife's family had forced him into voluntary exile for some years afterwards, but he had managed to return to Hime three years ago, thanks to his allies. In spite of all that, there was no scotching the record. No voter was ignorant of his story in the last elections. This explained why Iemasa Yamazaki, of an august name that should have guaranteed the consulship, was passed over for other candidates.

"By comparison, Osamu Himura was seen as much easier to deal with," Sosius went on. "The Traditionalists themselves supported his election. His family's conservative too, after all. I think they believed he would be easier for Ayano Utada to control."

"Yes, that makes sense. He was not even hard enough to try to strike a better bargain with you."

"Nor sharp enough to advance your cause as far as he could, if you'll pardon me saying."

Shizuru admitted the truth of that.

"But no matter," she said. "A consul in the pocket is always a help, even if it is a second-rate one. What a pity we did not slip someone

stronger in his place! I wonder now if we should not have tried to get someone elected from the start."

But Sosius shook his head.

"It would never have worked, even with all your resources," he said apologetically but with candour. "Had the archconservatives known you to be backing someone as consul from the start, they would have thrown everything they had into lobbying against him. They know how important this year is to you and your command."

Shizuru sighed and confessed that he was right.

"I know that, of course," she said wearily. "Blame what I just said on wishful thinking! Well, then, away from wishes and to reality again. Who are the others we bought? Any other elected magistrates?"

"Yes, of course. Two of the praetors and two more tribunes of the plebs."

"Which gives me three in Banri-han's College, himself included. Very good. Has Chikane any this year?"

"Well, this is only conjecture, but I believe one of the tribunes is a friend to her young cousin."

"I should write to Urumi-han soon, then. Three are enough, of course, but it never hurts to have more instead of less in this case. Anyone else worth mentioning?"

He gave her a list of the other senators he had bought for her sake. While they were not elected officials, they were all nevertheless endowed with some desirable traits for a lobbying senator. Several were good orators with consular status, for instance, and therefore high in the House's speaking order. Some were political moderates with significant pull among their fellows. Others were not even accorded the right to speak within the House yet: but her agents had apparently deemed them good wagers for her team, anyway.

Shizuru and Sosius reviewed the personalities her money had bought, and when it was over, seemed suddenly to recall their quiet spectator. Shizuru had never really forgotten her, of course: she had

even silently thrilled to the girl's patently growing amazement. Now she grinned at the foreigner, whose eyes said she was grappling with a puzzle.

"I can feel your mind galloping, Princess," she grinned at the girl. "What do you make of all this?"

Natsuki shook her head at the two Himeans.

"All this?" she said in wonder. "How did you do *all this*?"

"With the help of exceptional allies," Shizuru responded. "And even some obliging enemies, who not only gave Chikane her commission but also gave Haruka Armitage a censorship."

# Chapter 83

## **Vocabulaire:**

1. **Censor** (L.) - An office responsible for monitoring the list of senators as well as the public's "morality". They also had the power (technically the duty) to eject senators from the House if they failed to meet some legal requirement, e.g. if a senator was in arrears, which one law said no senator could be.
2. **Eiichi Kiyosaki** - A character in this story. He was a tribune of the plebs when Chikane's antipiracy commission was created, and it was due to his agitation of the people then that said commission even came to be. See Chikane's letter to Shizuru in **Chapter 73** : hit Ctrl+F and search for "Eiichi Kiyosaki".
3. **Lustrum** (L.) - The five-year term to which censors (s.v.) were elected. For the historians: A lustrum can end prematurely if one censor dies or resigns in this story, since it takes place well after the 393 BCE lustrum that made censor replacement nefas (sacrilegious).
4. **Mare nostrum** (L.) - Literally **Our Sea** , the Ancient Roman term for the Mediterranean.
5. **Talent** (L.) - The amount of silver/gold a man can carry. The standard here is for each talent to be equal to 6,250 denarii or 25,000 sesterces.
6. **Tuatha** - The druidic gods/pantheon.

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## **Inter Nos II: Inde ira et lacrimae**

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When Haruka Armitage was elected a censor, it sent shivers throughout the Senate. Everyone knew she had powerful crotchets

about the inappropriate and immoral. Since she also had the constricted perceptions of a true conservative, this spelled catastrophe for all the senators less than Platonic of character.

Most worrying of all was her stance on indebted senators. As many expected, the woman cracked down on these with a vengeance. High time, she announced at the start of her *lustrum*, that someone finally enforced the law banning senators from being in arrears. If she was aware how many of her own faction's allies broke that rule, she gave no indication. Only natural that her investigations should begin-and for the most part, proceed-with those who were not her associates.

"So you won't see any stout conservatives in the list of ejected senators," Chie Harada told Shizuru when she came to Ravenna. "She would've dearly loved to kick out people like you or Himemiya's cousin. You're the ones she thinks are the real dangers to public morality! But since you're both debt-free and scrupulous about your assets, she couldn't very well impeach either of you during her *lustrum*."

Shizuru suppressed a grin as she imagined her nemesis raging over being unable to strike at her.

"I imagine she conducted an investigation, nevertheless," she posited, "to ensure all our businesses were ones legally allowed for senators."

"I'm sure she did! As it is, mostly radicals or moderates've been getting stripped of their senatorial status. Oh, there've been one or two names from conservative families, but only disreputable members of those clans. You might say she picked out the black sheep of each herd, so she wasn't really going against her Traditionalist grain."

"Wonderful, is it not?" was Shizuru's reply. "For all her noisy insistence on legal fairness, Armitage still has a discretionary view of justice. I doubt she would ever eject your father-in-law for his debts, for instance, given that he and she are in the same faction."

"As I already paid off those debts, she wouldn't have reason to."

Shizuru stifled a grin at the wry reminder.

"Anyway, there's been plenty of other targets for her to light upon," continued the other senator. "For some reason or other, the number of senators deep in debt has gone up sharply in recent time. In fact, it's not even limited to the senators. A lot of people seem to have fallen into dramatic arrears in just the past three or four years!"

Shizuru withheld another chuckle at these words. "For some reason or other" indeed! The rising number of bankrupts in past years was far from a mystery.

It all began with the lasting drought. Its onset had driven up the cost of grain as merchants prepared for shorter supplies than usual. But then it had persisted through another harvest and yet another, turning into a full-blown famine. This sent already-escalated grain prices skyrocketing to over twenty times the normal price in some places.

These particular outcomes of the famine were not difficult to understand. Low supply married to unchanged demand birthed terrible grain prices. That in turn led to starvation in the lower classes. But that was not the end of the famine's devastation. To make matters worse, few of the people in charge understood that.

Shizuru's senatorial fellows were either members of the richest class or fiscal dunces. Thus they often failed to appreciate how far a food shortage went. They only saw the lower classes agitating about hunger and the rabble rousers like Eiichi Kiyosaki who stirred them up. They saw the poor complaining about having only turnips and millet, and thought that was the end of the matter.

A short-sighted view. Shizuru knew a famine was an economic disaster for the entirety of Hime.

It started with those most ubiquitous of vendors, the grain millers and the bakers. Many of the lower classes did not have their own ovens, so they asked bakers to bake their bread. They lacked mills too and relied on the millers to grind their grain. As payment for the trouble, the millers took a portion of what they ground and resold it for an income. The bakers did the same, taking a portion of the flour



people asked them to bake. They took this payment of flour and used it to make loaves they could then sell for a profit.

When people could not afford to bring grain to them, the millers' grinders stilled. When there was no one bringing in flour, the bakers' ovens quieted. Even if the latter did manage to find enough flour to bake loaves, the bread would be so costly that no one could afford to buy them.

Few ate well during a famine; this had an impact on all the other tradesmen. The common labourers and porters started working less and less. Building foremen saw workers faint in the middle of construction. Manufactory workers slowed to a crawl from hunger.

Projects were delayed at great cost, as a result. Goods' prices shot up due to the increasing expense and inefficiency of production. Shops for inedible items closed because people saved what they had to spend on foodstuff. People sold their slaves because they could no longer afford to feed them. Wages went down as employers factored in both lowered profits and worker productivity. Apartment owners and estate landlords could no longer collect rents because tenants had no money.

And the crime rate went soaring, further upsetting what little commerce still proceeded.

With most of the population suddenly dealing with higher costs and thinner revenue streams, the moneylenders of the city made a killing. Many Himeans, including senators, did not cut back on their expenses even when flirting with bankruptcy. They solved the problem of money by borrowing it, simply trusting to the gods that they would find a way to pay it back in the future.

Thus the sharp increase in indebted senators recently. Shizuru knew that many of these debtors would even have borrowed from less-than-respectable creditors. That meant short payback terms on compound interest, which usually began a cycle that only worsened an account already on negative equity. It was debt of this sort that had driven Banri Ueda to her last year.

"Anyway, that's how it's been," Chie sighed about the situation. "It's

worked out for you, as I said-and even me, given the terms of my marriage-but I do think it's been an ill wind for many others."

"I can see that," Shizuru agreed.

She would have said more, had it not been for the woman coming to join them. She put the conversation on hold to reintroduce Princess Natsuki to her old friend. Mere formality, of course: the two were not strangers, even if they had not clapped eyes on each other for years.

The appearance of the Otomeian was not a surprise to Chie: Shizuru had said beforehand that they would dine with her mistress. Chie knew too that said mistress had suffered certain bodily changes, including but not limited to an amputation.

So when the foreigner presented herself, Chie was able to react without shock or suspicion. In its place she had a hushed enthralment as she studied the changes of half a decade. What *had* she expected? Something like this, yes, but also something so much less. Even in a light but fine dress and leaning on an ivory-topped cane, Shizuru's mistress emanated more of her formidable austerity than ever.

When the foreigner had settled herself into the third couch-sitting up instead of reclining as Chie and Shizuru were-Chie addressed the young woman.

"How do you find Fuuka, Natsuki-san?" she ventured, striving to sound casual because she sensed Shizuru preferred that. Whether the foreigner would or not... Well, that was beyond her senses. "Do you like Ravenna, now you finally see it?"

The densely-fringed eyes lit up at the question.

"Yes," Natsuki said.

Then, because it was obvious she did not want to be considered impolite by being curt with her lover's friend, she added, "It is quiet, but I like that too."

"Well, it's a popular holiday place for that reason, although usually in

the summers," Chie told her, silently cataloguing the changes even in this conversation. She had not spoken that much to the Otomeian in her time as senior legate to Shizuru, but she could still remember the foreigner's barely concealed anxiety during all those instances. Now she could discern no such apprehension. Oh, the girl was still closed up! A riddle locked away. But not an uncertain one, it seemed, or not any longer.

"Most people come here for peace and quiet," she told this more certain Natsuki. "As well as the cool northern weather."

A pause as all three of them thought the same thing.

"Well," Chie said with a laugh, "northern for *us*, you know."

"I know," Natsuki said. "As this is southern for me."

The Himeans grinned.

Then, because the only true northerner seemed to sense that she had interrupted their conversation, she drew them back into it: "You were talking of Shizuru's new senators?"

Chie said they were, if she was referring to the ones Shizuru had bought. More specifically, she explained, they had been speaking of the conditions that made it possible to buy them.

"It's worked out so well because the creditors have all been calling in debts," Chie told the room. She had been asked beforehand to conduct this discussion normally even after the Otomeian joined them. Further, Shizuru had even asked that Chie expect the foreigner's occasional participation. A change from their old situation, when the Otomeian had still been the woman's bodyguard: while privy to Shizuru's private talks then, the girl had not been expected to be a contributor in them. This was a whole new power for someone who was an alien paramour.

What Shizuru was granting her mistress here was the confidence one gave an esteemed partner of senatorial blood. Chie herself had just spent a year wedded to such a partner. Yet there were vital dissimilarities. Chie's partner was not only a wife, but also a

senatorial and Himean one. How much could Shizuru truly expect her northern foreigner to understand, even given all their time together?

She did as her friend had requested anyway, and went on as though she faced two Himeans instead of her current hybrid audience.

"There's been a rash of usurers demanding full repayment of arrears in the last few months," she revealed. "At the same time, there's been a sudden difficulty in getting any more loans. I know, because some of our fellows have been trying that old trick-you know, borrowing money from someone else to pay off *yet another* someone else-but no such luck. Most people aren't lending anymore, just collecting. And doing it rabidly, of late!"

Shizuru smiled and said that was to be expected. Chie withheld the sigh.

"At the risk of sounding repetitive, Shizuru-san, I have to reiterate that most people don't see how you get your expectations," she said. "I don't know about Natsuki-san here, but I'd really appreciate a clarification of how you foresaw this state of affairs before it even came about."

"It has been coming about for a while now."

"So you keep saying! Now explain how and what led to it, I do beg you!"

The other held up her hands, laughing.

"Very well, if you insist on it," Shizuru said with a swift glance at her mistress.

The foreigner's eyes gleamed; Chie read excitement in them. But excitement over what? Over an explanation of fiscal movements? Stranger and stranger still!

"As you observed earlier, Chie-han, many persons fell into arrears very recently," Shizuru started. "This was because the drought and ensuing famine had caused an economic downturn. If people cannot afford to eat, they cannot afford much of anything else. Too little

profit for everybody, too many expenses still going. This much is clear, is it not?"

"It is," Chie agreed.

"The usual recourse for most in such a situation is to sell what they can to supplement a suddenly thin income stream. The problem with that is-well, you know the problem with such a solution, do you not, Princess?"

Natsuki sounded to Chie like a youngster answering her pedagogue: "Few have money or interest to buy during a downturn."

Shizuru's pleasure in the answer was also just like a pedagogue's.

"Precisely that," she said, red eyes alight. "There are exceptions, of course, but these are usually only interested in large assets like houses. Even then, those buying such properties know they can bargain for lower prices since the sellers' needs are pressing. So, whatever is sold goes too cheap and many things are not sold at all. Just as an example, I know you will have noticed all the property being put up for sale in Hime last year. More than half of it remains unsold, my banker tells me."

"That's so."

"So selling off assets is not always useful. A lot of people take the other recourse then, which is to borrow money. That is how I knew a lot of people would be running up big debts over the past two years. Since the lenders have the upper hand in the transaction, by the way, they can also impose even worse terms than usual."

Chie snorted aloud as she remembered something at this statement.

"You can say that again!" she exclaimed. "Some of the really horrible cases rumoured recently had debts set at over forty percent compound interest!"

Shizuru was familiar with the way moneylenders worked, but was still disgusted.

"That is manifestly felonious!" she said to Chie, who concurred first,

and then asked what all this had to do with Shizuru's forecast that the creditors would call in all of those debts aggressively this winter season.

"Is it because you thought the moneylenders would finally be running out of cash themselves?" she guessed, making no attempt to conceal her hesitation even as she spoke. She did not want to make too many conjectural sallies in this conversation because she was acutely aware of her deficiencies in the topic. Nor did it help that Shizuru's mistress was present: Chie was starting to suspect that the girl understood economics better than she did!

"Something like that, but not exactly," Shizuru told her, before expounding further.

She said the decisive factor on which she had gambled her predictions had been Chikane Himemiya's appointment to rid Mare Nostrum of pirates.

"This is especially since her command is a strong one," she detailed. "I doubt my predictions would have come true so dramatically had the Senate strapped Chikane with an underfunded and weak campaign. She would still have trounced whatever pirates she met, but she would not have cleared Our Sea the way she is currently doing, so exhaustively."

When Chikane had revealed to her the resources of the antipiracy command, Shizuru had seen the future immediately. She saw a Mare Nostrum safer than it had been in more than a hundred years. Ships would again be free to sail to and from every corner of it without fear of seizure. Sea travel as well as trade would undergo a revival.

All of which Shizuru and the other mercantile-minded Himeans saw as imminent opportunities. The Himemiya Campaign might not have completed its objective yet, but it was obvious to all, as early as last autumn, that it would do so presently.

The business community started preparations for it.

"The eradication of the pirates makes overseas investment possible

again," Shizuru explained. "Do you realise that in the last hundred years, the presence of these seafaring thieves has prevented our businessmen from sending their money out of the country? This has kept Himean money concentrated in Fuuka and Hime for virtually a century! The only exceptions have been the nearer provinces with overland routes, like the Spains. Even then, businessmen have still been moderate, wary of sinking too much money into places far away."

"But now, thanks to Chikane, everything has changed," she continued. "Suddenly the sea routes are open again. Capital has other places it can now go. And like water, it *shall* go, believe me. Streams flow from a dam whenever you open a channel."

She met Chie's narrowed eyes and said, "This is what led to the economic crisis we are seeing, which is also the fulfilment of my predictions. I knew Chikane would have enough victories by this time to show everyone she would complete her undertaking to clear the seas. I knew many would see the opportunities that would present in the foreign markets as a consequence. I knew those who want to invest would have to gather up their capital. That includes capital many of them may have originally lent out to others at profitable rates during the famine."

Chie stared at her, brow wrinkled, and more than a little daunted by what Shizuru had just exposed.

"So you mean," she started slowly, "you started planning this as soon as Himemiya got her commission? That you knew, as early as then, that a lot of our peers would end up in hock up to their necks after the famine and her activities?"

"Not precisely," Shizuru said, with a look at the youngest woman in the room.

Chie looked that way too and noted the ruddy cheeks.

"I see you suspect the truth, Princess," Shizuru teased. "Out with it, if you care to hazard another of your suspicions."

Chie saw that whatever the foreigner thought was so exciting that

she could barely keep it in. The Otomeian's next words came out very swiftly.

"You started planning as soon as you conquered Septentria, soon after Terantrum," she deduced.

Shizuru laughed, applauding. Chie gaped at both of them.

"That couldn't be!" Chie said. "How could you have known that early that something like this would happen? I mean, Himemiya's campaign hadn't even been thought up yet when you fought King Obsidian at Terantrum! And you'd not have heard of it until much later. Why should you think the creditors would be on a collections rush to shore up capital before that?"

"Because," Shizuru responded, "if the Himemiya Campaign had never happened, capital would still be flowing or preparing to flow out of Hime this moment. You see, I myself have played a part in changing the economic situation as I described it. By conquering the Mentulaean Empire, I opened up yet another playground for our many knight-businessmen."

The breath left Chie loudly as she realized what her friend was saying.

Shizuru forged on: "It might not be 'overseas' any longer, especially with the establishment of the *via Fujino* as an overland route, but Septentria remains a foreign playground with a lot of opportunities for the smart investor."

"Which means many 'smart investors' would have been dying to invest in it," Chie concluded with amazement. She was finally processing all this fiscal elucidation, all further proof of the oddity of her colleague. Who could predict things like this in the middle of taming a new province? How magical was the Fujino mind!

"There would still have been a lot of them calling in debts," she went on, still marvelling at her friend's foresight. "Yes, I see! That's why you'd still have been able to count on some of our fellows falling headlong into bankruptcy recently."



Shizuru said that was right.

"I am still pleased Chikane's command happened," she qualified. "Otherwise, I might never have had such a wide array of choices for buying senators. With both of our campaigns unlocking so many prospects abroad, the business community has been in a bigger panic than ever about settling accounts outstanding. The result has been scads of bankrupts in the House... all of whom, incidentally, are hugely afraid of being stripped of senatorial rank by Dear Censor Armitage. Thank goodness for her aggressiveness, as well as the knights' efficiency at collecting their capital."

Although they would have an unpleasant surprise waiting for them when they tried to use that capital to flood the Septentrian market, she told her lover later. This was when they were changing for the night in their bedroom; Chie herself had retired to the suite they had given her.

"Why?" Natsuki asked with interest. "You will stop them?"

"Well, I do not want them overwhelming all the local businesses."

Natsuki was at the foot of their bed: she had just removed her prosthetic and now worked on the bandages protecting the stump.

"But," she said, "I thought investment from outside would be good. Even for Septentria."

"It is," Shizuru agreed. "But only insofar as the investors would not try to edge out nearly all local competition. They would, you know. Hime's plutocrats are merciless about that sort of thing. Plutocrats are generally that, I suppose."

A speaking look from Natsuki. Shizuru smirked and put a finger beside her nose.

"Shh, most people think I am only a senator," she quipped.

Natsuki shook her head playfully: "But how can you stop them? The Himean plutocrats?"

Shizuru had finished donning her sleeping tunic. She now brought a

wash basin to Natsuki and crouched before the young woman, offering to wash the exposed stump in her place. Natsuki accepted.

"I can impose regulations on new businesses, for one," Shizuru said as she ran a wet cloth over the stub's smooth skin. "I can also be careful about the concessions and grants I give. The problem with our other conqueror-governors, when they founded our provinces, is that they were more interested in enhancing their popularity or purses than with ensuring the Republic's future. This led to entirely free markets for Himean businessmen in the provinces. The natives had rather less leeway in their commercial activities."

Natsuki noted that the natives were the conquered. Therefore, they were naturally expected to have the shorter end of the stick after having lost their wars.

"Yes, of course," Shizuru agreed. "But not to the point that a province is mired in an economic morass. Most of its revenues are siphoned off to another country's private individuals ever after. A bad thing, Natsuki. The provinces have to be self-sufficient, not milked dry. They and Hime's dominance of them cannot last otherwise."

"Many of your people would disagree," Natsuki pointed out.

"Many of my people are certifiable cretins," Shizuru answered. "Look at our Senate, which is stuffed full of nincompoops. No, I long ago ceased paying attention to what The Many think or desire, at least insofar as my own opinions are made."

"What do you think of that Greek idea, 'democracy'?" the girl asked all of a sudden.

Shizuru looked up from her task, intrigued.

"I think it like many other things the Greeks came up with," she said honestly. "A dream, a beautiful fiction that works on paper and nowhere else. That is because, in the vast majority of gatherings, there will still be more fools or middling minds than actual intelligent persons. How can the rule of The Many be wise when wisdom is in scarce supply throughout humanity?"

"Yet your senators pass decisions based on the vote of The Many."

"Indeed, and they often pass stupid decisions. Even so, I still think our implementation of majority rule better than the Greek 'democracy'. Hime is government of The Many by The Few. Of course, I still wish The Few were more rational, but no system is perfect."

The polemarch laughingly told her she was "so Himean".

"I take it as a compliment," she replied.

She had finished washing the shortened limb and now dried it with another cloth. She put away the washbasin and rags after and headed to a table where more of her tools for personal hygiene waited.

There was a jug of water and a saucer of salt, as well as a twig that had been frayed at the end. She picked up the jug first and poured water into a cup to rinse her mouth. The fluid was spat into a small bowl she used for that purpose.

She took up the twig and began in earnest, picking between teeth and rinsing her mouth at regular intervals. After that there was the square of clean cloth waiting on the table. There was only one square because Natsuki had used the other earlier. Now Shizuru wrapped the remaining one around a finger and dipped it in the cup to dampen. Next it went into the saucer of salt. This was rubbed against her teeth.

Shizuru knew not everyone went through as meticulous a regime of dental hygiene as she did. Many Himeans made do with only a quick rinse, even, or an occasional tooth-picking. She herself was both vain and practical enough to do more: she wanted to keep all of her teeth for as long as fortune permitted.

This had actually led to another of the Fujino legions' quirks. Their officers were instructed to drill the basics of dental care into the legionaries. To those who accused her of imposing her personal eccentricities on the troops, Shizuru insisted that carious soldiers fought less efficiently.

"The pain can distract them in the middle of battle, if it gets bad enough," she would say. "More than that, it tends to make them weak, because they either eat less food or consume too much of addling substances like liquor in an effort to avoid the ache of it. Decayed teeth are a disease! I want my army to be healthy. So what if, in the process, they also happen to boast whiter smiles than the rest of Hime?"

To finish tending to her own white smile, she rinsed the salt out of her mouth again with more water. This accomplished, she settled down to sit at the foot of the bed with Natsuki.

"I do hope," she sighed, "that some enterprising apothecary shall eventually invent a substance for cleaning teeth that does not leave one so thirsty."

Her companion chuckled, busily running a comb through jet hair. It was a nightly ritual that Shizuru loved: the sight of the comb raking those black locks in ripples delighted her.

She leaned closer as she watched. This way she could enjoy too the pine-dusted, snow-on-skin scent of her mistress's body.

"But Shizuru," Natsuki said suddenly. "Tell me."

"Yes?"

"When you planned this, what you said earlier-to expect many of your people to be in debt."

"What of it?"

"Did you think of it too when you told Fumi Katou to prosecute Sumio Fujimoto in an Assembly?"

Shizuru's brightest smile came out at this.

"What makes you ask that?" she said, knowing it was as good as a confirmation.

Natsuki explained: if the people had been suffering so badly through an economic downturn that they could barely feed themselves, they

would have been even more eager to see a rich man convicted. She said it was human nature to be inflamed by envy.

"You really would make a fine philosopher, Love," said the woman besotted with her, earning an unphilosophical snort.

"But this," Natsuki persisted. "You thought of all this? What if-if something went wrong? You did not fear it? With your intention to buy bankrupt senators for your cause?"

Shizuru said she had not.

"There was a constant in my favour," she answered. "No matter what obstacles could have arisen, one thing would not have changed: there would still have been senators in debt. There always are. There just happened to be a lot more this time. I also still have other allies. Banri-han, the President of the Plebeian Tribune, is obviously one of them. I would have pulled him, along with every other string I could find. And I think you know by now that I always find strings when I go looking for them."

"Yes, it-it is Ulyssean."

Shizuru heard the depth of her tone and noted her colour, recognising it all of a sudden.

"I think you must admire me a bit, Polemarch," she said quietly. "Did my schemes impress?"

Natsuki looked away. Still her skin telegraphed the answer. Shizuru studied the flagrant colour and knew she had read right. The success of her scheming had excited her lover.

It was no surprise, she considered. People in her occupation always had their triumphs-their power-woven into their attraction. She recognised when the stare given her held a fantasy of being subject to her strength. And there had long been many such stares, even before she came to North and put down an empire with her boot to its neck.

She took the comb from Natsuki and set it beside them.

"If I impressed you so much, grant me a reward," she coaxed, fingers describing the concave small of Natsuki's back. Even the girl's shift was hot from the skin beneath it and she called herself a fool for not noticing quicker.

She pressed down with her palm.

"A little incentive to continue being impressive, perhaps?" she asked, smiling at the other's gasp.

"But your friend..."

"Chie-han already went to bed."

"But-no, still."

"You saw how much wine she drank at dinner. I wager she is already asleep."

"She may wake!" Natsuki hissed.

She followed the hands guiding her onto the sheets, all the same.

"The sitting room is between her room and ours." Shizuru crept over her mistress. "Now lift your hips. Just so. And your arms?"

Again the other obeyed and they helped each other out of their clothes. The younger woman pushed at Shizuru when the latter tried to lie atop her, however.

"Wait," she panted. "Stay up?"

Shizuru stared. "I thought I was getting a reward."

"You will... if you stay so."

"An odd reward, to be denied your body," Shizuru pretended to grumble as she stilled. In truth, she was interested to see what her lover wanted. An examination, it turned out: her eyes widened as Natsuki's gaze roamed like a proprietor assessing territory. It was a surprisingly forthright visual caress from a girl who could still blush if the subject's eyes met hers. Not that the girl was pale of cheek even

now.

Then it was not just the green eyes ogling but also the scarred fingers. From trim flanks to slender waist, raking to her hips and the tender flesh of her bottom. Shizuru fought down a shiver when they scraped the soft skin of her thighs. Then they found her and she inhaled, but mastered the urge and permitted herself no greater relief, even at the torture they started.

Her composure pulled black brows together, to her amusement.

"Do you know what you are doing?" she challenged.

The next touch wiped away her smugness. She blinked rapidly but got no reprieve, especially when a hand cupped her rear in encouragement.

"Tell, Shizuru," Natsuki told her, going so far as to smirk. "Do I?"

Shizuru glared as another splash of pleasure streaked her vision. She would have answered, but Natsuki's hands persisted. It did not take long before she sensed herself beaten.

"I will make you pay for this, you know," she still got out, arms shaking.

"Yes," Natsuki agreed.

She lipped Shizuru's ear when the latter finally fell, a toppled idol moaning into her hair and clutching at the sheets. She added a tongue and Shizuru lost all restraint, hips plunging uncontrollably. Soon the older woman was whimpering her finish against one of Natsuki's cheeks. Natsuki swiped her palms over the wetness on the strong shoulders and back afterwards; Shizuru twitched helplessly, huffing.

"Does it please you to have power over me?" the Himean asked after she recovered.

She had to lift herself again to see the answer in the flushed face. Yet Natsuki was not meeting her gaze: the green eyes were on the older woman's body again.

It seemed the Otomeian had not been satisfied by her earlier assessment. Now one of the hands on Shizuru's shoulders slipped its way to a bicep. Thumb and digits caught the swell of the muscle, dipped into the dint of the septum and over the slimmer swell at the back of the arm. Natsuki's eyes were on the inspection and Shizuru watched her in return.

Suddenly the girl withdrew her questing hand and tongued the tips of her fingers. Shizuru drew a breath at the sight and Natsuki's eyes darted up, as if in alarm. Shizuru wondered if the girl had actually forgotten her for an instant.

"I am, ah-" Natsuki began, looking strangely embarrassed. "Um, I..."

Shizuru said it for her: "You like my sweat."

Brilliant eyes shut away even in admission: "Yes."

Shizuru sighed. She turned Natsuki onto her stomach, to hold the girl captive in her turn. Especially after what she had just experienced, there was a gnawing desire to have it done: to see every knob of the princess's spine strained, scapulae flapping like the wings of a bird held down.

"Your sweat," Shizuru said while spreading her lover's legs. "I love yours."

She loved too that this creature kindled from her strength as much as her love. So she gave Natsuki both, branded a writ of ownership and adoration on the fevered nape. She trapped the smaller body with her shoulders so it could not flee; pinned the slender hips with hers so they could only follow her rhythm. And she exacted vengeance until the other was reduced to submission so fine it left Shizuru as breathless as the girl broken beneath her.

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Back in Septentria, Calchis was a satisfied man. His allies among the Arvetii had performed a great deal of canvassing on his behalf. Not only could they now assure him of perfect loyalty from their own folk, but they also reported the addition of many Carsinian lords to



their side.

This was of consequence because Calchis was banking on Carsinian support. Unlike many of the other tribes of the empire, the Carsinii could not be bullied into joining the imperial cause later. The imperial restoration needed their strength from the outset! They were one of the country's primary sources of cavalymen. Without the Carsinian troopers, the resumption of the Mentulaean-Himean War would have a poorer beginning.

Baron Epodorus was deputed by the Carsinii to attend the clandestine meeting with Calchis. They were joined by deputies from the other tribes of the land's northeast region.

"If you talk to them yourself again, Your Highness, we'll sway all the others too," Epodorus promised. "It's not lack of sympathy for your cause that's causing them to hesitate. It's fear."

"That won't stand them well on the battlefield," Calchis observed disapprovingly.

"They can be broken out of it! The Himeans walloped us heavily during your father's time, I ask you to remember. We took more beatings for longer than the others, thanks to our position near the river border and our fidelity to the king. That tells you we also held out longer than the others! My fellows just need encouragement again... something you can give. You're exactly the tonic they need, Prince Calchis. Our own great general to contend with the enemy's!"

So sharp was fear of their foe that not one protested the baron's indirect praise of her as a "great general". Not even, several noticed, their leader, who also let the "Prince" slip. Insisting on being called "King" could wait until he had gathered enough allied lords together and got Hiempnos to perform the rite before them.

"Very well," Calchis decided. "I'll meet the undecided Carsinian lords as soon as you can arrange it, Epodorus. Other than that, how go your preparations, Barons and Baronesses?"

A heavyset woman spoke up.

"They go well, Your Highness," said the woman, Baroness Sedulia of the Arvetii. "Among us we've been readying our people in secret. We meet only in small groups to avoid notice. Only community leaders and nobles, who manage getting word to their own people after it."

"The same for the allied Carsinii," said Epodorus.

"And the Veromandae," said another man. "The Himeans may have won the last war, but there's still too few of them to cover the land effectively. There are a lot of places we can go to avoid their suspicious eyes."

"The Lenapii and Bellones aren't here, but I saw them not long ago," said Calchis. "They're doing the same and doing well."

The Baroness Sedulia cleared her throat affectedly. Calchis almost dismissed it, as he was so used to people doing that around him—why was it that one man's hoarse voice made another's throat feel ticklish?—but she followed it up by leaning forward in her seat.

"Recruitment isn't our problem," she announced. "People are still eager to throw off the southerners' yoke! They'll rally to a leader who offers them a way to achieve that."

"And the problem is?" Calchis prompted, unintentionally forbidding in his dense-maned and dense-bearded guise.

"The problem is as it was last we met, Your Highness," said the baroness. "It's armaments. Things actually grow worse as our recruitment improves, which has been happening all this time. As things are going, we may indeed be successful in getting nearly all the tribes to resume our fight against the Himeans. Well, with the exception of traitorous rubbish like the Aexelli or the bumpkins of the southeast, anyway."

Someone growled out not to forget the Leucones, a tribe neighbouring the Aexelli and also among the first to go over to the southerners.

"Yes, them too, of course," Sedulia agreed, her broad face twisted

by hatred. "I don't even need to mention Firens."

There was a chorus of snarls at that name.

"As I was saying, we'll have more than enough soldiers for our cause," the baroness went on. "We'll even have enough officers, thanks to all those armies that were demobilised instead of being captured at the end of King Obsidian's fight against Hime. The officers of those forces got to come back home. All valuable men and women we can use now! But since it's looking more and more like we'll have a great many of those men and women, we might not have enough gear to arm all of them! Nor all the people they'll be commanding! Tell me, Epodorus, if we got all the Carsinii on our side, how many soldiers could you field?"

"I would say thirty thousand at least," he said. "More if we can train the youngsters somehow. A lot of them are burning to avenge relatives who were in King Obsidian's armies."

"We're training our own youngsters now," Sedulia said. "Just do it in small groups again, wherever it's safe. Do it in basements or warehouses, and cover every window while using lookouts! The Himeans are too few to be able to see everything."

Epodorus revised the quote at this advice: "Forty or fifty thousand, thereabouts, then."

"We Arvetii may produce near forty thousand ourselves. Now let me ask you, if we asked you to muster in the next month, could you arm all of them?"

Here the Carsinian baron made a face.

"No," he told the group. "You're right, Sedulia, it's a problem. We don't have the gear! The first thirty thousand we probably can arm, or just about. Some will have to go with an old blade or patched-up armour, but better than going without. The other twenty, though, will be as naked as new-born babes! We'll be lucky to even find them all decent swords!"

The others in the gathering murmured, realising the same held true

for their own peoples.

"We lost a lot of equipment to the Himeans," said a dour-looking man next to Sedulia. He was the baron representing the tribe of the Veromandae in this conference. "I know all of us held some back when we surrendered armaments to them. But even with those secret caches, the bulk of the empire's military paraphernalia is no longer in our hands."

"To make matters worse," someone added, "we no longer have a Comus to go to for mass manufacture of weapons and other equipment. Nor is Arvern available to us."

Calchis spoke up again.

"Actually," he said, "it's time you were told something."

From the outset, Calchis had known armaments would be a concern. Many had been lost during the war, often as a natural outcome of casualties. The victorious army usually stripped armour and weaponry from enemy corpses on the field. Himeans were especially methodical at it, actually: no scrap of salvageable materiel was typically left behind once they finished.

Other things had further attenuated the stockpile of arms the empire had accrued over the years. Decay, which was hardest on shields and composite gear. Cowardice (fleeing soldiers cast off their gear in order to run faster), of which there had been a lot in the empire's last engagements. Then there were the natural gestures of capitulation.

How fortunate that the barons had known to conceal some of their remaining war equipment! Calchis had initially feared that the druids would need to send them messages to do it, and that would have broken his cover early to too many people. But the lords had done it on their own.

So when the Himeans managed disarmament of the fiefdoms, it had been an incomplete job. Most barons hid away a third of what their armouries had left: a few of the more daring hid away half or more. None had really known when they might need those weapons and

armour again, yet instinct drove them to risk their conqueror's wrath by keeping them. Instinct, or the Tuatha? Perhaps both were on Calchis's side.

In spite of that, the retained equipment would not be enough. Not when one considered how many feasible soldiers remained. And how many more Mentulaeans had come of age since the start of the war, since all those losses...

So he and Faris had puzzled out early on how they would solve the problem. Arvern was the best place for getting what they needed. Its sister-city Comus was little more than a scar on the ground now, a sore on which their own mother's tribe, the Ganni, focused blazing resentment. Arvern it had to be-if not for Shizuru Fujino's ban on its forges bulk-manufacturing weapons. To enforce her restriction, the woman had installed a garrison in the region, and even a small station within the city itself. The officers in the city station monitored the city's countless smithies and their production.

An insurmountable problem, it had seemed at first. Then Faris had pointed out the weakness of the Himean governor's arrangement. While clever in itself, it would rely nonetheless on people for its execution. People were the same in some ways, regardless of the land that raised them. Himeans could still be as lazy or half-hearted as the next Mentulaeen shirking orders.

So the siblings told Arvern to wait and observe the monitors. Which officers were thorough and which just flipped through logs without crosschecking against the warehouses? Which completed their rounds no matter the time and which went off after the first handful of smithies? Who kept their observations to themselves and who could be diverted by a chat with some charming locals?

In short, which officers were dangerous and which were susceptible to deception?

It took some time, but they eventually managed it. Soon they knew when which officers were on duty and which of them were feckless. Given the invaders' complacency, there were more of these than the careful ones. Most Himean officers found the task of monitoring smithies too tedious to do well.

This was how the smithies managed their illegal business. They even devised a system whereby they could warn each other if a break occurred in the officer rotation.

Sometimes other Himeans appeared in an area or a lazy officer bestirred himself for more thorough inspection. To guard against that, lookouts and messengers were stationed at the city's crossroads. An approaching problem saw the messengers run to all the smithies in the area. All said the same words: "My mother's soup ladle is broken." The smiths knew to conceal their contraband work at hearing that.

So only five months after Arvern's surrender, it had already begun its subversive work against its new masters. Still, the work had to be done with care, which slowed production. Even the process of hiding away the new weapons and armour had to be carried out in secret. This made the siblings antsy as it prevented arms from piling up as fast as they wanted. At the rate equipment was coming in, it could be another half-decade before they could get everything together!

The duo and their chief confederate concurred: they needed another source of gear.

When Faris went to the Kingdom of Celsor, it was with the knowledge that the Himeans had already visited. She had even stopped to view the impressive remnants of the bridge they had used to cross the River Flundanus. Talking to the river-folk confirmed the rumour about the construction having taken merely ten days. It gave her something to think about when the same folk conveyed her to the other side on one of their raft-barges. The engineering feat was not good for Faris's needs: she knew such a feat would have awed their brother-by-marriage.

The original intention had been to directly approach Celsor's King Leontes. He had lent soldiers to their father against the Himeans and the siblings hoped he would do the same for them. Faris revised her plans after three days in his kingdom. The Himeans had obviously impressed the Celsorians, who were still big with talk of the southerners. Who had come in peace and even been conscientious enough to avoid arable land in their marches. They had also bought a lot of foodstuff in passing, and paid for it at

handsome prices!

The king too, she discovered, had scorned to assault them with his troops. From what Faris could tell, he seemed to be reconciled to their nearby presence. Again, not good for her needs: she suspected Leontes was not inclined to helping her or her brother. So the person she contrived to meet in secret changed from him to his wife: their half-sister, Amanea.

Amanea had never been a friend to Calchis and Faris, but nor was she a particular enemy. Her elevation to Queen of Celsor through marriage to Leontes had meant a lack of clashes between her and those of Obsidian's brood interested in the empire's kingship. Amanea already had her own kingdom, so to speak. Why would she need to tussle with her siblings for another?

So when Faris tapped her for a furtive reunion, she had no problem saying yes to one of her few siblings still at large in the north.

"I don't know what you want me to do," she told Faris. "Leontes won't give you any more of his soldiers, even if I ask for them. He says we've already lost the ones we sent to Father. He'll just see sending more against those southerners as a waste."

"I understand," Faris said. "He needs a reason to believe his men won't be wasted. What I'm asking is, can't you give him that reason? Have you no sway over your husband?"

Amanea's blue, beautifully-opened eyes snapped to Faris's dark ones.

"Sway enough," she said snidely, eyeing her sister with disdain. Faris knew it was because of her current appearance, which had caused Amanea gasp. Her peasant-robed, cropped-maned guise was an affront to someone as vain as the Queen of Celsor.

"I can't work miracles, Faris," Her Majesty now sniffed. "If you want me to convince my husband, you'll have to give me proof for the argument. Maybe Calchis can go and win some battles. Only then might Leontes be persuaded. Because I tell you, that Himean general who trounced Father was very good at persuading him that

she'd trounce any and everything going against her."

"Is that what he said?"

"Not in those words, but that's the impression I get." Amanea sighed and rearranged herself in her seat. "I wish I could've seen that foreigner, myself, but I didn't go with him to meet her. Is she really as tall as Leontes? If so, she's a giant of a woman!"

"She's certainly a giant," Faris said. "In more ways than one."

"I can only imagine how mannishly ugly she must be."

Faris eyed her half-sister dryly. Trust Amanea to be concerned with the woman's looks when all that really mattered was her genius on the battlefield!

"Actually," she said, knowing Amanea would dislike to hear this, "those who've met her say she's one of the most beautiful women they've seen. You should ask your husband... although he probably won't want to admit thinking another woman beautiful to his wife. Or would he?"

The barb struck; Amanea's pretty face turned ugly. Leontes was not short of mistresses, which galled her conceit.

"Anyway, if you really think he can't be persuaded-

"He can't."

"Then we'll leave it be until things change. There's another thing you can do to help us anyway, and it doesn't need your husband's support."

"What makes you think I'll give you mine?"

"Because you'll get something out of it."

Faris explained that Calchis's armies would need equipment. Celsorian armour and blades would suffice in the absence of traditional Mentulaean ones; anyway, they were not that different. She could not buy them herself, however: nor indeed could she



nominate an agent to do it on her behalf. There would still be questions going around about the destination of such an amount of arms as she intended to get. So she needed a local buyer, and one whose motives could not be questioned.

"If you use one of your people and tell him to make it seem like the purchases are for Leontes's own armouries, there'd be less curiosity about their purpose," she told Amanea. "Whatever agents may be sympathetic to the Himeans will also fail to see cause for alarm. Then, I can just have some of my people meet yours to take charge of the equipment."

"You still haven't said what I get from it."

"You get paid for the service. Say, a hundred talents? We'll pay for the equipment too, of course, but only at fair prices, so don't even think about adding a middleman's bonus-we know how much gear costs."

Amanea looked sly. "Interesting that you can afford to pay, Faris. Did some of Father's money find its way to your coffers?"

"Let's just say we preferred to spirit away the contents of some of the northwest Treasuries before the Himeans could. In addition to the hundred talents, let me throw in something else. I have a certain turquoise and jade necklace I'm sure you'd like-"

"How did you get that?!" Amanea cut in, spitting like a cat splashed with water. "That was stolen!"

"Yes, it was, and not by me, before you accuse me of that," Faris answered serenely. The necklace in question had belonged to Amanea's mother, from whose neck it had been taken prior to her interment. Amanea had long grieved its loss, having intended to take it as a keepsake of her parent.

"If you didn't steal it, how do you claim to own it?" the still-grieving daughter now hissed.

"I found it in an old courtier's jewellery chest," Faris said. "I wouldn't worry about it anymore-they're dead now. I made sure of it. You can

have the necklace along with the silver I promised. As long as you help us and keep quiet about everything, at least until we need you to talk to Leontes in favour of our cause. The hundred talents buy that too: the promise of a word in our favour."

Thus did Faris secure more of the equipment her brother's armies needed. Calchis told his allies some of this now, promising the imminent arrival of gear from both Celsor and Arvern.

"This is welcome news!" Baroness Sedulia said, brightening. "We'll have to devise a way of getting them to the barons without being noticed, but since trade's started up again, that should be doable. It's not like the Himeans are inspecting carts any longer."

"I agree," said Epodorus. "It's manageable."

"Good. So just worry for now about getting more people on board," Calchis said to them. "The Chief Druid actually made an interesting suggestion on that last we met. The Himeans plan to hold another Septentrian Conference this spring, don't they?"

"The Septentrian Conferences," one of the barons echoed. "A preposterous name, Septentria!"

"And entirely foreign," Calchis agreed, again with a calm that had never been evinced by his father. Obsidian would have visited awful punishment on any man who interrupted him, even in private conference. But then, Obsidian had not been a fugitive prince who needed allies to claim his throne and title.

"Going back to the topic, these conferences could be useful. It makes it easier for the lords allied to us to meet and potentially convince others to throw in their lots with us."

"But... they can do that easily even now, Your Highness," Epodorus said. "Meet other lords to persuade them, that is."

"To some extent. At the moment, only lords from the same region can meet comfortably without arousing suspicion. One coming from a distant region to meet another would get more questions. For example, the Himeans' spies might be wary of a Gannian baron

meeting a Trocarian one down south. But if those two met at that Septentrian Conference in Gorgo? Wouldn't lift an eyebrow! It would let our recruitment of people proceed so much faster if we could meet the other lords without worrying about being covert."

The others exchanged glances. What their future king was true, of course, in that it would make far more sense for a distant tribe's baron to meet with another's at that event. Yet it was also far more dangerous to do so, at least if the purpose of the meeting was to invite someone into sedition. One had to assume the Himeans' spies all over the capital city. Besides, what if they made a mistake and revealed too much to a contrary baron with no sense of kinship? There would be no time to correct the mistake! He could walk out of the meeting and head straight to the Himeans for a report!

So much did Baron Epodorus explain to Calchis now, only to have the prince shake his head.

"I don't want our meetings to happen during the conference itself," Calchis explained. "All that needs to happen during the conference is a sounding out, a test of which lords we might be able to tell more. Any we do think trustworthy, we can then invite to another interview. The barons would have to go incognito for that later interview, of course, but not necessarily before that."

That got the faces turned to him loosening as they saw the reason behind his plans. He and his accomplices continued their planning for another hour before they broke up, at which point the barons asked for his instructions on a final matter.

"Is there anything we should do during the Septentrian Conference?" they asked. "Any special grievance or issue we should bring to the Himeans, perhaps to keep them busy while we work?"

"None," he answered. "In fact, be as cooperative as you can! Let them think us as placid and biddable as oxen grown accustomed to the yoke! That way, when our forces rise up, they will be just like those oxen-surprised by the slaughter."